The late 1970s and the 1980s in post-Mao China were an age of ideas and ideals. Thanks to Deng Xiaoping’s more liberal cultural policy, Western theories of various persuasions surged in with unprecedented speed and force. Despite their sometimes conflicting and mutually deconstructive theoretical premises, Western concepts of all sorts were eagerly swallowed up, hastily digested, and hurriedly circulated by the intellectually starved Chinese critics to both create and fill up a new discursive space where the critics’ position in the changing society was negotiated and their own notion of modernity articulated and disseminated. Among all the entrées on the discursive menu whetting the post-Mao appetite, nothing has held greater power over the imagination than subjectivity (zhutixing) and modernization (xiandaihua). Though closely associated, sharing blurred sociohistorical and theoretical boundaries in the Chinese context, these terms seem to have had special appeal to the different social forces that remapped post-Mao China. As indicated in the state’s goal of constructing a “socialist modernization,” the word modernization was repeated like a mantra in the government-sanctioned program of reforms that swept across the country in the wake of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976); indeed, it quickly swallowed the “socialist” adjectives in both official and public discourse as China moved swiftly to reengage global economy and society. “Subjectivity,” by contrast, couched in the epistemological framework of the Enlightenment, appeared to have struck the fancy primarily of the cultural intellectuals, spicing up their debates on how to achieve postrevolutionary modernization in the late 1970s and during the well-publicized Cultural Discussion in the mid-1980s. Nevertheless, these discourses should not be seen as separate undertakings. Rallying round the
common objective of turning China into a rising world power, together they defined the ideological-cultural terrain of the New Era (1976–1989), making social progress and spiritual enlightenment an underlying theme of the post-Mao reconstruction.

But modernization, the programmatic center that held together its various manifestations in the discursive and nondiscursive arenas, played a cruel joke on its primary partner in the project of enlightenment and subjectivity, its fervent advocates, the post-Mao intellectuals. Although social modernization in material terms forged ahead full strength at the end of the twentieth century, the talk of subjectivity and enlightenment, loud and clear in the previous decade, all but died out. The treatises and theses that had so recently fired the zeal of thousands inside and outside intellectual circles now interested only cultural historians and the most committed scholars in the humanities. What is more, the 1980s were subjected to radical reassessments in the 1990s. Not only did its Western-oriented modernization come under severe criticism, now faulted for precipitating a national identity crisis that eventually led to the Tiananmen unrest, but the dominant discourse of subjectivity and enlightenment was also thrown into serious doubt. To give a provocative literary example, the human subject, the agent of subjectivity and enlightenment, in such avant-garde works as the fiction of Yu Hua was ruthlessly and literally mutilated and dismembered in the late 1980s. As an ancient Chinese aphorism puts it, “After the skin is gone, where would the hair grow?” (Pi zhi bu cun, mao jiang yan fu?). When it is disembodied, how can human consciousness as the locus and arbiter of the knowledge of the self (to follow the line of argument of Enlightenment philosophy) survive? Whether or not they agreed in their interpretation of the motivation behind the relentless scrutiny of the 1980s, critics concurred that the pursuit of the enlightenment and subjectivity was just another trial run—collectively engaged in by the post-Mao intelligentsia—at fulfilling a utopian dream that seemed to have been eluding China for a century.

Calling the post-Mao attempt “another” trial run was obviously a historical nod to the May Fourth project where the Enlightenment ideals debuted to become an alluring theme in China’s modernization. What made matters worse for the new believers of enlightenment was that when the May Fourth project was aborted in the 1930s and 1940s because of China’s domestic and international strife, there was still strong hope for its later revival under more favorable social conditions. Post-Mao intellectuals were convinced that they had finally found and created a congenial environment for the project in the 1980s, and they celebrated its coming of age. But following much hype, dreams that the lofty ideal would regain its glory
were definitively shattered in the 1990s. The feverish push for enlightenment was branded “a myth of the century,” a *juechang*, the last song of enlightenment (*qimeng de juechang*), as one critic described it. This characterization captured simultaneously the heroic spirit and the tragic futility of the intellectual effort. As the same critic said, “The enlightenment project has turned out to be an extremely absurd endeavor at the turn of the century” (Meng Fanhua 1997, 192). What a difference a decade makes.

What went wrong? While modernization is still an ongoing process with attendant ambiguities and uncertainties, without sufficient historical distance, we may not see clearly the complex relationship between the enlightenment and the social modernization in the post-Mao era to explain why the latter apparently succeeded at the expense of the former. Would economic and technological development, marketization, and globalization produce conditions to eventually bring forth a full-fledged democracy, create a new form of “civil society,” and result in the individual’s emancipation, as some scholars argued (G. White 1994, 73–92)? Or would China’s economic makeover only fashion a “self-centered consumer” instead of a “sovereign citizen,” as others reasoned (Barmé 1999, 238)? It is still too early to tell. But a basic understanding of how the two major players in the social program—the state and the intellectuals—interpreted “modernization” helps us put the current discord into some perspective. In these preliminary remarks, which will lead me into the central theme of this book—the subject in crisis in post-Mao literary representations—I highlight the characteristics that distinguish the state’s approach to modernization from the intellectuals’. To differentiate the state from the intellectuals is not to simplistically set them off as opponents. As I comment later in the book, their relationship, however problematic, was close and multifaceted. We must bear in mind that intellectuals have never been either completely inside or outside of the governmental structure, whether in dynastic China, in Mao’s China, or after; nor should we forget that, as with any social group, they were far from homogeneous. Inasmuch as their voice in the 1980s was not officially programmed and their opinions manifested certain common inclinations, however, the intellectuals represented divergent concerns from those of the state.

The state’s program of modernization clearly emphasized the development of the economy through the adoption of advanced science, technology, and contemporary management theories and practices. Prior to and following reform and the open-door policy being declared the new party line at the momentous third plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee, in December 1978, Deng Xiaoping and his supporters, in preparation for Deng’s formal reassertion of power, encouraged “de-Maoization” in the
realms of literature and ideology and implemented measures to shake up the administrative bureaucracies and the relationship of state and society. Yet, political reforms were not the new regime’s priority. As stressed in the official slogan of the four modernizations (in agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology), under Deng the state shifted its focus toward boosting production and the economy. The off-and-on attempts of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to curb intellectual trends too liberal for its liking showed that it was very much aware that the “emancipation of thought” it had endorsed in the late 1970s was a double-edged sword that could delegitimize the center it had helped legitimize after the Cultural Revolution. Consequently, although the Deng reform regime was willing to effect drastic institutional changes to accelerate economic growth through, for example, the elimination of communes, the de facto decollectivization of farmland, and the application of the household-responsibility system in agriculture and a contract-labor system in urban industry, it was cautious about introducing political reforms that could threaten the Party’s hegemony. Modernization for the state thus meant, above all, economic modernization, a pragmatic program to build up the nation’s strength and prosperity through stimulating production and improving the standard of living while maintaining the central leadership of the CCP.

