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ROGUE VERBS

The Situation of Chinese Culture in the 2020s

In a dizzying sequence, a student heroine is whirled back through the years to awaken at the scene of her own funeral in the 1980s. As the assembled mourners go through their formal bows, she stirs on the bier, sits up in her burial silks, gawps at their dark and shapeless clothes, leaps to her feet, rushes to the doors of the funeral parlour, flings them open to reveal the colourless, carless 1980s street and gasps: 'I've gone back in time!' Thus begins the highly successful 2024 micro-drama, *I Became a Stepmother in the 1980s*. Formatted in a vertical 'portrait' frame for watching on a smartphone, each of its 82 action-packed episodes takes on average less than two minutes. In what follows, the highly relatable Si Nian, as spirited as she is beautiful, navigates multiple domestic power struggles, at breakneck speed—standing up to the patriarchal Si family that had adopted her, then to a domineering female-in-law—all in the first five episodes. Humiliating the villains and winning widespread respect, she offers the micro-drama's multitude of viewers a satisfying narrative of revenge and wish fulfilment, affirming the progress that's been made in women's social position since the 1980s.

Few cultural forms have commanded such a vast audience. As of February 2026, over 700 million viewers were registered across the micro-drama platforms' monthly user bases, with daily screentime averaging two hours per person. The form first emerged in 2018, then underwent explosive growth during the pandemic; today, it constitutes an industry worth approximately 100 billion yuan ($14 billion). According to a recent White Paper, over 140,000 micro-dramas were released in the first eight months of 2025, with more than a hundred thousand enterprises

involved.[1] These are conservative estimates, however, since the number of private online drama-production companies is impossible to account for and the 140,000 figure represents only the 'vertical-screen' content that could be statistically tracked. Nevertheless, set against the 600-plus full-length feature films produced in 2025, the contrast is stark. Jokers have re-dubbed Hengdian, China's Hollywood—the vast film and TV-production complex in Zhejiang—as 'Verticaldian'.

Formally, micro-dramas are distinguished by fast-paced storytelling and plentiful twists, with much of the plot conveyed by dialogue or voice-over—an explosion of events and verbs, comparable to a comic strip. Individual episodes can last less than a minute, packing in the content that a feature film might take an hour to unfold; some series run to hundreds of episodes. The production process is just as rapid: a whole series is often shot within a single week, with the production cycle taking just a few weeks more. Micro-drama apps come with a micro-payment mechanism for each episode—the first few are free—and are deeply integrated into algorithmic recommendation platforms, whose intensive 'traffic testing' assesses user completion and conversion rates, thereby determining whether to increase promotion or discontinue the series. Combined with the micro-payment system, this results in an extremely flexible business model. Needless to say, AI technology is currently driving a new wave of industry transformation, reshaping both production processes and aesthetic style.

In many respects, high-speed micro-dramas can be seen as the defining form of our era. But they are not alone. A plethora of new cultural modes have been generated amid the breakneck change that Chinese society has undergone in the past twenty years: the full arrival of the online realm coinciding with gigantic processes of modernization and urbanization, within a continuous national and political frame. Serialized, self-published, pay-as-you-go web-novels and online fictions have won hundreds of millions of readers across multiple genres—fantasy, sci-fi, martial arts—with readers' online reactions providing an updated form of traditional Chinese marginal commentary. User-generated short videos and livestreams attract showers of likes, comments and ratings. These forms have been the subject of much anxious editorializing in China, with critics accusing them of causing 'brain rot', linking them to diminished attentions spans and a decline in mental well-being, or

[1] See 'White Paper on the Development of China's Micro-Short Drama Industry (2025)', *The Paper*, 12 November 2025.

advising that algorithms are sapping users' agency and self-regulatory capacity, increasing passivity and isolation.[2]

Such criticisms are understandable, and not without merit. Yet it would be a mistake for cultural theorists to dismiss outright new forms that are entrancing hundreds of millions of China's citizens. Moreover, as we shall see, the 'highest' modes of avant-garde literary production have been adopting comparable strategies of speed and action for quite some time. History has its reasons; and it makes sense to try to understand this cultural moment before we condemn it. 'Hysterical realism' was the phrase coined by James Wood to describe novelistic reactions in the Anglosphere—by largely oppositional writers: Pynchon, Rushdie, David Foster Wallace, Zadie Smith—to the Thatcher–Reagan shock: fictions that 'operated like a perpetual motion machine, fleshing out inhuman stories with wild plotting and larger-than-life characters'; the pursuit of 'vitality at all costs'.[3] In some respects, this 'hysteria' might be said to describe the operating principles of contemporary Chinese art and literature. Television dramas and films are driven by the relentless multiplication of situations and actions; when one device or protagonist can no longer sustain the plot, a new one is rapidly drafted in. This game-like expansion of the narrative constitutes a new grammar, one that finds its most concise expression in the cultural capsule of the micro-drama form. Nevertheless, I shall argue here that actions imply actors, as verbs imply subjects; it may be mistaken to identify these new forms with passivity and isolation. To explore this, we need to shift perspective, setting them in a longer cultural history as part of a larger contemporary condition. In doing so, we can perhaps offer a more nuanced and cautiously hopeful account of their social meaning.

