

**Subversion, Transcendence, and Rejection**  
**History in the Fiction of Contemporary Chinese Avant-garde Writers**  
**Su Tong, Yu Hua, and Ge Fei**

by

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the different patterns of history presented in the fiction of the three major contemporary Chinese avant-garde writers Su Tong, Yu Hua, and Ge Fei as well as their respective views of history. Based on detailed case studies of the three writers, the thesis examines the complicated and intertwined relationships of contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction with previous Chinese traditions—Confucian, the May Fourth, and Communist—and with foreign influences. It also assesses the overall literary achievement of Chinese avant-garde fiction, its position in the history of modern Chinese literature, and its impact on the Chinese writers of later generations.

Unlike most previous research on this subject, which overemphasizes the “alien” nature of Chinese avant-garde fiction or its discontinuity with Chinese tradition, this thesis aims at a more balanced investigation. Not only is the “newness” of Chinese avant-garde fiction deeply explored, its “Chineseness” or its profound continuity with Chinese literary and cultural conventions is also carefully examined. By comparison, the thesis attaches more importance to the “Chineseness” of Chinese avant-garde fiction.

My analysis demonstrates that, while Su Tong aims at the total subversion of the Communist interpretation of the Chinese revolution and history, while Yu Hua attempts to transcend the Maoist materialistic view of history through reincorporating subjectivity into historical interpretation, Ge Fei totally rejects the conceptualization of history and the underlying rationalistic assumption of human experience as a perceptible and understandable unity.

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## Introduction

The emergence and flourishing of contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction from the middle 1980s onwards, with Su Tong, Yu Hua, and Ge Fei as its most distinguished representatives, are undoubtedly among the most important literary and cultural phenomena in modern Chinese history. Like a dazzling thunderbolt striking through the night, the birth of Chinese avant-garde fiction, with all its astonishing originality in style and language and its radically defiant attitude towards both Communist and Confucian traditions, lit up the dark literary sky of 1980s China which was still dominated by the Maoist conceptualization of literature.<sup>1</sup> The emergence of Chinese avant-garde fiction greatly reshaped the contemporary Chinese literary landscape, and since then modern Chinese literature began to take a different direction. Undoubtedly, Chinese avant-garde fiction represents a milestone in the history of modern Chinese literature.

One of the most influential cultural trends and most accomplished literary practices in contemporary China, Chinese avant-garde fiction concerns itself with many important social problems facing modern China and existential predicaments confronting all human beings. Among all their preoccupations is the obsession with history—the most profound and long-standing legacy of Chinese literature. Like their forefathers, Chinese avant-gardists are also highly fascinated with what happened in the past and with the deep implications underlying the historical facts, though the history constructed by them and their views of history might be different from those of their forefathers.

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<sup>1</sup> Li Tuo, a highly reputed literary critic from mainland China, in an essay tracking the development of contemporary Chinese literature, incisively points out that the so-called New Era Literature including Scar Literature, Educated Youth Literature, and even Native-roots Searching Literature actually makes no essential difference in fundamental principle and mode of thinking with the sort of literature that was advocated by Mao Zedong and therefore dominated the Mao era. It only tells different stories but shares with Maoist literature the same “historical grammar” (Li T. 2001).

The main purpose of this thesis is to explore the different patterns of history presented in the fiction of the three major contemporary Chinese avant-garde writers Su Tong, Yu Hua, and Ge Fei and their respective views of history. Setting it against China's long literary and cultural tradition, frequently comparing it with literary works from both inside and outside China, the thesis examines the complicated and intertwined relationships of contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction with previous Chinese traditions—Confucian, the May Fourth, and Communist—as well as with foreign influences. Based on detailed case studies of the three writers, the thesis also traces the origin of contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction and assesses its overall literary achievement, its position in the history of modern Chinese literature, and its impact on the Chinese writers of later generations.

Now over two decades have passed since the birth of Chinese avant-garde fiction. Given its dazzling accomplishment and the highly remarkable position it occupies in modern Chinese literature, it is only natural to find that it has already drawn much attention from literary critics and been highly evaluated (Wang 1996, 1998, X. Zhang 1997, Huot 2000, Yang 2002, Duke 1993). However, when we look back at the previous research on Chinese avant-garde fiction as a whole, we find that, for all the enthusiasm and effort of these critics, most of the research conducted by them, either from the West or from China, is far from satisfactory.

In my observation, the existing Western research on Chinese avant-garde fiction reveals two major tendencies. One is to treat the fiction as an ingredient of a certain “grand” intellectual trend in contemporary China, and in most cases, to identify it with

so-called Chinese “postmodernism.” For instance, in a book by Xudong Zhang on contemporary Chinese intellectual trends, Chinese avant-garde fiction is viewed as a literary expression of “postmodernism” in contemporary China (1997). In a book by Claire Huot on contemporary Chinese cultural shifts, it is treated as an element of China’s “new cultural scene” (2000). This tendency or approach, while appropriately highlighting the link between Chinese avant-garde fiction and the external social and intellectual background of contemporary China, relatively overlooks its internal features and merits as a literary genre. Much worse, treated merely as a component of a certain “grand” trend which is composed of many ingredients, the fiction naturally cannot draw sufficient attention from the researchers. In this sense, Xiaobin Yang’s monograph on the subject represents an exception (2002). Focusing on the themes of trauma and irony in Chinese avant-garde fiction, Yang provides several detailed and remarkable case studies of Chinese avant-garde writers. Unfortunately, he also labels the fiction genre the “Chinese postmodern.”

Another tendency of Western scholarship is to adopt a purely feminist approach to Chinese avant-garde fiction. This can be best demonstrated by Lu Tonglin’s monograph on the subject (1995). Given the projected position that sexuality and gender relations occupy in Chinese avant-garde fiction, this approach can be justified to a large extent. Moreover, most of the research, by virtue of the approach, does come up with some inspiring perceptions and conclusions. For example, Lu Tonglin’s analysis of the ideological links between Chinese avant-garde and Confucian moralities and social practice and her examination of sexuality in Chinese avant-garde fiction and the underlying political and cultural implications are quite impressive. In spite of the merits

and achievements of the approach, it displays some serious limitations. By reducing the broad historical representation with multiple dimensions in Chinese avant-garde fiction to mere sexuality and gender relations, the approach inevitably leads to the under-estimation of the social, political, and ideological implications of the fiction. As a result, many important dimensions or aspects of historical presentation in Chinese avant-garde fiction are left untouched. For example, Su Tong's exploration of the relation between the Chinese revolution and tradition, Communist history writing, the spiritual and identity crisis on the part of modern Chinese people, the rural-urban confrontation in modern China, and power relations in general history, Yu Hua's transcendental meditation on death, nature, and human conditions and his exposure of the darkness and brutality of totalitarian domination, Ge Fei's metaphysical meditation on human predicaments, on the relation between history, memory, and human identity, etc.—all these themes can not be fully understood if we limit our insight merely to sexuality and gender relations and adopt a purely feminist perspective. The narrowness and exclusiveness of the approach, in my view, greatly limit the researchers' insight and weaken their comprehensive and interpretive power.

The situation of the research on this subject in mainland China is not optimistic either, though for different reasons than in the Western case. During the years immediately after it emerged in Chinese literary circles, Chinese avant-garde fiction, regarded as an anomaly by the mainstream literature, was valued only for its experimental quality and "entertainment elements," its ideological significance was not taken seriously, let alone deeply explored. Fortunately, after the mid 1990s, the profound

social, political, and ideological connotations of Chinese avant-garde and its remarkable aesthetic values have gradually drawn scholarly attention, and the exploration of them deepened, though the research is mostly crystallized in the form of research papers rather than book-length studies. Among the few monograph books on this subject is a work by Zhang Qinghua (1997), whose approach, merits, and weaknesses, in my view, are typical of contemporary Chinese scholarship of the younger generation. Extensively borrowing theories and neologisms from the West, not without misunderstanding and occasional distortions, covering almost all the writers in the post-Mao era, both major and minor, the scope of the book and its author's ambitions are obviously grand. However, judging by even ordinary academic standards, the book's flaws far outweigh its merits. The major shortcomings of the book are mainly displayed in two aspects: first, methodologically, without providing any close reading of any representative work by the Chinese avant-garde writers, the author makes many overgeneralizations in the book, which are both problematic and simplistic; second, and more importantly, thematically, confined to the mechanical dichotomy of tradition vs modernity and the related mode of thinking, the author totally ignores the Chineseness of Chinese avant-garde, namely, its profound links to Chinese traditions, treating it as if it were not rooted in the Chinese literary soil. It is simply unimaginable to assume that a group of writers, who lived all their formative years in a country which was totally cut off from outside world and cultures, except for the former Soviet Union, have not been at all influenced by their own traditions.

In a debate with a young scholar over the politics and critical paradigms in modern Chinese literature studies, Michael S. Duke makes very clear the nature of literature and

its relation to theory. As he points out, “literature is always involved with archetypal human situations in the family and society,” concerned with universal human conflicts, emotions, and predicaments. Taking this as the starting point, Duke further argues that, in literary criticism, “literature is primary. Theory is secondary. Theory is the servant of literature” (1993:64).

In compatibility with Duke’s view of the relation between theory and literature, I uphold the seemingly hackneyed yet actually profound notion that literature is a presentation or expression of human experience, lived or imagined, personal or universal. In light of this notion, it is not too difficult to understand that the interpretative power and values of a literary theory are justified only if it can help us better understand human experience and literature as an expressive form of it. So in the present research, I will make use of all the theories within the reach of my knowledge—from Fredric Jameson’s theory of political unconsciousness and textualization of history, Hannah Arendt’s speculation on totalitarianism and violence, Paul Ricoeur’s conceptualization of narrative, history, and memory, Michel Foucault’s discourse of power relations, to Georg Lukács’s discursive formulation of the relation between literary content and style, just to name some of the most important—which I think can enrich and deepen my reading of the literary texts, rather than the reverse, namely, to use a certain theory or theories to confine the literary texts, to eliminate their multiple interpretative possibilities. The reasons for my choice of this strategy or mode of thinking in interpreting the texts of Chinese avant-garde fiction, lie not only in my belief in the primacy of literature over theory as just mentioned, but also on the grounds that among Chinese avant-garde writers there are tremendous differences from one individual to another, in terms of worldview, outlook on

history, conception of literature, attitude toward people and life, sources of influence upon their thoughts and writings, etc. The diversity of the theories I choose actually is both a reflection of the complexity of the thoughts displayed in Chinese avant-garde fiction and an expression of my attempt to expose and interpret the complexity in an accurate and convincing way.

Close reading is the basic methodology adopted in the thesis because I believe a thorough and intensive scrutiny of a literary text is the base for powerful literary criticism and solid knowledge. As far as primary sources are concerned, focusing exclusively on the novels and novellas of the three major Chinese avant-garde writers, I will first provide a close reading of two or three representative works of each writer, and then, based on the close reading, the “deep narrative structure” and the underlying social, political, and cultural implications of the works will be analyzed. The adoption of this methodology, of course, does not mean to reject evidence drawn from other sources or methodologies. Actually, in this thesis, in addition to the evidence derived from close readings of the representative works, some supporting or supplementary materials from other works by the same writer, which can not be examined in as detailed a manner as the “closely-read” ones due to the limited space of the thesis, will also be incorporated in and used to enhance the conclusions. As for secondary sources, those from either China or the West will be freely employed in the thesis to support the analyses, provided that they can extend, enrich, and deepen our understanding of the texts.

One of the distinctive features of this thesis, which I hope will be recognized as one of the major contributions this thesis makes to the study of Chinese avant-garde fiction, lies in my endeavor to incorporate many important theories and analytical techniques of

modern narratology into the research. The particular attention paid to narratological analysis in this thesis is due mainly to three considerations. First, the many conceptualizations and techniques developed by modern narratology—the “unreliable narrator” (Booth 1961), the distinction between traditional and modern narrative mode (Chatman 1978), the stratification of narration and focalization levels, the distinction between narrator and focalizer and between external focalization and internal focalization (Genette 1980, Bal 1985), just to name a few—provide us with some effective frameworks and powerful tools to analyze the “deep narrative structure” of the literary text and with some new insight into the underlying implications of the text. Second, Chinese avant-garde writers have been well known for their enthusiastic experimentation with new narrative devices and techniques, and the clever maneuver of narrator, narrative stratification, and the manipulation of temporal and spatial dislocation, etc. are among the most commonly employed devices shared by almost all Chinese avant-garde writers. Accordingly, the adoption of theories of modern narratology, proven to be a powerful and effective system of interpretation and meaning production in dealing with modern literary texts, obviously can deepen our understanding of Chinese avant-garde fiction. Third and finally, for all the power and virtues of narratology as an analytical tool and its profound links to Chinese avant-garde fiction, few critics both inside and outside China, have applied its strategies to the analysis of Chinese avant-garde fiction, which undoubtedly limits the interpretative power of the critics and constitutes a regretful void in this field. The present research represents a sincere attempt to fill the scholarly void.

To sum up, in this thesis, focusing exclusively on the novels and novellas by the three major Chinese avant-garde writers, based on close reading of representative literary



texts by the authors concerned, extensively referring to varied theories proven able to deepen our understanding and facilitate our interpretation, with particular attention paid to modern narratological discourses and devices, I will carefully examine the different patterns of history presented in the fiction of Su Tong, Yu Hua, and Ge Fei, respectively. In this thesis, set against China's long literary and cultural tradition and the broad social and intellectual background of modern Chinese history, not only will the newness, the modernity, the "avant-garde" qualities of Chinese avant-garde fiction be deeply explored, its "Chineseness," its traditional side, its profound continuities with Chinese literary and cultural conventions will also be carefully examined. Unlike most research of same sort conducted by critics from mainland China, this thesis will attach at least the same, if not more, importance to the "Chineseness" of Chinese avant-garde fiction.

This thesis, in addition to the Introduction and the Conclusion, is composed of four chapters, which I will summarize here. Chapter one provides an overview of the history and the nature of contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction and the social and intellectual background against which it emerged. Setting it against China's long cultural and literary tradition and the broad social and intellectual background of modern Chinese history starting from the late Qing, by carefully examining its relations both to Chinese society and to the "grand cause" of the modernization of China, and its position and functions in the Chinese cultural and intellectual hierarchy, the chapter traces the origins and development of contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction and the specific historical settings for its emergence and efflorescence in the mid 1980s, examines the status of Chinese avant-garde writers and their changing relation to the Party-state in a post-

totalitarian era, and explores the changing patterns of historical presentation in Chinese literature from ancient times to modern days.

Chapter two grapples with Su Tong's fiction. Based on a close reading of Su Tong's three most famous novellas—"Opium Family" (*Yingsu zhi jia* 罂粟之家), "Proliferation of Wives and Concubines" (*Qiqie chengqun* 妻妾成群), and "Nineteen Thirty-four Escapes" (*Yijiusansi nian de taowang* 一九三四年的逃亡)—with the supporting evidence from his two novels *Rice* (*Mi* 米) and *My Life as Emperor* (*Wo de diwang shengya* 我的帝王生涯), thematically, this chapter explores how Su Tong manages to subvert the whole set of Communist ideologies and the Communist interpretation of the Chinese revolution and history and how he presents and interprets sexuality, the relation between the Chinese revolution and Chinese tradition, Chinese modernization, the intellectual and identity crisis on the part of modern Chinese people, historical writing on the part of the ruling party, and power relations in general history. Technically, the chapter examines the profound continuities of Su Tong's fiction with both traditional Chinese literary conventions and Communist literary practices, as well as its modernist quality as the crystallization of foreign influence.

Chapter three is devoted to Yu Hua, focusing on his three most read novels *Screaming in the Drizzle* (*Zai xiyu zhong huhan* 在细雨中呼喊), *To Live* (*Huozhe* 活着), and *Xu Sanguan Sells His Blood* (*Xu Sanguan maixue ji* 许三观卖血记). Thematically, the chapter explores how Yu Hua endeavors to pursue a dual goal in his fiction, that is, simultaneously to meditate on the universal human condition and to expose the suffering and misery inflicted upon the Chinese people by the totalitarian regime. It also examines the radical thematic changes in Yu Hua's fiction from his first novel to the later two, and

traces his profound continuity with Chinese tradition in worldview, belief, and values. Technically, the chapter demonstrates how Yu Hua employs violence as a narrative and aesthetic principle rather than as mere substantial social and political existence in his fiction to achieve his desired purposes.

Chapter four deals with Ge Fei, based on a close reading of his first and most controversial novel *The Enemy* (*Diren* 敌人) and the later two *On the Margin* (*Bianyuan* 边缘) and *Flags of the Desire* (*Yuwang de qizhi* 欲望的旗帜). Thematically, the chapter explores how Ge Fei manipulates fear as both human imagination and an existential and social event to meditate on human predicaments and how he deals with history, reality, memory, human relation and identity, and the complex and interlocking relationship between them. Technically, the chapter examines how Ge Fei cleverly plays with varied narratological devices to design varied “narrative traps” for his discursive purposes.

The Conclusion first summarizes the three case studies and, based on the summary, makes some suggestive comments on the shared features of the three writers and on their complex and intertwined relationship with Confucian tradition, Communist ideology, and the May Fourth legacy. By comparing it vertically with the May Fourth fiction and horizontally with some contemporary fiction genres such as Native-roots Searching Fiction (*xungen xiaoshuo* 寻根小说), New Realist Fiction (*xinxieshi xiaoshuo* 新写实小说), and feminist fiction, the Conclusion also provides an assessment of the general characteristics and overall literary achievement of Chinese avant-garde fiction and its contribution to and position in Chinese literature. By examining its influence, positive or negative, on some later genres such as New Generation Writing (*xinshengdai xiezu* 新生

代写作) and Beauty Writing (*meinü xiezu* 美女写作), the Conclusion also discusses the legacy and possible impact of Chinese avant-garde fiction on Chinese literature.

## Chapter 1

### Road to the Chinese Avant-garde

#### Chinese Avant-garde Fiction: Its Origin and Nature

Contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction (*zhongguo dangdai xianfeng xiaoshuo* 中国当代先锋小说) is a term loosely referring to a cluster of fictional works which emerged in Chinese literary circles in the middle 1980s, flourished through the second half of the 1980s and the early 1990s, and currently are still active in the Chinese literary world. It derives its name from both its obvious experimental nature in style, technique, and language, and the deliberateness and radicalism it displays in breaking itself from the fictional writing immediately preceding it including both Maoist “revolutionary romanticism” and so-called New Era literature. New Era Literature, which is mainly composed of Scar Literature and Educated Youth Literature, as Li Tuo incisively points out, for all its radical difference in content from Maoist literature, actually reveals profound continuities with it in style, technique, language, and most importantly, in mode of thinking and historical rhetoric.

Another name frequently used for Chinese avant-garde fiction is “experimental fiction” (*shiyān xiaoshuo* 实验小说), though this usage is much less known than *xianfeng xiaoshuo*, and now has already faded into obscurity. Personally, as with most literary critics in mainland China, I prefer *xianfeng xiaoshuo* as the proper name for this fictional genre. This is not only because *zhongguo dangdai xianfeng xiaoshuo* or “contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction” as a name has already been widely accepted by the

overwhelming majority of critics in China and actually become a fixed appellation, but also because the name, apart from its capacity to properly denote the experimental and original character and unfailing pursuit of “newness” of this genre of fiction, hints at the extremely conservative intellectual and social forces that Chinese avant-garde fiction was confronted with when it immersed in the middle 1980s.

This is something particularly Chinese and explains why this fiction that reprises pre-Communist (pre-1949) elements of fictional style can be considered avant-garde in the Chinese context. The very act of calling this type of fiction “avant-garde fiction” despite its incorporation into texts of many traditional Chinese literary conventions in itself constituted an open mock of the philistinism of contemporary conservative forces. The Party ideologues, “mainstream” critics, and readers at that time were so accustomed to the Communist conceptualization and configuration of literature and so ignorant of the long-standing Chinese literary and cultural conventions that they mistook the time-honored pre-Communist tradition for the “new” and the “alien.” Thus, in the Chinese historical context, although this new fiction reprised many literary conventions, the very act of doing so (plus its thematic originality) made it avant-garde.

In contrast with the many merits of *xianfeng xiaoshuo* or “Chinese avant-garde fiction” as a name, *shiyen xiaoshuo* or “experimental fiction” is much inferior in this respect. The major flaw that “experimental fiction” displays as an appellation is that it overemphasizes the “experimental” or transitional nature of the fiction but fails to indicate the fact that the fiction is actually already a fully developed and mature literary genre in both style and content. This becomes more manifest when compared with the naming of Lu Xun (1881-1936)’s short stories. Despite the obvious experimental nature

of Lu Xun's stories in technique, language, and style, it is not proper, I believe, to employ the term "experimental fiction" to designate them because they are already a fully-developed and highly accomplished form of literary art.

Historically, contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction enjoys two major efflorescent periods, or two "high tides" (*chaotou* 潮头), as the critics in mainland China put it. Intriguingly enough, Chinese avant-garde fiction, like May Fourth literature, saw its first efflorescence immediately after its emergence in the Chinese literary world around 1985. At this stage, Chinese avant-garde fiction distinguishes itself from the preceding fiction mainly by its enthusiastic experimentation with varied new techniques, devices, styles, and especially with language. Though some talented writers such as Can Xue and Mo Yan had already created some outstanding works characterized by the harmonious combination of formal originality with thematic profundity in this period, Chinese avant-garde fiction as a whole at this stage had not yet reached its thematic or ideological maturity and therefore not yet revealed its full artistic appeal and discursive power. The "precocity" of Chinese avant-garde fiction in the sense of the concurrence of its emergence and efflorescence, unfortunately, only makes some of its "precocious" writers such as Hong Feng and Ma Yuan, who were highly active and creative at the first stage, fade in obscurity and mediocrity as quickly as falling stars in the contemporary Chinese literary world.

The second efflorescent period or "high tide" of Chinese avant-garde fiction appeared around 1987. From then on, the three most accomplished and influential avant-garde writers Su Tong, Yu Hua, and Ge Fei began to ascend the historical stage of

Chinese literature, and Chinese avant-garde fiction gradually comes to its maturity in both form and content. As demonstrated later by the case studies in the thesis, I think Chinese avant-garde fiction actually represents another summit in modern Chinese literature, whose overall achievement and impact are at least as splendid as May Fourth fiction. Moreover, Chinese avant-garde fiction also represents a miracle in Communist China. It is from its emergence onwards that the dominant literary trends and practice in China began to deviate from and even break with the literary “mainstream” prescribed by the Party, though the distance that it can get away from the Party’s line is still limited.

After the strike of the two powerful “high tides,” Chinese avant-garde fiction gets on a track of smooth and steady development from the 1990s onwards. Because the once “avant-garde” techniques, devices, and views now have been so widely accepted and employed in literary practice, the “avant-garde” color of this fiction genre as a whole has gradually faded away. However, the three once foremost avant-garde writers Su Tong, Yu Hua, and Ge Fei are still highly active and are still among the most creative and influential writers in contemporary China, though in the eyes of the New Generation writers (*xinshengdai zuojia* 新生代作家), they are no longer avant-garde at all, if not old-fashioned.

Setting it against the broad social and intellectual background of modern Chinese history starting from the Late Qing, after carefully examining its relations to the “grand cause” of the modernization of China and its position in the Chinese cultural and intellectual hierarchy in modern times, we find that the emergence and efflorescence of Chinese avant-garde fiction in the middle and late 1980s are not accidental. Actually its



splendor at that time is the culmination of the endeavor and the fulfillment of the dream of generations of Chinese intellectuals to “modernize” their nation, rejuvenate their culture, and pursue the “new,” and is the natural result of century-long development of modern Chinese literature. The social, cultural, and intellectual milieu of the 1980s, one of the most exciting, creative periods in modern Chinese history, with all its openness, ideological tolerance, rebellious spirit, and cultural pluralism, provides the most favorable soil and atmosphere for the development of Chinese avant-garde fiction.

It is now common knowledge that after the continual defeat and humiliation of the Central Kingdom (*Zhongguo* 中国) by the “foreign devil” since the middle nineteenth century, to recover and retrieve its past glory, wealth, and power, and to restore the central position it once supposedly possessed in the world become the most pronounced preoccupation of generations of its loyal subjects, especially the educated. Benjamin Schwartz’s classic study of Yan Fu (1854-1921), an outstanding representative of first-generation Chinese intellectuals, provides an impressive and clear demonstration of this preoccupation (1964). What makes Chinese intellectuals feel most painful is that the West, the “foreign devil,” the other, who inflicted continuous humiliation and suffering on China in modern times, unfortunately, represents the “modern” and the “new.” As a scholar adeptly puts it, “In the modern period, it [the West] was seen both as an aggressor inflicting shame and humiliation on the nation in its recent history and as a representative of a historically progressive force whose Enlightenment philosophy and advanced scientific knowledge could facilitate China’s belated modernization” (Cai 2003: 108). Though Schwartz repeatedly warns us against the potential fallacy and negative consequences of the clear-cut dichotomy of tradition versus modernity and of China

versus the West as a legitimate approach to the study of the relation of China to the West (1996: 45-64), it is an undeniable fact that most Chinese intellectuals as well as ordinary people did place China and the West at the opposing poles of modernity in their formulation of Chinese modernization, especially in the early days of modern times. This can be best witnessed by reading Joseph R. Levenson's classic study of the mind of Liang Qichao (1873-1929), another outstanding representative of first-generation Chinese intellectuals and by examining the thought of the May Fourth generation with Lu Xun as its most preeminent spokesman (Levenson 1959, Lin 1979).

An important component of the "grand cause" of Chinese modernization, modern Chinese literature, from its very beginning, displays a strong desire and powerful tendency to reject the "old," which was roughly equated with Chinese tradition by many Chinese at that time, and to pursue the "new," which is correspondingly identified with the West. Modern Chinese fiction, the genre which has already completely shaken off its humble status assigned to it in the ancient times and is now promoted to the top position in the Chinese literary hierarchy, is obviously no exception. This can be best demonstrated by the fact that Liang Qichao, the first Chinese intellectual who zealously and painstakingly advocated a "fiction revolution" in China, named the fiction created by himself and some others New Fiction (*xin xiaoshuo* 新小说), which promotes some progressive political ideas based on social Darwinism but is quite immature and naive in form and style. When we take a close look at the development of modern Chinese fiction as a whole, we find that the most brilliant part of it—Lu Xun's short stories, Yu Dafu (1896-1945)'s fiction, and some of Ding Ling (1904-1986)'s early fiction in the 1920s, Shanghai New Sensationalism (*xin ganjue pai* 新感觉派), Xiao Hong (1911-1942)'s

fiction, and some fiction of the July School (*qiyue pai* 七月派) as best represented by Lu Ling (1923-1994)'s works in the 1930s, the writings of Zhang Ailing (1920-1995) and Qian Zhongshu (1910-1998) in the 1940s, Chinese avant-garde fiction and the fiction of Mo Yan, Han Shaogong, Can Xue, Chen Ran, and some others in the post-Mao era—reveals a powerful tendency towards “newness” and a clear line of Western influence in almost every aspect of literary development, though the line was interrupted for nearly thirty years in the Mao era.<sup>2</sup> Along with modern Chinese fiction's unfailing pursuit of “newness” and modernity, we also discern a strong desire for and powerful tendency towards literary autonomy—to escape or shake off the varied external forces imposed upon literature, especially the tight political control imposed by the Party after 1949. Literary autonomy, as many believe, is both a precondition for the birth of a great literary work and a manifestation of the greatness and maturity of that work. Intriguingly and ironically enough, when we look back over the whole process of the development of modern Chinese literature, we are surprised to find that literary modernity or the pursuit of literary “newness,” which is originally regarded merely as an effective means to serve the grand end of enlightening the people and finally strengthening and rejuvenating the nation by Liang Qichao and the May Fourth generation of Chinese intellectuals, itself becomes an end for contemporary Chinese avant-garde writers. The thick and heavy political and moral covering imposed on literature in the name of enlightenment, nationalism, or serving the Party and the people is finally stripped off in the post-Mao era,

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<sup>2</sup> Actually even in Mao's China, Chinese literature's pursuit of “newness” and its enthusiasm for the West did not really interrupt, and such kind of literary practice was only forced to turn underground. For example, during the Cultural Revolution, some novels which go directly opposed to Maoist socialist realism in both content and style were secretly transmitted among ordinary people in the form of “handwritten copy” (*shouchaoben* 手抄本). A lot of poems which were only allowed to be published later after Mao's death and now known as Misty Poetry (*menglong shi* 朦胧诗), an integral part of contemporary Chinese avant-garde literature, were also created in the 1970s and spread underground at that time.

though there are still some “forbidden zones” that the writers are not allowed to transgress. Chinese fiction, after more than a century of erosion by didacticism and political utilitarianism, especially by the castration of the Maoist ideology, has finally got rid of its humiliated status as the servant of politics and restored its original dual nature: its simultaneous defiance of and conformity to dominating ideology, its simultaneous appeal to popular tastes and elite expectation.