If the state gave weight to pragmatic considerations and everyday material life in its plan to modernize the country, the intellectuals concentrated on the cultural-ideological front, where they traditionally functioned best. To them the “emancipation of thought” was not an expediency but the essence of modernization. Though the intellectuals produced multiple interpretations, a review of the major themes in the New Era (“practice as the criterion for testing truth,” the concept of subjectivity, scientism and instrumental rationality, the revival of Confucianism by the neo-Confucians at home and abroad, and literary modernism) and the discursive venues (workshops on university campuses and academic journals) through which they were formulated and articulated shows that modernization, or modernity, in the eyes of the intellectuals was first and foremost a discursive revolution. The zeal and seriousness with which the intellectuals tackled issues of culture and ideas in China’s modernization drive clearly spoke to their strong conviction that modernization in science and technology could be achieved only with, if not after, the modernization of thinking. Intellectual enlightenment was thus viewed as an indispensable prerequisite to economic modernization.

To anyone familiar with modern Chinese history, this smacks of déjà vu
of the May Fourth type. Although the radically different global and domestic conditions each movement found itself in and responding to made it impossible for the post-Mao modernization to be a mere replay of the May Fourth revolution, a similar idealism—the preeminent emphasis put on the value of ideas—continued to be a hallmark of the ideological and methodological makeup of contemporary intellectuals. Despite a historical divide of some six decades, during which a significant portion of the May Fourth legacy (most notably, conceptions of the self and its subjective powers) was rejected by the Communist ideology, post-Mao intellectuals maintained faith in the self and in the power of ideas to effect social change. For many of them, this was also an epistemological and ideological rebound of the voluntaristic belief they were conditioned to operate under in the Communist era, when human consciousness was given primacy as the decisive factor in charting the course of history.

But as the intellectuals were shadowboxing with themselves in the battle of words, the economic modernization they had helped legitimize arrived with all the speed and power technology and market forces could provide. What came as an unpleasant surprise to the intellectuals deeply in love with their own modernist vision was the reality that once economic modernization had benefited from the discursive revolution (courtesy of the intellectuals, for the most part), it developed a course of its own and had no further need for the ideals dear to the intellectual heart. In fact, the commercialized popular culture that took China’s cultural market by storm after the late 1980s made irrelevant many of the humanist morals I discuss in the following text, such as truth, rationality, integrity, and human dignity. In the intellectuals’ blueprint of modernity, enlightenment in thought would lead to economic modernization. It did. But what then? Would the discursive and economic revolutions live happily ever after in a blissful union? Few dwelt on the possibility of a divorce. Little did the intellectuals anticipate that when the repressed productive forces were unleashed by the reforms, so would be the human desires alien to the enlightenment project they had championed. What Matei Calinescu calls “the other modernity” of “capitalist technology and business interest” won out (1987, 8). Deeply disillusioned with the Maoist socialist system, people searched for new social values, and many found them in individual wealth and personal fulfillment as exemplified in bourgeois societies. Is it then any wonder that popular culture in China today exhibits many of the symptoms inherent in capitalism, the “cult of instant joy, fun morality, and the generalized confusion between self-realization and simple gratification” (7)? To be fair, the
Communist suppression of human desires, the conditions of economic scarcity that people had endured for decades, and the political frustration in the wake of the Tiananmen crackdown, must take part of the responsibility. In the end grand idea(l)s retreated, the enlightenment vision yielding its place to popular, materialist cravings. In an ironic twist, the intellectuals relearned the Marxist principle that the economic base has a decisive say over the superstructure after all.

But in our critique of the idealism of the 1980s, we should also avoid being caught up in the same excitement and enthusiasm over conceptual schemas. The critique cannot be adequately maintained by engaging the intellectual tides of the times only on the level of theory and polemics. We should keep in mind that besides theoretical speculation on subjectivity and the Chinese modern, much of the discursive revolution was carried out through creative activities. As is traditionally the case, Chinese intellectuals often wore two hats, serving as critics and writers at the same time or in alternation. Writers critiqued, and critics wrote. Literary practice, consequently, was an integral part of the postrevolutionary pursuit of the modern. A close examination of the practice of literature and the fictional world as part of the social discourse of subjectivity and modernization would carry us beyond theoretical abstractions of the ideas of self, at which level much of the intellectual thinking in the 1980s was formulated. Anchoring the critique of idealism in the fictional world and its imaginings would also allow us to probe another side of the idealism of the era: the intellectuals’ optimism about the prospect of a humanistic future for China and their central role in its reification. By turning to literature, we raise the issue whether a faith in the theory of subjectivity and enlightenment was and could be translated unproblematically into fictional realities, which, unless completely utopian (and in that case self-defeating for the social project), cannot transcend the trappings of history. We cannot assume that the age of ideas was automatically an age of the triumph of ideas. It is my contention that despite the blare surrounding subjectivity and enlightenment, the post-Mao subject was in trouble long before its final dissolution in the 1990s. Before I go on to explore that topic, however, I offer a closer look at why I use the question of subjectivity in literature as my springboard.

**Why Subjectivity and Why Literature?**

To answer this question requires looking back, which is abundant in contemporary criticism. Browsing through essays on Chinese literature written since the late 1980s, we are likely to come upon such descriptive
phrases as “digu” (low valleys), “piruan” (fatigued and weak), “shiluo” (loss), “shizhong” (loss of gravity), and “shiyian” (loss of voice). Putting aside questions of whether these judgments are fair and accurate and whether we should take into consideration the complex emotions that may have prompted this kind of response (e.g., the cultural intellectuals’ need to negotiate their anxiety toward a blooming popular literature, which many of them could not endorse for artistic and ideological reasons), we can agree that the negative verdict was based on the perceived existence of a prior condition. The digu presupposes a binary opposite, a gaofeng (peak) from whose glory the present has descended. Similarly, “loss,” an indication of depletion, by necessity speaks to a previous state of fullness and plenitude. Behind these rather gloomy characterizations, it is not hard for us to detect a sense of nostalgia for the vanished good old days.

The “good old days” the post–June Fourth literature is often measured against came to be known as literature of the New Era (xinshi wuxue), a golden age of creation when Chinese writers enjoyed unprecedented intellectual freedom and social prestige. Indeed, aided by Deng Xiaoping’s open-door policy and the inflow of ideas from the West, post-Mao literature flourished, enlivening the literary stage with a fanfare of fresh trends and new voices. As many critics have noted, the most important feature of this new literature was its focus on the representation of the self and subjectivity, an issue at the heart of the May Fourth fiction, revisited with a sense of urgency and vengeance after the Cultural Revolution. But this was not simply a venture confined within the literary field: it had sociopolitical significance. The orchestration and exploration of the self indicated a search for a new subjectivity. In other words, the permutations in the presentation of the self and subjectivity can be interpreted as a consciously constructive process, by which means Chinese writers were seeking an alternative to the old model of the nonindividuated class consciousness imposed on the human subject by Maoist Communist ideology. The ultimate purpose of the search was to establish a new subject.

This ambitious project was initiated in an ethos of re-creation at a critical, historical juncture. The conclusion of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 marked the end of Maoist rule and the beginning of a new era. As is clear from Chinese intellectuals’ fondness for the words “zai” and “cong” (equivalent to the prefix re- in English) in such terms as “zai zhu” (reconstruct) and “cong jian” (reconfigure), the post-Mao period was perceived as an era of extensive demolition and rebuilding. Like all former Communist states in the Eastern bloc in the 1980s, China faced profound ideological transformations, a process inevitably accompanied by ecstasy, expectations, confusion,
and frustration. At the start of the radical reformation following the Cultural Revolution, society experienced an acute identity crisis. What critics called the “three-belief crisis” (sanxin weiji)—crisis of belief in Marxism (xinyang weiji), crisis of faith in socialism (xinxin weiji), and crisis of trust in the Communist Party (xinren weiji)—was widespread in society at large, and among young people and intellectuals—the most sensitive barometer of social sentiments—in particular (Goldman, Link, and Su 1993, 129).