Speed-up

Well before the micro-drama transformed the mass-cultural landscape in China, a dramatic acceleration in tempo had already been taking place within contemporary literature. Plot came to predominate over

[2] *Inter alia*, 'In the Age of Fragmentation, Micro-Series Must Prioritize Quality', *People's Daily Online*, 22 September 2022; Yan Qing, 'Reflections on the Mechanisms of Short-Video Addiction and the Mismatch Between Human Intelligence and Interaction', *People's Forum*, no. 3, 2025, pp. 101–105; Dai Yao and Wang Zhiwei, 'Accustomed to Being Fed "Fragmented" Content, Can You Still Think for Yourself?', *China Youth Daily*, 13 February 2026.

[3] James Wood, 'Human, All Too Inhuman', *New Republic*, 2000; collected in *Serious Noticing: Selected Essays*, London 2019.

atmosphere, events over psychology, verbs over adjectives. Indeed, micro-dramas can be seen as the latest manifestation of a longer-running cultural phenomenon. Consider the evolution of two representative figures of the late-1980s literary avant-garde, Yu Hua and Sun Ganlu, whose work has undergone a marked change in velocity. Yu Hua's early novellas, such as *1986* (1987) and *One Kind of Reality* (1988), proceeded methodically, their depictions of malice, violence and mortality rendered with clinical precision.[4] In the 2010s however, his narratives began to accelerate. The tempo of *The Seventh Day* (2013), for instance—in which the recently deceased protagonist Yang Fei wanders the world of the living, recounting stories of the marginalized and dispossessed—keeps frantic pace with the contemporary news cycle.[5] Characters are no longer presented through extensive internal monologue; the drama of the inner life has been superseded by the drama of the situation and the act. *Lu Keming's Secret Smile* (2025), Yu Hua's most recent novel, a satirical tale that follows the turbulent life of a small-business owner, moves faster still, shocking many readers who felt it too resembled the breathless, disposable style of online fiction.[6] Yet we might also read this narrative acceleration as a synchronization with contemporary life—Yu Hua's paring back of style, the grounding in the 'here and now', not a concession to commercialism, but working towards a somatic mapping of our era.

Sun Ganlu's work has seen an even more radical transformation from the 'linguistic labyrinths' that brought him to prominence.[7] During his avant-garde period, he was renowned for his unhurried, densely poetic language, in which imagery and metaphors were layered one upon another to create what was called a 'strange Chinese'. In the new century, he has transformed from an alchemist of language into a chronicler of history. Here are the opening lines of his latest novel, *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* (2022),

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[4] Yu Hua (b. 1960): major works include *To Live* (1993), *The Story of Xu Sanguan Selling Blood* (1995) and *Brothers* (2005–6). During his avant-garde period, he favoured absurd, non-linear narratives; his style continued to evolve, at times displaying dry humour and at others unbridled exuberance, navigating between 'treating the weighty with lightness' and 'treating the light with gravity'. Yu Hua, 'Nineteen Eighty-Six', *Harvest*, no. 6, 1987; 'One Kind of Reality', *Beijing Literature*, no. 1, 1988.

[5] Yu, *The Seventh Day*, Beijing 2013.

[6] Yu, *Lu Keming's Secret Smile*, Beijing 2025.

[7] Sun Ganlu (b. 1959): major works include 'I Am the Young Wine Jar' (1987), *The Messenger's Letter* (1986) and *Breathing* (1993).

> It was the fifteenth day of the twelfth lunar month, barely ten days to go till New Year's Eve.
>
> At about 9.35 in the morning, Wei Dafu walked up to the entrance of the Zhejiang Grand Theatre, directly opposite the market on the Fourth Road.[8]

The plot concerns the underground operations of the Party in 1930s Shanghai and their strategic relocation to Ruijin in Jiangxi Province. In what follows, eleven CCP members arrive in quick succession, with the KMT authorities on their heels. The novel is built upon a cascade of incidents, quite unlike anything else in Sun's oeuvre. While the work that established his reputation was not devoid of suspense, this typically derived from his use of language. In *The Messenger's Letter* (1987), the mysterious origins of the figure and the unknown destination of the correspondence might have provided the ingredients for a *noir*, yet the plot was perpetually derailed by intricate metaphors, disjointed syntax and a narrative voice that turned in upon itself.[9] The first two paragraphs of his seminal novel of urban alienation, *Breathing* (1993), were twelve times as long as those of *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains*, yet nothing really happened beyond the protagonist, Luo Ke, 'hanging up the telephone with a sigh'. The primary action was rumination, even as 'he took two steps barefoot along the grain of the floorboards'. In the 1980s and 90s, Sun Ganlu's characters were not men of action but 'sleepwalkers'. His explorations of memory, dream and subjective time led critics to refer to him as China's Proust.