In light of this speculation, when we carefully examine the broad social, political, and intellectual milieu of the second half of the 1980s as well as the subjectivity of individual writers, we find that the emergence and efflorescence of Chinese avant-garde fiction at that time are an inevitable and natural outcome because, as mentioned earlier, the social, political, and intellectual conditions at that time provide the most favorable soil and atmosphere for its birth and growth.

First, after Mao Zedong’s death, with the gradual de-politicization of socioeconomic life and the adoption of the policy of reform and opening up in China, and especially with the launching of the so-called Thought Liberation Movement, which is characterized by the rise of so-called “humanistic Marxism” and the fierce attack on the Maoist dictatorial control over literature and arts, the extremely harsh political control over literature and arts typical of the Mao era is greatly loosened. As a consequence, literary autonomy, a longstanding dream on the part of Chinese writers, at least is partially fulfilled for the first time after the Communist victory in China. To be fair, the 1980s, especially the second half of the decade, is undoubtedly the most politically relaxed period in Communist China. The relative political tolerance and freedom at that time tremendously

activate the creativity and vigor of Chinese intellectuals and writers, and the newly released feelings, emotions, and thoughts of Chinese people also provide powerful dynamics for literary expression.

Second, Mao's China, especially the Cultural Revolution, an event and legacy significant not only to Chinese people but also to all human beings, which all contemporary Chinese avant-garde writers experienced and witnessed in their formative years, constitutes an invaluable cultural wealth to the writers. By saying this I not only mean that the Cultural Revolution provides them with abundant "raw material" for their writings, but more importantly, I also mean that all the violence, absurdity, and suffering they experienced and witnessed during the Cultural Revolution and the underlying logic and mode of thinking of the Revolution provide them with a unique perspective to look at the world and history, and consequently endow their writings with extraordinary profundity and penetrating power. Just as the "Great War" creates Hemingway, the "Great Depression" creates Steinbeck, it is only natural to see that the "great" Cultural Revolution produces some great writers like Yu Hua and Su Tong. This perception is not baseless. As we will see later in the three case studies on the writers, even in some of the works by Su Tong and Ge Fei which have no direct relation with the Cultural Revolution in content, the experience they derived from the Revolution still dominates the characters' spiritual world. In other words, they simply "materialize" or "textualize" their personal experience derived from the Cultural Revolution in different historical settings.

Third, with the opening up of China to the outside world, large influxes of foreign theories and works into China created the sensation of the so-called "culture fever" (*wenhua re* 文化热). The Chinese people who had just gone out of the Maoist ideological

and political Utopia seemed to be seized by another Utopia. The new Utopia is constructed on the worship of foreign ideas and technologies. Just as the Chinese people of the 1990s and later are hungry and crazy for money, the people of the 1980s, who were in ragged clothes and sometimes even had not enough food for eating, surprised us by their unbelievable hunger and craze for foreign ideas.

Among the innumerable foreign theories and trends introduced into China during the “culture fever,” Nietzsche’s philosophy, Sartre’s existentialism, Freudian psychoanalysis, and Kafka’s fiction are the most influential among Chinese writers and critics. While all the other theories and trends were viewed by Chinese writers and critics as important mainly on technical and methodological grounds, the four, apart from their methodological significance, profoundly influenced the worldview or the way that Chinese people looked at the world and history at that time. Intriguingly and ironically enough, despite the political neutrality in nature of the four philosophical and literary trends, at first they were all introduced into China as instruments to undermine Communist ideology and the Maoist view of literature and history. For example, Nietzsche’s skeptical and iconoclastic philosophy, needless to say, was accepted as a valuable source of rebellious spirit and a powerful weapon by Chinese people who were so eager to overthrow the idol of Mao and the varied orthodoxies, political or ideological, created by him and the Party. The existentialist notion that existence is prior to essence was also borrowed to subvert the Communist notion of a “transcendental class essence.” Moreover, Sartre’s extremist pessimistic and negative view of the world as exemplified by his assertion that “hell is other people” and Kafka’s depiction of a absurd and violent world also evoked enormous sympathy and resonance from the Chinese people who had

just witnessed in the Cultural Revolution all what Sartre and Kafka delineated in their fictional and philosophical works, and who had been completely disillusioned with Communist ideology and been plunged into a “belief void.” Freud’s notion that human mind is a complicated structure that is made up of mutually interdependent yet conflicting components was cited by Chinese writers and critics as a powerful instrument to fight against the Maoist oversimplification in understanding human nature and in characterization that there is a clear-cut line between good people and bad elements in personality, moral standards, etc. Actually, Freud’s theory is one of the theoretical cornerstones for Liu Zaifu’s well-known “theory of the combined personality of literary character” (*xingge zuhe lun* 性格组合论, 1986).

If, among the varied foreign theories and works introduced into China, the works and thought of Nietzsche, Sartre, Kafka, and Freud exercised influence mainly on Chinese writers’ worldview and their mode of thinking and perception, Western modernist and postmodernist masterpieces such as Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*, and especially Latin American “magic realism,” provided the Chinese writers with new literary conceptions, techniques, and devices to accommodate their newly perceived reality and to express their newly released emotions, feelings, and thoughts. The varied modern techniques and devices employed in the foreign masterpieces—temporal and spatial dislocation, the blurring of the line between reality and imagination, stream of consciousness, soliloquy, the incorporating of supernatural elements and folk legends into the text, fragmented narration, etc.—were all accepted and adopted by the Chinese writers as powerful instruments to present the complex and split reality they observed in Mao’s China, where almost everything was

upside down, where events and people's behavior and mentality were so absurd and incredible that they might exist only in human imagination in a normal world, and where reality lost all its unity and harmony. In this sense, Chinese writers' fascination with the techniques of the sort at that time itself was an embodiment of their feeling of confusion and sense of intellectual and identity crisis.<sup>3</sup>

With the introduction and adoption of the foreign theories and masterpieces, the highly stereotyped and trite conceptualization of literature typical of the Mao era has gradually been replaced by thematically more thoughtful and aesthetically more refreshing literary forms and genres, and modern Chinese literature once again displays a tremendous creativity and vitality which was witnessed only by the May Fourth period.

It is common sense that any thing's birth and development in the world are a combined outcome of external conditions and intrinsic elements. Chinese avant-garde fiction is no exception. Apart from the favorable external social and political settings, the emergence and efflorescence of Chinese avant-garde fiction in the middle 1980s are also a natural result of century-long development of modern Chinese literature as a continuous process of self-adjustment, self-amelioration, and learning from the alien. After a century of exploration, accumulation, and development, after absorbing so much nutrition, native

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<sup>3</sup> In an excellent book on Latin American magic realism, the author María-Elena Angulo points to the significant fact that the emergence and flourishing of magic realism in Latin America from the 1940s onwards are closely connected with the expectation and effort on the part of the Latin Americans to shake off the identity imposed upon them by the colonial authorities and ideologies and to establish an authentic Latin American identity (1995). In this sense, it is no surprise to find that the Chinese writers of the 1980s, who were so eager to fill the belief void after the bankruptcy of Communist ideology and the Maoist Utopia and to build a new cultural identity in the post-totalitarian era, were highly obsessed with magic realism, which actually became one of the most, if not the most, influential literary trends in the 1980s China. In other words, it is the shared sense of identity crisis that links the Latin American magic realists and the Chinese writers of the 1980s together. In my view, another fact—the shared status of “underdeveloped country” of China and Latin American nations and similar socioeconomic realities and mentalities in correspondence with the status—also constitutes a reason for Chinese writers' fascination with magic realism.



and foreign, traditional and modern, experiencing so many setbacks, and learning so many lessons, modern Chinese literature grows to a big tree in the 1980s. In this course, I believe, the gradual maturity of modern Chinese language as the medium for literary expression is the decisive factor. It is common knowledge that while the peripheral features of a language like its style might change very quickly with time, the establishment and development of its internal mechanism—its grammar, norms, etc.—as a complex organic system are a long process of accumulation and perfecting. After century-long development, modern Chinese language as a medium has reached its maturity and gained its full expressive power. This perception can be effectively demonstrated by a particular example that in Xiao Hong's representative work *Tales of Hulan River* (*Hulanhe zhuan* 呼兰河传), a novel written as late as 1942, more than two decades after the publication of Lu Xun's *Diary of a Madman*, we can still find many awkward and even grammatically incorrect phrases and expressions. A literary language of the sort would naturally do damage to the expressive power and aesthetic appeal of a literary work.

### **The Chinese Avant-garde: Postmodernism?**

As mentioned in the Introduction, most previous research on Chinese avant-garde fiction, both inside and outside China, tends to label it “the Chinese postmodern.” In order to make a sound judgment of the labeling, it is necessary for us to take a brief review of the definitions and understanding of the European avant-garde, the origin of the avant-garde.

So far there are two major monograph books on the (European) avant-garde, and both of them bear the same title (Poggioli 1968, Bürger 1984). The two works actually represent “two directions of thought” or two different views of the nature of the avant-garde. To distinguish the two views, we shall begin with a discussion on European art history.

In the foreword to the English edition of Bürger’s book, Jochen Schulte-Sasse, a renowned scholar of modernism and the avant-garde, in addition to providing an insightful analysis and balanced assessment of Bürger’s theory of the avant-garde, presents a sketch of Bürger’s reconstruction of European art history and a comparison between Poggioli and Bürger in their views of art history and the avant-garde.

According to Schulte-Sasse and Bürger, the art history in European bourgeois society—roughly modern European art history—undergoes three phases. “The historical transition establishing the first phase of bourgeois art was determined by the loosening, and ultimately by the severing, of artists’ dependence on patrons and their replacement by an anonymous, structural dependence on the market and its principles of profit maximization” (Schulte-Sassae 1984: x). In this first phase, in spite of an already discernible tendency of art towards isolation from society, the increasingly autonomous “high” bourgeois culture as a whole kept “reflecting critically upon society.” Literature in this phase “is intended to have simultaneously a social and aesthetic effect,” always referring “critically or positively to norms and values essential to social interaction” (xi-xii). The second phase—a phase usually referred to as modernism—started with “the great artistic shift to a skepticism towards language and form in the middle of the nineteenth century,” “roughly from Flaubert on.” Literature in this phase “no longer

refers positively to society by critically presenting norms and values, but rather attacks the ossification of society and its language” (xiv). The beginning of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of the “historical avant-garde” mainly including Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism, and the left avant-garde in Russia and Germany—the start of the third phase of modern European art history. According to Bürger and Schulte-Sasse, the birth of the “historical avant-garde of 1920s” is actually motivated by the avant-gardists’ recognition of the modernist autonomous art’s separation from society and of “the social inconsequentiality” that the autonomy brings about, and by their attempt to reverse the tendency and to “lead art back into social praxis.” As Schulte-Sasse puts it, “The historical avant-garde of the twenties was the first movement in art history that turned against the institution ‘art’ and the mode in which autonomy functions. In this it differed from all previous art movements, whose mode of existence was determined precisely by an acceptance of autonomy” (xiv).

After a brief introduction of Bürger’s reconstruction of modern European art history and a comparison between Poggioli and Bürger in their respective analyses of European avant-garde, Schulte-Sasse points to a major difference between the two scholars’ theories on the avant-garde. While Poggioli adopts “sweeping criteria” and fails to examine the avant-garde against the specific historical background from which it emerged, Bürger “gives us a historically concrete and theoretically exact description of the avant-garde” (xiv). Derived from this difference is another major difference between the two scholars in their views of the nature of the avant-garde. Poggioli, due to his lack of historical consciousness and correspondingly the lack of a sense of historical periodization, tends to view art in modern bourgeois society as an inseparable whole

under the label of “grand modernism” and to “equate modernism with the avant-garde.” Bürger, in sharp contrast, emphasizes the “radical differences” between modernism and the avant-garde by repeatedly pointing to their historical, ideological, and rhetorical distinctions. Taking modernism as a reference point, Bürger views the avant-garde as something “emerging from, in reaction to, or superseding modernism,” or as something post-modern (Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, the entry of “postmodernism”).

According to Bürger and Schulte-Sasse, the essential difference between modernism and the avant-garde lies in the ways “art comprehend[s] the mode in which it function[s] in bourgeois society, its comprehension of its own social status” (xiv). As Schulte-Sasse points out, modernist art is a sort of “institution ‘art,’ i.e. the specific institutionalization of the commerce with art in bourgeois society” (xiii). The institution art is actually a direct consequence of the autonomy enjoyed by individual artists in bourgeois society. Artistic autonomy, a positive quality and usually a precondition for the greatness of an artistic work in pre-modern and totalitarian societies, turns negative after being commercialized in bourgeois society; it leads the artists merely to the principle of “profit maximization” and to the increasing separation from social praxis. As a result, “even the most critical work inevitably exhibits a dialectical unity of affirmation and negation by virtue of its institutionalized separation from social praxis” (xi). As Bürger adeptly points out, “In bourgeois society, art has a contradictory role: it projects the image of a better order and to that extent protests against the bad order that prevails. But by realizing the image of a better order in fiction, which is semblance (*Schein*) only, it relieves the existing society of the pressure of those forces that make for change” (50). Citing Herbert Marcuse, Shulte-Sasse makes the duality of artistic autonomy in bourgeois society quite

clear, “the autonomy of art had from the beginning is a very ambivalent character. Individual works may have criticized negative aspects of society, but the anticipation of social harmony as psychic harmony, which is part of the aesthetic enjoyment for the individual, risks degeneration into a mere cerebral compensation for society’s shortcomings, and thus of affirming precisely what is criticized by the contents of the works.” “The contradiction between negation and affirmation, implicit in the autonomous mode in which art functioned, led to a feeling of impotence among writers, to a realization of the social *ineffectiveness* of their own medium” (xi, *italic in the original*).

In sharp contrast with the degeneration of modernism’s negative effort into merely “an attack on traditional writing techniques” due to its substantial affirmation of social norms and values of bourgeois society, the avant-garde, according to Bürger and Shulte-Sasse, “can only be understood as an attack meant to alter the institutionalized commerce with art” (xv). It is precisely in this sense that Bürger regards the avant-garde as “the self-criticism of art in bourgeois society.” In opposition to modernistic art’s separation from social praxis, the avant-garde attempts to restore the social commitment of art and to rebuild the connection of art to social reality. Like Bürger, Poggioli also identifies social engagement as a defining feature of the avant-garde. He adopts the term activism to designate this feature.<sup>4</sup>

In light of Bürger’s criteria for distinguishing between modernism and the avant-garde, which I think are historically true and logically consistent and convincing, I

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<sup>4</sup> Bonnie S. McDougall, in her book on the introduction of Western literary theories into modern China, provides an accurate summary and incisive review of Poggioli’s theory on the avant-garde. Employing Poggioli’s theory as a yardstick, she concludes that China’s “New Literature Movement was not essentially an avant-garde movement” (1971: 190-218). The work done by me here is quite similar to McDougall’s. The only difference is that I adopt another scholar (Bürger)’s theory to judge another literary phenomenon (Chinese avant-garde fiction).

believe that *Zhongguo dangdai xianfeng xiaoshuo* definitely does not belong to the category of the avant-garde or the post-modern as construed in the Western context. Therefore the English transliteration of the name of the fictional genre as “contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction” is correct merely on a superficial, linguistic level; it is actually misleading and incorrect on a substantive, semantic level as understood in the Western context. However, as noted above, this does not necessarily mean that this name is invalid in the Chinese context. On the contrary, given the astonishing experimental and iconoclastic nature of the fiction compared with the literature preceding it and its radically defiant attitude towards non-literary traditions, the name is fully justified in the Chinese context.

First of all, *Zhongguo xianfeng xiaoshuo* (Chinese avant-garde fiction) reveals neither an enthusiasm for and commitment to true social praxis nor any intent to reject artistic autonomy, and according to both Büreger and Poggioli, social engagement and rejection of artistic autonomy are the defining characteristics of the avant-garde. As far as social commitment is concerned, on the one hand, subjectively, contemporary Chinese “avant-garde” writers, in near complete contrast to their May Fourth forefathers and writers in the Mao era, tend to regard writing as an individually significant activity and feel that the social commitment of writing is a burden or signal of the lack of literary autonomy. Nevertheless, the sense of social responsibility and historical consciousness are by no means lacking in their writings where they are influenced by the long-standing Chinese literary tradition of social engagement and obsession with history. To be sure, by writing, Chinese “avant-gardists” aim more at personal popularity, fame, and wealth than at social changes in China and the nation’s wealth and power. Unlike Lu Xun, whose

dream was to use literature as a means to cure China's social ills, the now already well-established avant-garde writer Su Tong's original dream of writing is to become a "prolific writer" (*zhuzuodengshen de zuojia* 著作等身的作家); he cares little, if any, about curing China's social ills.

According to Bürger, one of the most pronounced embodiments of the social engagement of the (European) avant-garde is the fact that the content of its literary texts is always about the true social reality. In this respect, the Chinese "avant-gardists" of 1980s also constitute a sharp contrast. For example, all the three major contemporary Chinese "avant-garde" writers—Su Tong, Yu Hua, and Ge Fei—are fascinated more with the "reality" created by their imagination than with the true social reality of China. Here Chinese "avant-garde" fiction reveals a manifest tendency towards separation from the true social reality—a defining feature of modernistic art according to Bürger, Schulte-Sasse, and many other Western thinkers. On the other hand, objectively, the semi-totalitarian political reality of post-Mao China also greatly restricts Chinese writers' intention to engage in social participation, if they do have such an intention. In Communist China, the writers who carry out the activities that were once practiced by the European avant-gardists such as delivering socially and politically significant lectures, writing literary manifestos, proliferating magazines to promote political ideas, organizing literary societies, etc. are subject to potential surveillance, punishment, and persecution. This is actually determined by the particular relationship of intellectuals to a socialist party-state, a topic that I will elaborate in detail in the next section of this chapter.

According to Bürger and Schulte-Sasse, the European avant-garde is a reaction to the functioning of artistic autonomy in bourgeois society. Completely disappointed with

the “social inconsequentiality” that autonomy brings about, the European avant-gardists rather abandon the autonomy and resume the social and political commitment of art. This is absolutely not the case to the Chinese “avant-garde.” The artistic milieu in the Europe is totally different from China; there excess and abuse of artistic autonomy make it a nuisance or burden in the eyes of the avant-gardists. In contemporary China, given the dictatorial nature of the political reality, literary autonomy is still an unfulfilled dream for Chinese writers and a precondition for the greatness of literary texts. The remarkable achievement that Chinese “avant-garde” fiction has made is for the most part derived from the autonomy, though limited, granted by the Party, thanks to the gradual loosening of political control over arts and literature in post-Mao China. According to Bürger and Schulte-Sasse, adhering to artistic autonomy or not is a dividing line between modernism and the avant-garde. In light of this demarcation, it is also more appropriate to put the so-called Chinese “avant-garde” into the former category than into the latter.

According to Bürger’s and Schulte-Sasse’s theoretical formulation, the most salient feature to exclude *Zhongguo xianfeng xiaoshuo* from the category of the avant-garde as construed in the European context lies in the fact that it is an “institution art,” and that it follows the artistic principle of “dialectic unity of negation and affirmation” characterizing modernist art. In spite of the authenticity of Chinese “avant-gardists”’ intention to subvert Communist ideology and to negate the dominant principles guiding art in a post-totalitarian party-state, in reality, the dual force of the lure of personal fame and profit and the pressure from the Party’s political control restricts their subversion and negation largely to the technical and aesthetic level. Fear of the potential punishment and persecution by the Party and of losing their hard-earned fame, social status, and wealth



make Chinese “avant-gardists” reluctant to transgress the boundary drawn by the Party. As a result, the stylistically and linguistically subversive and original writings of Chinese “avant-gardists” are actually quite compatible with both the Communist doctrines and the market rules dominating the socioeconomic reality of post-Mao China. In effect, the exposure of the misery and darkness of Chinese society caused by the Party’s “incorrect lines”—not by the Party itself because the Party is supposed to be always correct—on the part of Chinese “avant-gardists” serves to a large extent as a vent to release the psychological tension imposed upon Chinese people by the Party and the political system. Ironically enough, the seemingly subversive Chinese “avant-garde” eventually turns into an “institution,” which functions to stabilize the existing social and political system and values.

The above analyses make it quite clear that *Zhongguo xianfeng xiaoshuo*, in spite of the English transliteration of its name as “Chinese avant-garde fiction,” does not at all belong to the category of the avant-garde *if judged by the criteria derived from the European context*, due to its obvious tendency towards separation from social reality, clinging to literary autonomy, and its nature as “institution art.”

Since in Bürger’s formulation, the avant-garde is presented as a trend that is historically and logically after modernism, or as something of the post-modern, it is also quite erroneous to label Chinese avant-garde fiction the “Chinese post-modern.” This perception is actually also supported by some other facts and perceptions related to the Chinese historical context. First, the “avant-garde” quality and reputation of Chinese avant-garde fiction as well as its name are established by its contrast with the rather stereotyped and trite Maoist literature rather than with any sort of modernism, and

therefore, logically it can not be something post-modern. Second, if Kafka can be viewed as an avant-garde or postmodernist writer and surrealism as a sort of postmodernism, then the (European) avant-garde or postmodernism is at best one of the many sources of foreign influence for Chinese avant-garde fiction, and consequently, it is unreasonable to assume that the so-called “avant-gardists” of China only adopt the European avant-garde theory or postmodernism as their sole guiding principle. Last but not least, according to Lyotard and some other post-modernist theorists, postmodernism originated from postmodernist conditions—postindustrial economy, postmodern culture, etc. (Lyotard 1993). Given the facts that in the 1980s China, the government still reveals obvious traces of tyrannical rule, half of its population is underfed, and such ordinary electronic appliances as telephone and television are luxuries for ordinary families, it is simply impossible, I believe, for something like postmodernism to emerge from such social and political soil.

### **Writers in a Post-totalitarian Party-state: Unchanged and Changed**

The labelling of Chinese avant-garde fiction as an embodiment of “Chinese postmodernism” is not the only misinterpretation of it, there are certainly some others. For example, given the obviously defiant and subversive attitude of Chinese avant-garde writers towards the Maoist conceptualization of literature and Communist ideology, some critics take it for granted that there is a clear-cut line between the Chinese avant-garde and the Party in ideology and in view of literature and history. Some others assume that the avant-gardists’ reversal of their Communist fathers’ negation of their Confucian

grandfathers necessarily leads them to their grandfathers' position: the unconditional affirmation and acceptance of Confucian values (Lu 1995: 13-14). In fact, both assumptions are problematic because they fail to realize the very complexity of the relation of the Chinese avant-garde to both its Communist father and Confucian grandfather and the interaction and intersubjectivity of the three parties.

Actually, the defining characteristics and the social, intellectual implications of Chinese avant-garde fiction cannot be fully understood if we do not know of the identity, the special and somewhat embarrassing status of Chinese writers in general in a Communist party-state and its symbiotic relation to the state, and the nature of the Chinese avant-garde in particular and the specific historical context under which it emerged and developed.

Yu Hua, one of the most renowned avant-garde writers in China, toured the United States in late 2003 and delivered a series of lectures there, whose explicitly favourable attitude towards the current Communist regime and whose obvious stance of defending it, surprised, if not shocked, many Americans and overseas Chinese who favour democracy and freedom, and who evidently expected a different attitude and stance from him. The huge discrepancy between their expectations and the actualities on the part of Americans and those overseas Chinese, in my view, turns out to be a result of their misunderstanding of the identity and the special relationship to the Communist regime of Chinese writers in general and Chinese avant-gardists in particular.

In his highly acclaimed book *The Velvet Prison* on artists under state socialism, the Hungarian critic and writer Miklos Haraszti accurately describes the “symbiotic

relationship” between artists and the state and the special “censorship culture” in modern socialist states. Based on his own personal experience and perceptions in socialist Hungary, Haraszti points out, in the modern socialist state, every artist is a state employee, and “his thoughts, his sensibilities, his moods are no longer a private affair.” The “artists, as a group, have become a part of the political elite,” and they form a cooperative and symbiotic relationship with the socialist state. On the part of the state, “the heavy-handed methods” of the old censorship is increasingly superseded and replaced by “more subtle means of constraint.” By absorbing the ideology of the censored, learning the language of its victims, combining punishment with reward and sustenance, privilege and ambition, artistic autonomy and expression have been largely eliminated, and finally the artists have become “accomplices in their own oppression and exploitation” (Haraszti 1986: 7-19).

Though Haraszti’s perceptions and conclusions are based on his personal experience and observations of the former Eastern European socialist state, they can be safely applied to China’s situation. Given the fact that Chinese artists are much more docile and submissive than their Russian and Eastern Europeans counterparts (Liu B. 1990:41), that the political control over literature and arts in China is much more strict, and that the Party’s “use of literature” is much more extensive and intensive within “the socialist Chinese literary system” (Link 2000), the validity and applicability of Haraszti’s perceptions to China’s case can be more justified.

The writers’ status as employees of the state and “establishment intellectuals” (Hamrin and Cheek 1986),<sup>5</sup> and the complicity displayed in their willingness to

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<sup>5</sup> Both Su Tong and Yu Hua are “professional writers” (*zhuan ye zuo jia* 专业作家) of the Writer Association of China (*zhong guo zuo jia xie hui* 中国作家协会), an organization controlled and financed by

collaborate with the Party, as well as the differences in degree of their aversion toward the Communist version of historical interpretation on the part of each individual writer, inevitably limit the subversive power of Chinese avant-garde writings. As a result, their original intention to undermine the whole Communist representation of history cannot be completely fulfilled. They must write “between the lines” (Haraszti 1986: 142-149), because any transgression into the “prohibited zones” will be punished. Understanding the special relationship of writers to the socialist state—the Leninist party-state in China’s case—there should be no surprise that, for all its “avant-garde” nature in form and style, the historical representations in Chinese avant-garde fiction show high degree of compatibility with the orthodox communist historical construction. For example, the basic historical facts represented in Mo Yan’s highly acclaimed novella “Red Sorghum” highly tally with the Communist historical account that guerrillas and the people led by the Party were the mainstay in the War of Resistance against Japanese. The outline of the historical process in mainland China after “liberation” in Yu Hua’s *To Live* is also compatible with the discourse of the official history textbook. In this sense, Geremie R. Barmé’s perception that Chinese literature after Mao is just “repacking and commercialization of twentieth century Chinese history along the general lines determined by a party-defined nostalgia” proves to be both insightful and accurate (Barmé 1999: 247), though the term “party-defined nostalgia” seems somewhat awkward to me and might evoke some controversy.

Barmé’s notion of the “commercialization” of Chinese history on the part of contemporary Chinese avant-garde writers readily leads us to another important aspect of

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the Chinese government. They both receive salaries from the government as the state’s employees. Ge Fei’s situation is similar. He is a professor of Qinghua University (Beijing), a state-owned higher education institute of China. He is also paid by the government.

the socioeconomic life in Deng Xiaoping's semi-totalitarian China—the all-around commercialization of social life. This phenomenon has exercised enormous influence on the relation between the writers and the post-totalitarian party-state. After Mao Zedong's death, China has undergone drastic and rapid changes in almost every aspect of social life. Among all these changes, the transformation in the economic field from so-called socialism to market capitalism is the most radical. As a consequence, China in the post-Mao era witnesses a surprising and bizarre combination of political dictatorship—though in a much looser form than that in the Mao era—and economic freedom—though merely in a relative sense compared with the true market economies in the West.