No doubt the crisis was precipitated by the calamity of the Cultural Revolution, but arguably the changes implemented by the new regime also played a part. Initiated by Deng Xiaoping’s supporters in June 1978, the discussion of the “criterion of truth” was carried out in the media to repudiate Mao’s personality cult (Schoenhals 1991). It was soon followed by official deprioritization of the class struggle in society and the rehabilitation of hundreds of thousands of people wrongly accused of various ideological crimes. These corrective measures helped Deng Xiaoping distance his Party from his predecessor’s regime, winning him tremendous support from the populace. But with all former policies denounced and new ones not yet in place, not much was left to guide the individual in the still highly politicized society. The extraordinary zeal poured into the discussion of “socialist alienation” in the early 1980s proves that despite its defiant tone, the post-Mao self found it necessary first and foremost to define itself vis-à-vis the political system. If the category of class no longer served to separate “us” from “them,” how would people align themselves and relate to one another? If the socialism practiced since 1949 was a moral and economic failure as often presented then by a sweeping condemnation of the Communist history in the wake of the Cultural Revolution, what could replace it as a centripetal force for the country? To those who tended to emphasize China’s impressive economic accomplishments in the past two decades without the help of class struggle and Mao’s brand of socialism but failed to adequately note the enormous costs exacted by the process, these may appear to be unnecessary worries. But we must remember that people had previously genuinely believed in socialism as a viable cause to lead China out of national humiliation and poverty, and that the forceful official indoctrination of class struggle and socialism since the founding of the People’s Republic had enabled the three beliefs (in Marxism, socialism, and the Party) to manipulate their perception of their legitimacy in the Communist society. The political convictions on which the three beliefs rested provided the ideological moorings for individuals to regard themselves as meaningful entities in relation to the established social order.
With the ideological ground shifting under their feet after the Cultural Revolution, many felt a strong sense of disorientation.

In the late 1970s the journal *China Youth*, the organ of the Communist Youth League, launched a discussion on the meaning of life, drawing hundreds of letters in response. In one widely disseminated letter, an aspiring young writer found “the path of life narrower and narrower.” Relating her disappointment with reality, she commented that altruism, the moral principle of socialism, was but a façade. Deep down everyone was selfish and would act on self-interest at critical moments (Pan 1980). In another article a young man questioned the viability of socialism. He wrote:

So far as our generation is concerned, we have been taught, ever since primary school, how good our socialist motherland is and how bitter and hard the lives of the people are in capitalist nations. [Now] we see from television the skyscrapers, modern facilities, parks and cultural centers in foreign countries. Compared with that, our country is backward. How can you expect us to turn our thinking around to continue believing in the superiority of socialism?2

What is more interesting here is not the writers’ recognition of the erroneousness of their former beliefs but the deep ambivalence embedded in their remarks. The anguish felt by the young people, I would argue, resulted from their unwillingness to fully accept their new convictions. The letters’ negation of the whitewashed socialist reality notwithstanding, the writers still implicitly held the moral, ideological principles of socialism to be the norm. Why should attention to personal interests lead to a narrower path of life (if the idealized socialist cause was not regarded as a broader path)? Did it matter if a person believed in socialism or not? To the young man, it obviously did, or he would not have found it necessary to talk about his inability to do so. The erosion of political beliefs after Mao’s death created a vacuum. It freed the individual, but for what purpose? People were consequently forced to reorient and ask themselves, “Who was I? Who am I? What will I be?” Reconstruction of the human subject(ivity) thus became an urgent task for Chinese intellectual-writers, who continued to see themselves, in the May Fourth tradition, as social reformers and spokespeople for the national conscience.

True heirs to their May Fourth predecessors, who created the *baihua* (vernacular) fiction to castigate the Confucian self in celebration of the Enlightenment individual, post-Mao writers also made literature a site of
contestation, resistance, and experimentation. It was where the new human subject(ivity), often in open opposition to the former Communist ideology, was imagined and represented. Various ideas of the self and subject-positions were explored and conceptualized, their consonance and contradictions affirmed or negated in the created world. Working in close conjunction with other critical discourses of the era, literature gave concrete forms to many theoretical arguments of the day through its products and production. An important force in the postrevolutionary reconstruction, literature made a noticeable social impact in the New Era, injecting much energy into China’s course of modernization. Textualizing and consequently constituting history, post-Mao literature not only is rich in “historical resonance,” to use a new historicist phrase, but also has helped generate it.

Thus, postrevolutionary literature offers fascinating material for a study of the search for a new subject(ivity) in contemporary China. But in studying the works, we cannot afford to overlook their authors, those who attempted to construct China’s national story. As in any act of representation, the writer’s agency (or lack of it) unavoidably comes into play. An appropriative activity, representation registers, among its other aims, the representer’s visions, aspirations, expectations, and anxieties. This is especially true of post-Mao literature. Wrestling with the question of the subject in literature, Chinese writers often used their own experiences of suppression (which they saw as representative of the people’s experience) under Mao’s rule as a reference for analysis and protest. For example, not only did many stories in the New Era have intellectuals and writers as the heroes, but also the issue of representation became a central point of contention. Liu Zaifu’s theory of subjectivity in literature, which I discuss in the next chapter, stems specifically from his challenge to Mao’s denial of the writer’s subjective agency. The search, as a result, was as much a crusade for the Chinese people as one for the intellectuals themselves. The writers’ self-consciousness in the project is clearly manifested in the directions of the search (the recall of humanism as an emancipatory discourse to counter the “socialist alienation”), its priorities (the focus on independence and autonomy), and its double objective: restoring subjectivity to literary characters and, in the process, to the writers themselves as creative agents. A decade into the New Era, the result seemed heartening. As Howard Goldblatt aptly puts it, “Chairman Mao would not be amused” (Goldblatt 1995). Post-Mao writers mounted an all-out assault on the Communist principles—artistic, social, and ideological—ignoring taboos in both subject matter and techniques. It is no exaggeration to say that post-Mao literature has effectively challenged all previous traditions (which came to
include the May Fourth literary realism), completely repainting China’s literary landscape in the 1980s, though the writers inherited from both the May Fourth and Communist traditions the confidence in the power of literature over the human minds, the belief in literature’s role in nation building, and the intellectuals’ social commitment.

