My dissertation argues for contemporary Chinese novelists’ contributions to the debate over China’s modernity. My project proceeds in two steps. First, it outlines the reinterpretations of Confucian tradition, historical languages and power relations by the major debaters: liberals, neo-leftists and neo-Confucians. This outline shows that their reinterpretations have produced a fuller understanding of modernity than previous intellectuals, but still fail to connect their political ideals to China’s complex social imaginaries of everyday life. Then drawing on the works of Charles Taylor and Meili Steele, I develop the social imaginary as a distinctive background understanding carried in everyday speeches, narratives and practices, which underlie any particular transition to modernity and receive important articulations in literature. I use three case studies, Chen Zhongshi, Han Shaogong and Wang Xiaobo, to demonstrate that contemporary Chinese novelists’ works do not merely illustrate particular political positions, but argue at a deeper level by revealing and reworking China’s underlying social imaginaries of everyday life. My research shows that instead of reinforcing the intellectual split, literary writers could offer a complementary way of arguing that challenges as well as supplements intellectuals’ frameworks of ethical and political philosophy. By treating social imaginaries not as objects of investigation but as subjects of public reasoning, I intend my dissertation to offer a novel way of integrating literature into intellectual history research.