The dual reality of strict political control and market economy in post-Mao China has inevitably brought about serious negative impacts on the life of Chinese people as well as on their mentality, beliefs, and values. In a country where economic freedom is the only sort of freedom granted by the Party, it is only natural to find that the abuse of the freedom and the corresponding all-around commercialization of all aspects of social life become a common social phenomenon. Much worse, the total collapse of Communist ideology as a consequence of the disastrous social practice in the name of socialism in Mao's China, especially the Cultural Revolution, actually turns the Chinese-style economic freedom into money fetishism. When the God of Communism dies, and the “old” God of Confucianism has been “thrown into the historical trash bin,” money naturally fills in the void and becomes the new God for Chinese people. Under such social circumstances, it is quite understandable that Chinese (avant-garde) writers, like all

other Chinese people, are profoundly influenced by the all-around commercialization of Chinese society and the nation-wide wave of money fetishism.<sup>6</sup>

Corresponding to the changed socioeconomic reality of post-totalitarian China, the relationship between the intellectuals and the state also undergoes a radical change. Officially promoted to “part of working class”—the nominal “leading class” prescribed by the country’s constitution—Chinese intellectuals as a collective now enjoy much higher and more privileged social and economic status than in Mao’s China. As a result, being a famous intellectual in post-Mao China not only means high status and fame but also wealth. This is even truer to a writer who usually can gain fame much easier than other intellectuals—in the broadest sense of the term—such as philosophers, historians, scientists, engineers, etc. due to the relatively popular and entertaining nature of his/her career. It is safe to say that, in post-Mao China, while the symbiotic relationship of the intellectuals with the party-state remains unchanged, the intellectuals play more substantive and important a role in the relationship and enjoy more autonomy and independence than before.

Therefore, contemporary Chinese avant-garde writers, like all other Chinese intellectuals, are confronted by a dilemma in the post-Mao era. On the one hand, their disillusionment with Communist ideology based on their personal experience and

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<sup>6</sup> Unlike in Mao’s China, where writing is mainly associated with political capital and political honor, in post-Mao China, especially after the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989, economic consideration of writing far outweighs its political value, though the latter is by no means absent from it. This is even truer when applied to look at Chinese avant-garde writers. For example, in my observation, no other reason can account for the motivation of Ge Fei’s repackaging and relabelling his first novel *The Enemy*, a work which is widely viewed as the foremost avant-garde novel in contemporary China dealing with serious existential predicaments facing human beings, as “mystery fiction” and “the first Chinese detective and horror novel,” except the commercial consideration. Su Tong, another major contemporary Chinese avant-garde writer, never conceals his strong desire for popularity and fame, the two things which are often closely linked with money. Su Tong is also a writer in contemporary China who is well known for his love for fashion such as famous brand clothes, cigarettes, etc.

observation of all the darkness and cruelties in the Cultural Revolution evokes in them a strong and authentic intention to subvert Communist ideology and the Communist presentation of Chinese history. On the other hand, the lure of fame and wealth, the motive to keep and protect their newly gained status and vested interest, and the fear of Party's still quite strict political control and potential punishment, in effect, greatly restrict and weaken the strength and power of Chinese avant-gardists' subversive intention. Under such circumstances, it is only natural for the reader to discern a clear consciousness of restraining from transgressing the boundary drawn by the Party in these writers' works. This perception might disappoint many who imagine the avant-gardists as "cultural heroes" who bravely fight against Communist ideology and political control.<sup>7</sup> Intriguingly and ironically enough, in a post-totalitarian society where orthodox Maoist doctrines have already become a common aversion to the general public, certain kinds of well controlled and adeptly manipulated rebellious behaviour and thought against the doctrines themselves become an effective means to gain personal popularity, fame, and wealth. For example, to our great disappointment, those ingeniously created and widely read stories, novellas, and novels of Su Tong aim not only at the subversion of Communist ideology but also at personal fame, popularity, and ultimately money.

Here I feel it necessary to point out the fact that the ideological limitations of contemporary avant-garde fiction imposed by the Party, by the writers' subjectivities, and by the external socioeconomic background in the post-totalitarian party-state do not necessarily mean inferiority of its literary quality. On the contrary, the intricate relation

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<sup>7</sup> Actually some overseas Chinese writers like Gao Xingjian and Ha Jin are much more defiant political dissidents than the avant-garde writers in mainland China, due to the "safe geographical and political distance" they keep from the Party.



of Chinese avant-garde fiction to Communist ideology to some extent enriches its social, intellectual, cultural connotations. After all, literature cannot be equated either with history or historiography constructed by historians or with pure political propaganda, and the significance and values of literature do not lie in whether its description of historical process is accurate or not, but in the content and depth of the social, political, humanist implications behind the historical description it provides.

### **Obsession with History: Deepening of an Old Tradition**

Chinese writers' obsession with history and the intertwined relationship between Chinese literature and history/historiography are now common knowledge among critics of Chinese literature, both inside and outside China. Associated with this prominent phenomenon are two equally pronounced facts concerning Chinese history and literature: history's central position in Chinese culture and fiction's humble status in the Chinese intellectual and literary hierarchy. The humble and marginalized status of Chinese fiction in an intellectual hierarchy and society characterized by its overemphasis on history as the sole source of value and moral judgment, inevitably endows it with a dual nature: its transgression, its rebellious spirit, and its noisiness to orthodox ears on the one hand, and its frequent aspirations and conformity to orthodox values on the other (McMahon 1988:12, Plaks 1977: 318-320). The duality or two-sidedness, the simultaneous defiance of and conformity to orthodoxy, the simultaneous appeal to popular tastes and elite expectations, is one of the most durable and remarkable features of Chinese fiction in the ancient times.

The dual nature of Chinese fiction remained unshaken until the late Qing when Liang Qichao promoted a “fiction revolution.” Based on his observation and study of Japanese literature of the Meiji era, which largely copies European literary values, by elevating fiction to the top position in the Chinese literary hierarchy, Liang emphasized the instrumentality and didacticism of fiction, asserting that fiction should shoulder up the mission of enlightening and renewing people, and of strengthening the nation. Interestingly enough, in light of the thinking and logic of Liang Qichao and other advocates of the New Fiction, when fiction takes the place of poetry and prose as the most prestigious genre in the literary hierarchy, it is also expected to assume the functioning and role that traditionally poetry and prose had played in Chinese society. Actually, the notion of New Fiction potentially implies the breakdown of the unity and integration of fiction as a genre combining popular appeal and elite expectation and a shift of fiction’s purposes to serve the edifying role preciously occupied by poetry. The actual historical process of Chinese literature unfolded just as Liang Qichao and his fellows advocated and designed. With the development of modern commercial society, the modern press and media, and the emergence of a modern middle class as the potential consumers of modern entertainment culture, Chinese fiction finally split into two thematically, stylistically, and linguistically distinct sections: serious fiction and popular fiction. And from then on, these two forms of fiction have played different roles and exercised different functions in Chinese society, appealing to different literary expectations, aesthetic tastes, and psychologies of different readership (Link 1981, Zhao 1995: 21-25).

For all their pursuit of artistic autonomy, independence, and critical spirit, May Fourth writers, however, embraced and even pushed further the didacticism and instrumentality of literature advocated by Liang Qichao. To write for history or epoch, a strong desire to participate in and “to be at the center of historical transform” (Denton 1998: 48), “a didactic impulse to fulfill their sense of social duty through literature” (Ng 2003: x), a heritage passed down from Yan Fu and other first generation intellectuals, was still the main preoccupations of May Fourth writers. To some extent, the May Fourth “literary revolution” can be conceived as a movement of the affirmation of serious literature as the mainstream in the literary hierarchy. It sets the direction to “revolutionary collectivism” for modern Chinese literature, and starts the process of the gradual undermining during the Yan’an period and finally total rejection of humanist individualism and literary autonomy during the Cultural Revolution in Mao’s China. It is only natural that some scholars repeatedly remind us of the fundamental continuities between May Fourth discursive presentations and Maoist ideology in their shared view of the instrumentality and didactic nature of literature, in spite of the significant distinctions between these two discourses in many aspects (Lin 1979, Denton 1998). Tracing the origins of Maoist proclivities to exalt the masses, collectivism, totalitarianism, the total subjection of literature to political needs, etc., to the May Fourth, Kirk Denton definitely rejects the notion of “any baldly political, black-and-white interpretation of the struggle between May Fourth and Yan’an values” (Denton 1998:6). Ironically and interestingly enough, the Maoist rape of literature by politics was also carried out in the name of “history.” By claiming that it represents the interests of the Chinese people, and that the Communist ideology represents the direction of “historical development,” the Party

adeptly equates the writers' submission to Party politics with the sublime mission "to answer the call of history."

In the years immediately after Mao Zedong's death, Deng Xiaoping masterminded and launched the so-called Thought Liberation Movement. Behind this superficial political debate over "the criteria for evaluating truth" lay Deng's attempt to rewrite or re-interpret Maoist history—the renewal of an old Chinese political strategy. Actually, at the core of the Dengist "thought liberation movement" is a partial negation of Maoist social practice and a partial liquidation of Maoist ideology. This is fully displayed by Deng's claim of "total negation of the Cultural Revolution" and the fierce attacks on the "whateverists," people like Hua Guofeng, "who maintained that whatever Mao said or did should be taken as gospel" (Brugger and Kelly 1990:119).

In face of the nation-wide surge of rewriting of and reflection on "history" in every aspect of social life, Chinese writers, who always have a strong impulse to be the spokesmen of history, naturally were not willing to stand still as outsiders. Actually, if we look back over Chinese literature in the post-Mao era, we could find that, from Scar Literature, Educated Youth Literature, Native-roots Searching Literature, to the avant-garde literature, Chinese writers' reflection on Chinese history and culture has gradually deepened, and it has gone so far that sometimes it even transgressed the boundaries drawn by the Party and constructed a counter-history, a history running counter to Communist version. This could be expressed in the form of total subversion and reversal of the Maoist interpretation of the Chinese revolution and history, as in Su Tong's case, or in the form of transcendence of Maoist materialistic view of history through reincorporating subjectivity into historical interpretation, as in Yu Hua's case, or in the

form of total rejection of the conceptualization of history and the underlying rationalistic assumption of human experience as a perceptible and understandable unity, as in Ge Fei's case.

Since history is the core concept in this thesis, I would like to conclude this chapter by articulating my understanding of it. History is a highly complex term, and it seems to be made more and more complex and even mysterious by some theorists of "New Historicism." However diversified the definitions and understandings of the term, I believe its essence and denotation remain unchanged. In this respect, I think Collingwood's notion that history (meaning historiography) is a mental "reenactment of the past" is highly convincing. According to Collingwood, because a historical event has both its "inside face" (human thoughts and emotions in the past historical process) and "outside face" (natural changes in the past), the reenactment of the past means not only "to construct a picture of things as they really were and of events as they really happened," but also to rethink "what was once thought for the first time" in the past. Here Collingwood actually emphasizes the fact of the unity of objectivity and subjectivity in history (Ricoeur 1988: 144-5).

For our purpose, the distinction between the history written by the professional historian and the so-called "history" presented by the novelist is highly significant. While the former should always attempt to provide as accurate, all-around, and complete as possible a presentation of the facts and thoughts of a past period, the latter never aims at completeness, and its presentation sometimes is also inaccurate (often deliberately so). What interest the novelist are often some particular aspects of history, especially the

imagined feelings, emotions, and thoughts behind the historical facts. Therefore, in most cases, a literary picture drawn by a novelist in the name of “history” is more often an expression of the novelist’s subjective view or thoughts about history than a presentation of actual historical facts. This observation is true even to the so-called “realistic” writers and works.

History not only has two faces—inner and outer—but also has two sides: specific and abstract. As far as the treatment of history in fiction is concerned, different writers have different ways. While some writers’ preoccupation is mainly with historical specificity and authenticity, others tend to meditate on history on an abstract, philosophical level. For example, in our case, while Su Tong and Yu Hua are more obsessed with the Chinese social reality in a specific historical period, or some specific social phenomena in Chinese history, Ge Fei attempts to explore some general issues of history such as the nature of history, the accessibility or inaccessibility of history to human beings, etc.

## Chapter 2

### History as "Retrogressive" Process: Subversion, Identity Crisis, and Power Relations in Su Tong's Fiction

I wish I could penetrate China's thousands of years of history. I wish I could have been an aged guest in an ancient street teahouse, with the kaleidoscopic universe, all mortal beings, and the passage of time fully absorbed into my sight.

In fiction, the rouge and silhouettes of beauties, and the palace conspiracies, are nothing but nightmares on rainy nights. And the disasters and killings in fiction are no more than the expression of my anxiety and fear for any group of people in any kind of world. That's all.

---Su Tong<sup>8</sup>

Fredric Jameson in his influential book *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* emphasizes "the priority of the political interpretation of literary texts" and upholds the notion of political perspective "as the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation." As he points out, "there is nothing that is not social and historical—indeed, that every thing is 'in the last analysis' political" (1981:17, 20). The seemingly absolutistic and arbitrary tone notwithstanding, Jameson's arguments, in my view, can be properly applied to many literary texts produced in totalitarian or semi-totalitarian countries, where the politicization of all aspects of social life and the domination of the "logicality of ideological thinking" becomes the most characteristic feature of those countries. According to Hannah Arendt, ideologies are "historical" and

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<sup>8</sup> The original Chinese is: 我希望我渗入了中国几千年的历史, 希望自己是古代街肆茶馆中的一位老迈茶客, 大千世界, 芸芸众生, 岁月流逝尽收眼底。

小说中的红粉鬓影和宫廷阴谋都只是雨夜惊梦, 小说中的灾难和杀戮也只是我对每一个世界每一堆人群的忧虑和恐慌, 如此而已。《我的帝王生涯跋》, 186-7 页。

In this thesis, all English translations in the text which are followed by the Chinese originals in the footnotes are mine.

"always oriented toward history," and promise to provide a "total explanation" of all historical happenings (1966: 469-474).

The applicability of the political and historical approach to contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction in the analysis and assessment of its ideological importance, I believe, can be perfectly justified, provided that all contemporary Chinese avant-garde writers have spent their formative years in Mao's totalitarian China, and continue to live in a China characterized by semi-totalitarianism in social life in the post-Mao era. As a result, their mindsets have inevitably been politicized and ideologized, more or less, consciously or unconsciously. The justification of my perceptions is especially manifest in Su Tong's case; his extreme obsession with history and politics is made so clear in his fiction that some novels of his are actually called New Historical Fiction (*xinlishi xiaoshuo* 新历史小说). Su Tong's enthusiasm for politics and his treatment of his stories as political allegories are also explicitly indicated in the novella "Opium Family" by the fact that 1949, the year marking the Communist seizure of power in China and the victory of the Chinese revolution, is arranged, just as in the actual historical course, as the turning point in the story, and that the execution of the young landlord and the ultimate demise of the opium family took place on December 26, 1950, a date marking the birthday of Mao Zedong, the leader and most powerful symbol of the Chinese Communist revolution.

It is a shared intention of all Chinese avant-garde writers to sabotage Communist ideology, especially the Maoist doctrines. The uniqueness of Su Tong and the difference between his work and that of other Chinese writers, in my view, lie in the deliberateness and thoroughness of his rebellion against the Communist orthodoxy, and in his willingness and moral courage to systematically subvert the whole set of Communist



ideologies and the Communist interpretation of Chinese history and revolution, though in an artistically and linguistically subtle way, of which "Opium Family" is most typical.

Before entering into the fictive world of Su Tong, I find it necessary to point to a methodological issue particularly important to the reading of Su Tong, due to his complex yet intimate relationship to both the Communist tradition and the Confucian legacy. The issue is intertextuality or intersubjectivity. Rather than adopting the structuralist conceptualization of "text", which is put into an unreasonably broad context referring to "not only actual discourses, but the 'texts' of appropriate behavior in the society at large" (Chatman 1978:50), here I employ the term in a rather conventional and much narrower sense, exclusively designating any concrete discourse in the form of speech or writing. In this chapter I will occasionally compare and contrast Su Tong's novels with both "model" Communist literary texts and traditional Chinese literary masterpieces, to highlight the rebellious nature of his writing and to deepen our understanding of his fiction in a broader cultural context.

### **History as Battlefield for Ideological Domination**

Highly talented, prolific, and with a certain "feminine" sensitivity, Su Tong is among the most popular and most read writers in contemporary China. Of his voluminous fictional writings, the highly acclaimed trilogy *Raise the Red Lantern: Three Novellas* translated by Michael S. Duke (hereafter *Trilogy*) and the novel *Rice* translated by Howard Goldblatt are best known to Western readers.

***Parody as Narrative and Discursive Strategy***

Readers and critics who are fascinated with Su Tong's fiction and familiar with the research on him might, as I do, find a perception associated with the reading of his fiction disturbing. For all its preeminence and far-reaching influence in the history of contemporary Chinese literature in terms of its ideological and aesthetic significance, the novella "Opium Family" has long been left in obscurity in relation to the other two novellas in the trilogy. Actually I think the novella is the most important of Su Tong's works, and as we will discover later, is also the most ideologically "reactionary" judged by the Communist view.

Entering into the world of the "Opium Family", we may be surprised at first glance by its high similarity to the "revolutionary" works dominating the literary world of the Mao era, especially the Communist "model" play *The White-Haired Girl* (*Bai mao nü* 白毛女) in terms of subject matter, plot structuring, and arrangement of character. It is also a story about oppression and revolution, with all the characters divided into two clear-cut social classes, the landlord family on the one side, the poor peasants and the Communist work team leader Lu Fang on the other—a pattern that resembles the revolutionary novels perfectly. The story is narrated along two parallel lines, one telling of the flourishing, "inevitable" decline, and final demise of the landlord family, and the other narrating the rebellion of the poor and the "oppressed" and the equally "inevitable" victory of the revolution. The two narrative threads are joined with a main male character Chen Mao, a long-term laborer of the landlord Liu family and later the most resolute revolutionary and Peasant Association chairman of Maple Village, who is structurally assigned by the implied author the role of a go-between negotiating between the two

distinct narrated worlds, namely, that of the revolutionary and of the landlord family. The relationship between Lu Fang, the Communist leader, and Liu Chencao, the new generation of "landlord" as classmates also functions technically as a narrative adhesive connecting the two spheres.

Specifically, along the first narrative line is the history of the opium family—how the old landlord Liu Laoxia makes his way to become the biggest landowner of Maple Village, through planting and selling opium and gradually swallowing up his brother's inherited land and other properties; how the new generation of "landlord" Liu Chencao's frailness, laziness, and the indifference to wealth accumulation leads the family downwards; and how finally the landlord family is completely destroyed by the surges of revolution. Along the other line is the story about the poor long-term laborer Chen Mao, telling how he is "exploited," "oppressed," and humiliated by the landlord, along with the vivid descriptions of his intertwined relationship with the family; how he becomes the resolute revolutionary and the Peasant Association chairman ruthlessly struggling against the landlord; and how finally his death as the result of the fatal shot by the young landlord Liu Chencao, who is actually his biological son, leads to the execution of the latter by the Communist leader Lu Fang and ultimate demise of the landlord family. Around the two narrative lines, interwoven into the text are adultery, cuckoldry, illicit children, extramarital sexuality, banditry, intra-family animosity and killing, and idiocy—all are good material for the long-lasting literary themes of containment vs transgression, conformity vs rebellion, and all are among the most favorable motifs popular in traditional Chinese fiction, reminiscent of *The Golden Lotus*, *Dream of the*

*Red Chamber*, *Water Margins*, and the Ming short stories created and compiled by Feng Menglong (1574-1646) and Ling Mengchu (1580-1644).

However, we should be cautious not to be deceived by the seeming similarities between Su Tong's writings and the previous texts, both Communist and traditional. Actually, the originality of Su Tong as an excellent writer just lie in that, through the clear manipulation of varied literary devices, which will be specified later in the chapter, he creatively invests into the old story the astoundingly new political and cultural implications, endows the familiar motifs and imagery with new connotations and meanings, and finally comes up with the effect of total defamiliarization and subversion of the old texts, both thematically and aesthetically.

When penetrating through the descriptive level of superficial familiarity onto the deeper allegorical level of discursive interpretation of the novella, we should be shocked by the totally different personalities, mentalities, behavior, and moral standards of the seemingly familiar characters who usually appeared in the Communist literary works, and by the radically different ideology and view of history displayed in the novella, which run completely counter to the Communist version.

Totally contrary to the Communist novels, where the landlord is always depicted as a caricatured minor character, whose ugly physical appearance, evil mentality, and corrupt moral standards only function as a perfect antithesis to project the socialist hero's or heroine's great, sublime, and lofty image, in "Opium Family," the landlord Liu Laoxia is assigned the role of the protagonist, and described as a man of dignity and moral virtues. Completely different from the images of landlords in the Communist novels who are lazy, vulgar, and stupid, live parasite-like lives, and obtain their wealth by exploiting

the poor, Liu Laoxia makes all his way to be the biggest landlord of Maple Village by his own intelligence, hard work, and the spirit of never giving up. Totally in opposition to Communist propaganda, where the landlord class is depicted as living a luxurious and extravagant life through exploitation and extortion of the poor and the unprivileged, in the novella, Liu Laoxia, despite his enormous wealth and power, lives frugally and runs his home "with industry and thrift"—two fundamental moral virtues universally accepted by Chinese people as able to make a family enjoy long-lasting growth and prosperity. Liu Laoxia is also a man of courage and dignity. When the notorious bandit leader Jiang Long leads his troops to break into the Liu family's compound to blackmail the family, threatening to kill all if their demands are not fully met, while all the other people in the family cry and scream in great panic, the landlord talks and negotiates with the bandit leader with great composure, standing there "as straight and unbending as a tree trunk" (*Trilogy*: 218). Later, when the village is already under Communist control, he is forced to attend a struggle meeting against himself. Though suffering humiliations, beatings, and threats of death through the course of the meeting, the landlord continues to behave himself as a man of dignity, with all his self-respect and confidence, and his contempt for Chen Mao and the villagers unchanged. The image of the landlord, as it is delineated here, reminds us of the fearless heroes or heroines in the Communist works who are ready to sacrifice their lives for the "lofty Communist cause."

From the brief analysis of the overall structure and plot of the novella and its characterization as exemplified by the portrayal of the landlord Liu Laoxia, and through its comparison with the Communist literary "model" *The White-haired Girl*, it becomes

quite clear that, the superficial similarity between the two works is actually a narrative strategy elaborated by Su Tong for discursive purposes. The strategy is parody.

The cultural and ideological significance and power of parody as a narrative device have already been illuminated by many modern theorists. For instance, Linda Hutcheon, an internationally renowned "postmodernist" critic argues that "parody in this century [twentieth century] is one of the major modes of formal and thematic construction of texts. And beyond even this, it has a hermeneutic function with both cultural and even ideological implications" (1985: 2). She defines parody as "a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text," to which she adds, parody is "repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity" (1985: 6). Because parody occurs not only between different "individual works" but also between different sets of "conventions," and concerns "trans-contextualization" between the present parodying representations and the past parodied ones, it actually becomes "a productive-creative approach to tradition" (1985: 7). As she points out, "through a doubling process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference" (1989: 93). Another critic, Simon Dentith, defines parody as "any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice" (2000: 9).

In compatibility with Hutcheon's and Dentith's conceptualization of parody, Su Tong also employs parody as a critical tool for ideological purposes. By parodying the techniques, conventions, and "historical grammar" of the Communist literary "model," Su Tong successfully distances his historical presentation from the Communist version

and consequently subverts the asserted "universal validity" of the Communist presentation. In this sense, the superficial, formal resemblance between Su Tong's novella and the Communist "model" works just to highlight the enormous gap between the Communist version of history and the "counter-history" constructed by him.

***Trumpet vs Hidden Organ: Symbols of Revolution vs Tradition***

The characterization and manipulation of the image of Chen Mao, the long-term laborer of the Liu family, prove to be another great artistic success of the novella. Rather than the familiar poor peasant images in the Communist novels, who are always embodiments of moral virtues and innate high class consciousness, Chen Mao in this novella is depicted as a socially abject and morally corrupt person, whose notorious fame is built upon his love for his brass trumpet and his extremely strong sexual desires and activities, and especially upon his adultery with the mistress of Liu family, Liu Laoxia's wife Jade Flower:

There wasn't a man in Maple Village whose sexual history was richer or more varied and fascinating than Chen Mao's. When Chen Mao walked through the village, everyone admired two things; one was his brass trumpet, and the other was his hidden organ.

The men of Maple Village always believed that Chen Mao's golden spear could never be bent, and women gossiping on their porches always had one everlasting topic of conversation: Chen Mao climbed into Jade Flower's bedroom window again last night (*Trilogy*:209).

A narratologically important figure who, as discussed above, structurally connects the two narrated worlds together, Chen Mao's "two most admired things"—his trumpet

(*suona* 唢呐) and hidden organ (*yinwu* 阴物, penis)—are also highly significant. As we will discover later, the antithesis and conflict between them, as two symbols representing two different kinds of way of life, different levels of mentality, and different sets of ideologies, are extremely meaningful in the novella.

The trumpet, a musical instrument originally used by the peasants in China at weddings, funerals, and other socially important occasions, was adeptly transformed and employed by the Party during Yan'an period as one of the most powerful symbols of revolution. In the novella, it is the trumpet that associates Chen Mao with revolution. In the first half of the story, when revolution hasn't taken place in Maple Village, the trumpet seems hidden from our view. The first time the trumpet draws our attention is the moment when the Communist Party controls Horsebridge. Driven by the news, Chen Mao goes excitedly into the landlord's compound to warn and threaten the family. He "took his brass trumpet off of his belt; the sound of the brass trumpet rose up into the highest heaven, and he heard the roar of the great earth trembling as lava burst forth" (*Trilogy*: 228). Later on, when Chen Mao attempts to agitate the peasants to make revolution against the landlord but failed, under the order of the landlord he is tied up by the peasants on the beam of the Straw Pavilion. "During the night he managed to work his brass trumpet into his mouth, and we heard the loud mournful sound of his trumpet reverberating out from the Straw Pavilion and spreading out all over Maple Village" (*Trilogy*: 232). Finally when Maple Village is already under the Communist Party's control, the revolution is approaching its ultimate victory, and Chen Mao has become the chairman of the Peasant Association of Maple Village, we hear again "the loud clear sound of a brass trumpet", "calling all of the land and people of Maple Village, calling all



of the confined spirits to rise up on the wind." At this moment, the status of the trumpet as the symbol of revolution is fully affirmed, as "all the men in the Peasant Association had a brass trumpet hanging from their waists" (239). From the brief description above, we have no difficulty finding that the trumpet actually represents revolution, rebellious spirit, and the desire to control others.

Compared with the trumpet, the story around Chen Mao's hidden organ seems much more complex and meaningful. Through his hidden organ, Chen Mao relates himself to the landlord family in an extremely complicated and intertwined way. He has adultery with Liu Laoxia's wife Jade Flower; Chencao is his biological son as the result of the adultery; and towards the end of the story he rapes Liu Laoxia's pretty daughter Liu Suzi. The extreme complexity of the relationship between the long-term laborer and the landlord family, especially his adultery with the mistress, naturally provides a huge discursive space for multiple interpretive possibilities. The immediate ideological breakthrough the descriptions have brought about lies in that, for example, the intertwined and inseparable ties between the poor laborer and the landlord family ruthlessly subvert the Maoist assertion that there is a clear-cut class line between the landlord class and the poor peasants. Moreover, the fact that the young landlord Liu Chencao is the poor laborer's biological son also powerfully destroys the blood determinism in class division insisted on by the Party during the Mao era. It is right at this point that Su Tong shows his profound discontinuities with the Communist tradition—a sign of his uniqueness and rebelliousness as an avant-garde writer.

Of course Su Tong has gone far beyond this in his writing. As we will discover below, it is the remarkably creative way in which Su Tong treats the stock subjects or

motifs such as adultery that distinguishes him from both the traditional *zuoshude* 作书的 or "book makers" (humble self-reference employed by traditional Chinese vernacular novel writers) and the mouthpieces of the Party in literature.

It is a commonplace that adultery has been among the most long-lasting and most popular themes in Chinese fiction. Traditionally Chinese novel writers—with only few writers such as the author of *Dream of the Red Chamber* as exceptions—tend to treat the subject in the sense of Platonic mimesis to achieve a twofold purpose. On the one hand, as sex, especially illicit and extramarital sexuality, always draws the reader's attention with its ability to evoke libidinal ecstasy and the consequential sensual and psychological satisfaction, therefore the description of adultery always proves to be a shortcut to make a writer popular quickly. On the other hand, more importantly, by claiming that their description of the varied sexualities is merely an objective presentation of the obscene behavior and that imitation of such destructive desires is the antithesis of Confucian moral standards and teachings, the writers adeptly dodge the accusations for their purported pornography, and successfully disguise themselves as faithful disciples and defenders of Confucian principles.

