1989: The year of the publication of Amy Tan’s *Joy Luck Club* and Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* was also the year when the Tiananmen Square Massacre took place. Witnessing the government crackdown of prodemocracy demonstrators while he was in the United States, Chinese author Ha Jin became convinced that China was no longer a country to which he could return and embraced the condition of self-imposed exile. Jin was not alone in discovering that he had to live outside the country of his birth. The dissident journalist Liu Binyan, who was also in the United States, suddenly found himself barred from returning to China after Tiananmen, forced into the condition of state-imposed exile. Whether exile is voluntary or involuntary, it leaves a critic of the state speaking in opposition to power outside of the social and political space where it most matters—the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Criticizing the government when in China can mean imprisonment. Criticizing the government when outside of China can mean that what one says remains unheard in China and is therefore inconsequential.

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Chinese American literature continues to represent Chinese history but with an emphasis different from that encountered in Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, Shirley Lim, and Li-Young Lee. Where in canonical Chinese American literature China is a geopolitical and cultural space that authors do not always find easy imagining and representing, recent émigré and exilic authors like Ha Jin and Anchee Min offer detailed and closeup look at life in China under Communist rule.
This closeup look may require some adjustment of expectations on the part of readers accustomed to Chinese American literature’s conventional foregrounding of the United States as the controlling setting for writing the politics of identity. If one is used to impressions of China generated by literary renditions of Chinese myths, portrayal of exotic beliefs and unfamiliar social practices, and Anglicized transliterations of Chinese dialects, the representation of life in a commune or of the Tiananmen Square Massacre facilitates reader experience of a very different social and political world.

Writings that involve criticism of Communist China rely on familiarity with Cold War history for greater effect. Alluding to Cold War antagonisms enables an author to be aligned with values associated with Western liberal democracy. Focus on China’s dire social condition underscores the imperative need to create a new life in a different society capable of inspiring dreams and realizing individual ambition.

PRC-born authors who focus on China as the thematic center of their writing bring a new dimension to our reading of Chinese American literature. In particular, this focus moves critical consideration away from the cultural politics of national belonging that we have come to expect as a normative feature of this literature. While the focus on China enables Jin and Min to highlight the suffering brought about by Communist rule, it also prompts comparison between conditions of social life in the PRC and the United States. The Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and the Tiananmen Square Massacre affirm that, unlike the PRC, the United States is where the good and free life can be found.

The literary project of narrating the story of the self to give exposure to events in a country’s history that have been excised from history books and public discourse stresses the need to be open about the past. If the PRC has accused the Japanese of not formally owning up to atrocities committed against the Chinese people in the Sino-Japanese War and World War II, it is itself guilty of censoring access to information on the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and Tiananmen Square in constructing a particular narrative of the nation. If historical understanding is often affected by the strategic selection of details that are left out of or inserted into official narratives, the writer can strive to adjust or correct this understanding by filling in representational gaps and giving voice to silence imposed from above by political power.

Narrativizing the story of the self and sharing with the reader the private spaces of the heart and mind that have been concealed from Communism’s