In *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains*, however, Sun Ganlu takes the opposite approach. Sentences are clipped, paragraphs short, narrative momentum continuous—there is a verb every ten characters. Protagonists speak succinctly and act decisively. 'Old Wei stood by the kerb, holding a cigarette case in his hand, just about to open it. He paused, looked up ahead, as if he had suddenly noticed something.' Whether comrades or enemies, no one stops to rest unless they've been wounded. The adverb 'fast' appears 87 times in the novel; the verb 'retreat', 54 times. In the context of Sun's previous work, such a style could be seen as a regression. More interestingly, though, it may mark an enigmatic movement in literary history. The proliferation of verbs has often marked paradigms shifts—as when Robinson Crusoe arrived on his desert island and established the early-bourgeois order there through a relentless series of acts. The emergence of a new literature

[8] Sun, *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains*, Shanghai 2022.
[9] Sun, 'The Messenger's Letter', *Harvest*, no. 5, 1987.

can also announce itself in this way: *The Plum in the Golden Vase* under the late Ming dynasty, or Jin Yong's fiction in the 1950s and 60s, used verbs to set new cultural rhythms in motion. To borrow from Franco Moretti, this groundswell announces 'not just the beginning of a new era, but a beginning *in which a structural contradiction becomes visible that will be never overcome*'.[10]

Since the 2010s, events—and with them, a proliferation of verbs—have flooded Chinese fiction, often confronting the reader on the first page of the novel. Bi Feiyu's *Welcome to the World* (2023) throws us into the chaos of a medical emergency, Zhang Yueran's *Swan Hotel* (2024) into a kidnapping, which is in turn rapidly interrupted.[11] The alteration in tempo and subject amongst these leading contemporary writers has been accompanied by a matching change in style: the long, syntactically complex sentences of the previous era have given way to short, verb-driven statements. This is nothing less than a textual manifestation of the contemporary invading the novel. Jin Yucheng's celebrated *Blossoms*, with its panoramic account of daily life in Shanghai during both the Cultural Revolution and Reform Era, clearly belongs to this turn; Jin portrays the diverse inhabitants of the city along two parallel timelines, the 1960s and 1990s, with characters and narratives that are dazzlingly varied, yet the prose is characterized by concise sentences and a plain descriptive style, capturing the city with unadorned precision.[12] So too the work of the three writers who symbolize the revival of Northeast Literature—Ban Yu, Shuang Xuetao and Zheng Zhi.[13]

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[10] Franco Moretti, *The Bourgeois*, London and New York 2014, p. 35.

[11] Zhang Yueran, *Swan Hotel*, Shanghai 2024; Bi Feiyu, *Welcome to the World*, Beijing 2023. Zhang Yueran (b. 1982) made her name with vivid narratives of youth, including the short-story collection, *Sunflowers Lost in 1890* (2003), and *The Cocoon* (2016). In recent years she has evolved from a chronicler of individual experience to an explorer of generational trauma. The earlier works of Bi Feiyu (b. 1964) include *The Blue-Robed Singer* (2000), *The Plain* (2005) and *Massage* (2008).

[12] Jin Yucheng, *Blossoms*, Shanghai 2013. Jin (b. 1952) wrote *Blossoms* in Shanghainese for serial online publication in 2011; it was published in book form two years later.

[13] Ban Yu (b. 1986), Shuang Xuetao (b. 1983) and Zheng Zhi (b. 1987): often referred to as the 'Three Masters of the Northeast Literary Renaissance', their work depicts the landscape of the region in the wake of industrial decline in a stark and concise style. Zheng Zhi's work is gritty and raw, focusing on the struggles of marginalized youth; Ban Yu employs a more poetic mode to portray the hidden pain and glimmers of hope of his characters; Shuang Xuetao excels at weaving historical reverberations through a suspenseful narrative of ordinary lives.

Remapping the nation

The novel had thus begun to align itself with the frenzied velocity of China's 21st century well before the tsunami of micro-dramas. As narrative accelerated and verbs proliferated, the relationship between characters and space changed, too. Leaving the confines of their inner world, characters return to the scenes of public life—to streets and alleys—in ways that remake the geography of the novel. In place of 'sleepwalking', Chen Qianli, the main character of *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains*—whose name literally translates to 'a thousand miles'—slogs through a litany of locations in the planned journey between Shanghai and Ruijin. The characters in Sun Ganlu's novels still migrate to windows, which often look out on the 'gathering dusk' or the 'shrouding mist of dawn'. Some of the locations are familiar: in *A Thousand Miles* we revisit the old French Concession, where Luo Ke stood in *Breathing*, next to the library he used to go to. Yet what characters see has undergone a transformation. In *Breathing*'s opening scene, the protagonist pushed open the window and was met by 'a flood of past memories and the dense, leafy shadows of the plane trees'. In *A Thousand Miles*:

> Qin Chuan'an cast a glance out of the window. It was nearly midday. The sun shone over the houses on the other side of the street, where strings of salted fish, cured pork and wind-dried chicken hung beneath the windows.