Rather than adopting the traditional approach to adultery, which exclusively focuses on the mimetic and descriptive function, Su Tong elevates the narrative of his story to the figurative level and makes it a deliberately constructed political allegory. It is a well-known fact that in the "model" Communist novels, sex—if it is allowed to appear in the text—is also always used as political allegory or vehicle to convey the notion of class hatred or class oppression. However, even a brief comparison between the "model" Communist play *The White-Haired Girl* and the "Opium Family" in the ways in which

they treat sex respectively, is sufficient to reveal the huge and essential differences between the Communist writers and Su Tong.

I believe no reader could ignore a distinct difference in plot structuring between the two works when comparing them: While in *The White-Haired Girl*, sexual intercourse is presented as the rape of the kind and innocent poor girl by the cold-hearted and lustful landlord, in "Opium Family," it is delineated as the willing adultery between the landlord's mistress (yet unprivileged in gender) and the poor laborer (yet higher in gender hierarchy). In my understanding, the very difference between the two works in plot is highly significant. Actually, by rewriting the sexual intercourse between a member of landlord class and a poor peasant, from presenting it as the rape of the poor girl by the powerful landlord—an act symbolizing the idea of landlord class brutalizing the poor—in the Communist "model," to depicting it as the voluntary sexual activity between two equals in his own story, Su Tong ingeniously yet in a subtle way strips off the political and moral dimensions imposed on sexuality by the Communist ideology, and adeptly deconstructs the notion of class oppression projected by the sexual abuse in the Communist text.

Actually, in the novella Su Tong's intent to neutralize and reinterpret sexuality is made extremely clear by his vivid and detailed descriptions of the course of the adulterous act between the laborer and the mistress. Every time Chen Mao climbs into Jade Flower's bedroom window to make love with her, the sexual intercourse is always accompanied by his unbearable hunger for food and Jade Flower's insult by calling him "dog." As the reward for his sexual "labor", at end of their lovemaking, he will get half a steamed roll from the woman; then chewing on the roll, he will wrap his pants around his

waist and jump out the window "with a heart full of sadness and anger." After he left Jade Flower's room, the story reads:

Under the night dew a pile of fodder gave off an odor of tears and complaint.

Chen Mao reflected that all of his days stacked up together amounted to nothing more than a pile of fodder; some of it he squandered on women's bodies, and some of it he wasted in the Liu Family's fields; this was life, too, and he had to go on living this way (*Trilogy*: 210)

Obviously here, sex is described not as one-directional violence but as mutual or reciprocal physical need and satisfaction. For the poor laborer, sex means at once both the physical and psychological satisfaction, and the sense of sadness, heaviness, and humiliation. Sex for him to a large extent is nothing more than another kind of "labor," another means for food, a basic need for survival, and a primitive way of life. Su Tong's interpretation of sex at this point is perfectly compatible with the Confucian worldview, which insists that need of sex and food is human nature.

### ***Revolution vs Tradition: Ideological Struggle for Interpretive Power***

The fact of Su Tong's depoliticization and neutralization of sexuality in his novella doesn't necessarily mean the weakening, even elimination of the political and historical dimension and interpretation of his novella. On the contrary, as common sense, to remove the political clothing imposed on a subject by an ideology in an attempt to subvert this ideology, the action itself is political. Moreover, specifically, the political dimension and cultural connotations of Su Tong's novel are not derived from the interpretation of sex as an isolated subject. Rather they are achieved through the juxtaposition of the now neutralized sex and the highly politicized revolutionary ideology, symbolized by the

confrontation of hidden organ vs trumpet. Here we actually arrive at one of the core ideas displayed in the novella: battle for legitimacy and domination between the two distinct ideologies, traditional and Communist.

Actually, in the novella, by deleting from the text the descriptions of military conflicts, wars, and massive violence—the scenes usually indispensable in both actual revolutions and the revolutionary novels, Su Tong deliberately highlights the ideological nature of revolution. Revolution here is depicted as battle between worldviews, values, beliefs, discourses, and ways of life, as struggle between ideologies for interpretive power and cultural hegemony, as “war without smoke of gunpowder.”

As far as ideologies and ideological boundaries are concerned, readers who have long been immersed in Communist propaganda might be shocked by the reality presented in “Opium Family.” Contrary to the Communist assumption that the line demarcating the ideological divisions is drawn between the exploiting class (landlord Liu family) and the exploited and oppressed class (poor peasants and their representative the Communist commander Lu Fang), in the novella, the line, to our great surprise, actually is set between the whole Maple Village (the landlord family and other poor peasants as a whole) and the Communist leader Lu Fang (and the “grandsons” nurtured on the Communist ideology). The astoundingly unbelievable truth is, as revealed in the story, it is with Liu Laoxia the “class enemy” of the poor, rather than with Lu Fang the self-assumed representative of the poor, that Chen Mao and other poor peasants share the same worldview, values, beliefs, and way of life. In other words, the ideological battle actually takes place between the old Maple Village and the Party, rather than between the “exploiting” class and the exploited, as the Communist Party asserts.

In the novella, Lu Fang is the natural spokesman of the Communist ideology, and the "grandsons", who are nurtured on it, are upholders and successors of the ideology. The role of the spokesman of Maple Village, and of the traditional worldview, is assigned by the implied author to an anonymous plural "Grandfathers." The "Grandfathers" know all the history of Liu family and Maple Village before the Communist seizure of power in 1949, they have a strong belief in old Maple Village way of life, and they share "a kind of primitive anthropocentric thought" with all the other people in the village (*Trilogy*: 248). In this sense, the "Grandfathers" can be safely identified with the peasants of old Maple Village. The role of the "Grandfathers" as spokesmen of Maple Village is further projected in the novella by the fact that the "Grandfathers" scarcely take any other actions in the story, they only "speak", and that their existence in the story is merely the many paragraph-long speeches. If we understand the fact that Lu Fang and the "Grandfathers" are the spokesmen of the two different ideologies, respectively, we should not be surprised that they are the most articulated persons in the novel. Actually in the story all the long speeches are uttered by them.

The fact that the landlord family shares the same values and beliefs, and takes the same ideological side with other peasants in the village, is described in many places in the novella. At the very beginning of the novella, as mentioned earlier, the "Grandfathers" testify to the fact that the Liu family shares with all the other peasants in the village "the same" "good rural habits of living frugally and running their homes with industry and thrift", and the same values and way of life. The "Grandfathers" further point out, for all its wealth and fortune, the landlord family also eats thin rice gruel every day, and they also suffer from hunger, just like all the other people in Maple Village

(*Trilogy*: 185). Later on, the narrator mentions the enormous respect and admiration the "Grandfathers" show to Liu Laoxia: "It was mostly due to hero worship that all the grandfathers took great delight in talking about Liu Laoxia" (216). Finally, when the village is already under Communist control, Lu Fang and his work team make great efforts mobilizing the peasants to struggle against the landlord family, and encourage them to expose the supposed landlord's evils of exploitation and oppression. However, to their great disappointment:

All they [the work team] heard from them [the poor peasants] were Liu Laoxia's great achievements. They said, "In a thousand years Maple Village produced one Liu Laoxia; he can stamp out gold ingots with his bare hands" (*Trilogy*: 240).

In the eyes of the poor peasants, Liu Laoxia, is unanimously regarded as the embodiment of the highest virtues, a hero and a legend. They worship him because he fulfills the old dream that they share with him but fail to reach.

Having established that the old Maple Village as a whole shares the same worldview or ideology, the ensuing questions arise: What is the worldview? What are the fundamental principles guiding old Maple Village's way of life? In the novel the implied author gives unequivocal answers to these questions.

In the novella, the narrator uses the term "primitive anthropocentric thought" to summarize Maple Village peasants' ideas (*Trilogy*: 248). In another place, directly quoting the "Grandfathers", the narrator puts the seemingly sophisticated term in a much clearer way. As he points out, the people in Maple Village believed that "people are just like crops: Whoever plants them, reaps them, and they reap whatever they sow" (224). They attribute the flourishing and decline of a family to nothing but heredity—a physiological phenomenon which merely follows natural laws and is completely out of

human control—"Just look at landlord Liu Laoxia: when the pure, strong unmixed bloodline, passed on for generations, reached Chencao, it got mixed up and diluted; and when it got mixed and diluted, it declined; that's just the way heredity works" (248). It is made very clear here that old Maple Village merely adopts a neutralized way of life and follows the laws of nature. As a result, "every kind of thought and 'ism' was far removed from Maple Village" (196). In short, the old Maple Village's worldview is based on common sense and immediate sensual life experience, characterized by its neutralization and naturalization, which constitutes a sharp antithesis to the highly politicized revolutionary ideology. Here we have no difficulty finding that the way of life of the old Maple Village as a whole actually follows the same principle as the hidden organ; and Chen Mao, for all his "high class consciousness" and resolute revolutionary spirit derived from his strong desire to change his social status and financial situation, is no exception. Chen Mao's conformity to Maple Village's worldview and way of life is also testified by Lu Fang's comments on him: "the work team could cut Chen Mao down from the roof beam of the Straw Pavilion, but they could not prevent him from *acting like most of Maple village men*" (260. My emphasis), to which he added, "You can change a person's fate, but you can't change what's in his blood" (256).

Radically contrasted with the descriptive, tentative, and explanatory tone of the "Grandfathers", a gesture compatible with their humble status as the dominated and the inferior in the ideological hierarchy, Lu Fang's speeches in the story always bear an arbitrary, authoritative, and conclusive tone. Rather than merely providing description of history, as the "Grandfathers" did, Lu Fang's speeches aim at making judgment and conclusion.



Compared with the other two tasks Lu Fang has accomplished—mobilizing and leading the struggle against the landlord; executing the young landlord Liu Chencao and finally destroying the whole landlord family—his long speeches are of greater thematic and ideological importance. Judged by the content, Lu Fang's speeches can be safely regarded as an abbreviated version of the Communist representation of Chinese revolution and modern Chinese history, as well as the elucidation and propagation of the fundamental Communist doctrines. In the beginning of the story, when the revolution hasn't taken place in Maple Village, Lu Fang employs the theory of "class hatred", one of the Communist fundamentals, explaining to Liu Chencao the relationship between his family and the peasants of Maple Village. He tells his high school classmate, "They [the peasants] hate your family because your family controls them," to which he adds, "Hatred can only disappear when everyone is equal" (*Trilogy*: 196). Later on, he adopts the theory of "proletarian revolution" to explain the reasons why he chose Chen Mao to be the Chairman of the Peasant Association. As he says, "Only one kind of peasant could make the revolution against the rich landlord Liu Laoxia: He had to possess absolutely nothing of his own; his labor and all of his spiritual resources had to have been completely expropriated" (240). Towards the end of the story, while commenting on the struggle meeting against the landlord, Lu Fang makes his judgment and statement on the peasants or the "revolutionary masses", the reliable force for revolution: "The people of Maple Village were naturally so undisciplined there was no way you could change them." He further stated: "Maple Village peasants weren't afraid of anything but the sound of a gun" (249, 251). These statements, in my understanding, might evoke bifurcated interpretations. On the one hand, by emphasizing the undisciplined nature of the

"revolutionary masses" and their passivity in revolution, the statements actually imply the leading and disciplinary role the Party has played in the revolution. On the other hand, the statements also betray some "ideological ruptures" in the revolutionary theory that the peasants do not possess "naturally" the high revolutionary consciousness as the Party often asserts, and that the participation in the revolution on the part of the peasants was actually forced by "the sound of a gun." Here Su Tong actually subtly points to the innate contradictions of the Communist interpretation of Chinese revolution and history.

From the above discussions it is not difficult for us to deduce that, if the revolutionary ideology, as represented by Lu Fang and symbolized by the trumpet, addresses political control, desires for change and for domination of others, the active, changeable part of our mind and life, and the socialized existence, then the worldview of Maple Village, as represented by the "Grandfathers" and symbolized by the hidden organ, addresses basic needs of life and human nature, desires for security and to submit to the strong, a way of life based on immediate sensual experience and common sense, and the bodily existence.<sup>9</sup> Therefore the relationship between Lu Fang and the old Maple Village, between the "Grandfathers" and the "Grandsons", and between the trumpet and the

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<sup>9</sup> Clifford Geertz, one of the most renowned cultural anthropologists in the world, in his famous work *The Interpretation of Cultures* deplores the ideologization of ideology itself in recent centuries. He argues that the originally "nonevaluative" concept of ideology as "a collection of political proposals" has gradually transformed to a term referring to "a form of radical intellectual depravity" characterized by its deliberate "overselectivity" and "distortion." By the "overselectivity" of ideology, Geertz, citing Talcott Parsons, means that "ideologies," beyond the quality of selectivity characterizing all theories, "are subject to a further, cognitively more pernicious 'secondary' selectivity, in that they emphasize some aspects of social reality" while neglecting and even suppressing other aspects. By the "distortion" of ideology, he refers to that ideological thought, "positively distorts even those aspects of social reality it recognizes." Geertz tends to restore the nonevaluative nature of the concept of ideology and defines it as "a cultural system" (Geertz 1973: 193-199). When we juxtapose Geertz's observation of the changing connotations of ideology and Su Tong's interpretation of ideology in his novella, we find them quite compatible. In "Opium Family," while Communist ideology represents a collection of overselective and distorted ideas, the ideology of old Maple Village is an expression of their long-preserved culture. Therefore the domination of the former over the latter actually indicates the historical fact that Communist ideology and the Chinese revolution suppress and destroy the traditional Chinese culture and the related way of life.

hidden organ, has naturally been transformed into a political and cultural allegory, and becomes extremely meaningful.

In the novella, as in the actual historical process, the relation between the two ideologies, between the two extremes of the dichotomy of trumpet vs hidden organ, turns out to be strongly antagonistic, and the ultimate domination of the former over the latter is vividly displayed in varied ways, both explicitly and implicitly.

In some places, the antagonistic nature of the two ideologies is explicitly expressed by the direct confrontation between the "Grandfathers" and the "Grandsons" in worldview. For example, their evaluations of Liu Chencao are strongly opposing. After taking over the whole family from his father's hands, the young landlord, who receives a modern education and consequently possesses a vague sense of modern democracy and equality, "drove the long-term laborers and the maidservants out of the house", and "gave his lands away to others." As a result, many poor peasants show great gratitude to him and regard him as a benefactor. In response to this phenomenon, the "Grandfathers", for all their slight reservation, give Liu Chencao a basically favorable and positive judgment by calling him "a young benefactor, a stranger, or one with evil face and a good heart." The judgment of the "Grandfathers", obviously based on common sense and immediate sensual life experience, is totally compatible with their "primitive anthropocentric thought." In sharp contrast with the positive judgment of the "Grandfathers", the "Grandsons" however, employing the theory of "class hatred and class exploitation", view the true benevolent behavior of Liu Chencao as merely another kind of cunning strategy of exploitation. They assert that, rather than giving the poor peasants the land, the landlord gave them a curse: "He's got you tied up with no chance of escape until your

blood and sweat are exhausted and you die of old age working in the fields." They further stated, the poor peasants "should hate him", rather than eulogize him (*Trilogy*: 225, 226).

The ideological confrontation is also displayed implicitly in the story. For example, the technical arrangement of assigning the Communist leader Lu Fang a role of main character while putting the "Grandfathers" in a dim light—actually, the visual image of the "Grandfathers" in the story is simply "absent" from the text, and only their voices can be heard—also allegorically refers to the obscure and dominated social status of the latter in relation to the former's dominant position.

As the trumpet and the hidden organ symbolize the two strongly opposing ideologies, Chen Mao the person with these two "most admired things" naturally becomes the "site" of the historical battlefield for ideological hegemony. In the story, the absolute domination of the revolutionary ideology over the Maple Village worldview, and the trumpet over the hidden organ, is allegorically indicated towards the end of the story by the event of the rape of Liu Suzi by Chen Mao, a serious "error" committed by the hidden organ.

For all his enormous trust in Chen Mao's "high class consciousness," resolute revolutionary spirit against the landlord, and absolute loyalty to the Party, and his regret and reluctance to punish Chen Mao, after the occurrence of the rape, the Communist commander Lu Fang dismissed Chen Mao from the position as the Chairman of the Peasant Association. Naturally Chen Mao was very confused and disappointed with the decision, and he questioned Lu Fang: "Why can't I fuck her? I hate them all, and I can make the revolution against them!" The antagonistic relationship between the two extremes is fully revealed at this point, and the principle of the absolute domination of the

trumpet over hidden organ, the revolutionary control over bodily existence, over the traditional way of life based on common sense and immediate sensual experience, is finally confirmed and consolidated.<sup>10</sup>

Here we actually arrive at one of the most important, if not the most important, conclusions the author attempts to make in the story. Totally contradicting the Communist assertion that the Chinese Communist revolution destroyed the ideology and way of life of the "exploiting class," the author concludes that the revolution, as represented and construed in the novel, and as it was in the real historical process of modern China, actually ruined a kind of traditional way of life, worldview, and culture, which had been shared by all the Chinese people, regardless of class, and which had lasted for thousands of years.<sup>11</sup> To the orthodox Communist ears, the voice is rather shocking and "reactionary". In my understanding however, it merely tells a historical truth. It is at this point that Su Tong shows his penetrating profundity and moral courage as an outstanding writer and a modern intellectual with social conscience in his exploration of modern Chinese history and thought.

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<sup>10</sup> Domination through control of the body is by no means a new phenomenon in human history. Paul Connerton in a book on social memory argues that in any society, "bodily practice" is an important means to create and transmit social memory and collective identity of the people who live in the society (Connerton 1989). Foucault, through his investigation of the birth of the prison in European societies, points out that discipline and punishment of the body are an effective and crucial way to establish, preserve, and pass on social norms (Foucault 1977). In traditional Chinese society, the training, control, and punishment of the body are regarded as closely linked to the maintenance and transmission of proper morality and social order, which can be best demonstrated by the millennium-long practice of footbinding on the part of Chinese women. In Communist China, the Maoist belief and practice to cleanse and transform the intellectuals' mindsets through harsh labor camp—abuse and punishment of the body—are obviously an inheritance of the long-standing tradition.

<sup>11</sup> Actually Su Tong's perception and my analysis of the impact of the Chinese Communist revolution upon Chinese tradition are supported by many Western scholars. For example, Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz, and Mark Selden (1991), in their highly influential book *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, a fruit of their continuous observation of and investigation into a northern Chinese village for over a decade, provide an all-around and convincing description of how the Chinese revolution and Maoist Communism destroyed what was good in peasant tradition and encouraged what was bad.

***Strategies in (Communist) Historical Writing***

Obviously Su Tong is not satisfied with merely limiting his quest to the Chinese revolution; he shows much enthusiasm and ambition in the investigation of history in general and of modern Chinese history in particular. A close reading of Su Tong's "new historical fiction," including primarily the three novellas in the trilogy and his two famous novels *Rice* and *My Life as Emperor*, reveals that the greatness of Su Tong as a modern writer lies not only in the attempts and efforts he has made to provide a trustworthy and convincing presentation of general history and modern Chinese history, but also in his exposure of the secrets of history—how and by what kinds of strategies can a particular historical representation obtain its political and cultural legitimacy and hegemony and finally establish itself as *the* history.

In "Opium Family," whose time span is exclusively confined to the Communist revolutionary period—the years before and immediately after 1949, Su Tong exposes and explores the varied strategies the Party manipulated to achieve its own political legitimacy and ideological monopoly of historical presentation. By obscuring deliberately the links between the characters and their specific historical background in *Rice*, and by omitting completely the temporal markers from the text to eliminate the historical periodization in *My Life as Emperor*, Su Tong adeptly extends the applicability of his observations and perceptions of the Communist historical (re)writing to the interpretation of history in general, and in so doing, he creatively invests into his historical fiction a philosophical and transcendental dimension.

In the preface to Peter Bürger's well known book on the theory of the avant-garde, Jochen Schulte-Sasse argues that an ideological battle is actually a "struggle for interpretive power." As he points out: "The predominant ideology of a period could be interpreted as a strategy of textual domination, with the goal of robbing the dominated groups, sexes, nations, and classes of the language necessary for interpreting their situation" (1984: xxvii). Fredric Jameson also emphasizes the fact of the textualization of history and the multiple "interpretive possibilities in any given textual situation" (1981:31-32). He argues: "history is not a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious" (35). Jameson constantly reminds us of the importance of the "master code or interpretive key" in historical representation (61).

In "Opium Family," Su Tong subtly yet ruthlessly exposes how the Party, through deliberately wrongly deciphering the "master code or interpretive key" to historical interpretation, and through secretly changing the connotations of crucial concepts of history, successfully wove its own historical narrative of Chinese revolution, and created a logically coherent and linguistically expressive ideology.

Entering into Maple Village, we have no difficulty finding that "hatred" (*hen* 恨 or *chouhen* 仇恨) is the most predominant life experience and social phenomenon or ethos in the village. It permeates every corner of the village and the deep recesses of the opium family. Therefore, the term hatred can be safely identified as the "master code or interpretive key" to the history of Su Tong's fictional Maple Village as well as to the landlord family.

In Maple Village, hatred exists everywhere and is displayed in every human relation, visible or invisible. Hatred exists not only between the landlord family and the poor laborers, as the Communists claim, but also and more preeminently between the landlord family and the bandits, and between the landlord family members. Actually, it is the hatred between the landlord family members that constitutes the most unforgettable scenes in the story. The members of the landlord family hate each other, with Chencao the only exception to the rule. There is hatred between father and children (Liu Laoxia/his own father, Liu Laoxia/Yanyi, Liu Laoxia/Liu Suzi, Chen Mao/Liu Chencao), between husband and wife (Liu Laoxia/Jade Flower, which can be deduced from the fact that the husband knows he is cuckolded and Chencao is the biological son of Chen Mao as a consequence of the adultery between the laborer and his wife), between brothers (Liu Laoxia/Liu Laoxin, Yanyi/Chencao), and between sisters-in-law (Jade Flower/Liu Suzi).

In the story, hatred constitutes the most powerful motivation for human behavior and action, and the driving force of historical development. In the story, the fateful gunshots, raging flames, and the endless bloodshed—all these can be identified with the devastating blaze of hatred. It is out of hatred that Liu Laoxin sets fire on the Woodfire Hill in an attempt to destroy all the properties of his brother, who has taken all his belongings away and turned him into a beggar, but in the end burning himself to death. It is also out of hatred, as a result of the humiliations he suffers during his childhood, that the bandit leader Jiang Long blackmails the landlord family, threatening to kill all the family if his requirements are not fully met. It is hatred that motivates Chen Mao to join the revolution in an attempt to destroy the landlord family. It is because of hatred that the landlord Liu Laoxia orders his son Chencao to kill Chen Mao and manages to hang up his



body on the beam of the burning pavilion. In the story, the prettiest woman Lu Suzi is always lying on the bamboo mat sleeping. Only the conflicts with Jade Flower, caused and fueled by long-term hatred, can wake her up from slumber and make her active and energetic. Here hatred seems to be the sole source for the meaning of human life, from which all the courage, strength, and power of human beings are generated. In other words, it is hatred that makes a human being energetic, productive, and powerful. The magic power of hatred is also conversely proven by the fact that Liu Chencao, the only person in the story who carries least hatred and shows most love for his family and most compassion to his fellow villagers, is actually the weakest, least powerful, and most confused person. The life story of Chencao clearly reveals: Once you lose hatred, you lose your motivation, strength, and power for actions, you lose the meaning and direction of your life.

From the above discussion, we have no difficulty finding that in Maple Village, all the variations of hatred are actually individual-based, depending on specific, contextual, and personal reasons. There is no abstract and transcendental hatred. Liu Laoxia hates Chen Mao because the latter has adultery with his wife; Chen Mao hates Liu Laoxia because he thinks he is being exploited and humiliated; the idiot Yanyi hates all the people because he thinks they rob him of his food; the bandit leader hates Chencao and the whole landlord family because he thinks he was humiliated during his childhood; Liu Suzi hates her father because he sold her to a hunchback for 150 acres of land and deprives her of her access to happiness; even the seemingly mysterious hatred between the two women in the landlord family, could be explained by their mutual disgust with

each other's behavior and morality, and the possible contradictions among people living under the same roof.

However in the novella, the Communist leader Liu Fang completely ignores the individual-based, concrete, and personal nature of the hatred existing in Maple Village. By categorizing the landlord family and other peasants in the village as two opposing classes on the two sides of the hatred, he secretly yet successfully substitutes the so-called "class hatred" for the real personal, psychological, and social experience of the villagers, and completely changes the connotations of the term derived from its original context. Subsequently, employing the supposed "class hatred" theory as a powerful device to mobilize and agitate the peasants of Maple Village against the landlord family, with the assistance of the threat from the gunshot, Liu Fang and his work team successfully invent and fabricate the "class hatred" and "class struggle", and finally make a successful revolution in Maple Village.

Su Tong's reflection on the revolutionary ideology and on the strategy the Party employed to achieve its own political and ideological goals, actually testifies and confirms very well Hannah Arendt's theory of ideology in general and the totalitarian ideology in particular.

According to Arendt, the totalitarian ideologies, as exemplified by Nazism and Stalinism, apart from the shared features of all ideologies—their claim to total explanation, their independence of all experience, and their common strategy to reduce thought to a kind of logical deduction—bear a unique, distinguishing character, that is, they no longer appeal primarily to the "idea" of the ideology, but rather to the "logical process which could be developed from it." She argues that what makes a totalitarian

ideology powerful and effective is "its inherent logicity"—the "ice cold reasoning" and the "irresistible force of logic" (Arendt 1966: 470-472). Here Arendt actually emphasizes the fabricated nature of the totalitarian ideology, which largely cuts itself off from the real experience of human life.

In "Opium Family," the revolutionary theory made by the Communist leader Lu Fang is obviously less an honest presentation of the actual life experience and mentality of Maple Village than a "logical deduction," a political device manipulated by the Communist leader to achieve his own purposes. Here the totalitarian nature of the ideology is manifest.

For all its preeminent role and overwhelming function in the Party's construct of its historical representation, the clever maneuver of changing the connotations of the keywords in history is merely one of the varied strategies devised and used by the Party.

While comparing the revolutionary classic *The White-Haired Girl* with "Opium Family," we find an interesting and meaningful coincidence: they both begin with the humiliation and brutalization of the poor peasant by the landlord because of the former owing a "debt" to the latter. However the unfolding of the respective stories goes quite differently. In the revolutionary classic, the origins and nature of the "debt" are left unexplained and therefore the "debt" is endowed with a transcendental quality. In the "Opium Family" however, the "debt" (metaphorically referring to the landlord being cuckolded by the poor laborer) has been implicitly explained, as the adultery between the landlord's wife and the long-term laborer is actually an open secret in all of Maple Village.

The difference in plot arrangement between the Communist "model" and Su Tong's novella, in my understanding, is highly significant, because it subtly yet unequivocally exposes another important rhetoric or strategy of the Communist historical (re)writing: by deliberately covering or omitting some actual events in the historical process, to change or reverse the actual order of the cause-effect sequence in history.

In light of my reflections, omitting the origin and nature of the "debt" from the text on the part of the Communist writers serves at least a threefold purpose. First, the narratological absence of the "debt" from the text subtly puts the authenticity of the existence of the "debt" open to question, and it allegorically implies the fictional or fabricated nature of the "debt"—a "debt" without origin and nature simply does not exist in reality; it might be only a fabrication on the part of the landlord as a pretext to blackmail, rob, and abuse the poor. Second, with its signified being taken away, the word "debt" actually becomes an empty signifier. The empty and transcendental nature of the "debt" metaphorically implies the transcendental nature of the landlord class's vicious will—they presuppose that the exploited "transcendentally" owes a "debt" to them. Third and finally, by omitting the history of the "debt" completely from the text, the Communist writers adeptly set the abuse and brutalization of the poor by the landlord at the starting point of the historical narrative as the very origin and cause of history, therefore the historical process is logically represented in the sequence from the landlord class's oppression (cause) to the oppressed class's revolution (effect). The historical causality displayed here is obviously in opposition to that displayed in the "Opium Family," where, the intrusion of the poor laborer into the landlord family through his adultery with the mistress as the preceding event is the very cause of the landlord's anger

and the seeming abuse and humiliation of the poor laborer by him. The birth of Communist revolutionary theory, as depicted in the *White-Haired Girl*, once again confirms Arendt's perception of totalitarian ideology—its power derives more from its "inherent logicity" than from its ability to provide a convincing explanation of the true reality.