While I fully acknowledge, however, the achievements of post-Mao literature, the purpose of this book is not to trumpet the success of the search. In recent years post-Mao literary and cultural scenes have been the subject of a number of inquiries. From the symptoms of the “culture fever” in the 1980s, the rise of Chinese modernism in the age of reforms, to the evolving conceptions of modernity and their critiques in the intellectual discourse, from the masculinist search for the male self and the disturbing trend of misogyny in post-Mao literary practice to the individual visions of the new avant-garde writers, the critics have probed various aspects of the era, discerning and dissecting its dynamics and problematics from a variety of theoretical perspectives. These studies have shed much light on the complexities of the vibrant New Era. But what David Wang names the “bizarre visage of life,” a prevalent phenomenon in the New Era literature, has not received extensive attention. In 1988 Wang noted:

Throughout modern Chinese literary history, it is difficult to find a period in which [the literary scene] is peopled by so many bizarre characters invested with such complex symbolic meaning. The range of characters that emerge from the works of the New Period mainland Chinese writers include: the blind, the mute, the crippled, the humpbacked, the sexually impotent, the bound-feet fetishist, the osteomalacia victim, the “living dead,” not to mention the mentally deranged and the psychotic. Suddenly the “Socialist New China” that was once glorified by such writers as Yang Mo and Hao Ran has become a dilapidated and grotesque haven filled with souls that are maimed either physically or spiritually. (209)

Possible cases to footnote the critic’s terse summary come to mind readily. Both prominent and less well-known examples, which for lack of space I do not discuss in the book, are: the politically as well as sexually impotent rightists in Zhang Xianliang’s novellas about life in the labor camps published in the early 1980s; a fifty-year-old man who never outgrows the mentality and physique of a child in Wang Zhaojun’s story “The Man That Never Grows” (“Bu lao lao”); Cripple Ah Er, a youngster who has lost all sensitivity as a result of the abuse he suffers in the story of the same title by Wang Anyi; the tormented souls in a series of absurdist fiction on the
dehumanizing political repressions written by Zong Pu, “Who Am I?” (“Shei shi wo?”), “The Humble Abode” (“Woju”), and “The Head in the Swamp” (“Nizhao zhong de toulu”); the world inhabited by the inmates of a madhouse, their warden, and the spectators, in which insanity is only a matter of degree, in “The Director and His Lunatics” (“Yuanzhang he tade fengzimen”) by Xu Xiaohe. The late 1980s produced its own breed of inexplicable characters that defies logic and reason, most notably in Yu Hua’s fiction—the self-mutilating middle school teacher who practices his obsession with ancient methods of torture on his own body, family members who destroy one another in senseless revenge, and friends and neighbors reveling in gruesome killings.

The “complex symbolic meaning” of these “bizarre characters” is worth further exploration. I agree with David Wang’s view that this grotesque vision of life is a repudiation of embellished socialist reality; but to my mind, to confine the interpretation of such characters within the Communist past fails to recognize the full force of their representation as a historical phenomenon at the intersection of China’s transition from Mao to the post-Mao era. I would argue that the problematic figures do not speak only from and about the Maoist past. As shown in many instances, the production of bizarre characters persisted well after the cathartic “literature of the wounded,” which exposes the wrongdoings of the Mao era, then subsided around 1980. Distressingly resistant to closure, these characters have deeper implications that go directly to the heart of the recall of human subjectivity. While the physically deformed beings bear outward signs of their symbolic deficiencies, less obvious but equally significant to our understanding of the era and the challenges it faced are characters that appear physically unimpaired but nonetheless suffer from functional inadequacies. These apparently “normal” characters betray more insidious problems in exercising human agency and are therefore mirror images of the physically crippled. Together the two types of flawed beings form a stubborn underscore, a discordant note in the symphony of enlightenment and subjectivity.

A sharp contrast to the optimism and forward-looking ethos of the era, the problematic characters and their representation ought to be studied against the designs and desires of the age that had made the recovery of human subjectivity paramount to all its other objectives. I would contend that the imagining of the blemished characters points inevitably to the tensions very much covered up by the post-Mao urge to surge ahead. In particular, it signifies certain tensions between the writers’ creative intentions—their ambition to erect a new subject in literature—and the created realities. I address these tensions through a critical reading of the problematic sub-
ject, the physically and the metaphorically impaired beings alike. I am interested in teasing out their symbolic meaning in relation to the post-Mao reconstructive project. I explore the facets of what I call the subject in crisis that has emanated from the search for a new subject, focusing on the representation of human agency in post-Mao literature. I ask the following questions about the represented as well as the representing: What are the paradigms of the problematic subject? What accounts for its deficiencies historically and ideologically? Further, what is the nature of the crisis in ontological and epistemological terms? The analyses of the fictional subject lead to questions about the meta-narrative, the national story of rejuvenation. Situating the problematic subject in the national search, I examine its potential links to the post-Mao future by uncovering the latent anxieties that informed and were embodied in its representation, anxieties about the redeemability of the subject and the writers’ own creative potency muted and overlooked by the utopian longing of the era. As we reassess the euphoria of the 1980s more than a decade after it dissipated, it is time for us to recognize the prophetic role of the problematic subject and acknowledge the limit in the power of literature to transcend its own social and historical circumstances.

**What Subject?**

Before I spell out the details of the investigation, I must ask some questions and establish parameters in order to define the post-Mao ideal of the self, which in turn will allow us to address its absence in literature evidenced in the problematic self. I propose to locate the post-Mao subject on two spectrums outlined here in general terms, a theoretical spectrum where we can measure the Chinese model against the development of ideas in world history, and a historical spectrum where we can situate it in relation to China’s own pursuit of modernity.

The formation of subject(ivity) is a well-studied category in philosophy. The twentieth century in particular has witnessed constant revisions of each and every theory of the subject. In view of the rich and vigorous inquiries, to speak of an unspecified subject becomes problematic in itself. It is generally agreed that reconceptualization of the human being in the twentieth century started with the deconstruction of the Cartesian Enlightenment subject of rationality, self-knowledge, and universality. The development of psychoanalysis and the keen interest in the function of language constitute the two dominant tendencies in the deconstructive efforts. By digging into its childhood and unveiling the repressed and distorted
memories and conflictual desires in the subconscious and unconscious of the mind, Freudian psychoanalysis has successfully debunked the rationality of the self-knowing subject. Jacques Lacan, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Michel Foucault, and the feminists have further destroyed the wholeness and autonomy of the subject by locating its subjectivity in the realms of language and institutionalized discursive practices. They argue that as the subject participates in a multitude of discourses, subjectivity becomes precarious, contradictory, and ever-changing. As a result, the conscious, coherent, and rational self envisioned and idealized by Enlightenment humanism as the producer of universal meaning is radically decentered. The autonomous individual yielded its throne to the subject, whose subjectedness, according to post-structuralist theories, reduces it to being a product of language and discourse. But the story does not end there. If the subject is generated by discourse, is not discourse also generated by the subject (Weimann 1987)? Thus, while acknowledging that the subject is a discursive construct subjected to the mediation and manipulation of social practices, feminists and many others chose to emphasize human agency, the being’s ability to understand the condition and intention of its actions and, consequently, to effect changes. They have turned language and discursive practices into sites of resistance to carry out struggles to redefine femininity, masculinity, and both male and female subjectivity.