Or again, as Chen Qianli and Wei Dafu sit down: 'the room gradually darkened; someone was taking in the laundry that had been hung out to dry and the sound of a rattan beater striking a cotton quilt drifted in through the window.' These quotidian signs of life—the salted fish and dried meat, the beating of quilts—no doubt existed outside the windows of Sun Ganlu's earlier novels. The difference is that his protagonists barely registered them, so preoccupied were they with their inner life. Settings in *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains*, by contrast, are not featured as expressions of subjectivity or spurs for reflection. The material specificity of locations like Shanghai's Fourth Road Market, the North Sichuan Road Bridge, the Soy-Sauce Brewery, the Maochang Coal Depot, Zhujiajiao Town and the Dianshan Lake District is now registered with startlingly immediacy within the novelist's field of vision.

The new Chinese novel has returned to the external world, wanting to be back in touch with it. *Ascending Spring Terrace* (2024) by Gei Fei, another

key figure of the avant-garde period, is symptomatic in this respect.[14] This latest novel is his most expansive in terms of geography and *dramatis personae*. Each of its four chapters unfolds around a central character, from different social strata—Zhou Zhenxia, a corporate executive; Chen Kemiing, the middleman between the boss and his employees; Shen Xinyi, a clerk; Dou Baoqing, a driver—who each inhabit their own terrain: the city of Tianjin, Xiaoyangfang village in Beijing, Tiaoxi village to the south of the Yangtze and Yunfeng town in Gansu. These are still typical Ge Fei characters, through whom he pursues his perennial themes—'the crowd and solitude', 'silence and tumult'—but the way their fates are intertwined is new. The novel connects them all to a single Beijing address, 67 Chuntai Road, through which the plot is set in motion, drawing in a wider circle of characters that produces an intricate matrix of social relations—mother and daughter, father and son, husband and wife, lovers—as well as frictions within families, workplaces, communities; a vast network, sociological in its intricate design and anthropological in its categorizations, forging all sorts of unconventional relationships—and ultimately leading to a collective social spectacle in which 'the multitude are merrymaking, as though ascending a terrace in spring', drawn from Laozi's *Tao Te Ching*. Similarly, Sun Ganlu draws on another masterpiece of Chinese classical culture in his mapping of the social: Wang Ximeng's panoramic scroll-painting, *A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains*, from which Sun borrows his title. It is notable that both novels draw on the past in this sense; the impulse is not only to remap, in Jameson's terms, the space between character, world and reader, but to reconstruct the social whole in an era of fragmentation.

Other novels display the same desire: not just to reinstate a relationship with the external world, but to reforge broken connections. In the manner of a road movie, Yu Hua's *City of Fiction* (2021) depicts the journey of its protagonist, travelling south in search of his wife. Moving from the freezing North to Xi Town, below the Yangtze River, the narrative unfolds across a richly articulated terrain of 'cotton, wheat fields, bandits, straw and rivers'.[15] Likewise, Zhang Yueran's *Swan Hotel* maps out a

[14] Ge Fei (b. 1964) is the author of *The Brown Flock* (1988), *Peach Blossoms with a Human Face* (2004) and *Mountains and Rivers Enter Dreams* (2007) among other works. Thanks perhaps to his scholarly background, avant-garde narrative and a classical spirit coalesce in his writing, imbuing his novels with philosophical depth; an exploration of the disillusionment of idealism amid the torrent of history has been a constant theme.

[15] Yu Hua, *City of Fiction*, Beijing 2021.

particular geography as its protagonists migrate between the countryside and the city, navigating the margins of contemporary Beijing. In similar spirit, Lin Bai's *Beiliu* (2021) goes so far as to include supplementary textual devices—such as a catalogue of regional fauna—to render the local texture of a small southern town. Lu Nei, from a younger generation, renders the industrial geography of Dai City in extraordinary detail throughout his semi-autobiography *Following Trilogy* (2007–2014).[16]