In "Opium Family," Lu Fang as spokesman of the Communist ideology, his behavior, thinking, and narrative naturally follow the same historical "logicity" or causality as displayed in *The White-Haired Girl*. In the ending of the story, when Lu Fang saw that Chen Mao's dead body had been dragged out of the village police office and strung up once again from the roof beam of the burning Straw Pavilion—which he regards as "one of the most frightening scenes in the history of Maple Village," he is shocked and indignant:

Lu Fang said from that point on he forgave the dead Chen Mao his many mistakes and began to hate that self-immolating landlord Liu Laoxia with a passion, to hate that whole generation of an already destroyed and extinct landlord class (*Trilogy*: 266).

The subtext of Lu Fang's speech is made quite clear here—now he begins to understand the deep and enormous hatred of Chen Mao toward the landlord family, which even led him to some serious mistakes such as raping the landlord's daughter, because the landlord is too cold-blooded—"He wouldn't even let a dead man go." Obviously here Lu Fang presupposes the cruelty of the landlord as the starting point of history, and as the very cause of the poor peasant's rebellion. When the Communist leader makes his conclusions, he apparently ignores an ineradicable historical fact seen with his own eyes: Right beside the *one* single dead body of the poor laborer, there are

lying *three* dead bodies of the innocent landlord family. It is very clear here that the validity and persuasiveness of the revolutionary ideology are achieved mainly through the clever maneuver of omitting or covering some crucial historical facts on the part of the Communist writers.

As discussed briefly above, an ambitious avant-garde writer obsessed with history and the universal human condition, Su Tong is apparently not satisfied with merely exposing the incredible and arbitrary nature of the Communist historical (re)writing. By erasing the temporal markers from the text in *My Life as Emperor* and deliberately obscuring the specific historical background in *Rice*, he adeptly extends the applicability and validity of his perceptions of a particular historical writing to historical representation in general.

In *Rice*, Su Tong ruthlessly exposes another effective and commonly adopted strategy by the dominating class and ideologists to construct a historical interpretation for their own purposes and interests, that is, by completely distorting the actual historical happenings, to provide a totally wrong presentation and representation of historical process.

In the novel, when the penniless yet physically strong peasant Five Dragons, through his cunning conspiracies and cold-blooded killings, becomes a notorious "local tyrant," he frequents whorehouses. As a result, he finally is infected with a venereal disease. Blaming the prostitutes for the disease, he sends a gang of Wharf Rats to kill all the eight prostitutes with whom he once had sexual intercourse, and dump the dead bodies into the city moat. Policemen are dispatched to Five Dragons's house to investigate the murders;

however, they leave only "loaded down with sacks of rice, followed by Five Dragons himself, who bowed them out the door":

Not long afterward, newspapers put forth a new theory on the deaths of the eight prostitutes: The countless dead left in the wake of the Japanese bombs included eight prostitutes who were swimming in the city moat at the time (*Rice*: 197).

Ironically enough, a crime of atrocious killings perpetrated by the notorious gangsterdom is adeptly rewritten by the dominating media into a story of a brutal crime committed by the Japanese invaders, readily evoking the strong patriotic passions and nationalistic appeal among the Chinese people. In my understanding, the total distortion of real historical process presented in the novel serves at least a dual purpose. On the one hand, it subtly hints at and satirizes a preeminent historical fact that, during most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, considering the overwhelming power and impact of the nationalistic sentiments and discourses upon Chinese people and society, both the Nationalist Party (KMT) and the Communist Party (CCP), the two most powerful and opposing parties in China, took advantage of nationalism as an instrument to seek sympathy and support from the Chinese populace and to justify the legitimacy of their own dominance and political power. On the other hand, it also ruthlessly exposes a universally applicable truth of historical writing, that is, sometimes the so-called history is nothing more than an aggregate of some totally distorted stories or deliberately designed lies on the part of the dominating class in favor of their own interests and purposes.

In *My Life as Emperor*, Su Tong exposes another seemingly trite yet universally acknowledged truth: Historiography or historical writing sometimes is mere embodiment of power. In the novel, all the life experience as emperor of the protagonist Duanbai—the fifth son of the late emperor of the Xie Empire—and the history of the empire, are

actually based on one single fact that Madame Huangfu, the mother of the late emperor, who now holds real power over the whole empire, forges a testamentary edict stating that the late emperor bequeaths the throne to Duanbai as the new Xie ruler, in place of the original and authentic one which claims Duanwen the eldest prince to be the new emperor. Ironically, while the forgery is widely established as the "real" testamentary edict and Duanbai becomes the new emperor, what is said in the authentic, original one is simply announced as a vicious rumor. And Madame Yang, the holder of the original edict, is treated as a mad woman and finally killed as a human sacrifice to the late emperor. All these absurdities and cruelties displayed here actually testify to one fact that power is the very thing behind many historical writings, especially historiographies.

In sum, by deliberately parodying the structure and characterization of the Communist "models," Su Tong effectively yet subtly subverts the whole set of Communist ideologies and the Communist interpretation of Chinese history and revolution. Strongly opposing the Communist assertion that the Chinese revolution destroyed the ideology and way of life of the "exploiting class," Su Tong concludes that the revolution actually ruined the traditional way of life and worldview, which were based on common sense and immediate sensual life experience, and which had been shared by all Chinese people and lasted for thousands of years. Through his exposure of the varied strategies employed and manipulated by the dominating classes, as exemplified by the Chinese Communist historical representation, to establish their own historical interpretation and political legitimacy, Su Tong comes up with his own view of history:



Sometimes historical (re)writing is nothing more than struggle for interpretive domination and ideological hegemony.

### **History as a Route of Escape to the Modern**

#### ***Rural-Urban Confrontation as Historical Phenomenon and Literary Theme***

China since the late Qing has witnessed a substantial break with its time-honored tradition and undergone overwhelmingly rapid and drastic changes in almost every aspect of social life: politico-economic system, values and belief, worldview, way of life, etc. Actually this social process constitutes the central content of modern Chinese history, regardless of what terms we adopt to name it—modernization, urbanization, or modern transformation of the traditional society.

Just as the unfolding of world history reveals, in any society, the social process of modernization inevitably evokes a confrontation between the rural and the urban, though the degrees of the confrontation might be different from one society to another. It is now common knowledge that traditional China was a nation characterized by "an agriculture-based economy, a patrimonial bureaucracy, and a family-centered society" (Tu 1976: 242), and had lasted for thousands of years with little radical change in its social structure, values, and belief system. Fei Xiaotong coined the term *xiangtu zhongguo* 乡土中国 or "China from the soil" to designate the old China, because he thought the rural or the soil constitutes the nature and foundation of traditional China (Fei 1992). Given the longevity and the "rural character" of traditional Chinese society, and the extent and degree to which this rural character had been ingrained and permeated in the thought and society of

Chinese people, it is only natural to perceive that, during the process of modernization in China, the confrontation between the rural and the urban, between countryside and city, inevitably is highly intensive, and displayed in a very antagonistic and bitter way.

When looking back on modern Chinese literature, we have no difficulty finding that the exposure of the rural-urban confrontation, the obsession with modernization and modernity, and the anxieties and fears over the negative impacts of modernization on the part of modern Chinese writers, constitute an uninterrupted theme running through its entire process, and become one of the most pronounced preoccupations of modern Chinese writers and intellectuals. The theme is practically expressed in different ways with different focuses and implications in the writings of different writers. For example, in Mao Dun's rural-related novels and short stories, the modern—the factory chimneys standing above and beyond the village with columns of black smoke out of them, the loaded steam cargo ships traveling back and forth along the Yangtse River, or the silk factories far away in Shanghai—just like a ghost floating in the sky of the village, brings visible damages and invisible threats to the peaceful villagers who for generations have made their living on and from the soil. In Shen Congwen's writings, the rural or countryside as embodiment and symbol of natural humanity, "emotional integrity, and instinctive honesty," is sharply antithetical to the urban or city, which is perceived and described as symbol of "utilitarian materialism" and moral corruption, a place filled with cunning, greed, duplicity, and other moral vices (Hsia 1961: 189-211). The rural-urban confrontation, the deadly antagonistic relationship between the traditional countryside and the Westernized city, is perhaps most powerfully articulated and most vividly delineated in the Taiwan *xiangtu wenxue* 乡土文学, or Native Soil Literature of the 1960s

and 1970s where the intrusion of the city as representative of a heterogeneous culture, value system, and mode of production into the peaceful village, is described as a fatally destructive force, which, in spite of its contribution to the economic prosperity and wealth boom of the society, destroys ruthlessly the traditional culture, values, and way of life, and brings disasters and a sense of hopelessness and helplessness to the innocent and honest villagers. Sometimes the confrontation between the two cultures and the sense of hopelessness it brings about are so fierce and fatal that they finally claim the villager's life, as presented in some of Huang Chunming's novels.<sup>12</sup>

After the Communist Party seized power in 1949, through the nation-wide implementation of the "household registration system" (*hukou zhidu* 户口制度), along with other notorious, discriminatory domestic policies, China in the Mao era as a country had actually institutionally and structurally been split into two clear-cut worlds—the countryside and the city, which are differentiated in almost every aspect of social life. Accordingly the country's population was classified into two different kinds of citizens—the rural residents (peasants) and the urban residents (workers), two groups of people who are totally different in social, political, and economic status, and have different political obligations and rights despite the fact that they are citizens of the same country.<sup>13</sup> Though the split state and tendency of China have procedurally and formally

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<sup>12</sup> For a more detailed and more balanced analysis of Taiwan *xiangtu* literature, see Jing Wang, "Taiwan *Hsiang-t'u* Literature: Perspectives in the Evolution of a Literary Movement" (J. Wang 1980: 43-60). In this essay, Jing Wang provides an insightful and convincing assessment of Taiwan *xiangtu* literature, examining the social, political, and cultural milieu of its emergence, the various phases of its development and the varied themes expressed in these phases, and the literary and historical importance and overall achievements of the literature. Jing Wang argues that, the confrontation between village and city is the most preeminent theme of Taiwan *xiangtu* literature, though it is expressed in different forms and bears different cultural connotations in different phases.

<sup>13</sup> The notorious *hukou zhidu*, or household registration system, was established shortly after the Communist victory in China in 1955, as an administrative means of political control, economic planning, and population management. In light of the system, each Chinese citizen acquires (or is assigned) at birth

weakened and ameliorated in the post-Mao era, however Deng's policy of "making a part of the people get rich first" in social practice has actually widened the already huge gap between the urban and the rural, between the rich and privileged and the poor and unprivileged, and made it almost unbridgeable. As a result, the split of China and the confrontation between countryside and city remain one of the most severe social phenomena of injustice and inequality in contemporary China, which deserves particular attention and profound reflection from those Chinese writers and intellectuals who have a strong sense of social duty and social conscience.

For all the severity and preeminence as a social problem and the importance of its underlying cultural and historical implications, the split of China and the confrontation between countryside and city did not attract due attention from the Chinese writers both in Mao's and Deng's China—though for different reasons in the respective eras<sup>14</sup>—until

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either an agricultural (rural) or a non-agricultural (urban) *hu kou* or resident status, which is fixed and permanent, and which can be changed only under some extremely stringent government-defined conditions. The nature of *hukou* of a person (agricultural or non-agricultural) is determined by the place of his/her residence at birth and his/her parents' *hukou*. Though this system has undergone some minor improvements in the Deng Era, and the conditions for changing the nature of a *hukou* have become more flexible and loose, the basic functions and structure of the system remain unchanged. Now the system has been under fierce fire among Chinese intellectual circles, and almost universally regarded as a major source of social inequalities, accounting for the huge gap between countryside and city, between the rich and the poor. For more detailed discussions and an overall examination of Chinese *hukou zhidu*, see He and Yu 2003; also see Chan 1994.

<sup>14</sup> In the Mao era, the exposure of the rural-urban abyss—writers were only allowed to eulogize the great endeavors and achievements the Party made to bridge the gap—was obviously at odds with the Party's literary policy of prohibiting the description of the dark side of social life. Because it was supposed that, in the "great socialist country," the darkness in social life, when compared with the overwhelming virtues of the system, is so minor that it can be totally ignored. Moreover, the exposure of the gap most possibly might be regarded as a political conspiracy aiming at the sabotage of the "grand cause" of worker-peasant alliance (*gongnong lianmeng* 工农联盟). The situation is quite different in the Deng era, where the economic development, rather than the Maoist class struggle, was put at the core of the process of the nation's modernization, and was given the absolutely top priority and urgency. In the light of the Dengist economic determinism and materialistic utilitarianism, the gap between the urban and the rural, between the rich and the poor, along with other social inequalities, was considered the "inevitable and indispensable" price the nation must pay for its economic development and modernization, the "birth pangs" in the course of reform and opening up, therefore a normal social phenomenon deserving no particular attention.

the emergence of Chinese avant-garde fiction in the mid 1980s.<sup>15</sup> As an integral part of the contemporary Chinese counter-culture, contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction is supposed and expected to deal with some issues or themes which have long been excluded from or ignored by the mainstream literature. Therefore it should be no surprise that the exposure of the rural-urban confrontation and the examination of its underlying cultural and political implications become a theme shared by many contemporary Chinese avant-garde writers,<sup>16</sup> among whom Su Tong is the most articulate and most accomplished in exploring this theme.

### ***Modernization: Victimizing the Countryside?***

Indeed in contemporary China, no other writer is more obsessed with the rural-urban confrontation than Su Tong.<sup>17</sup> In many of his fictional works called "Maple Village series," the "archetypal" story—that a man who escapes from his disaster-ridden and death-haunted Maple Village home to make a living in a materially well off yet morally corrupt city, only ends being emotionally and spiritually trapped in the abyss between countryside and city, and dying a miserable death—constitutes the basic plot structure and the most predominant theme of those works. Su Tong once confessed his obsession

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<sup>15</sup> Some critics may challenge my arguments by referring to the so-called *xungen wenxue*, or Native-roots Searching Literature, which emerged in the Chinese literary circles immediately preceding the Chinese avant-garde in the mid 1980s. Actually completely contrary to our expectations, Native-roots Searching Literature had never touched the theme of the rural-urban confrontation. Paradoxically and ironically enough, the original intent and the pain-taking endeavors made to explore and rediscover the "roots" of Chinese culture on the part of those writers finally led them to the total denial and rejection of the "roots," which turns out to be a highly significant and thought-provoking phenomenon in Chinese literature.

<sup>16</sup> For example, in Yu Hua's most important novel *Screaming in the Drizzle*, not only is the story set in a rural-urban border area during the Cultural Revolution, but the rural-urban confrontation also constitutes a powerful dynamic for the plot structuring and characterization of the novel. In both *To Live* and *Xu Sanguan Sells His Blood*, the confrontation constitutes part of the characters' living environment, significantly influencing their fate and fortunes.

<sup>17</sup> Robin Visser published an inspiring essay on this subject. Compared with his approach to the Chinese rural-urban confrontation, mine seems more historically concrete and empirical. See Visser 1995.

with the rural-urban confrontation in the preface to a collection of his novellas and stories. He regards the countryside and city as "the two sides of the world." As he points out: "All human beings actually live on either of the two sides of the world, countryside or city. As for myself, while my blood impulse is on the side of countryside, my body however is on the side of city."<sup>18</sup> This explains why Su Tong entitles this collection of his novels and stories *The Two Sides of the World*.

"History as a route of escape to the modern," the seemingly awkward subheading I coin here actually represents my attempt to summarize Su Tong's interpretation of modern Chinese history and his reflections on and anxieties for Chinese modernization in a relatively accurate way. In my understanding it is no accident that Su Tong entitles his first novella—a novella which won him nationwide fame for the first time and established him as one of the first-rate novelists in contemporary China—"Nineteen Thirty-four Escapes," which exclusively focuses on the rural-urban confrontation and the bitter experience of being trapped and suspended in it.

Setting the story against the historical background of the turbulent, chaotic, and plague-ridden old China of 1934, an ordinary yet typical year constituting an equally ordinary yet typical link in the long chain of the process of Chinese modernization, by associating the main male character Chen Baonian's personal experience, the rises and falls in his career and fortunes with the nation's encounters and fate and its exciting yet painful process of industrialization, Su Tong deliberately makes this story an allegory of Chinese modernization, and the experience of the Chen family and Maple Village the epitome of modern Chinese history.

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<sup>18</sup> 人们就生活在世界两侧，城市或者乡村，说到我自己，我的血脉在乡村这一侧，而我的身体在城市这一侧。《世界两侧 序》。

Unlike either Shen Congwen or Taiwan *xiaoguo* writers of the 1960s and 1970s, whose strong nostalgia for the golden old time and whose strong motivation for preserving the traditional values and the natural humanity and maintaining their cultural identity unsullied by the modern civilization, evoke the tendency in their writings of idealization of countryside, Su Tong, however, with a detached attitude and the mixed feeling of both despair and sympathy, always tends to expose, not without distortions and exaggerations, the ugly and dark face of the Chinese countryside of 1930s. In all his "Maple Village series" stories, the Maple Village home which the man left behind is described as a desperate, hopeless, and helpless place harassed and devastated by wars, diseases, disasters, poverty, and exploitation and corruption of the ruling class. In his novels, Su Tong repeatedly emphasizes the fact that all the Maple Village men are actually forced—rather than willingly or voluntarily to chose—by all the unbearable heaviness and darkness of the countryside to leave their old homes and run to the city. Therefore their running to the city is nothing more than escape of fugitives. If in "Nineteen Thirty-four Escapes," when Chen Baonian left his home seven days after his marriage and went into the city, the sense of his being forced to leave home is not yet manifest. However with the unfolding of the story, when the grim facts—Chen Baonian is so poor that he is forced to sell his extremely pretty younger sister Phoenix to Chen Wenzhi the landlord as a concubine, who is later tortured mad and dies a mysterious and miserable death; the deadly plague actually claims countless lives of Maple Villagers including his five children's, etc—are exposed, the reality that Chen Baonian is driven by all these catastrophes and deaths to the city is made very clear. Here Su Tong actually allegorically highlights the passive nature of the Chinese urbanization or modernization

process from the rural point of view. It is taking this as the departing point that Su Tong starts his long journey of the exploration of and reflection on modern Chinese history and Chinese modernization.

The countryside, as described in "Nineteen Thirty-four Escapes," is not a harmonious whole. Actually there are two highly opposing forces involved in the process of Chinese modernization in the countryside. In the novella, if Chen Baonian and the Maple Village men represent an alienated and rebellious force to escape the confinement of the countryside and to break with the bonds of the soil, then Grandmother Jiang and the Maple Village women undoubtedly represent the countryside, the soil, and the rural nature of Chinese society. In the novel, Su Tong makes great efforts to establish and project the symbolic role of Grandmother Jiang as representative of the countryside. When Grandmother Jiang makes her first appearance at the very beginning of the story, we see her "long, skinny feet pressed firmly and motionlessly into the cold, muddy, wet rice paddy," making a "perfect picture of a rural woman in early spring" (*Trilogy*: 105). Here the image of Grandmother Jiang and the soil actually fuse into an inseparable and harmonious one. Later on the narrator repeatedly mentions "the smell of a sacrificial animal in heat" emanating from her body. The fact is highly significant, because offering sacrificial animals to ancestors on memorial and other socially important occasions is one of the most important rituals of traditional Chinese patriarchal society. Moreover, Grandmother Jiang's "strong and dexterous" fingers, her surprisingly strong "procreative powers," and her virtues of fortitude, tolerance, and strong will to live, indicated by the fact that she brought up all her seven children alone in the extremely harsh countryside without any assistance from her husband—all these qualities like invisible and



inseparable ties bind her to the countryside, to the soil tightly. Because the men and women of Maple Village represent two different kinds of attitudes, two different kinds of views, and two different kinds of forces of the countryside involved in Chinese modernization, respectively, then the relationship between them naturally becomes a powerful political, cultural allegory of Chinese modernization.

In my understanding, an image in "Nineteen Thirty-four Escapes" is crucial and indispensable in exploring and grasping the profound political, cultural connotations of the story. It is the Maple Village's "wide yellow mud road." In the story, after the news of Chen Baonian's rise to fame and fortune in the city through his splendid bamboo craftsmanship and dark tricks is sent back to his hometown, the thousands-year-long peace and stagnation of Maple Village is broken all of a sudden. As a result, a "massive change in occupation and general round of disturbance is set in motion." The men in Maple Village abandon their work in the fields and take up the big-handled bamboo knife, following in Chen Baonian's footsteps and crowd into town to make great money:

The people of my clan crowded together with their Maple Village neighbors like a line of ants on the move; countless pairs of bare feet strode upon the road of their ancestors, hurriedly departing in the direction of unknown cities and towns...the sound of those rebellious feet tramping through history.

[The] Maple Village's wide yellow mud road probably came into being at that time. Grandmother Jiang watched with her own eyes as that road was transformed from a narrow path to a broad thoroughfare and from desolation to prosperity (*Trilogy*: 129).

From the above descriptions it is safe to say that the "wide yellow mud road," which connects the countryside and the city, transporting farmers in the desolate countryside to the rapidly modernizing prosperous cities and transforming them into city workers, is

actually a path to the Chinese modernization. And what happens on and around the road can be properly regarded as the unfolding of the process of Chinese modernization. By putting Grandmother Jiang in a position as bystander watching all the happenings on the road, the narrator actually entitles her a dual role as both representative and guard of the countryside and victim and witness of the process of Chinese modernization.

From this perspective, the incident of Chen Yujin's wife struggling to block her husband's way to the city, an act finally leading to her brutal murder by him on the "wide yellow mud road," can be seen as a profound allegory deliberated by Su Tong to express his reflection on Chinese modernization.

In light of my speculation, the extremely bloody scene of Chen Yujin killing his wife on the "wide yellow mud road" is highly meaningful. Like most of his fellow Maple Village men, one day in the morning Chen Yujin attempted to escape from the village, taking the big bamboo knife in hand with the hope to make money in the city. In great fury his wife caught up with him and launched a hand-to-hand struggle with him for that bamboo knife, the tool to making a living in city, in an attempt to block his way to the city. At that time Grandmother Jiang was standing by the side of the yellow mud road. As she witnessed the entire process of the "suffocating" hand-to-hand struggle between the couple for the knife, "she felt an unbearably stifling sense of depression" and decided to leave:

She picked up her straw basket and had started to return home when she heard Chen Yujin roar like a caged animal. Grandmother Jiang turned around just in time to see every detail as Chen Yujin swung his bamboo knife down in a murderous attack on his wife. As the knife's cold glint flashed in all directions, deep red blood spurted up like fiery flames, mottled and misty. The vibrant, young, beautiful body of Chen Yujin's wife

was rent apart with a terrible noise as she collapsed facedown in the middle of the yellow mud road...

My grandmother Jiang jumped onto the road, raised her scythe, stepped over a pool of blood, and set out after the wife killer Chen Yujin as he made his escape. The yellow mud road buckled under the weight of Grandmother Jiang's feet as she ran haltingly along with her round eyes staring angrily ahead. But the name she yelled out, as she chased Chen Yujin, actually belonged to our family. The people in the fields heard her call Chen Baonian's name. "Chen Baonian...murderer...Chen Baonian... grab him...!" (*Trilogy*: 131-132).

What Su Tong intends to achieve in the description of this surprisingly shocking and exquisitely depicted scene is obviously something far beyond merely evoking visual and sensual sensation and psychological concussion on the readers. The creation of this scene is the crystallization of Su Tong's reflections on Chinese modernization, especially of his anxieties and fears for its deadly negative impact on the Chinese countryside.

As the incident makes very clear, the process of Chinese modernization, from its very beginning, encountered fierce rejection from the countryside, as symbolized by the act of Maple Village women's blocking their men's way to the city. As a result, the process inevitably enkindled the equally fierce conflict between the city and the countryside, and the outcome of the conflict was always bloody and deadly, as symbolized by Chen Yujin's wife losing her life as the price of the blocking. Here Su Tong actually subtly points to the unsolvable internal contradictions within Chinese modernization.

In the story the description of Chen Baonian's city life also proves highly meaningful. While Grandmother Jiang alone raises their seven children in the countryside

under the extremely harsh conditions and five of them die of the deadly plague, Chen Baonian, the now wealthy and prosperous bamboo goods store proprietor, however, "far away from the plague, far away from the epidemic of 1934," stays in the city "eating, drinking, whoring, and gambling to his heart's content." If we link this description with the brutal incident of Chen Yujin killing his wife, we have no difficulty understanding another point Su Tong makes in his reflection on Chinese modernization, that is, the process of Chinese modernization, from its very beginning, is at the cost of concurrent victimization of the countryside. This point is highlighted by the fact that after their men go to the city, the whole Maple village becomes a "village of women", who themselves have to shoulder up all the heaviness and darkness of the countryside, especially by the sacrifice of their lives on the part of Chen Yujin's wife and Grandmother Jiang's five children. Su Tong's blaming of urbanization as a crucial factor for the deepening and deterioration of the already miserable situation in the countryside is also subtly indicated by the act of Grandmother Jiang's mistakenly calling Chen Baonian's name while she chases the true wife murderer Chen Yujin. In my understanding, Grandmother Jiang's "mistake" is a carefully designed literary device manipulated by Su Tong to serve at least a dual purpose. First, read at surface value, the mistake unconsciously betrays Grandmother Jiang's deep hatred of her husband Chen Baonian, a passion which, in light of Freudian theory of the unconscious, might be read as some kind of profound physical and psychological need for and missing of him, but expressed in a disguised and distorted form. Second, and more importantly, upon a closer investigation, it becomes clear that the scene on a deeper level also reveals Su Tong's criticism of Chinese modernization—Chen Baonian, the man who leads the Maple Village men to the city and breaks the

tranquility of the countryside lasting for thousands of years, is the "true murderer" of the Chinese countryside. Along the path to the Chinese modernization, there left behind unbearable miseries and deaths in the Chinese countryside.<sup>19</sup>

In light of my reading of the story, another description is also highly significant. After Chen Baonain makes great money and rises to fame and fortune in the city, he spends all his money going "to the brothels to sniff heroin and fuck the women," and refuses to give even "a single copper" to Grandmother Jiang, in spite of the fact that Grandmother Jiang is maintaining a family for which he is supposed to hold the major responsibilities in light of the customs, conventions, and moralities of the traditional Chinese patriarchal society, and that their children, who have been brought up alone by Grandmother Jiang in the countryside, are starving to death. The description actually reveals Su Tong's further reflection on and even condemnation of Chinese modernization—for all the fact that the flourish and modernization of the city are based on the concurrent victimization and exploitation of the countryside, the now modernizing, better off city repays the countryside nothing. In other words, the Chinese countryside is benefited with nothing, except for the humiliation and further exploitation, from the process of Chinese modernization.

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<sup>19</sup> Here Su Tong's description of Chinese modernization is obviously incompatible with the actual historical process. In spite of the fact that, in Republican China, the rural economy and social development might be slower than that in the urban area, and that the process of Chinese urbanization did bring some negative impacts on the countryside, as presented in "1934 Escapes," the historical truth is that the Chinese countryside did benefit from the process of modernization or urbanization at that time. According to *The Cambridge History of China*, completely opposite to Su Tong's description here, in the Republican era, the money which was made in the city was often transferred back to the countryside for the use of building schools, temples, or supporting other public causes. See Twitchett and Fairbank 1978, Vol. 12: 1-48.

I think Su Tong's somewhat distorted description of Chinese modernization actually is a reflection of his worry and anxiety about the increasingly widening gap between the countryside and the city, between the rich and the poor in the Deng era. The gap eventually became nearly unbridgeable under Jiang Zeming's domination, where Su Tong's worry that the development of the city is at the cost of the concurrent victimization of the countryside came true. For a detailed discussion about the rural-urban gap in current China, see Pei 2006.

***Modernization: the Lure of City, Desires, and Evil Human Nature***

As just discussed, in the story of Chen Baonian and the old generation of Maple Village men, Su Tong mainly intends to demonstrate the passive nature of the process of Chinese modernization from the rural point of view. For all the seemingly active posture of Maple Village men in escaping their old home, the Chinese countryside was actually forced to break with its time-honored tradition and to involve in the process of urbanization. In sharp contrast, in the story of Dingo of the younger generation, however, Su Tong attempts to expose another force involved in the process of Chinese modernization, that is, the fateful temptation of the city to the villagers, to the countryside. Rather than being driven to the city by all the unbearable heaviness and darkness of the countryside like his father Chen Baonian, Dingo voluntarily and willingly runs to the city under the lure of the "provocative and richly exotic aura of the city." Surprisingly and coincidentally enough, Dingo's baby brother, later the first-person narrator's father, learns "how to smile when he smelled the flavor of the city brought in by Huanzi."