Where, then, does the post-Mao subject stand on this spectrum? Anti-climactic to the radical rethinking of the human being in the West, the subject idealized, glorified, and pursued by post-Mao Chinese intellectuals turns back, by way of the May Fourth tradition, to the Cartesian Enlightenment humanist model now very much out of favor in Western theories. How do we account for this anachronism? To understand the post-Mao fascination with the Enlightenment paragon, it is necessary to bring into our discussion the historical spectrum. A brief review of the genesis of the modern self, the prototype of the post-Mao subject, in pre-Communist China will enable us to put the contemporary project into historical perspective. Tracing the contours of the discursive self can also help us specify the historical roots of the postrevolutionary ideal and its salient characteristics within the modern tradition. The May Fourth endeavor that enframed the conception of the modern self and its legacies has been the subject of numerous inquiries. More recent scholarship in particular has examined, against the claims by the May Fourth elites, the evolution of the Chinese discourse of modernity and the cultural politics—the linguistic, rhetorical, polemic, and historiographical practices—that helped turn the project into a dominant discourse with hegemonic power in the era (Doleželová-
Velingerová and Oldřich Král 2001; Duara 1995). With full recognition of the complex nature of the movement, and the modern discourse of the self and the intricacies in its imagining and practice, I offer here a very much truncated outline of its development in the May Fourth period.8

The invention of a new individual has long been a central issue in China’s quest for modernity. After their country’s repeated defeats at the hands of foreign powers in the second half of the nineteenth century, Chinese intellectuals finally realized the need for China to emphasize ideological transformation over technological improvement in its modernization. In what Yu-sheng Lin characterizes as a “totalistic” repudiation of China’s past—“an ideological commitment to a cause of total rejection of Chinese social and cultural traditions”—the May Fourth radicals advocated a complete overhaul of Chinese culture that crystallized in the creation of an antitraditional being (Lin 1972, 26).9 Identifying Confucianism as the primary target, the critique of tradition focused on the Confucian self in personal relations, the pivot of the Confucian vision of the world. Grounding the self firmly in its relatedness to other human beings, Confucianism underlines role-playing, specifying the human being in the male position as father, son, husband, brother, friend, or subject to a ruler. Under this philosophy, self-cultivation means learning to be a ritual being, to know and observe appropriate social rules. Nevertheless, scholars of Confucianism have reiterated that the emphasis on role-playing and on the self as a center of relationships should not restrict us to seeing the self as a static, passive being (Tu 1985; Munro 1985b; King 1985). The self plays an active part in fulfilling its social duties and in developing the inner ren, the inborn goodness of human beings. The inherent conflicts and tensions within Confucian ethical and cultural norms10 and the complexity of social relationships and responsibilities compel the self, with subtle efforts and initiatives, to maneuver and structure the boundaries between itself and others, to certain degrees.11 The Confucian self enjoys some autonomy.

The iconoclastic May Fourth intellectuals, however, did not see this as their lived reality. The Confucian self in their interpretation is a totally suppressed being in submission to the authority of the father and other formalized obligations. Confucian society is, to use Lu Xun’s famous conceptualization, cannibalistic, a man-eating mechanism. Putting the self and society in sharp opposition, modern intellectuals accused the Confucian system of crippling individual personality and depriving the person of choice, freedom, and independence. The catchwords of the age imported from abroad, as a result, were “individualism,” “freedom,” and “democracy.” The words “geren” (individual) and “geren zhuyi” (individualism), now in prevalent
use, rang loud and clear in literature and other intellectual writings. Though the terms did not present an essential and fixed meaning to their advocates, they nonetheless seemed to have captured the May Fourth generation’s desires, hopes, and ambitions. Besides registering the confusion of an idea in the making, the indeterminacy of the terms created space for interpretation and individual appropriation (Lydia Liu 1995, 77–99). As can be gleaned from various expository essays and literary representations of the period, the tenor of the widely adopted neologisms of individual and individualism is the celebration of the once neglected and suppressed self. In broad terms, ideal individuals are beings who, free from Confucian familial obligations, have a moral right to develop their personalities to the fullest and pursue personal happiness in such basic matters as the choice of education, career, and marriage partners. This individualistic self originated in the immensely popular Western and Japanese literature introduced into China since the late Qing. The foreign texts actively appropriated by the May Fourth generation provided moral examples, behavioral codes, and discursive models, which together led to profound changes in the perception of the self and the way literature was practiced in the twentieth century. The antitraditional self, scholars concur, was a synthesis of the Enlightenment humanist ideals of rationality, truth, and compassion and the nineteenth-century realist and romanticist conceptions of combative spirit and inner sensibility.

Despite the legitimization of the self and its subjective feelings, the new individual did not evolve into an isolated entity. This is best illustrated by Hu Shi’s theory of da wo (big self or society) and xiao wo (small self or individual). The famous May Fourth scholar explains their relationship thus: “This small self of mine is not an autonomous entity, but is joined together through direct and indirect relationship with the whole of society and of the world.” As a number of critics argue, the big-small dichotomy operates on a hierarchical order, allowing the state to have precedence over the individual and nationalism over personal development (Denton 1996, 44–45; Lydia Liu 1995, 91–93). In his recent reflection on the “multidimensional” and “multidirectional” nature of the May Fourth movement, Ying-shih Yu points out that there were “two contrasting projects” in it: the Chinese Renaissance and the Enlightenment. “Renaissance was originally conceived as a cultural and intellectual project” based on the notion of intellectual autonomy. “In contrast, the Enlightenment project designed by Chinese Marxists was ultimately revolution-oriented” with an emphasis on patriotism and national salvation. Given the sociopolitical condition of the May Fourth era, the Renaissance gave way to the Enlightenment and radi-
calization of intellectual thought (Yu 2001, 307, 308). This also sheds light on the conception of the modern individual. The privileging of the collective seems to make perfect sense when we consider the historical situations leading to the inception of individualism (however it was understood in the period). Since its birth was historically grounded in the national crisis, the design and implementation of individualism were inextricably linked with the idea of nationhood and modernity. The May Fourth individual, consequently, had a teleological purpose. It was not a simple reproduction of the Enlightenment humanist ideal that insists on the intrinsic worth of the human being independent of its social values and functions (Lin 1972, 23–58). In its commitment to the nation, the modern self did not make such a clean break from the Confucian tradition as the iconoclasts would like to think. Substituting the Confucian state with the modern society they envisioned and sanctioned, the May Fourth intellectuals relocated their loyalties and obligations and, in essence, adhered to the Confucian ideal of social service.  

The Communist dogma of the self is discussed in more detail in chapter 2. Suffice it to say here that it selectively preserved what it approved of in the May Fourth tradition while suppressing the elements it did not countenance. The May Fourth brand of individualism of autonomy, personal choice, and inner feelings was condemned as decadent, petty-bourgeois indulgence contradictory to the proletarian notion of selfless devotion to the collective. In both its conception and dissemination of the Communist doctrine of the self, the CCP demonstrated a remarkable continuity with the tradition it purportedly broke away from. Although in the Marxist fashion, the Party adamantly rejected all previous systems of thought, it nevertheless capitalized on the traditional belief that the individual is part of the whole, which, as I have mentioned, also became a May Fourth component.  