In a sense, this move can be understood as a cultural return. Following the founding of the People's Republic, there was a concerted effort among writers to map the nation's geography. Liu Qing's *The Builders* (1960) described the socialist transformation of Hamatang, in the mountainous Guanzhong region of Shaanxi, during the agricultural collectivization movement of the 1950s, providing a vivid portrait of changing class relations; the clash between Liang Shengbao and Old Liang San was a striking illustration of the divisions and remaking of the Chinese peasantry at that historic turning point. Liang Bin's *Red Flag* (1957) chronicled generations of peasant resistance on the Central Hebei Plain, from the late Qing to the period of the Northern Expedition, drawing on classical concepts such as the 'lands of Yan and Zhao', and offering an immersive portrait of the region.[17] Writers of that era shared a cultural-historical impulse to situate individual life within the geography of the new republic. After the Cultural Revolution, however, the 'Scar' literature of the post-1978 years, dealing with the personal suffering caused by that period of gigantic upheaval, reconfigured the external world as a dangerous terrain, while narrators retreated into introspection; a shift epitomized by Xie Jin's trilogy of films, *The Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (1980), *The Herdsman* (1982) and *Hibiscus Town* (1986).[18]

Chinese literature is now mapping the geography of the People's Republic for a second time. Symptomatically, these new works often include

[16] Lin Bai, *Beiliu*, Hubei 2022; Lu Nei, *Following Trilogy*: *Young Babilun*, Chongqing 2007; *Following Her Journey*, Beijing 2009; *Where Does the Angel Fall*, Beijing 2014.
[17] Liu Qing (1916–1978), *The Builders, Vol 1*, Beijing 1960; Liang Bin (1914–1996), *Red Flag*, Beijing 1957.
[18] These three films by Xie Jin (1923–2008), known as the 'Reflection Trilogy', examine the traumas caused by the Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Cultural Revolution. *The Legend of Tianyun Mountain* portrays the exile of a wrongfully accused intellectual; *The Herdsman* depicts mutual support during times of hardship on the rural frontier; *Hibiscus Town* portrays the devastation and loss of humanity by the spiral of injustice.

actual maps of their terrain. An example is Jin Yucheng's *Blossoms*, which features hand-drawn illustrations by the author of Shanghai's streets—Gaolan Road, Jinxian Road, Yellow River Road. In this writing, native landmarks—street numbers and local flora, water towers and railway tracks in factory districts—insist upon the specificities of local experience. In face of the atomization and time-space compression of our era, these works seem animated by what Lukács identified as the desire to reconstruct an organic totality—to reach towards the form of a renewed epic.[19]

In broad daylight

With these shifts in speed and space comes a change in diurnal temporality. A striking number of recent Chinese novels begin in the daytime. In Yu Hua's *City of Fiction*, the protagonist walks 'towards the light of the rising sun' as he enters Xi Town. Zhang Yueran's *Swan Hotel* opens on a morning in April, Ge Fei's *Ascending Spring Terrace* begins at 'half past nine in the morning', Sun Ganlu's *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* at 'nine thirty-five a.m.'. Jin Yucheng's *Blossoms*, Bi Feiyu's *Welcome to the World* and many other novels do the same. These works operate on a new timetable, which typically begins with 'going out' into the daylight, in stark contrast to those of the 1990s avant-garde which which tend to figure characters coming home in the twilight.

Once again, this is reminiscent of a cultural shift in the early years of the PRC. Before the Revolution, many Shanghai-themed films opened with nocturnal scenes illustrating the city's decadence. Wu Yonggang's *The Goddess* (1934), for example, introduces its heroine, played by Ruan Lingyu, streetwalking at night. Yuan Muzhi's *Street Angel* (1937) features an opening montage sequence of Shanghai's neon-lit night life.[20] Then, between the founding of the People's Republic and the Cultural Revolution, culture entered a period of sunlight. Xie Jin's *Woman Basketball Player No. 5* (1957), the PRC's first technicolour film, opens in the morning dew as the protagonist arrives with a potted orchid to register at his new work unit.[21] Ren Lu's *Today I Rest* (1959) shows the

[19] György Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock, Cambridge MA 1971 [1920], p. 152.
[20] Yuan Muzhi, *Street Angel*, 1937, Wu Yonggang, *The Goddess*, 1934.
[21] Xie Jin, *Woman Basketball Player No. 5*, 1957.

protagonist going home after night duty, and the story starts with daybreak.[22] In literature, daytime narratives were even more pronounced. One of the period's defining novels was Hao Ran's three-volume *Bright Sunny Sky* (1964–66). Liu Qing opened *The Builders* in the early morning, with the villagers waking for the working day, while Old Liang San collected a bucket of animal dung. Zhao Shuli, the founder of the Shanyaodan School, which aimed to fuse traditional storytelling forms with realism, often began his fiction with commune members heading to the fields.[23]

With the state's takeover of social space and daily time, the literary landscape was bathed in blinding sunlight, while work, social interactions and everyday customs were structured by a new temporal order, pulsing with a collective rhythm. Subsequently the literary compass, having steered through the 'Scar' and 'literature of reflection' periods after the Cultural Revolution, began to point towards the dusk, while the Root-Seeking movement—scouting cultural resources in Chinese myth, folklore and regional traditions—together with the 1980s avant-garde, pushed it deeper into the night. In Zhang Xianliang's *Mimosa* (1984), physical labour under a scorching sun becomes a punishment, while the hungry protagonist reads *Das Kapital* on cold nights, dreaming of a woman's love. In Han Shaogong's *Pa Pa Pa* (1985), the remote Jitouzhai village appears shrouded in perpetual twilight. In Can Xue's surreal short story, 'The Hut on the Mountain' (1985), the rule of night perhaps reaches its pitch.[24] The daytime order defined by the 'bright sunny skies' and village loudspeakers of what's known as 'seventeen-year literature', the initial revolutionary period of 1949–66, was well and truly over.