In "Nineteen Thirty-four Escapes," Dingo the fifteen-year-old manure collector is perhaps the most touching, if not the most important, image. For little Dingo, all his dreams amount to nothing more than getting a pair of rubber overshoes using the coppers he has earned from the sale of the dog manure he has collected. Unfortunately however, his pitiful dreams are only shattered by the fact that one morning the wooden box containing all the money he has earned suddenly disappears—it turns out later that the wooden box was drawn by the magic mice of the Chen family down deep into the foundations of the house.

After the missing of the wooden box and the shattering of his dream, Dingo suddenly loses all his enthusiasm for collecting dog manure. He sits all day on a pile of straw in the corner of the room examining his surroundings, or roams the countryside carrying his manure basket. His mood of depression and indifference remains unchanged until one day he receives the "awl-shaped bamboo knife" sent to him by his father Chen Baonian. Dingo is strongly captivated by "this mysterious object" with "the provocative and richly exotic aura of the city" at once:

That night Dingo stared at his father's awl-shaped bamboo knife in the moonlight for a long time without sleeping. Dingo's naive imagination was so strongly called forth by the light from that bamboo that it flowed like a torrential stream across the dirt floor of his old home. He imagined the city where all the bamboo craftsmen lived, imagined the buildings, the women, the foreign motorcars, the department stores, and his father's shop in the city; all the time he was mumbling vague exclamations of ecstasy (*Trilogy*: 136).

Dingo leaves home the night of the very day he receives the bamboo knife, and launches his long march to the city along the "wide yellow mud road." Unfortunately however, "the road made for night flight" later turns out to be a path to death for the naive countryside teenager.

If Su Tong, as the above analysis shows, has mixed feeling and holds a basically sympathetic attitude towards the countryside, in "Nineteen Thirty-four Escapes" and all the other stories in the "Maple Village series" alike, he always puts the city in a pejorative and contemptible light and holds a basically hostile attitude towards it. The city in these novels is delineated as nothing more than a place of desire, where the satisfaction of varied desires constitutes the sole goal of life, and where the pursuit of women and money forms the "rounded, black life curve" of human beings (*Trilogy*: 162).

In the story, the existence of two people is extremely crucial and even fateful for the city life of the country boy. These two people are like two ties that bind the countryside boy tightly to the city overflowing with desires. They are the little blind man and the little woman Huanzi.

If the little blind man and Huanzi are important for both Chen Baonian and Dingo alike, they are important in different ways and different reasons for the two Maple Village men of two different generations. For Chen Baonian, the two people obviously represent the two sides of the city. While the little woman Huanzi, the mistress of Chen Baonian in the city, who warms up the bed of the countryside man using her own body, symbolizes the openness, kindness, and accommodation of the city to the countryside, the little blind man, the superficially loyal yet essentially deceitful and cruel disciple of Chen Baonian, who finally turns out to be the murderer of his master, apparently embodies the hypocritical, cunning, and brutal nature of the city, and the latent hostility towards and rejection of the countryside on the part of the city. In sharp contrast with the split, double-sided image of the city in Chen Baonian's eyes, for little Dingo, the city is a unified whole. For all the differences in gender, physical appearance, social status, moral character, etc. between the little blind man and the little woman, in Dingo's eyes, both of them are nothing more than embodiments of desires. If the little blind man, through his "unique influence and education" such as teaching the naive country boy how to masturbate and instigating him to spy on his father and Huanzi's fornication, trains "Dingo's fifteen-year-old sexual desires," Huanzi, the little woman with all her charms and flavor of the city, constitutes the true and substantial temptation to the countryside teenager.



Under the dual driving force of both little blind man's instigation and little woman Huanzi's temptation, Dingo is quickly attracted and pulled into the turbulent whirlpool of desires of the city. As a result, the once confident, determined, and resourceful country boy, indicated by the act of his insistence on the self-administration of his money box by rejecting his mother's interference and supervision, now completely loses control of himself. He repeatedly steals his father's big-handled bamboo knife—the symbol of power and money—though the thefts always lead to the same outcome of his being hit so violently by his father that the sound of the “tearing and cracking of his skin and bones” can be heard. He habitually spies on his father and Huanzi's fornication, and the “sound of Huanzi's cat-like screeching” makes his sexual desires run up like “boiling water.” When juxtaposing Dingo's behavior with the philosophy of city men indoctrinated to him by the little blind man, we might be surprised by the essential congruity between them. Though the stench of Maple Village dog manure still emanates from his body, the life trajectory of the country teenager follows exactly the same “rounded, black life curve” of the city men: to pursue money (symbolized by his repeated stealing of the bamboo knife) and women (indicated by his spying on his father's sexual intercourse and his desire for Huanzi), which constitutes the sole goal of his life.

Desire always proves itself a double-edged sword. The city life stirs up Dingo's flame of desires; however the unbearable heaviness of the desire ruthlessly crushes the frail body of the naive country boy in return. Dingo contracts typhoid fever shortly after his arrival in the city, and soon dies with all his city dreams left unfulfilled. Ironically and interestingly enough, the life story of the countryside teenager Dingo, created by a Chinese avant-garde writer, reminds us of the image of the Old Master Wu in the novel

*Midnight* (*Ziye* 子夜), a major work by the left-wing realist writer Mao Dun (1896-1981), where the extremely conservative, hard-headed, old countryside landlord is actually shocked to death by the overflowing desires of Shanghai, a rapidly Westernizing and alienating city in the 1930s. In my understanding, the similarity in their life stories and fate between the countryside teenager and the old countryside landlord is by no means a coincidence. It actually reveals the profound continuities in their preoccupations between the different generations of Chinese writers before and after the Communist victory in 1949, and through these continuities, reflects a basic fact that some issues such as the rural-urban confrontation, the spiritual and identity crisis (which I will discuss in detail later), etc. actually constitute a chain of uninterrupted social phenomena running throughout the whole process of Chinese modernization, and that these social phenomena have attracted the attention from generations of Chinese writers and intellectuals.

The story of Dingo, in my understanding, conveys multiple meanings and implications. First of all, it is a story of desire. Through Dingo's story, Su Tong attempts to pose and make responses to a pressing question, that of why the city, with all its evils—the overflowing of desires, the moral depravity, the squalid and heavily polluted environment, the hypocrisy, duplicity, and the brutality of the people, etc.—constitutes such a substantial and irresistible temptation to the countryside people? Is it simply because the city is materially better off than the countryside? In the story Su Tong obviously does not confine himself to answering these questions from a superficial and materialistic perspective, rather he elevates his responses to the level of the metaphysical reflection on the universal human condition and human nature.

Su Tong makes it very clear in Dingo's story that, just as the fly's nature of loving the dirty, stench, and the rotten constitutes the sole reason for its being lured by all the disgusting things and places, it is the evil nature of human beings and their negative moral qualities that drive them to swarm into the city, where the overflowing of desires and the rampancy of evils, crimes, and corruption provide the pleasure-hunting people with an ideal place to satisfy their variegated, abject desires.

In his fiction, Su Tong repeatedly emphasizes the evil nature of humanity—a view quite different from the mainstream Confucian perspective, which considers human nature basically good. Unlike the innocent, kind, and angel-like images of children usually appearing in movies and novels, the children in Su Tong's novels are always cruel and violent like all the adults, in spite of their seemingly naive appearance and behavior and their young ages. In this sense, Dingo is quite typical of Su Tong's images of children.

In the story, after his wooden money box disappears, Dingo ties several of his younger brothers and sisters up and beats them with a whip, suspecting that they stole it. The crying and shouting of his younger brothers and sisters disturb the entire village. Grandmother Jiang hears news of the commotion and hurries home from the fields to find Dingo ruthlessly whipping his brothers and sisters:

The look of wild cruelty in Dingo's eyes made her shiver all over...

Grandmother Jiang suddenly realized that evil is a large part of the original nature of human race; it is as natural as the movements of the sun and moon (*Trilogy*: 116).

In Su Tong's fiction, as mentioned above, the fifteen-year-old country boy with "the look of wild cruelty" and evil "original nature" is rather an exemplar than an exception of human beings construed by Su Tong. If we link this story with *Rice, My Life as Emperor*,

and some other novels of Su Tong, we have no difficulty finding that, for Su Tong, the evil nature of human beings—the brutality and violent character of men, the deadly jealousy and the unspeakable hatred toward the same sex of women, and the unsatiable greed for sex, wealth, and power of both—constitutes not only the universal human condition characterized by tragedy, absurdity, and mutual hostility, but also the determining factor leading to the unavoidable fate of the ultimate destruction of human beings. In Su Tong's novels, with few exceptions, the main characters are engulfed and destroyed by the turbulent surge of desires in the city and the evils of their original nature.

### ***Trapped in the Rural-Urban Abyss***

If Su Tong's attempt to expose the destructive force of the desires and evils of human beings, and through such exposure to illuminate the basically tragic, absurd, and hostile human condition is manifest in Dingo's story, another theme underlying the story—the bitter experience of modern Chinese people being trapped and suspended in the abyss between the countryside and the city—is only expressed in a very subtle way.

Viewed in this light, a detail of description of Dingo's last day in his life is highly significant and meaningful. As mentioned before, shortly after his arrival in the city, Dingo contracts deadly typhoid fever under the torture of the flames of his strong desire for the little woman Huanzi, and in the afternoon of the last day in his life, he is already clinging to life by just a few feeble breaths. At the last moment of his life:

Chen Baonian heated a pot of warm water and washed Dingo's head with it.

Chen Baonian washed Dingo's head repeatedly with Beauty brand perfumed soap, so that the smell of dog manure nearly disappeared completely and his head gave off an urban fragrance (*Trilogy*: 165).

The description is thematically important, because it reveals an important fact that Dingo does not cut himself off from the tie to the countryside (indicated by the smell of the Maple Village dog manure emanating from his body) until the last day of his life. In other words, never fusing himself with nor being accepted by the city, Dingo has remained a "stranger" or "outsider" to the city and kept the identity of a fugitive from the countryside all his life, though his body is completely away from the countryside and settled in the city. Here we are actually approaching one of the most important points Su Tong attempts to make in the story, that is, the revelation of the bitter life experience of modern Chinese people being trapped in the rural-urban confrontation. This theme is best articulated and interpreted in the novella with the life experience of Chen Baonian.

In the story Su Tong takes great effort deliberately projecting the split state of Chen Baonian's life world and mentality after his moving to the city, even after he becomes a wealthy, powerful, and socially preeminent personage there. For Chen Baonian, the world is split into two isolated and non-interchangeable parts: the countryside and the city. While the countryside, associated with the ancestral house, the procreative powers of women, the extension of the lineage, and other traditional elements in a patriarchal society, constitutes the root of his life; the city, associated with varied sensual, material pleasure and satisfaction, adventure, fantasy, and conspiracy, constitutes a temporary shelter for his floating body. The truly serious dilemma confronting Chen Baonian lies in that, for all the seeming freedom he possessed to travel back and forth between the countryside and the city, he actually belongs to neither. He is driven out of and cursed by the countryside, but finally he is murdered by the city. He can not find peace and happiness in either part of the world. Though he is far away from his old Maple Village

home, the flavor, atmosphere, and influence of the countryside always follow him like shadows or ghosts, and infiltrate into the recesses of his everyday life. As indicated by the narrator: "His bamboo goods shop was illuminated by the bright blood of Grandmother Jiang's female nature," in spite of the fact that Grandmother Jiang is hundreds of miles away from the city. When his beloved mistress the little woman Huanzi is pregnant, he sends her back to his old Maple Village home for childbearing, even though the city is materially a much better and safer place for women's confinement and parturition than the countryside. The act actually betrays the deep secrets in Chen Baonian's heart—his profound disdain for the city on the one hand, and his concurrent identification with and nostalgia for the countryside on the other. For all the poverty, disasters, and the plague inflicting upon it, in Chen Baonian's eyes, his old home is still the true "root" he can fully trust, even if the city provides him with the wealth, power, and satisfaction of desires.

In the story, the descriptions of the antagonistic relationship between Grandmother Jiang and the little woman Huanzi prove both impressive and meaningful. As analyzed earlier, the deadly opposing relationship between these two women, first of all, can be regarded as a powerful symbol of and index to the severity of the rural-urban confrontation. In the story, while Grandmother Jiang gives some deleterious medicine mixed with food to Huanzi, and successfully gets rid of her unborn child, Huanzi, in retaliation, steals away Grandmother Jiang's newly born baby, and brings him up in the city. This grim fact allegorically indicates a long-lasting social phenomenon in the process of Chinese modernization: Both the countryside and the city struggle to claim its

own legitimacy and dominance, by means of confining each other's development, expansion, and extension, and undermining and destroying each other's "roots."

In the story, the antagonistic relationship between Chen Baonian's two women obviously conveys some implications far beyond merely as index to the rural-urban confrontation. Actually it subtly reflects the profound contradictions and confusions within Chen Baonian's psychology.

In the story, a controversy over their respective identity between the two women breaks out as soon as the city woman Huanzi enters into the ancestral house of the Chen family in the countryside. Each woman claims identity as the true wife of Chen Baonian. After recording the whole process of the controversy, the narrator deliberately reminds us of the possible eavesdropping of the quarrel on the part of Chen Baonian:

(At the same time, I hear the sound of Chen Baonian's footsteps crunching the snow behind our ancestral home. Is Chen Baonian listening too?) (*Trilogy*: 167. parentheses in the original).

In my reading, by linking the two women's controversy over identity directly with the existence of Chen Baonian, the author subtly implies that the strongly opposing opinions of the two women and their hostile attitude toward each other, might be interpreted as a hint of the two diametrically opposite forces within Chen Baonian's psychology, and that the two women's confusion with their identity might also be regarded as symbol and symptom of Chen Baonian's own sense of identity crisis.

In the later part of the story, through the perspective of Dingo, the author makes the image of Chen Baonian being split in half very clear:

Seen through the window frame, Chen Baonian appeared as though cut in half.

Dingo discovered that Chen Baonian's short, stocky legs and well-developed upper body

were those of the ordinary Maple Village man, well-known to him; but his dark face had been transformed by the city: Its vigorous heroic spirit already betrayed obvious traces of male weariness (*Trilogy*: 158).

It is only natural for a person being "cut in half" to have some feeling of "weariness." Because a person who was suspended and trapped in the abyss between the countryside and the city, being split into two isolated and independent halves, is destined to be one losing the sense of identity. His confusions, frustrations, weariness, and sense of identity crisis are inevitable. Moreover, just as the big-handled bamboo knife, originally a productive tool in the countryside for the good of human being, has transformed and degenerated into the "awl-shaped bamboo knife," a dreadful weapon used for robbery, intimidation, and killing in the hands of the city people, the countryside men who go into the city are doomed to go on the path of depravity, degeneration, and ultimate decay. As Grandmother Jiang curses:

The city that miserable place, good people go there and their hearts turns black; evil people go there and pus flows out of the soles of their feet and their heads are covered with sores (*Trilogy*: 136-7. My punctuation).

Maybe only after combining the "cruel and tyrannical glow" given off from his eyes with the "obvious traces of male weariness", can we finally obtain a relatively accurate image of the farmer-turned-proprietor Chen Baonian.

In the novel, by linking his own life experience and fate with that of his father and grandfather, the first-person narrator repeatedly emphasizes the fact that the bitter experience and feeling of being "cut in half" and the sense of the loss of identity on the part of modern Chinese people are by no means a short-lived social phenomenon, rather it is a phenomenon lasting for generations. At the very beginning of the story, the narrator



reminds us many times of his resemblance with his ancestors. As he said: "I am like my father." "The vital blood and semen of father's Maple Village continues to circulate through my body." "In the city I developed many habits inherited from my father." He stresses the fact that he is also an outsider or stranger to the city, taking on "the image of a fugitive," just like his father and grandfather. His running into the city is also "an escape":

As I ran wildly through the urban night's eerie light, my father's shadow was shouting and chasing me from behind in a surrealistic pursuit that transcended the nature of ordinary matter. I understand: Running for my life that time was an escape (*Trilogy*: 102-3).

Modern Chinese history, as interpreted by the story, is nothing but a painful and long flight from the disaster-ridden countryside to the materially well off yet morally corrupt city lasting for generations. In the course, being trapped and suspended in the unbridgeable abyss between the countryside and the city becomes the inescapable fate of modern Chinese people.

### ***Identity Crisis: Existential Anxiety and Spiritual Dislocation***

The spiritual and identity crisis is among the most pressing social and intellectual phenomena in modern China and has long been a heated topic among intellectual circles both inside and outside China.<sup>20</sup> Citing Joseph Levenson, Hao Chang argues that China

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<sup>20</sup> Lin Yü-sheng argues that the totalistic nature of Chinese social structure and mode of thinking constitutes the predominant factor for the spiritual and identity crisis in modern China. According to Lin, in traditional China, the sociopolitical order and the cultural-moral order were held together in a highly integrated fashion by the universal kingship into a unified and inseparable one. As a consequence, the breakdown of the sociopolitical order as a result of the collapse of the universal kingship inevitably undermined the cultural-moral order, and caused a serious cultural, spiritual crisis. Lin further argues, the totalistic antitraditionalism of the May Fourth era, as both consequence and symptom of the crisis, in return

since the late Qing has not only experienced a "crisis of cultural identity," which could be experienced by any rapidly and drastically changing society, but also undergone a "crisis of meaning" or "spiritual disorientation," due to the unprecedented magnitude in extent and degree of the social changes China has experienced. According to Chang, the spiritual disorientation in social practice consists of three dimensions: moral, existential, and metaphysical (Chang 1976: 276-283). Actually, from the May Fourth fiction exemplified by Lu Xun's short stories such as "The Misanthrope" (*Guduzhe* 孤独者), "In a Tavern" (*Zai jiulou shang* 在酒楼上) and some others, to Xiao Hong's *Tales of Hulan River* and Ba Jin (1904-2005)'s *The Family* (*Jia* 家) in the 1930s, to Lu Ling's novel *Children of the Rich* (*Caizhu de ernü men* 财主的儿女们), Ba Jin's *Cold Night* (*Hanye* 寒夜), *Garden of Repose* (*Qiyuan* 憩园) and Lao She (1899-1966)'s *Four Generations under One Roof* (*Si shi tongtang* 四世同堂) in the 1940s, finally to the fiction in the post-Mao era, the revelation of the spiritual and identity crisis on the part of modern Chinese writers has been a long-standing theme in the modern Chinese literature. Su Tong is undoubtedly among these writers in his unfailing endeavors to explore the spiritual and

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deepened and deteriorated the crisis, though it originally emerged as a potential remedy for the crisis (Lin 1979).

Yu Yingshi also insists that the long-standing radicalism in the history of modern Chinese thought, from the late Qing's "political radicalism" represented by and culminating in Tan Sitong's thought, to the "cultural radicalism" in May Fourth era, and finally to the "social radicalism" with the Communist victory in 1949, constitutes a major element for the intellectual, cultural crisis in modern China (Y. Yu 1990, 1992).

Joseph Levenson thinks that the cultural identity crisis of modern Chinese people is an inevitable consequence of the rapidly and drastically transforming society, he employs the paradigm of history vs value to explain it. He argues that the contradiction between their emotional nostalgia for the Chinese tradition and the rational belief in the value of the Western civilization on the part of Chinese intellectuals is the overwhelming source for their sense of crisis (Levenson 1959).

Li Zehou adopts the dichotomy of enlightenment vs national salvation to explain modern Chinese intellectual history and the intellectual, cultural crisis. According to Li, it was the overwhelming of the preoccupation of the national salvation over the enlightenment, as a reaction to the external threat of the possible elimination of China as a nation, that led to the interruption and failure of the mission of enlightening the Chinese people, and finally to the failure of the establishment of a new value system in modern China (Li Z. 1987).

identity crisis experienced by modern Chinese people, especially by modern Chinese intellectuals.

If in the stories of three generations of Maple Village men Chen Baonian, Dingo, and the first-person narrator of "1934 Escapes," Su Tong only scratches the surface of the theme of the spiritual and identity crisis on the part of the modern Chinese people, in the life experience of Liu Chencao, a main character of "Opium Family," Su Tong delves into the theme much deeper, and comes up with some profound and incisive observations and conclusions.

When juxtaposing the two Maple Village men, Chen Baonian in "Nineteen Thirty-four Escapes" and Liu Chencao in "Opium Family," we find that they have significant differences in many aspects: education, life trajectory, worldview, mentality, etc. In my understanding, the differences between these two characters in education and life trajectory are the most important. This is not only due to the fact that, generally speaking, these two elements often constitute the decisive factors for the encounters and fate of one's life, but also for the reasons that, specifically, the differences in these two aspects between the two men actually provide Su Tong with a vantage point to penetrate the deep recesses of the mind of modern Chinese people and to explore their spiritual and identity crisis thoroughly. Consequently an examination of the differences in these two aspects also makes an advantageous access for us to the understanding of Su Tong's writing.

In "Nineteen Thirty-four Escapes," as analyzed earlier, the fact of Chen Baonian's identity as an illiterate farmer and his existential situation of being geographically and physically trapped in the rural-urban abyss practically constitutes a limitation, restricts Su

Tong to exploring the sense of identity crisis mainly from an external and material perspective, and prevents him from examining it on a deeper and interior level. In contrast, in "Opium Family," however, the literary creation of Liu Chencao as a modern educated individual, who is highly sensitive to social changes and vulnerable to psychological and spiritual fluctuations, and who is being trapped in between the modern consciousness derived from the modern education he received and the old, rotten traditional way of life imposed upon him by the external environment, actually technically provides Su Tong with considerable facility and freedom in exploring the mentality or the interior world of modern Chinese people. Moreover, the difference in life trajectory between the two characters also constitutes a highly significant contrast. If Chen Baoninan's life trajectory is a one-way trip from the countryside to the city, Liu Chencao however, has apparently undergone a round trip—he finally has to return to the old home he once left behind, and is forced to resume the old way of life he once escaped from. The unwilling return inevitably makes him experience the psychological and spiritual bitterness, confusion, and the sense of crisis in a much more profound and acute way than Chen Baonian does.

In "Opium Family," the narrator provides us a vivid, detailed, and all-around account of the step-by-step transformation or degeneration of Chencao's mentality, profoundly displaying the intellectual and existential crisis he has experienced as a person who receives a modern education: his unbearable bitterness, confusions, and the sense of helplessness and hopelessness.

In the story, when adult Chencao appears for the first time in front of us, he has just finished his secondary education, and an old-fashioned horse cart sent by his father is

waiting there to take him home. Chencao, the young and handsome "provincial middle school" graduate, dressed in a black woolen uniform, is now at the peak of his refinement and ability. It was a nice spring day. Bathed in the shimmering sunlight, Chencao "walked across a stretch of green lawn, passed by two female students playing tennis," reluctantly saying good-bye to his school life. Here all the appreciative and favorable phrases employed to describe the young man, the charming setting, and the beautiful scenery, in my understanding, serve no other purpose than to hint at and emphasize the healthiness, at least the normality, of both the physical and mental state of Chencao. His reluctance to depart with his school life actually testifies to his fascination and identification with the modern.

To our great surprise however, the originally physically healthy and mentally normal young man is suddenly "seized by the feeling of weakness" and becomes extremely bewildered as soon as he comes back to the old family compound, "facing the blood-red opium fields and the tenant farmers," and soaking in "the all-pervasive odor of opium poppies" and "all sorts of unpleasant sounds coming from the house and courtyard." He experiences the first "fainting spell" caused by allergy to opium the next day after he returns home when exposed to the "murderous odor" of the opium poppies. During the first days after his return he lies all the day in bed, feeling as though "standing on an isolated island," "floating in a nightmare," "like a bird that had lost its way." He is captured by a profound consciousness of isolation, strangeness, confusion, helplessness, and hopelessness. He becomes a stranger to his own home, to the long-lasting tradition nurturing both his ancestors and himself.

Here I feel it necessary to point to the extremely complicated and ambiguous attitude Su Tong holds towards the tradition. As mentioned before, in the juxtaposition of revolution and tradition, Su Tong, while lamenting the decline and destruction of the tradition and the irrevocable loss of the moral virtues associated with the tradition caused by the devastating Communist revolution, expresses a lukewarm sympathy with the tradition and the countryside, which is the base camp of the tradition. However, when examining the tradition as an isolated entity, Su Tong, on the other hand, displays a highly critical attitude towards it. In the trilogy, the tradition is for the most part associated with negative and evil substances: the suffocating and highly oppressive patriarchy in "Proliferation of Wives and Concubines;" the landlord's "white jade crock," a mysterious, imaginative instrument reminding us of Taoist implements and the art of health preservation and pursuit of longevity, which turns out to be the very source of the plague devastating the village, and the peasants' superstition in "Nineteen Thirty-four Escapes;" and opium and idiocy in "Opium Family" (In the story the narrator deliberately highlights the fact that the idiot Yanyi was born in the same year when the opium was first introduced to and planted in the Maple Village. In other words, opium and idiocy have gone side by side from the very beginning in the Chinese countryside). The "tradition," with all its obscurity, superstition, backwardness, and corruption, as presented in the trilogy, obviously constitutes a tremendous obstacle to modernization and modern consciousness for Chinese people. Here again, Su Tong displays a profound similarity to the Communists and his May Fourth ancestors in the view of the Chinese tradition.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> I am well aware that tradition is a highly disputable and sometimes problematic term. I use it here simply for convenience. I also have full knowledge that some things mentioned here such as opium and idiocy are

An educated youth with a vague modern sense, Chencao is naturally unwilling to surrender to the decaying and suffocating tradition without resistance. At first he shows strong intentions and makes great endeavors to promote the modern consciousness and new way of life in the old landlord compound; he attempts to exercise some, even though limited, influence on the surrounding people and things; at least he hopes to make a compromise with his living environment and the old tradition in order to avoid the fate of being completely devoured. Unlike any other person in the compound, he never calls Yanyi, the "crude, vulgar, greedy" young madman "idiot"—an act which can be properly read as an index to his modern consciousness to respect everybody, even the people with physical or mental disability or disease. When he feels better, the first thing he does is try to teach people how to play tennis. The fact that he wants to play tennis using the self-made rackets and a ball made of threads—merely fakes or substitutes for real ones—carries, in my understanding, at least a twofold meaning. On the one hand, his intentions to introduce the sport to his old home actually reveals his dream to continue his old school dreams in the old-fashioned compound, to bring some fresh air to the conventional family, and to influence and even change his environment; on the other hand, the fake

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actually not Chinese tradition at all.

However, meanwhile we must keep in mind that in China, tradition, like many other terms, is often defined by the Party in quite different ways for political purposes. For instance, in China, the conclusive, official terms employed by the Party to comment on the traditional (or "feudal" as the Party puts it) Chinese society are *yumei* 愚昧 (obscure, unenlightened, or superstitious), *yeman* 野蛮 (barbarian, uncultured, or brutal), and *luohou* 落后 (backward, or uncivilized). And in Communist propaganda, *yapian* 鸦片 or opium, with its real impacts on Chinese society and thought (as displayed in the two so-called "Opium Wars") and its somewhat exaggerated, imagined harms to Chinese people, became the most powerful symbol of the Chinese tradition after the Communist victory in China. In this sense, it is absolutely no accident that Su Tong chooses the opium poppy as a core image in his story.

As far as the relation of idiocy with Chinese tradition is concerned, in contemporary China, Su Tong definitely is not the only writer who characterizes idiocy as an element of traditional Chinese culture and mentality. Actually the image of Yanyi the idiot in "Opium Family" readily reminds us another idiot Bingzai in Han Shaogong's widely read novella "BaBaBa." The idiot, who can speak only "BaBa (father)" and "F—Mother," is also treated as symbolic of the idiocy of popular traditional values, the collective ignorance and moral retardation of Chinese people in the novella.

nature of the rackets and the ball also indicates that the colors of his dream have already faded, and that he had already made one-step retreat from his original aspirations and hopes under the pressure of the all-pervasive and powerful tradition.