What the Party effectively modified to its own advantage was the definition of what represented the whole. The Confucian ren as the unifying principle, the Daoist world of nature, and the Buddhist universal Void were all dismissed when the Party state was legitimized as the larger purpose to overrule all other individual concerns. Assuming a status as the new state religion, the Communist ideology granted itself supreme power to regulate the thinking and behavior of all its subjects. At the same time, the integration of the traditional faith in the perfectibility of human nature and the Marxist-Leninist belief in transforming individual consciousness provided the CCP with both a theoretical basis and an institutional approach to ruthlessly impose its orthodoxy on citizens of the People’s Republic of China.
Whenever they could, Chinese intellectuals protested against the Party’s rigid control over the individual. Such protests, often made at great personal risk, met invariably with more severe suppression. It became increasingly obvious to the intellectuals that the socialist principle of ideological uniformity, which engendered the problem in the first place, could not at the same time be the source of rectification. When intellectual discontent with Mao’s blatant disregard of personal freedom was officially encouraged by the new regime after the Cultural Revolution, it was but a logical step for Chinese writers to return to the modern tradition. Called into question by the post-Mao critiques of the Maoist practices, neither the PRC history nor the Communist ideology could offer any credible solutions to their own problems. The only model left was the May Fourth legacy. The subjectivity desired and put into unambiguous terms in the New Era refers to the familiar humanist ideal first developed in the May Fourth period: dignity and respect due to every human being, the autonomy that enables people to think for themselves as rational beings, and the inalienable rights that guarantee the individual the status of a self-determining, self-regulating entity. Similar to the May Fourth emphasis on the needs of the country, the post-Mao pursuit of individuality was also initiated as a collective venture, which, the intellectuals hoped, would lead in the end to the modernization of the nation.

Now let us come back to the question posed earlier. The post-Mao resurgence of humanism presents us with an obvious anachronism: after subject(ivity) as a humanist concept had long been discredited and deconstructed by contemporary thinkers in the West, it regained currency in the People’s Republic. It seems that Chinese intellectuals were hopelessly out of step with the theoretical developments elsewhere in the world. Nearly a century after Friedrich Nietzsche’s devastating statement that “God is dead” brought down the Almighty and the centered being alike, humanism was resurrected in postrevolutionary China. When individual autonomy was already proved to be unattainable fiction, Chinese intellectuals still naively believed in its uplifting power. Should we be concerned about this discrepancy? By way of answering the question, let me quote Paul Smith. In his critique of various theories on the human subject, Smith warns that “current conceptions of the ‘subject’ have tended to produce a purely theoretical ‘subject,’ removed almost entirely from the political and ethical realities in which human agents actually live” (Smith 1988, 29). In other words, in discussing the role of the subject and subjectivity, we must always take into consideration the sociopolitical specificities of the human condition. To apply this to the Chinese situation, it means that while making use of the
powerful critical perspectives offered by contemporary Western theories, we should not lose sight of the concrete, historical circumstances that determine human existence in China. Although the post-Mao humanist notion of subject(ivity) seems almost too simplistic, naive, and old-fashioned against the modernist “dehumanization” and intricate post-structuralist speculations, the belief is nonetheless authentic to the people who had themselves gone through endless political movements and had been denied the freedom of speech, freedom of belief (political and otherwise), and even freedom of movement—the fundamental human rights people take for granted in the West. This is by no means a repudiation of the relevance of Western theories in the name of cultural relativism, but a recognition that the subject in spatial and temporal realities is a historical category and that its constitution is a historical practice that responds to a specific set of conditions, raises questions, and fulfills the desires of a particular moment. When it was revived in the wake of the Cultural Revolution, humanism was used, much as it was in the May Fourth era, as a liberating discourse to challenge Mao’s dictatorship and free the individual from the grip of his ultraleftism. No one can deny the great impact its adoption had on post-Mao reorientation. In my opinion, the intrinsic value of any theory lies in its application and the resultant social consequences and ought to be understood and evaluated accordingly. If the theory of the unconscious, or any theory for that matter, had been its author’s silent, private musings, who would care?

As an emphatic protest against Maoist strictures, the post-Mao ideal of the human subject as foremost a being who thinks independently also comes close to Smith’s definition of an agent. To quote Smith again, “The human agent will be seen...as the place from which resistance to the ideological is produced or played out” (Smith 1988, xxxv). The important word here is “resistance.” Generated out of a desire to resist, post-Mao literature in the New Era in general was engaged in a search for such a self-governing entity, a being free to exercise resistance to Communist ideological impositions. Thus, the post-Mao discourse of the subject was not purely ontological or metaphysical speculations on the part of Chinese intellectuals. The painful reality of the Cultural Revolution, which gave rise to the need to rethink the subject, made purely theoretical considerations a luxury unavailable at the moment. The post-Mao model subject was a politicized humanist being.

Although the moral principle of the search bore more or less a humanist stamp, the way it materialized in literary representations was very much in tune with the twentieth-century fascination with language and social discourses. Let me hasten to add, lest this be seen as another instance of China’s
eternal catching up with the West, that this was as much a result of the writers’ conscious adoption of Western ideas as a reflex action, especially in the first few years after the Cultural Revolution, when the infatuation with Western conceptions of language was still incipient. After all, no theory can claim to be prescriptive in good faith, even less so on foreign soil, where political conditions could be radically different from those in the theory’s birthplace. Neither Chinese intellectuals nor the CCP needed to be taught about the discursive power of language. The Party’s closely guarded monopoly over the formulation of social discourses proves that Communist ideology did not require any lessons from post-structuralist theories to be convinced of language’s central role in the formation and legitimation of social knowledge. The intellectuals, for their part, were victimized too many times in the Party’s political campaigns, where slogans had lethal powers, to doubt the authority of words. Since language was the medium through which the official inculcation was implemented, it was also the site for launching counterattacks. The intellectual debates over the reality of “socialist alienation,” the renewed interest in Kantian subjectivity, and the resurgence of humanism after 1976 were essentially fights over language, over the right to influence social discourses and, consequently, human subjectivity. Just like writers in the May Fourth era, post-Mao writers had full confidence in the discursive power of language to produce social changes.

What Crisis?

But has the recall of humanism and subjective agency been successfully played out at the textual level as was intended? The best way to find an answer to this question is to see whether the fictional subject is able to fulfill the humanistic functions expected of it. In approaching the topic, I do not take issue with humanism as a theoretical position. I am not concerned with pointing out its failure to account for the complexities of the subjectivity as contemporary theories have stipulated, thus proving that the post-Mao search was flawed to begin with. Even leaving aside the (de)merits of humanism, it is highly questionable that cultural transmissions could be exact reproductions of the original. Nor would such duplications be desirable, had it been possible. Moreover, the question whether humanism was the right model for post-Mao China some two decades ago is moot at the beginning of the twenty-first century. So is the discussion of “could have” or “should have.” Instead, I focus on the performance of the subject. I argue that the subject is problematic not because of its lack of post-structuralist sophistication and subtlety but because of a much more
fundamental deficiency—its incapacity to claim agency, a constituent of any notion of active subjectivity, humanist or not.

I have chosen, primarily, works of five writers, Han Shaogong, Can Xue, Yu Hua, Mo Yan, and Jia Pingwa, to demonstrate this point. Han Shaogong and Can Xue represent two influential trends in the search for a new subject in the New Era: the xungen (searching for roots) approach that centralized Chinese identity and its cultural foundation in the country’s modernization and an experimentalist, or more accurately, an absurdist approach highlighting existential conditions of the subject. I have selected the stories not only because the subjectivity on display there is paradigmatic of the post-Mao experience but also because the writers’ representational strategies upset rather than uphold the constructive principle of the future-oriented project. Resting on a firm belief that, with intellectual intervention, temporal movement would usher in growth and re-creation, the subjectivity discourse had put a high premium on the possibilities of change. Like the May Fourth revolution, the post-Mao program of renewal was also fostered by a linear view of history. It unfolded on the conviction that history was teleological and that time should denote progression. The authors’ departure from this vision is most obvious in their attempts to divorce time from its potency and evolutionary potentiality. Han Shaogong characteristically encloses his subject in a fossilized past that repeatedly generates copies of itself, whereas Can Xue fixes the self in a timeless metaphysical eternity where temporality and transformation are simply irrelevant. This making a problem of time and agency paralyzes the post-Mao project at its epistemological foundation that emphasized the self’s power to analyze, intervene, and develop, unveiling difficulties in the practice of subjectivity not fully anticipated by more purely theoretical speculations. That the texts were produced in the heyday of the New Era and that they offer multilayered perspectives (cultural, historical, and existential) makes the authors’ representation of the troubled subject all the more poignant and meaningful.