Today it seems that the 'New Era' has ushered in a new moment. In addition to the works discussed above, recent winners of the Mao Dun Literature Prize indicate that daylight is back in the Chinese novel, whether it be the crystalline light of the Tibetan plateau in Yang Zhijun's *Snow Mountain and the Homeland* (2022), or the traditional solar calendar that structures Qiao Ye's *Baoshui* (2022).[25] Yet the new light-filled order

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[22] Lu Ren, *Today I Rest*, 1959.

[23] Zhao Shuli (1906–1970): representative works include *Xiao Erhei's Wedding* (1943), *Li Youcai's Storytelling* (1943) and *Practise, Practise* (1958). His novels depicted the historical transformations of rural society and peasant life with rare insight.

[24] Can Xue, 'The Hut on the Mountain', *People's Literature*, no. 8, 1985.

[25] Yang Zhijun, 'Snow Mountain and the Homeland', *Chinese Writers*, no. 11, 2022; Qiao Ye, *Baoshui*, *October: Long Novels*, nos 4 and 5, 2022.

is more ambiguous than the near-sterile glare of the 'seventeen-year period'; in particular, its light source is highly complex. It is no longer the single, stable illumination provided by the state and its ideology, nor the 1990s Enlightenment from the West. Instead, it is a composite light, emitted jointly by the market, platforms, capital, history, ideals, institutions. In other words, daytime in contemporary fiction signifies not merely the rising sun, but a clocking-in, registered by multiple apparatuses. The typical characters in these narratives have also undergone a transformation—and here contemporary literature again finds its commonality with more popular cultural forms.

These characters are no longer the workers of the revolutionary period, but nor are they the loners of the avant-garde. They are both workers and loners, defined by a capacity for what has become a buzzword in contemporary China: *dǎ*—to beat, to fight, to slog, to work, to play, to push through, to survive. By analysing *dǎ*, we may get a better idea of the multiple light sources of the age.

Beating the boss

Dǎ today is the most active word in the Chinese lexicon. Once the categories of 'workers, peasants and soldiers' had faded away, people began to call themselves *dagongren*, or wage workers. They may mock themselves as *da jiangyou de*—the one who buys soy sauce, in other words, a bystander, or just passing through. They *dafa shijian* (kill time), they *dapai* (play cards) or *dayouxi* (play games). Among the countless variations that have permeated daily life, *Dǎ Boss*—'beat the boss', originally derived from a video game—has become hugely popular as a mass-cultural trope, animating all manner of micro-dramas, games, films and series. In the West, today's hero movies typically operate on a narrative model that video gamers would recognize as 'level-clearing'—the individual player beating a series of obstacles to get to the game's next level. It's not easy to think of a Hollywood blockbuster that targets the apex—let's call it the C-position: C for capital, or command—of the system as a whole. Instead of level-clearing, the most popular Chinese cultural products, from games to works of art and literature, often deploy the *Dǎ Boss* narrative form.

'Beating the boss' is closely linked to a second mass-cultural phenomenon: the vogue for *heihua* stories—narratives about 'darkening', 'turning

black', the colour associated with the social underworld, or 'going rogue'. Chinese culture of course has a famous tradition of outlaw literature, notably the classic mid-Ming novel *Water Margin*, also known as *Outlaws of the Marsh*; but this introduces a further qualification to the new cultural 'light of day'. In online forms, responsive to algorithmically monitored user engagement, a *heihua* plot twist—a virtuous character has had enough and goes rogue—can double the episode count. 'Turning black' is a frequent theme in micro-dramas; a more potent move than standard devices like amnesia or a car-crash.[26] On the same grounds, publicity for mass-cultural products often emphasizes their *heihua* content, too.

At another, more significant level, the move of 'going black' has an extraordinary capacity to evoke empathy and identification from loner-workers. The exhaustion and the grievances that have accumulated over decades among the broad wage-earning classes have created a multitude of candidates for going dark. It in this context that Sun Tzu-style maxims like 'those who harbour kindness in their hearts should also know how to protect themselves' have become the internet's common sense. At the same time, stock characters presented as the personification of 'Truth, Goodness, Beauty', or *zhen shan mei*, are now rejected—treated with impatience, if not repugnance. This represents a sea change in popular consciousness. From the founding of the PRC through to the 1980s, this was the basic protagonist-type in our literature and art. From the 1990s on, 'Goodness' has slowly been eased out of its central position, and 'Blackness' has come to take its place. 'Truth, Blackness, Beauty', *zhen hei mei*, have risen to the top as the attributes with the greatest appeal—not just in commercial terms, but for their cultural and aesthetic meanings.