When examining the process of Chencao's psychological transformation as a whole, we have no difficulty to find that the incident—the idiot Yanyi attempts to murder Chencao when he invites the idiot to play tennis, finally ends with the idiot himself being killed accidentally by Chencao in self-defense—is the turning point in Chencao's mental transformation.

If, before the incident, Chencao had always been holding the illusions to compromise and reconciliation with his old home, with the pertinacious tradition, the icy cold blade of the idiot's killing knife and the life-and-death struggle which led to the death of the idiot, shock Chencao awake from his beautiful yet naive dreams, and make him fully recognize the totally antagonistic nature of the relationship between his own thought and the rotten way of life and the ossified mindsets of the people in the deadly-silent compound. The incident actually marks the very beginning of the "spiritual suicide" of the educated young man. After that, he never tries to play tennis in his compound again—a gesture signaling his intention to give up all his old school dreams; he takes over the whole household from the hands of his father without any resistance and becomes the new landlord, a role which he feared and hated deeply before. More shockingly, he finally goes so far that he not only overcomes the dizziness to the opium poppies, he eventually becomes another "idiot" addicted to opium, just as the deceased idiot Yanyi is addicted to steamed buns:

Chencao sat on the big crock in the storehouse. That was also the place where the idiot Yanyi used to sit and eat his steamed buns. If you had ever experienced eating



opium, you would have understood what Chencao was doing. Liu Chencao was eating opium (*Trilogy*: 234-5).

The narrator also reminds us of the resemblance between the young landlord and his father through the observation of the Communist work team leader Lu Fang:

Five years later, Lu Fang recalled that Chencao's appearance was no longer handsome, no longer melancholic; his skin was waxy and sallow, his back bent like a shrimp, and from a distance he looked just as aged and pale as his landlord father (*Trilogy*: 237).

The once handsome young man bathed in the shimmering sunlight of modern school eventually metamorphoses into a new "idiot" and a spiritually depraved and intellectually inferior landlord. Given the fact that Yanyi is only addicted to steamed buns rather than opium, and that the old landlord never attempts to eat opium himself despite his status as the biggest opium producer in south China, we cannot help but be shocked by the degree of the severity and rapidness of Chencao's mental degeneration.

In my understanding, Chencao's mental metamorphosis or spiritual degeneracy, above all, can be considered a symptom and derivative of his intellectual-moral crisis, and the unbridgeable abyss in worldview, values, and beliefs between himself and the surrounding people. Specifically, despite the fact that Chencao shares with the Communists the common aversion and resistant attitude towards tradition, he makes essential differences from the Communists in worldview and the reading of China's reality. As the most powerful evidence to the differences, Chencao rejects without any hesitation the Communist leader Lu Fang's theory of class hatred and his reading of Maple Village's social reality. Chencao differs from the tenants and the farmers not only in social status, but more importantly, in values and moral standards—he disparages them

for their "animalistic" way of life and their shameless, despicable, and depraved behavior and morality epitomized by Chen Mao. Moreover, Chencao also distinguishes himself clearly from his father the industrious, thrifty, and arbitrary old landlord Liu Laoxia in that, while the old landlord has been obsessed with and dedicated to the accumulation and possession of wealth and power all his life, Chencao never shows any interest in material gain; on the contrary, he holds a nonchalant attitude towards life and the world, and regards all the wealth accumulated by his father as an unbearable burden, which he endeavors to discharge himself of. From the above analysis, it is safe to say that Chencao's strong feeling of isolation and strangeness in his old family compound is a natural reaction and reflection of the tremendous gap in worldview and life attitude between himself and his surrounding people, because he is "undoubtedly an anomaly in the Liu clan," and a true outsider to Maple Village.

Chencao's spiritual crisis, as displayed in the story, is also a natural consequence of his "existential" puzzles and anxieties. By "existential" I mean both the concrete individual living situations, "typical situations of human life everywhere, such as death, suffering, and love," as Hao Chang construes it (1978: 4), and the philosophical meditation on the universal human condition as understood by Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, and some other Western Existentialists.

Chencao's existential anxiety is first related to his concrete personal life situation, specifically, to his physical origin and his perplexed and mysterious relations with his biological father Chen Mao. In the story, the narrator repeatedly mentions the strange, "almost unbearable" itch he suffers when he senses the existence of the long-term hand—even merely hearing his voice. Since he is very young, Chencao has felt the unspeakable

and mysterious relations existing between himself and the shameless farmer, which always makes him confused and uneasy. More strangely and startlingly, the emergence of his biological father even evokes in his view the illusion of a "silhouette of a dog," to which he is even more perplexed and depressed. He is seized by mixed feelings towards this man—at once a strong aversion and attraction to him. Many times Chencao is haunted with the strong pulse to kill this dog-transformed man, however every time when confronting him face-to-face, he is suddenly captured by a strange feeling of weakness, and losing the strength to hold the gun for no reason. Towards the end of the story, when the villagers tell him personally that Chen Mao is his biological father, he still denied its authenticity, though he knows in his heart it is the truth. This fact actually betrays the profound and almost irresolvable contradictions, confusions, and bitterness of the once educated young man, who has been tortured by the inescapable existential anxieties.

Chencao's existential anxiety is also profoundly linked to his feeling of the absurd human condition and the nothingness of life. In this sense, Chencao's anxieties and crisis are the same as what were experienced by Kafka's human-transformed huge insect or Camus' stranger.

In the story, the concrete personal life predicaments and all the confusions and anxieties derived from his immediate surroundings finally lead Chencao to question his own identity as a human being, and to contemplate the ultimate goal of life and the universal human condition. As the narrator tells us, "Chencao was perplexed about himself;" and he often asks himself the same question "What was he all about?" He is always seized by a feeling of the inescapable fate and imminent calamity. In response to his father's statement that "I should have drowned you in the manure pit when you were

born," Chencao answered, "I don't care. I didn't want to live this long in the first place." Chencao's reply completely displays his despair of the world and human life. To some extent, for Chencao, his final insanity is a logical and inevitable result of his intellectual and psychological progress, a natural response to his belief in the absurdity of the world and the nothingness of life. The insanity, in my understanding, can be read here as a mental state of being lost in the perplexing and despairing world.

The above analysis makes it very clear that the spiritual crisis experienced by modern Chinese individuals, as Su Tong interprets in the novel, bears both the specific and historical dimension and the non-historical and transcendental character, and that Su Tong actually emphasizes the historicity of the origins of the crisis, a stance which, as I will discuss in the next chapter, is also articulated in Yu Hua's novels. In this sense, my analyses and perceptions inevitably put into question the dominating views among the literary circles of mainland China which stress the transcendental or metaphysical nature of Chinese avant-garde fiction.<sup>22</sup>

In the novella "Opium Family," Su Tong elaborates a metaphor or allegory of "a snail with a terribly heavy shell crawling forward" to project the spiritual and identity crisis experienced by the modern Chinese people, and to articulate his view of history:

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<sup>22</sup> For example, Chen Xiaoming, a leading critic of Chinese avant-garde fiction in mainland China, in a highly influential article entitled "The Last Ritual: History of 'Avant-garde School' and Its Assessment," argues that contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction can be regarded as a literary ritual for "self-salvation" and "salvation of literature." The writers of this school "are trapped in a dilemma, wander on the margin of civilization, are far away from the reality and with no history behind them, and writing becomes the major goal of existence and the sole means for spiritual transcendence." He thinks the major values of contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction lie in its meditation on universal human condition, human nature, history and individual experience, and some other non-historical, transcendental issues (Chen 1991). Zhang Qinghua, another important critic of Chinese avant-garde fiction in mainland China, as discussed earlier, in his monograph book on this school, never touches such important issues as the continuity of Chinese avant-garde fiction with its cultural tradition, how and to which extent this kind of fiction reflects the reality and history of China, etc. (Zhang Q. 1991).

He [Chencao] heard the sound of rain all over Maple Village...He saw that he had transformed into a snail crawling along in the rain...The snail was actually crawling toward that tennis ball. By the time the snail reached the grass, the tennis ball had long since disappeared...The shell on the snail's back was terribly heavy; he lay down in a shallow pool of water and went to sleep, but many people were running widely along that road; they were running widely up behind him; the snail heard the frenzied sound of their running feet; he wanted to hide, but he could not move his shell...He heard the loud reverberations of a crisp clear crackling sound as the snail's shell was squashed into the ground (*Trilogy*: 235).

The image of a snail carrying a terribly heavy shell on its back crawling for the tennis ball, only ending in its own destruction in the endless rain, violence, chaos, and turbulence, with nowhere to hide, indeed is a vivid and precise picture of the modern Chinese individual, who carrying his tradition with its unbearable heaviness on the back, strive for the remote and destructive modern. In the process, he has experienced tremendous spiritual confusion and bitterness, at the risk of losing his identity. His fate is also predicable. After its shell, symbol of the tradition, is squashed by the "people running widely along that road," who symbolize forces of revolution or modernization, the now "liberated" snail is already on the very brink of its ultimate destruction.

More importantly, the metaphor, in my understanding, also effectively and impressively conveys Su Tong's view of history: If history is the accumulated aggregate of such human experiences, which are merely oriented to and aimed at the sensual pleasure and material gains—sometimes in vain—at the cost of the physical and moral degeneration and even destruction of human beings, then it is absolutely not progressive,

if not retrogressive. This view is obviously at odds with the orthodox Marxist outlook on history, which insists that history is a progressive process.

### **History as Field of Power Relations**

"Proliferation of Wives and Concubines" is perhaps the best-known of Su Tong's stories—though not necessarily the best—for the most part due to Zhang Yimou's internationally acclaimed film "Raise the Red Lantern," which is adapted from the novella, and whose title has since taken the place of the original in most printings. In spite of the fact that since its publication, the novella has attracted enough attention from critics both inside and outside China, most of the previous critical research, however, has been limited to two perspectives: either adopting a feminist approach and claiming the novella exposes the theme of gender oppression, or adopting a "culture criticism" approach—a legacy of the May Fourth literature—and insisting that the novella fiercely attacks the cruelty, the ultra-stability, and the oppressive and evil nature of the traditional Chinese patriarchal family system and traditional Chinese culture. The latter theme is also inherited by and even more projected in Zhang Yimou's film, which deliberately exaggerates simultaneously the overwhelming power and authority of the patriarch on the one hand, and the passivity and frailness of the unprivileged female gender on the other, by adding some fabricated "familial customs" such as hanging a red lantern from the house eave of the wife to indicate that she is lucky enough to be the chosen one to stay the night with the Old Master, and that she will enjoy a foot massage—a service which is said can enhance women's sexual desires. My analysis is obviously different from both the approaches. By reading the story as an allegory of "power relations," through

examining the relations and interactions between the dominated and dominant in the patriarchal family, I attempt to explore the working and effects of power in a hierarchal society, and through this exploration to further investigate the universal pattern of "power relations" in history. For all the differences, however, my approach is not necessarily contradictory with those two approaches, and my final findings may also support the conclusions derived from those two approaches.

### ***Foucault's Discursive Formulation of Power***

Many might agree that power is a key word to the understanding of human history, and the issue of power has long been a preoccupation of many contemporary thinkers, among whom Michel Foucault might be the most renowned for his unremitting exploration of the working of power and his unfailing "effort both to develop a method for the study of human beings and to diagnose the current situation of our society" (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983: xvii). A preeminent figure in contemporary world intellectual history, at once highly influential and highly controversial,<sup>23</sup> Foucault's exploration and analysis of power, which are based on his meticulous—though sometimes lacking in factual accuracy (Merquior 1991: 87-88)—studies of the disciplinary histories of leper house, asylum, clinic, prison, and so on, in my view, are both provocative and inspiring, despite the fact that even Foucault himself agreed that "his concept of power remains elusive" (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983: xiii).

The uniqueness of Foucault's conceptualization of power lies, first of all, in that Foucault definitely denies the traditional notion that power is a thing or structure which

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<sup>23</sup> One of the best-known cultural anthropologists in the world, Clifford Geertz's comments expresses Foucault's status as a controversial thinker best. He called Foucault "a nonhistorical historian, an anti-humanist human scientist, and a counter-structuralist structuralist" (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983: xviii).

can be held or possessed by people, institutions, or organizations on the top of a society; instead he insists on the conception of "power relation" that, rather than being a substance, "power is only a certain type of relation between individuals." As he points out, "there is no such entity as power, with or without a capital letter; global, massive, or diffused; concentrated or distributed. Power exists only as exercised by some on others, only when it is put into action, even though, of course, it is inscribed in a field of sparse available possibilities underpinned by permanent structures." He further argues, "In effect, what defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action that does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions: an action upon action, on possible or actual future or present actions" (Foucault 2000: 340). Here Foucault actually places stress on the "multidirectional" nature of power—power is in social practice the interaction between the parties involved in the "power relation" and "is exercised upon the dominant as well as on the dominated" (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983: 186).

Another distinguishing point in Foucault's discourse of power is his tendency to "neutralize" power. He insists that power is not necessarily oppressive and detrimental as traditionally asserted. It can be "productive" and "liberating," because power or power relation, he believes, always evokes and correlates with freedom and revolt. As he puts it, "at the very heart of power relationship," "are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom" (Foucault 2000: 342). "There is no power without potential refusal or revolt" (324).

Compared with the traditional notion which tends to reduce power to a tool of domination, to a one-way, oppressive relation directed downward from the power-holder to those over whom power is exercised, and which shows a strong tendency to



oversimplify the working and effects of power in a given society, Foucault's conceptualization of "power relation" is much more complex, and shows a higher adaptability to and greater effectiveness in explaining the workings of power and the behaviour, encounters, and ultimate fate of people involved in the power relations in a society. Like traditional Historicism, Foucault's discourse of power, on the one hand, emphasizes the fact that the exercise and effect of power in a society as well as the historical process are the result of a combination of multiple factors in the society, rather than determined by one single "decisive" element such as economy as claimed by the Marxist economic determinism; on the other hand, Foucault insists on the freedom, autonomy, and subjectivity of the people or parties involved in power relation, and argues that a person's encounters and fate are for the most part determined by his/her own actions or choices, by how he/she locates and behaves himself/herself in the field of power relations,<sup>24</sup> rather than by external factors such as fate, retribution, etc, though he admits the fact that the differentiated and unequal statuses of the parties involved in the power relations in a hierarchal system do play an important, sometimes crucial, role in their encounters and fate in the system. Foucault's discursive formulation of power, in my understanding, provides an inspiring perspective and useful module for us to cut into

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<sup>24</sup> It seems that here Foucault overestimates the degree of subjectivity and freedom an individual can possess in modern society. Moreover, some of his other arguments on power are also highly problematic. For example, his assertion that power can function equally on the dominant and the dominated is completely incompatible with reality. However, his emphasis on the activity of the individual in power relations in modern society actually leads us to the different ways in which power works in our contemporary society and the society preceding us. And his notion of the interaction between the dominant and dominated in power relations also provides an inspiring perspective for us to explore the secrets of power in our society.

Actually the major reason to incorporate Foucault's notion of "power relations" in my analysis of Su Tong's novella "Proliferation of Wives and Concubines" is that I think it can provide me with a useful and convenient approach to analyze the complicated relations within the patriarchal household.

the inside of an actual society as well as the fictional world to explore the working and effects of power and the secrets of history.

### ***Household as Miniature of Society: Continuities and Discontinuities***

In the history of Chinese literature, it is a time-honoured and preeminent tradition and literary practice to use a household as a miniature and epitome of the society as a whole, and to reflect the history of a certain period through the description of the rises and falls of a family<sup>25</sup>—a tradition which is best exemplified by *The Golden Lotus*, China's first full-length novel authored by a single literatus, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, China's best classical novel, and many others. Su Tong's "Proliferation of Wives and Concubines" obviously is a continuation of the great tradition, though constructed on a greatly reduced scale and in a relatively less complicated structure. Moreover, like both the great classics, the novella "Proliferation of Wives and Concubines" is also centered on the female images and on the extremely complicated relations between them and inside the whole household.

The story's continuities with traditional Chinese fiction, especially its tremendous similarities to and even imitation of *The Golden Lotus*, are obvious. Not only does the structure of the two households described by the two works highly resemble each other—both families consist of an arbitrary, powerful, and lustful patriarch and many wives living in an enclosed compound, the two works also show enormous similarities in details

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<sup>25</sup> The analogical relationship between household and society in Chinese literature has been noticed by many. For instance, William H. Nienhauser in his highly acclaimed *The Indianan Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature*, while commenting on *The Golden Lotus*, points out, "By deliberately restricting his focus to the events in a single middle-class household, but subtly suggesting to the reader that this microcosm stands in an analogical relationship to the society as a whole, the author was able to attack the abuses of the day with far greater candor and analytical rigor than would have been possible, or safe, if he had attacked the reigning monarch and the existing social and political structure directly" (1986: 290).

of description. For instance, in addition to their shared image, pattern of behaviour, and worldview of the orthodox housewife of a traditional gentry family prescribed by Confucian moralities and duties, the first wives of both patriarchs practice Buddhist ritual at home, simulating the role of religious believer to harbour their true images as hypocritical, jealous, and mean-spirited women, and their ambitions to dominate the other wives (concubines), whose social statuses are legally and procedurally inferior in the family hierarchy. In both novels, the extreme beauty of physical appearance of the women constitutes a striking contrast with the cold-bloodedness of their hearts and the wicked nature of their minds. Moreover, in both novels, the relationships between the women are strongly antagonistic; they show little mutual understanding, sympathy, and lenience; instead they launch and are involved in lifelong, fierce, and sometimes mortal struggles against one another, which in both cases finally lead to the destruction of the lives of their fellow members. Most surprisingly, the names of the female protagonists in both novels have a Chinese character *lian* 莲 meaning lotus, which becomes their common name in the English translations.

For all its continuities and similarities with *The Golden Lotus*, "Proliferation of Wives and Concubines" is essentially different from the great classic in many aspects, especially in the thematic and discursive dimension, which is inevitably influenced by the overall trends of a time and in turn embodies these trends. The differences between the two novels, in my understanding, are much more significant and meaningful than their similarities.

While in both works, the different images of women represent different personality types and different sorts of life experience, Su Tong's novella as the creation of a modern

writer thematically transcends *The Golden Lotus* in that the different images of women and their life experience and fate in Su Tong's work also represent the possible existential patterns of people being involved in the power relations in a system or society, and the possible effects the patterns may bring about, and that Su Tong's work focuses more on the spiritual worlds of the women, especially their self-consciousness.

### ***Females in a Chinese Patriarchal Household: Four Types of Capital***

Similar to the structure of society as a whole, a traditional Chinese family, especially the big powerful household, has always presented itself as a rigid hierarchy of pyramidal stratification. The Chen family in "Proliferation of Wives and Concubines" is no exception in this respect. Like all traditional Chinese patriarchal households, the Chen family also has a pyramidal structure. The patriarch Chen Zuoqian, who enjoys the absolute authority over the whole household, and his eldest son Chen Feipu, the future patriarch who is fully responsible for the outside family affairs and currently doing business financially supporting the whole family, are at the summit of the pyramid. All the maids, servants, and laborers of the family are at the very bottom. And Chen Zuoqian's four wives, who are ethically and procedurally inferior to the patriarch and the grown-up male family members in status and gender, belong to the middle stratum of the family hierarchy, which connects and negotiates between the top and the bottom, and which is structurally the most important part of the hierarchy.

In light of Foucault's discursive formulation, "power is a general matrix of force relations at a given time, in a given society" (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983: 186). This means that the power and influence a person can bring about and possess in a given

society or system actually depend on how deeply and effectively one relates himself/herself to the society, especially to the authorities of it.

In my observation, in a traditional Chinese patriarchal household, several major relations or factors determine how much power and influence a wife can possess and exercise over the family, and consequently determine her social status and fate in the family. These factors or relations can be briefly summed up as four kinds of "capital" a wife can possess, obtain, or be entitled to as following: "economic capital," which is mainly determined by the wife's premarital family background; "biological capital," mainly referring to her procreative capacity, or her ability to accomplish the mission to extend the family's blood and carry on the ancestral line through producing as many offspring as possible, especially the male descendents, to the household; "sexual capital," or her physical charms and the ability to satisfy the patriarch's sexual desires; and "cultural capital," or the privileges and advantages which are entitled to her in light of the conventions, rules, or moralities prescribed by the traditional society or patriarchal family, or which she obtains through her own activities and relations in the family.<sup>26</sup> Of these four major relations or factors determining a wife's status, encounters, and fate in a traditional Chinese patriarchal family, if the first two—one's premarital family background and procreative capacity—are completely beyond one's control,<sup>27</sup> the

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<sup>26</sup> My conception of the four kinds of "capital" mentioned here is inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's highly influential capital theory. However, my definition of capital is obviously different from Bourdieu's formulation. In Bourdieu's capital theory, while "economic capital" is the only substantial capital directly related to social reality, "social and cultural capitals" are "symbolic capitals" whose values actually derive from some invisible networks or relations. Though capital in my definition also has its symbolic dimension, however, all the four kinds of capital coined here are essentially substantial. See Bourdieu 1984.

<sup>27</sup> It is common knowledge, in light of modern biological science, that a child's gender is determined by his/her father's hereditary genes. In traditional Chinese patriarchal society, however, due to gender discrimination and bias, it is believed that the wife is responsible for the gender of a child. Therefore, if a couple fails in bringing any offspring to the household or only produces the inferior female, all fingers will

remaining two are both, more or less, determined by one's own will, choices, behaviour, and activities. Next I will put the cases of Chen Zuoqian's four wives under examination in terms of these four major factors to explore the different patterns through which the women relate themselves to the family, and how the patterns determine their ultimate fate in the cold and rigid hierarchal household.

### ***Joy and Cloud: Submission and Security***

In light of the ordinances, conventions, and time-honoured social practices in traditional Chinese society, Joy, Chen Zuoqian's first wife, is the only official wife or *zhengshi* 正室. She not only enjoys higher social status than Chen's other wives, who are legally and procedurally only his concubines or *qie* 妾, but also is entitled automatically to the authority, in accord with her privileged status as the *zhengshi*, to take charge of the everyday household affairs within the compound. Her special and privileged status and authority as First Mistress of the Chen family are clearly indicated and testified in the story first by the fact that Lotus's objection to burning the leaves near her living place is effortlessly turned down by Joy with only a few words, and then most manifestly by an event that towards the end of the story when Lotus, who has now completely lost the favor of the Old Master and treated with contempt and disgust by the whole household, is drunk and utters some words regarded by Joy as "shameless" and "rebellious." First Mistress, the seemingly tolerant and merciful Buddhist practitioner, rushes over and slaps Lotus across the face to finally "show this drunken bitch who's the boss here" (Trilogy: 91). Moreover, the First Mistress's drastic change in attitude towards Lotus—from

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point at the wife, who is universally considered by the family having no capacity to produce the superior male offspring and therefore failing to carry on the family's lineage.

originally the seeming nonchalance when the latter, once the Old Master's favorite concubine, first enters the household and goes to greet her, and finally to contempt, insult, and abuse when the latter has completely lost the Old Master's favour and become the common aversion of the whole household—also makes it very clear that the seemingly indifferent and religious First Mistress actually knows perfectly the essence and the working of the politics in the powerful household, and knows perfectly as well how to conform to the proprieties, rules, and laws prescribed by the hierarchy, and how to restrict her speech, action, and thoughts within the boundaries drawn by the authorities and to behave herself properly.

Apart from the overwhelming "cultural capital" Joy possesses as First Mistress of the Chen Family, she has also accumulated enormous "biological" and "economic capital" for herself. Her son Feipu's position and status as the eldest male member of his generation and the would-be patriarch of the household in light of the traditional Chinese familial conventions and laws, weigh most heavily to consolidate her status as the most authoritative and secure wife in the whole household. Moreover, from the generally accepted and adopted principle of *mendang hudui* 门当户对, or "being well-matched in social and economic status for marriage," it is easy to deduce that Joy, as the only official wife of Chen Zuoqian, must have come from a similarly rich and powerful household as the Chen family. This deduction is later proved true by the talk of Mama Song, a long-term maidservant who has witnessed all the four marriages of Chen Zuoqian. As she testified, "When he [Chen Zuoqian] brought Joy, his First Mistress home, he was only nineteen; he wore a big gold pendant on his chest, and First Mistress had one, too, weighed every bit of half a pound" (*Trilogy*: 81). Compared with Cloud's "small gold

medal," Coral's "a few rings on her fingers", and Lotus's nothing "special," which they wore respectively when they were brought into the Chen household, Joy's tremendous advantage in "economic capital" and family background and the corresponding glories and benefits it brought to her, are manifest.

Joy's only disadvantage in her competition with the other wives is the insufficiency and lack in physical or "sexual capital," due to her relatively older age, and the corresponding loss of physical attraction and sexual charms, indicated clearly by Chen Zuoqian's contemptuous comments that "She [Joy] turned into an old hen long ago." However, in comparison with the overwhelming advantage she possesses in the other three aspects, Joy's disadvantage in her physical appearance and sexual appeal can appropriately be ignored. Because, according to the long-standing convention and social practice in traditional Chinese society, First Mistress, the only official wife or *zhengshi* in a powerful household, is mainly obligated to accomplish the mission to extend the family blood and carry on the ancestral line, and takes charge of the inside everyday household affairs, with less stress on her sexual obligations and charms. Sex appeal is supposed to be the major value and role of the concubines or *qie*.<sup>28</sup> In this sense, Joy's seeming devotion to the Buddhist practice and her pretended indifference to the domestic struggles among the female members can be read as both an elaboration she has made to distract attention from her physical and sexual disadvantage and a reflection of her sense of security and superiority in relation to the other wives in the household. From the above

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<sup>28</sup> This perception is also confirmed by the "narrator's comment" in chapter 72 of *The Golden Lotus*, "Readers, concubines are always ready to lead their husbands on and to bewitch them. To this end, they will go to any length of shamelessness and endure any shameful thing. Such practices would be abhorrent to a real wife who had married her husband in the proper way" (Vol. 3: 313). The Chinese original is: 看官听说: 大抵妾妇之道, 鼓惑其夫, 无所不至, 虽屈身忍辱, 殆不为耻。若夫正室之妻, 正大光明, 岂肯为也!



analysis, it is safe to say that Joy's status as the most secure, authoritative, and "powerful" wife in the household is the natural result of the incomparably strong relations she establishes and maintains to the household, no matter by which kind of means—being entitled to them in light of the conventions, laws, and social practice, or obtaining them by her own efforts.

If, as analyzed above, Joy attaches herself to the powerful household mainly through the conventions, laws, or social practices prescribed by the traditional Chinese patriarchal family system, taking advantage of her status as the *zhengshi*, Chen's other three "wives"—accurately his concubines—on the other hand, relate themselves to the family mainly through their personal wisdom and efforts, though all their wisdom and efforts can not necessarily lead to good fortunes in the family, due to the unequal and highly oppressive nature of the family hierarchy. In the story, through his vivid and impressive description and meaningful juxtaposition of the different life experience and fate of the three concubines in the Chen household—Cloud, Lotus, and Carol, Su Tong attempts to explore the three types of essentially distinct power relations or existential patterns existing in a system or society—obedient, defiant, and compromising—and the different consequences or impacts the different power relations may bring to the subjects involved in the relations. Through this exploration, Su Tong attempts to further investigate the social and political implications of the different power relations.

Apart from the apparent gap in social status in the household—official wife vs concubine, Second Mistress Cloud shares with First Mistress Joy many things, among which their common obedient attitude and symbiotic relation to the household, to the Old Master, is the most emphasized feature. The only difference between them in this respect

lies in that, while the First Mistress, as analyzed above, attaches herself to the family mainly through conventions and laws in favor of the official wife, Cloud, however, binds herself to the powerful household mainly through her own elaborations, maneuvers, cunning wisdom or dark tricks, and unremitting efforts.

In terms of the four types of "capital" mentioned above, Cloud is apparently rich in "economic and biological capital." Cloud is "cultured" and "from a good family," and naturally her economic background is strong. In the story, after Lotus enters the Chen household, she goes to Cloud's house for the first time to greet her. There Lotus receives an "enthusiastic" welcome from the Second Mistress, who sets out varied delicacies to treat Lotus. She told Lotus, "There aren't any good melon seeds around here; I have someone buy all the melon seeds I eat in Suzhou."