The fiction by Yu Hua and Mo Yan analyzed here moves us into the late 1980s and the post-Tiananmen era, when the subject, fictional and real, struggles to deal with a new set of imperatives. One such imperative affecting every individual in society was for China to speed up its modernization and continue the historical journey first set in motion in the middle of the nineteenth century. The achievements of the post-Mao reforms were undeniable and have been well documented. But not all travelers on the national journey are happy. The drastic alteration in ideological, cultural, and economic practices introduced undreamed-of opportunities as well as profound confusion and pain, making human agency and a person’s ability to
adjust two keys to survival and success. Yu Hua’s stories of the frustrated traveler offer a somber reflection on the individual’s precarious position in the collective venture, the effect of which was too often measured only in tangible, material terms. Fengru feitun (Large breasts and full hips) by Mo Yan (1995a) presents a unique approach to a particular aspect of the self that has piqued Chinese imagination throughout the modern era: the formation of the Chinese self in relation to its foreign counterpart. Similar to the experience of other third world countries, China’s consciousness of itself as a nation-state emerged on the heels of foreign aggression. Since the country’s first encounter with the Western powers in the 1840s, its position in the world and the future of its cultural tradition in the course of modernization had become recurring topics in debates. The rapid pace of westernization in the post-1989 reforms gave Chinese intellectuals further cause to worry about the erosion of the national identity. Evidently, the contemplation of the Chinese self could not be made without considering its interactions with the ever-present foreign Other. Mo Yan’s inquiry into an intriguing power play between the native self and the alien Other exemplifies many of the concerns central to the configuration of the post-Mao self, such as the vitality of the national self and the authority of the foreign Other. Finally, Jia Pingwa’s 1993 novel Feidu (The ruined capital) makes explicit the question of the writer’s own agency, an issue of great urgency for the intellectuals in the early 1990s, when they were impelled to reconsider their assumptions about their profession, themselves, and their relation with the community in an increasingly commercialized society. The self-reflexivity of Jia’s novel—it depicts the intellectual’s experience and highlights the problem of representation—makes it a prime candidate in our study of intellectuals as historical subjects in China’s transitional period (zhuanxing shiqi). Together the texts will help us gauge the significance of the problematic subject and the nature of the crisis in post-Mao literature and society.

To reach this objective, careful textual analyses are essential. No doubt theoretical reflections on the issue of human agency can be carried out at a more abstract level, but in literary representations human agency can best be studied in concrete terms through the choices made or avoided, actions taken or rejected by the characters and, at the representational level, through the author’s decisions to offer or withhold certain options. To reiterate the point, representation is an act consciously taken by Chinese writers in the post-Mao era for moral, political purposes. The historical mission of establishing a new being for China was reified through imagining the subject within the text. To the minds of post-Mao writers, writing had a full mate-
riality. By describing the “real” through fiction, literature, the intellectuals hoped, would be ultimately transcribing it, making it happen as reality. Thus, the imagined world speaks equally powerfully about the creative agent and the created agent. We cannot hope to fully measure the social effect of the post-Mao search through literature, but we can discover the desires, tensions, and anxieties brought into the project by scrutinizing the texts.

Although literature provides the sources for study, my exploration incorporates both textual and extratextual dimensions of the post-Mao search. I place the literary representation against the background of major intellectual and social trends in post-Mao China: discussions of “socialist alienation” in the early 1980s, Liu Zaifu’s theory of literary subjectivity and the culture fever in the mid-1980s, and post-Tiananmen marketization in the 1990s. I examine how literature concurrently produced and echoed these currents so as to lodge the literary search in its historical context. Ultimately, through a critical reading of the subject in the text against the social context in which it was created, I seek to prove that the crisis of the subject lies in the search’s failure to offer a viable counter-model to the Maoist revolutionary archetype. By identifying and analyzing the phenomenal gap between what Chinese writers were seeking and what they actually produced, I hope to contribute to a fuller understanding of the intricacies of the post-Mao experience.

How is the problematic subject defined? Some of its striking features can be seen in an emblematic story written by Mo Yan, “Baigou qiuqianjia” (White dog and the swings). By briefly referring to the story here, I can indicate the major thematic and theoretical concerns in my approach to the crisis of the subject. The protagonist/narrator of Mo Yan’s story is a college teacher. On his visit to his hometown in the country, he goes to see his middle school sweetheart, Nuan, in her home and discovers to his dismay that the former school beauty, who is now blind in one eye, has married an uncouth deaf-mute. But even more unsettling is the grievous reality that the three children born of the marriage are all deaf and dumb like their father. On his way back to his home after the visit, the narrator is intercepted by Nuan, who waits for him in the fields with a shocking request. The woman offers herself to the narrator, entreating him to give her “a child who can speak.”

Typical of the authors analyzed in the following chapters, Mo Yan traps us in a paradigm of human deficiency. The deformity in his story cuts across gender and generational boundaries: man and woman, parents and children, everyone in the family of five is handicapped. The situation, as a result, is sinister and threatens to expand to cosmic proportions. When procreation is
repeatedly proven to be defective, deformity becomes a perpetuated pattern. What is more, the human subject is deformed in a most incapacitating way. The individual either has limited access to language or suffers from damaged vision. Obviously, the Party’s annihilation of the subjective powers of speech and perception made post-Mao writers’ obsession with their representation in and out of literature prevalent. The individual’s (in)ability to be a speaking and seeing subject is consequently the central focus in my examination of the literary characters.

Mo Yan’s short story also beckons us to reflect on the second group of subjects under interrogation in my study: Chinese intellectual-writers and the restoration of their agency. Little wonder that language and perception became dominant characteristics of the crippled subject in post-Mao literature. It is clear that the writers, for whom the denial of voice and vision was undoubtedly even more painful because their productivity hinged upon the exercise of these subjective powers, identified with the characters. Mo Yan’s story suggests that the writer’s own agency can be recovered by claiming a voice for the voiceless individual by means of creating a normal person “who can speak.” Nuan’s desperate plea can be answered only outside marriage, through the drastic intervention of the narrator, a college teacher who represents the intellectual. The last ray of hope, the intellectual-writer becomes the indispensable agent of healthy reproduction. The potential of the intellectual’s creative power is in this way given both a dramatic representation and an existential urgency in Mo Yan’s world. Following in the steps of Lu Xun’s generation, post-Mao writers entrusted themselves with the task of giving birth to an unimpaired human being, a new national subject.