What is happening in Chinese culture today could be conceived as the formation of a B-word alliance.[27] Protagonists characterized by 'Bravery, Blackness, Beauty' are enthusiastically embraced. From their B-position, they join forces to 'beat the boss', prompting a deluge of online likes and approving comments. This widespread 'blackening' marks a transformation of the cultural landscape which is not without political resonance; in other words, the structural mobilization from the loner-workers of the

[26] Hit micro-dramas oriented around *heihua* themes include *Maid's Revenge* (2023), *Provoke* (2023), *Sweeping Black* (2026) and *The Hidden Queen* (2026).

[27] To borrow from the title of Perry Anderson's *The H-Word: The Peripeteia of Hegemony*, London and New York 2017.

B-position represents a general offensive, launched from below, against mainstream assumptions about literature and art.

New skies

Over the past few years, China has produced two phenomenally popular 'boss-beating' and 'blackening' works. The 2024 single-player video game, *Black Myth: Wukong*, reimagines the world of the Ming-era classic *Journey to the West*—that is, the voyage towards the Buddhist heartlands—in the aftermath of the quest for the sutras, as the Chosen One goes to seek the wisdom of the rebel Monkey King, Sun Wukong. Aesthetically, the game blends Eastern Zen philosophy, dark fantasy and advanced digital-modelling techniques, featuring extensive recreations of ancient architecture, grottos and sculptures, in a majestic yet sombre classical-realist landscape, through which the player-driven, boss-fighting action unfolds.[28] In 2025, Jiaozi's animated film, *Ne Zha 2*, drawing on another classic novel, blended ink-wash landscapes and Buddhist and Taoist imagery with cutting-edge animation effects to tell the story of the outcast folk-deity Ne Zha and his comrade-in-arms, Ao Bing. Again, the protagonists go rogue and challenge the cosmic order, in another iteration of 'boss-beating'.[29]

The workers of the B-Position set out with the rising sun, yet their battles against the bosses draw on other sources of light. In *Black Myth* or *Ne Zha 2*, it's striking to see how the initiation, development and culmination of these 'black' heroes' battles against demons and monsters can be mapped onto the poetry of Mao Zedong, itself saturated with the imagery of the Chinese classics. From 'only because the demonic mist has returned' and 'only heroes can drive away tigers and leopards', up till 'the jade-like firmament is cleared of dust', the allusions multiply. The final chapter of *Black Myth* is titled 'Unfinished', echoing Mao on the logic of the revolution:

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[28] *Black Myth: Wukong*, a single-player action role-playing game, was developed by Hangzhou Game Science Interactive Technology Co. Ltd and published by Zhejiang Publishing Group Digital Media Co. Ltd. Within three days of its launch on 20 August 2024, global sales exceeded 10 million copies.

[29] *Ne Zha 2: The Demon Boy Churns the Sea* (2025), written and directed by Jiaozi, is the sequel to *Ne Zha: The Demon Boy's Descent* (2019). It follows the story of the heroes Ne Zha and Ao Bing as they rebuild their physical forms after the Celestial Tribulation. Globally, it was the highest-grossing film of 2025.

> The sacred deeds of the Three Kings and Five Emperors,
> Have hoodwinked unnumbered travellers.
> How few were the truly great!
> Only after outlaws like Zhi and Qiao left their names in history,
> Did King Chen rise up, brandishing his golden battle-axe.
> The song is unfinished,
> Yet the East turns white.[30]

In both *Black Myth* and *Ne Zha 2*, the tactics deployed in combat draw extensively on Maoist guerrilla warfare; in the former, the Chosen One's sidekick Zhu Bajie sagely advises: 'When the enemy advances, we retreat; when the enemy retreats, we advance.' In a wider narrative sense, the two works make extensive use of Mao's formulations. In *Ne Zha 2*, from the moment the disembodied souls of the heroes, Ne Zha and Ao Bing, begin to share the same physical form, the film starts to forge an ever-expanding commonality. If at first this involves yielding a part of the self to accommodate the other, it culminates in the combined force of humans, demons and immortals, uniting to overturn the Celestial Cauldron which is used to dominate them. Yet the most powerful scene in the film is not the shattering of the Cauldron per se, but the moment when the strange, misshapen, myriad beings of the three realms unite to shake their shared chains. Technically, this sequence was the hardest for the animation studio to realize, for each being had to be given a reason to 'go black' and then a chance to break their chains, with the emergence of a new united front.

Likewise, the crucial point in *Black Myth* is not when the Chosen One defeats his opponents, but the final unanswered question of whether he will put on the Golden Band and submit to the will of the Celestial Court—a moment that remains 'unfinished', and so leaves demons, monsters, ghosts and spirits with the open possibility of uniting their forces to reactivate the spirit of the revolution. All those in the B-position, in other words, can imagine by way of literature and art the launch of a counter-offensive against the boss, in which demons and spirits might *dǎ* into being a new world—'Dare to command the sun and moon to shine in new skies'[31]—with the remaking of class and thus of the techniques of resistance.

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[30] Quotes respectively from: Mao Zedong, 'Reply to Comrade Guo Moruo, to the Tune of Seven-Character Lüshi', 'Winter Clouds, to the Tune of Seven-Character Lüshi', 'Reading History, to the Tune of Congratulating the Bridegroom', *Selected Poems of Mao Zedong*, Beijing 1996.

[31] Mao Zedong, 'Shaoshan Revisited' (1959), in *Selected Poems*.

Might this longer history, beginning in avant-garde literature and moving into mass culture, offer an alternative perspective to the moral panic and condemnation that has met the rise of new cultural forms like the micro-drama? At a moment when the discourse of a 'lying flat' generation—young people refusing to look for work, or even to leave their bedroom—dominates contemporary commentary, might the explosion of *dǎ* verbs in literature and the arts constitute a countervailing narrative strategy, one that might seek to reclaim the ontology of action? The events that occur in short videos, livestreams or micro-dramas are, in most cases, banal. But if we single out the acts, the *dǎ* verbs, they may bear an energy that could open up new channels between individual bodily sensation and external reality, colliding with the world in order to measure it anew, blurred as its features have become.

These *dǎ* verbs and their visual equivalents do not serve a decorative function; they constitute survival itself. One of the most common genres on user-generated livestream and short-video platforms consists of buying vegetables, cooking, eating and washing up: pure streams of action. Their densely verbal modes recall the signal works of Northeastern literature, set against the backdrop of deindustrialization and massive layoffs, where characters seem to lose their social meaning, undergoing disintegration and weightlessness, with nothing but their physical bodies to resist the void. In the Crusoe-like process by which these short videos and livestreams reconstruct an order of life, wage-workers are no longer passive objects, waiting to be enlightened or redeemed; nor do they yearn for poetry or faraway horizons. Instead, they use their physical bodies to act in a way that evokes the various meanings of *dǎ*—doing, fighting, persisting, pushing on. This kinetic logic has an elective affinity with the ceaseless action of the micro-drama, the massing of the thousands of demons in *Ne Zha 2*, or the Chosen One in *Black Myth*, who swings his staff to launch the Great Refusal. In this way, the B-position crowd use *dǎ* verbs to reinvent their own conditions of historical possibility.

To be sure, the B-position mobilization in short videos and micro-dramas belongs to the long tail-end of the culture's nervous system, but so many hundreds of millions of grains of mud and sand are not so easily dismissed. Once we strip away elitist nostalgia and petit-bourgeois moralism, perhaps the proliferation of *dǎ* verbs may help to register a shift in the 'structures of feeling' of our era. At the very least, these countless tiny

acts may help to prevent this 'accelerating world' spinning off its axis. After all, a *dǎ* verb always does something, gets us somewhere. One video poster goes to work, finishes work, buys groceries, chops meat, lights the stove, eats supper; another will like, comment and share. One wish-fulfilment drama will break off an engagement, launch a counterattack, seize a property or exact revenge; at the other end, someone will curse, laugh, get a thrill or repost. These small acts pile up, one on top of the other. They don't amount to a political movement, but perhaps they can constitute a grammar of community, low-spec yet not ineffective.

The significance of these works, then, does not lie in any inherent potency they may possess, let alone in their aesthetic innovations. On the contrary: their substance may be crude, their plots cheap, their values unstable; they may even help to reproduce fantasies of money, deference, violence and hierarchy. Yet precisely because they are crude, they lay bare the most basic nervous reflexes of contemporary society. People want to change their situation, to see retribution, to make the body useful again; despite every failure, they still want to 'stand up', 'rush out', 'try again'. Behind these verbs lies the desire for subjecthood, the warmth of action not yet extinguished by 'lying flat'.

In this sense, what the B-position crowd reinvents is not the position of the winners, but a subjectivity that refuses stasis. They have no grand theoretical language or ideas about organization, still less a clear vision of the future. But they are still doing, fighting, running, eating, repairing and restarting. The historical subject does not always appear with a solemn face; it may be awkward and dishevelled—appearing in the hand that has knocked over a spatula, the body unable to squeeze into a tube carriage, a late-night livestream restarted after failure. The aim of 'reinvention' is precisely to put these disregarded acts back at the centre of the historical narrative. Culture is not the sole prerogative of the C-position; the B-crowd can also present their own image and existence to the world, by means of the hundreds of millions of verbs with which they remake it.