But significantly, Mo Yan’s story is open-ended. It halts after presenting the concluding scene in the fields. The intellectual/narrator takes no action, leaving the woman’s plea and her desire for repletion unfulfilled. Will the narrator do as he is asked or won’t he? The lack of closure may point to a number of dilemmas facing the intellectual. He is confronted with awkward moral ambiguities. The moral duty of helping the voiceless can be achieved only by violating social codes, which would call the legitimacy of the assistance into serious question. In addition, as Yi-tsi Mei Feuerwerker cogently argues, the alienation between the intellectual and the poor peasant(s) he is supposed to represent, through which relationship Chinese writers have regularly explored the intellectual self and its role in various social and ideological programs in the twentieth century, makes his moral responsibility an “unresolvable issue” (1998, 210–213).22 The hesitation in the story thus directs a self-conscious question at the intellectuals on the
symbolic level: should they and can they shoulder the historical responsibility of creating a new subject for China? Extrapolating from Mo Yan’s story, my examination of the intellectual as a subject in history centers on unpacking post-Mao intellectuals’ ambivalence, doubts, and anxieties over their own creative power in China’s reconstruction.

Specifically, to put the literary texts in context, chapter 2 provides a historical account of the inception of and major landmarks in the post-Mao search for a new subject. It proceeds from a discussion of the Communist representation of the self to that of its destruction by contemporary Chinese critics and writers in two areas, on the theoretical front and in literary practice. The search had been a prolonged and difficult process with diversified political, moral, and aesthetic agendas. Committed neither to a fixed orbit nor to a unified leadership, the quest unfolded with constant reprogramming and new representations. In this chapter, I examine three representative models of the subject that emerged with or in response to the intellectual debates over humanism, subjectivity, and the culture fever in the New Era: the sociopolitical being, the cultural being, and the artistic self. The examination of these models offers a literary trajectory of the search as well as an assessment of their cultural-ideological significance. Readers familiar with the post-Mao cultural and literary scene might, however, wish to go directly to later chapters.

The next five chapters are devoted to the human subject within the text. Chapter 3 focuses on the protagonists in two of Han Shaogong’s xungen works, “Ba ba ba” (Pa pa pa) and “Nü nü nü” (Woman woman woman). Despite their different chronotopes (temporal-spatial backgrounds), the novellas have a conspicuous point in common: both have a flawed being as the central character, a retarded young man in the first and a half-deaf woman in the second. Adopting a Lacanian reading of the characters’ troubled relationship to language, I argue that their lack of access to language and their manipulation by an external meaning system signify the characters’ failure to be “speaking subjects,” preventing them from creating new subject-positions. Linking Han’s reproduction of the problematic subject with the politics of xungen literature, I also discuss the programmatic dilemma inherent in the xungen writers’ vision of reinventing China through cultural exploration. I contend that by condemning China to recycle its decrepit past, the author’s xungen practice unwittingly proves the impossibility of a cultural project that aims at simultaneously constructing both the past and the future.

Chapter 4 approaches the ineffectual self from the perspective of its relationship with the Other in Can Xue’s fiction. Analyzing the antagonism
between the self and the Other and, in particular, the author’s fascination with “eyes” in light of Jean-Paul Sartre’s theory of “the look,” I point out that in the eternal struggle to be the dominating “seeing subject,” the self in Can Xue’s universe, who surrenders its own power of seeing to the Other, is an ultimate victim of “the look.” Equally meaningful as the author’s vision of life in China is her unique approach of deemphasizing overt sociopolitical factors, thereby highlighting the metaphysical nature of the situation. I am interested in exploring how, by turning the existential nightmare into a perennial present, this approach projects into the future of postrevolutionary China.

Postrevolutionary China since the mid-1980s is where the next three chapters take us. I focus here in more detail on the three writers, Yu Hua, Mo Yan, and Jia Pingwa, and their representation of the questionable subject in response to social concerns crucial to the reforms. Chapter 5 studies the image of the traveler in two short stories by Yu Hua, “Shiba sui chumen yuanxing” (On the road at eighteen) and “Xianxue meihua” (Blood and plum blossoms). Situating the lonely individual on the road in Yu’s fiction against the post-Mao motif of progression and journeying, I examine the extraneousness of the traveler to the aggressive social trend of migration and movement in the post-Mao “New Long March.” The self’s confusion and lack of ability to negotiate its place in a new social space crowded with multiple competing discourses is the focus. I supplement the discussion of Yu Hua with that of a short story, “Ji zai pishengkou shang de hun” (A soul in bondage), by a Tibetan writer, Zhaxi Dawa. While the story shares similar concerns about the post-Mao traveler, Zhaxi Dawa’s metafictional design gives, however, the journey an intriguing turn, presenting an option with which the writer can contend the autocratic paternal tradition that has debilitated the younger generation.

My reflection of the self in Mo Yan’s Fengru feitun, in chapter 6, unfolds against the backdrop of China’s constant effort to create a modern self vis-à-vis the foreign Other. It centers on issues of legitimacy surrounding the fictional conflict between the Chinese self and the foreign Other/father over the ownership of the symbolic female body. I argue that the author’s preoccupation with sexual propriety and the masculinity of the Chinese self and the foreign Other is a manifestation of Chinese intellectuals’ continuing anxiety over China’s potency in the modern world. I also prove that by highlighting the impotence of the illegitimate child of racially mixed origin, Mo Yan questions both the authority of the foreign Other and the viability of the model of integration that has produced the weak bastard son. The novel thus constitutes another step in Chinese intellectuals’ unend-
ing search for a workable paradigm to imagine and define the boundaries between the national self and the foreign Other.

The final chapter, chapter 7, deals with the subject both inside and outside the text: the intellectual self in the reform era and its literary representation in Jia Pingwa’s novel *The Ruined Capital*. The chapter has a dual focus. After discussing the rise and fall of the intellectuals’ representative authority in relation to various appropriating activities in the post-Mao era, I concentrate on their marginalization in China’s consumerism in the 1990s. Next I examine how the intellectuals’ “existential” crisis is represented and “resolved” in literature, using *The Ruined Capital* as a case study. By analyzing the artist, the mirror image of the intellectual, against the social condition in which he was created, I seek to accentuate the role of representation in mediating the complex relationship among subject, text, and history. I argue that through the appropriative act of representation, the author creates a new center to allow the marginalized intellectual to negotiate his anxiety in real history in the realm of literature.

The problematic being, in whom individual and group subjectivity and the writer’s creative agency intertwine, occupies a conspicuous spot in the post-Mao gallery of subjects. A culturally and ideologically loaded complex, it aggregates post-Mao intellectual-writers’ contemplation of China’s past, present, and future. More intriguing than the all-powerful reformist who replaces the Communist hero and smacks of revolutionary romanticism in some of the post-Mao works, the crippled subject exposes the failure of literary imagination to go beyond the limit of its own burdened past, revealing the complexities and difficulties sometimes forgotten in the euphoria of the 1980s. The stories accounting the various deficiencies of the post-Mao subject analyzed here form a quintessential narrative of lack. Hauntingly persistent, they record moments of desire and loss. Too painful and too deeply felt to be cast aside, the lack has to be acknowledged before healing can begin. In the same spirit, I hope this study can help us recognize the full scope of the challenges confronting China’s project of reconstruction, which is compelled and has endeavored to come to terms with each significant moment in the country’s bumpy ride toward modernization.