These ordinary words uttered by Cloud during their first meeting at first glance seem insignificant and quite compatible with the atmosphere of that occasion. However, with the further unfolding of the story, when we link these words and the scene with the fact that there are life-and-death struggles existing between the wives for survival in the household and favor from the Old Master, and the truth that Cloud is actually a woman with "the face of a saint and the heart of a scorpion," who not only assists Swallow using black magic to curse Lotus, but also spies on Coral and finally sends her to be brutally murdered, we have no difficulty to read out all the underlying meanings and implications behind the seemingly simple words and ordinary family scene. Actually, Cloud's words not only can be read as hidden ridicule or curse for Lotus—"you are also not a good seed, just like all the other people here, though you think you were different because you were once a college student."—they also, along with the plentitude of the delicacies she

provides, constitute a deliberate display of her wealth and a challenge to Lotus: "Be cautious. Look, I am much richer than you."

Cloud contributes two offspring to the Chen family, though they are the unprivileged gender—female. However, considering the reality that Chen Zuoqian has already had two sons to carry on the family's ancestral line, Cloud's disadvantage or shortage in "biological capital" was tremendously reduced, and can even be ignored.

Compared with Coral's extreme physical beauty and Lotus's admirable "skill and passion in bed," Cloud's weakness in sexual appeal is obvious. Chen Zuoqian's comments also betrays his moderate complaint about this, as he said, "Cloud's still tolerable, but she's a little flabby." However, Cloud's shrewdness and survival wisdom lie in the fact that she has a full awareness of her weakness in this respect, and makes every effort to compensate for it. This is most manifest in the fact that, when the Old Master reaches the age of 50 and suddenly suffers some sexual disability or impotence, while either of his younger concubines Coral and Lotus refuses to provide sexual service to him like a dog or slave, Cloud, as hinted by the narrator and inferred from Lotus's "mad" words, is quite willing to do such things as stroking and sucking the disabled penis of the Old Master, and manages "to get the Old Master through the night" quite happily. In this sense, if the Old Master's impotence is disastrous to both Coral and Lotus, it is absolutely not for Cloud; on the contrary, it provides a perfect opportunity for Cloud to reduce and even bridge completely the gap in sexual capital between her rivals and herself, and makes the competition between them sway favorably to her side. It is easy to imagine that when the Old Master gets older and older, the final winner on the sexual

arena undoubtedly would be the Second Mistress Cloud. Our conjecture is also proven true by the life story of both Coral and Lotus, which will be discussed in detail below.

Cloud also proves herself a wonderful player and brilliant actress in the political arena of the powerful and corrupt household. Like First Mistress Joy but much better than her, Cloud can understand and see through all the political secrets and tricks going on within the big compound; instead of being restricted, damaged, or even destroyed by the rigid laws and rules, she manages to take advantage of them to serve her own interests and purposes successfully. In order to get a firm foothold in the household, she establishes strong horizontal connections both to the top and to the bottom in the family hierarchy. She, as indicated by her treatment of Lotus, deliberately and slavishly caters to all the tastes, desires, and requirements of the Old Master, and has won his favor and trust successfully. This is most manifest in the fact that, in the story, she is the only wife never being scolded or cursed by him and instead being treated with some warmth; even the First Mistress was once cursed by the Old Master as muddle-minded. A veiled hypocrite and highly skillful actress, Cloud, in spite of the fact that she is the most cunning, most evil, and most cold-blooded woman in the household, also disguises herself as a merciful and trustworthy mistress and has won the trust of the servants. This can be inferred from the fact that Swallow asks or trusts her to write down Lotus's name to curse her, and that all the people high or low in the household speak highly of the Second Mistress. From the above analysis, it is safe to say that Cloud's hypocrisy can be appropriately regarded not only as a reflection of her depraved moral character, but also and more importantly as an effective strategy or device to beat down her rivals, in order to survive in the highly hierarchal household corrupted by and teeming with conspiracies, duplicities, and

injustice. In the story, all the speculations, strategies, and efforts of Cloud culminate in her victory of successfully detecting the adultery between Coral and a doctor by catching these two in bed, an action which finally leads to the brutal murder of Coral. This is obviously a dual victory for Cloud. On the one hand, it makes her effortlessly eliminate her two most dangerous rivals simultaneously—one dead, the other mad—and further secures her position in the family as the most resourceful and almost invincible concubine. On the other hand, the victory further testifies to her loyalty and high adaptability to the hierarchy and authority, further consolidates her relations and connections to the household, and therefore accumulates more power for herself within the Chen family's compound. Towards the end of the story, a new concubine named Bamboo is brought into the compound and a new round of struggle between the females is inevitably begun. Though we are not told of the final outcome, we can imagine with some certainty that, with her superb performing skills of a first-rate actress and incomparable wisdom for survival and strategies for struggles, Cloud will be the final winner in this war without gunpowder. We all know that the fate of Coral and Lotus actually constitutes a mirror for the new comer.

### ***Coral: Defiance and Death***

If, in terms of their submissive and slavish attitude toward the patriarch and the parasitic relation to the hierarchy, especially their complete lack of self-consciousness and independent spirit, both Joy and Cloud have no essential difference from their predecessors described in *The Golden Lotus*, Coral and Lotus however, with their strong

self-consciousness, dreams for freedom and independence—at least in the spiritual dimension—and their remote, uncooperative, and sometimes defiant relation to the hierarchy and authority, undoubtedly represent a different sort of female image.

When juxtaposing the images of Coral and Cloud, we find that they constitute a sharp and meaningful contrast in many aspects. They represent not only two strikingly different personality types, but also the two extremes in the spectrum of existential patterns of female members in the powerful household. In the story, while Cloud is the most submissive concubine and the most cunning female image, Coral, on the contrary, with all her strong desire for freedom and self-determination and dreams of controlling her own life and taking hold of her own fate, is obviously the most defiant one, and represents the most tragic and the most moving female image in the story.

An orphan who used to make a living by singing the female lead in a traveling Peking opera troupe before entering the Chen family compound, Coral naturally lacks “economic capital” in the competition with her rivals. Moreover, her free and unrestrained disposition and personality function practically as an obstacle preventing her from being on good terms with the people high and low in the household, and consequently she never hopes to win the popularity and support from the servants that Cloud does.

For all her weaknesses and lack in “economic and political capital,” Coral however possesses superior “biological and sexual capital.” She not only brings to the Chen household a male descendant, an accomplishment weighing heavily to consolidate a concubine’s status in the traditional Chinese patriarchal family, but also is endowed with “extraordinary physical beauty,” one of the most important qualities a woman can

possess to physically enchant the patriarch, if not to capture his heart, and to enhance her status in the family. Unfortunately however, Coral never understands the politics of the body, and is never aware of how to take advantage of her physical and sexual superiority for her own purposes and interests. Much worse, Coral takes her extraordinary physical beauty as a weapon to make war on the Old Master, an action turning her original superiority to a deadly disadvantage and finally leading to her own destruction.

Of Chen Zuoqian's four wife and concubines, Coral is the only one who dares to challenge and defy him openly, and who dares to express her true feelings, emotions, and thoughts freely and with little reservation. As Chen Zuoqian testified, "That bitch [Coral], when she's happy, she sings, and when she's unhappy, she cries." To which he added, "When she feels defiant, she curses my ancestors for eight generations." Instead of worshiping the Old Master as the benefactor and ruler of the household commanding homage, allegiance, and awe from the family, Coral simply disparages him as "a dried-up old man;" she even threatens that if he stays away from her place more than five days, she will look for a bedmate.

Among all the rebellious and bold actions Coral takes, her adultery with the doctor undoubtedly is the most blatant. Here I find it necessary to point to the difference of Su Tong's treatment of adultery in this novella from that in Chinese fiction classics. For example, in *The Golden Lotus*, the adulteries—that of Golden Lotus with Ximen Qing, with Qintong, the boy (servant) of Jade Tower, and with Chen Jingji, Ximen Qing's son-in-law after Ximen's death, that between Snow Beauty and Lai Wang, a boy (servant) of Ximen, etc.—are all represented primarily as pure physical need and sexual satisfaction and pleasure, concerning little, if any, mental and spiritual dimension. In Su Tong's

novella, however, Coral's adultery with the doctor obviously carries much more profound and complex social and intellectual implications.

As mentioned earlier, completely different from the female images in Ximen's household, Coral is a woman filled with modern consciousness, with strong desire for freedom and self-determination, and with a strong belief in the absurd nature of universal human condition and the inevitable tragic fate of a female in a male-centered patriarchal system. These traits are indicated by the titles and content of the Beijing opera she sings such as *The Hanged Woman* (*Nüdiao* 女吊) and *Tenth Sister Du* (*Du shi niang* 杜十娘), and by her conversations with Lotus after her performance:

Coral lowered her head, looked at her opera costume, and said, "It's only acting; it's not worth feeling sad about. If you act very well, you can fool other people, but if you act badly, you only fool yourself" (*Trilogy*: 31)

Coral said, "There is only a breath's difference between people and ghosts; people are ghosts and ghosts are people" (*Trilogy*: 72).

Obviously Coral's discursive focus here is not on the opera itself or ghosts; rather, by talking about theater and ghosts, she is actually expressing her consciousness and views of the essence of the world and life in a metaphorical way. Her words clearly reveal that she is highly aware of the unreliability, unreality, and absurdity of the world and life, and of her own existence. Unlike Ximen's women, who have full trust in the patriarch and devote both their bodies and souls unconditionally to him, Coral has little trust in the Old Master, though she has to depend economically on him. Her life philosophy seems to be freedom and self-satisfaction or death. Between a long, suffocating, and restrained life without any pleasure and satisfaction and a life much shorter yet freer and more satisfactory, she rather accepts the latter. In light of this



speculation, Coral's adultery with the doctor, just like her bold action of cursing Chen Zuoqian's ancestors of eight generations when feeling defiant, can be appropriately read as another challenge to and rebellion against the deadly suffocating and oppressive hierarchy, only carried out in a form which is considered immoral, and therefore dangerous in light of the rules and laws of the hierarchy. In the face of the unbearable heaviness and darkness of the oppressive hierarchy, Coral chooses to rebel and fight back. Given the incomparably tremendous gap between the two opposing parties, Coral's fate of being completely destroyed is inevitable. Because it complies with the intrinsic logic of the hierarchy that if you go beyond the boundaries prescribed by the hierarchy and completely out of the confines of the relations and connections to the hierarchy, you will be deprived of everything including your life, and, needless to say, all the power and status you once enjoyed within the hierarchy.

***Lotus: Middle Way and Insanity***

If Cloud and Coral represent the two extremes in the spectrum of the existential patterns of females in the hierarchal household, namely, absolute submission and uncompromising defiance, respectively, Lotus, who endeavors to maintain a secure and favorable position in the household while attempting to keep her self and self-consciousness intact simultaneously, obviously represents the middle way. The Old Master's ridicule and curse of Lotus after he lost all his interests in her—"A whore already, and you still want to have a chastity arch set up in your honor?" with its insulting and sarcastic tone stripped off, actually accurately pointed to Lotus's compromising life pattern and split mentality. The central figure in the novel, Lotus's life story naturally

conveys much more profound and complicated social, political, and intellectual implications than the other wives'.

In the story, the narrator provides a detailed account of both Lotus's life trajectory and her psychological and spiritual transformation after entering the Chen household.

Originally a college student, Lotus is forced to marry Chen Zuoqian as a concubine after her father's tea factory goes broke and he himself commits suicide. This terrible family background inevitably determines her lack of the "economic capital" in the competition with the other concubines. Moreover, if, given the fact that she was just brought into the household and did not have enough time to bring a descendant to the family, her weakness or lack of biological capital can be ignored, she neither shows any superiority, if not the inferiority, in physical beauty over Coral to secure her status in the family. Besides, her somewhat picky and capricious disposition and usually contemptuous, harsh, and sometimes cruel attitude toward the servants, inevitably evoke hostility and aversion from the people at the bottom of the household.

For all her disadvantages in almost every aspect in comparison with her rivals, Lotus becomes the Old Master's favorite woman as soon as she enters the household. The secret, apart from the common sense that a man is inclined to love young women, mainly lies in the "kind of elusive and beguiling power" Lotus possesses, and her willingness and capacity to satisfy the Old Master's sexual desires to the full in bed. Completely different from Coral in this respect, Lotus knows perfectly the politics of the body, and fully recognizes the importance of making the best of her advantage to compensate for her disadvantages:

As a man with an abundance of sexual experience, Chen Zuoqian was even more obsessed with Lotus's skill and passion in bed. He seemed to envision many kinds of

ecstasy the first time he met her, and later on they all came to be confirmed in practice. It is difficult to judge whether Lotus was like that by nature or was reshaping her own disposition in order to please him, but Chen Zuoqian was very satisfied; the way he doted on Lotus was noticed by everyone high and low in the Chen household (*Trilogy*: 21).

If Lotus could abandon the self and self-consciousness completely and choose to attach herself whole-heartedly to the patriarch and the household like Cloud, there would be no difficulty for her to take a firm foothold in the family, thanks to the Old Master's favor. Moreover, some natural qualities or character possessed by Lotus also provide a further guarantee of her security in the family. Generally speaking, Lotus is a calm and rational woman; she possesses courage, bravery, and even cold-bloodedness and cruelty—qualities necessary to survive all the conspiracies, animosities, and endless struggles in the powerful and evil household. As the narrator points out, "She did not feel the nameless fear and trembling that most young women would. She was very practical." These qualities are reflected in the story first by the fact that after her father's death, while no one else dares to use the sink in which he took his own life, Lotus still washes her hair in it; then by her successful negotiation with her stepmother for her marriage after her father's death; and finally by the vividly depicted detail that she celebrates her nineteenth birthday in advance—an action which clearly reveals her awareness and resolution to say goodbye to the golden old times as the privileged Young Mistress of a rich silk merchant's family, and to bravely face the challenges of life as a concubine in an unknown household. In addition to her courage, calm disposition, somewhat cruel personal character, and other qualities necessary to survive in the dangerous household, Lotus is also a clever and resourceful woman. This can be inferred from the fact that she can manage to win the Old Master's favor immediately after entering the household and

from Coral's favorable comments that Lotus is a true match for Cloud, the most cunning and vicious woman in the household.

For all her disposition and varied qualities, gifted or acquired, adaptable to the hierarchy, and the patriarch's favor, Lotus still fails to gain a firm foothold in the household and finally becomes a loser in the familial battle between females. Why?

The truly serious problem for Lotus, in my understanding, is her unwillingness to abandon her true self and self-consciousness, unwillingness to give up all her dignity and pride as a human being, and correspondingly her unwillingness and inability to devote and submit herself unconditionally to the tyrannical patriarch like a slave or dog. These practically constitute the true obstacle to secure her status and power in the household. There is no doubt that, fueled by a strong desire to win the familial war and to secure her position in the family, Lotus does make every effort to court favor with the Old Master, just as Cloud and Joy do. However, unlike these two women, Lotus in the course always keeps a bottom line prescribed by the command of her true self and the consciousness of a modern woman which she does not allow herself to transgress. She definitely doesn't want a seemingly happy and comfortable life at the cost of reducing herself to the level of animal or slave.

When looking back at Lotus's life trajectory and the course of her psychological transformation in the Chen family, we find that the "flute incident"—Lotus can not find her long flute, an heirloom left by her father; it turns out later to have been burned by Chen Zuoqian—constitutes the turning point in Lotus' life and fate in the family. Actually the incident not only announces the end of the "honeymoon" of her relation to

the patriarch, but, more importantly, it also exposes for the first time the profound and almost irresolvable contradiction in values and worldview between them.

The image of the long flute is both important for Lotus and significant in our understanding of her mentality in many ways. First, in the story, the flute is the only thing passed down from Lotus's past life, the only bridge connecting her present life with the past. It reminds her of the warmth, pride, and dignity of life she had once experienced; it prevents her from being cut off from the past, and keeps her self an intact whole. Contrary to the assertion that "the flute, as a phallic symbol, represents power and control" (Lu 1995: 137), I think the flute actually represents the true self and self-consciousness of female. Second, the flute also works as a tie spiritually connecting Lotus and the Eldest Yong Master Feifu, between whom there exist "some sort of secret understanding" and a kind of ambiguous mutual admiration and love. Moreover, Feipu's flute playing also "reminded her of a young man at college who used to sit alone in an empty room playing a zither." In this sense, it is safe to say that the hidden flute, also represents Lotus's hidden dreams of spiritual freedom, privacy, and interior secrets. Third and finally, in the story, in the course of looking for her lost flute, Lotus accidentally finds Swallow's dark trick, a needle-stuck figurine attempting to curse Lotus to death, and Lotus then severely punishes swallow. This event later proves to be disastrous and fateful to both Lotus and Swallow. Because it plants the seed of hatred in the hearts of both women, which later not only claims Swallow's life, but also leads to the all-around collapse of Lotus and her final insanity. In this sense, this event can also be read as an allegory. It metaphorically implies that, in the highly oppressive hierarchal household, if you attempt to keep your true self or to retrieve the lost self, as symbolized by the

preservation and retrieval of the flute, you are to put yourself into a disastrous and jeopardized situation.

The flute is also significant to the Old Master Chen Zuoqian, though for different reasons. By burning the flute without getting permission from Lotus, Chen Zuoqian not only demonstrates subtly his absolute authority in the household, but more importantly, he also tests the degree of Lotus's loyalty to him. Can you expect the full loyalty from a woman who is even unwilling to sacrifice such a trivial thing as a flute for you?

Given the importance and significance the flute has for both Lotus and Chen Zuoqian, there should be no surprise that its destruction constitutes a turning point in their relationship. It tears a rupture in their originally intimate relation. As the story goes on, with the gradual deterioration of their relation, the rupture grew wider and wider, finally becoming an unbridgeable abyss separating the two completely.

Apart from the "flute incident," the author repeatedly describes Lotus's pursuit of emotional and spiritual satisfaction and her profound interior bitterness. Quite different from his treatment of other characters, in which he tends to reflect the character's feelings, emotions, and psychology through their speeches, actions, and facial expressions indirectly, the author likes to describe Lotus's moods, emotions, and states of mind directly and in a more detailed way. In the story, Lotus weeps twice—strangely and interestingly enough, she is the only wife who cries in the story. On one occasion, she is moved by the Peking opera piece *The Hanged Woman* sung by Coral; on the other, she is moved by the sound of Feipu's flute. Readers of the story can not ignore the fact that Feipu and Coral are the only persons who have some sort of spiritual connections to

Lotus. In some sense, we can say that, if Coral physically betrays the patriarch, Lotus betrays him spiritually—a betrayal much more profound and severe than Coral's.

If Lotus's adherence to her true self and self-consciousness, her persistence in the pursuit of emotional and spiritual satisfaction, and her unwillingness to abandon her pride and dignity as a human being, as indicated by her refusing to suck Chen Zuoqian's impotent penis to win his favor, constitute a serious obstacle to her security in the Chen household, her unfamiliarity with the conventions, laws, and rules of the household and correspondingly her ineptness to exercise them for her own purposes, and especially the naivety, immaturity, and weakness of the political strategies she employed in the domestic struggles, obviously constitute another one.

Wu Si, a contemporary Chinese scholar, based on his years of profound investigation and concentrated study of Chinese history, makes a very insightful and profound observation on Chinese society and history. As he adeptly points out, in Chinese society, it is the "underground rules" or *qian guize* 潜规则, rather than the formal or official laws, rules, or regulations, that actually play dominant role in shaping social life. By "underground rules" or *qian guize*, he means some unwritten but well-known rules, conventions, or agreements, etc. practiced by Chinese people, which might be at odds with, or even contrary to, the official laws and regulations, but which are actually much more powerful and more effective than the official laws in dealing with the actual social affairs and in solving concrete social problems (Wu 2002). Lotus apparently did not understand the secrets of the "underground rules" dominating the whole household. This is indicated by both the way she deals with her relation to the

maidservant Swallow and by her unwisely disclosing to Coral that she knows about her adultery with the doctor.

Lotus's gradually cruel attitude towards and abuse of Swallow, in my understanding, actually reveals a dual muddle-mindedness of her character. First, it clearly indicates that Lotus hasn't seen through the hypocritical nature of the traditional Chinese gentry family. The orthodox Chinese gentry family, for all the veiled injustice, oppression, corruption, and evils within the compound, always regards reputation or face as its life. Pretending to adopt the Confucian teachings of benevolence, justice, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness, it likes to disguise itself as a merciful and just household, a true benefactor to the poor. Therefore, to ruin the family's reputation, is universally regarded as one of the most severe crimes a person could perpetrate on the family, and deserves the harshest punishment. Unfortunately, Lotus's abuse of Swallow which leads to her death represents this phenomenon. Second, the act that Lotus makes her own maidservant the deadly enemy, clearly exposes her inability to make a sound judgment and the best choice. This act not only makes her lose all the respect, support, and sympathy from the people low in the household and in effect isolates her, but also provides a perfect opportunity for her rivals to attack her. Actually Cloud just makes use of Swallow as a medium to achieve her vicious purpose of cursing Lotus. Here Lotus again reveals her ignorance of the law of survival in the powerful household—maybe valid in any community—The more enemies you make, the more isolated you make yourself, the more easily you will be beaten down by your opponent. Actually Lotus's unwise disclosure to Coral that she knows about her adultery with the doctor further confirms her immaturity and naivety in family politics: She doesn't understand that duplicity and



hypocrisy—to harbor your true feelings, thoughts, intentions, etc, and be double-dealing—are the necessary qualities and strategies to survive in a highly complicated system. In terms of the effectiveness of political strategy, the stupidity and tremendous harm of Lotus's making her own maidservant her enemy are even highlighted, when compared with the extremely intimate relationship Golden Lotus establishes with her maidservant Plum Blossom and the enormous benefits she receives from that intimacy in *The Golden Lotus*.<sup>29</sup>

Obviously, apart from her ignorance of the rules of the game dominating the household, Lotus's weakness in adaptability, in decision making, and in political strategy and specific tactics, constitutes another important factor determining her encounters and fate in the family. This is highlighted in the story by the "Old Master's birthday banquet incident."

As mentioned above, after the "flute incident," Lotus and Chen Zuoqian are increasingly alienated. He seldom spends any nights with her, and her temper is "getting worse and worse." Under such circumstances, the Old Master's fiftieth birthday arrives.

For a traditional Chinese gentry family, the patriarch's birthday may be the most important event in the family, given his incomparably supreme status within the compound. It is also a very important social occasion connecting and opening the family to the outside world, a perfect opportunity for the family members to show their status, authority, and influence to the people inside and outside the household.

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<sup>29</sup> For example, in chapter 12 of *The Golden Lotus*, when Golden Lotus's adultery with Ximen Qing's boy servant Quintong is exposed, it is her maidservant Plum Blossom who covers the truth of the scandal for her, and helps her escape Ximen's punishment. In light of the familial laws and widely accepted social practice in the traditional Chinese patriarchal society, the female family member who committ adultery deserve death penalty.

Rather than taking this opportunity to win back the Old Master's favor and secure her already unstable status in the family, Lotus's behavior at Chen Zuoqian's birthday banquets instead, further irritates the Old Master, and makes their relationship deteriorate further, which proved to be the most foolish move and the biggest failure in her life, and which actually determines her irrevocable miserable fate in the household.

At Chen Zuoqian's birthday party, right in the course of the celebrations, the originally happy and harmonious atmosphere is suddenly interrupted and ruined by the smashing of the vase, caused by the children Feilan and Yirong, who are chasing each other around the room and knock it off the ornamental table—an occurrence which is generally regarded by Chinese people as inauspicious on such an occasion. Lotus unwisely involves herself in the incident, which otherwise has nothing to do with her, and results in her controversy with First Mistress Joy, who curses her without showing any mercy. Out of anger and depression, Lotus gets a headache and withdraws from the birthday party. Before the birthday midday banquet, Chen Zuoqian sends Cloud to call her back, but she refuses without considering its possible consequences and potential impacts—on such a socially important occasion and crucial moment determining a member's status in the family, Lotus obviously has made the worst decision. As discussed earlier, in a traditional Chinese gentry family, such sort of occasion was an ideal opportunity for a family member to show his/her status and importance in the household; you choose to withdraw from this occasion, you choose the risk of losing the recognition of your status and importance in the family. In the story, things go on just as predicted. When the evening banquet arrives, it starts simply without informing Lotus, let alone waiting for her—she actually is excluded from the family this time.

The story does not end at this point—Lotus makes the situation from bad to worse at the evening banquet. She not only doesn't know or forgot to tie the birthday gift she presents to the Old Master with a red silk ribbon—a token representing blessing and auspice on the occasion; she also chooses an untimely moment to kiss Chen Zuoqian in the front of the whole family, an action which she thought would evoke favor and compliment from the Old Master, but instead actually induces him to scold and insult her harshly. Here again Lotus reveals her immaturity and ignorance in political strategy and knowledge—her failure to understand the nature of the Chinese patriarch, who, despite the fact that he might be very lustful and obscene in private, as Ximen Qing is, in public however, always disguises himself as a decent and respectable gentlemen who deserves no defiance or offense in any way. Bodily contact with the patriarch, especially on public occasions, according to Confucian morality and long-standing Chinese social practice, is considered an offense to him, and therefore is strictly prohibited. It is a commonplace that if you want to play a game to win, you must follow the rules of *that* game; otherwise, your failure is inevitable. Lotus's mistake lies in that she fails to follow the right game rules—instead of behaving and regulating herself in accord with the rites, rules, or morality prescribed by the hierarchy, she acts according to her own will or what she thinks is right—and unfortunately she herself is never aware of the failure, as indicated by the fact that after being scolded by Chen Zuoqian in front of the whole family, Lotus is very "confused" and murmurs to herself, "What did I do wrong? What did I do wrong this time?"

As analyzed above, physical charm or "sexual capital" is the only resource Lotus possesses which she can resort to in her competition with the other wives in the

household, and the only means to connect herself to the patriarch and secure her status in the family. Consequently, for Lotus, the loss of her sexual attraction to the patriarch actually means that she lost everything in the household and becomes nothing. In this sense, it is safe to say that, if the "flute incident" indicates the very beginning of Lotus's bad fortune and tragedy in the evil household, as the story goes to the "birthday banquet incident," Lotus's tragic fate and destruction become inevitable and irrevocable.

It is only natural that after the "birthday incident," Lotus's status in the family plummets, and her mental state deteriorates drastically and rapidly. Moreover, with the impotence of the Old Master, her last dream to produce a child for the Chen family—the last straw she can resort to in the flood—is ruthlessly shattered. At this point, Lotus has become completely "barren," both in a real and metaphorical sense. The former college student full of dignity and self-consciousness, now shamelessly declares, in front of many family members and servants, that she will do anything Chen Zuoqian wants her to, such as stroking and sucking his penis, if only he stays the night with her. She becomes so scared at night she does not dare to sleep with the light off. In order to get rid of the unbearable loneliness and fears she has experienced at night, she asks Mama Song to accompany her and has to endure her most trivial and vulgar talk every night. She becomes so brutal that, when she finds that Swallow has cursed her again, she forces her to swallow soiled toilet paper, finally causing her miserable death. After Swallow's death, Lotus is considered universally the most vicious woman in the household, and she actually is on the very brink of ultimate collapse. At this point, Lotus's insanity or death is just a matter of time, and Coral's murder only becomes the final straw to induce her insanity. It is very clear that Lotus undergoes the same psychological degeneration, moral

depravity, and identity crisis as Liu Chencao had once experienced in the similarly corrupt and repressive landlord household.

The life stories and fate of Chen Zuoqian's four wives, as analyzed above, fit very well Foucault's notion of "power relation:" Power is a general matrix of force relations at a given time in a given society; it not only generates, but also reveals itself in, varied (power) relations. How "powerful" a person is—or how much power he/she can possess or share—in his/her community or society, and his/her encounters and fate in the society, are actually determined by his/her relations or connections to the society. As proven by Su Tong's representation, if you wholeheartedly and completely attach yourself to the household, either through conventions or laws or by personal efforts, as in the cases of Joy and Cloud, you will be protected by the system, and your status as "powerful" wife in the household will be secured. If you choose to betray and rebel against the household—or to cut off all your relations to the household completely, as in Coral's case, you will receive the harshest punishment—death, which means that you will lose every thing including your life as well as the power you once possessed in the household. If you choose to connect yourself to the household half-heartedly and in a remote and uncooperative way, as in Lotus's case, the system also will treat (punish) you in a subtle and embarrassing way—to make you mad or insane. Madness or Insanity, in some sense, means an existential state of being half-dead: Your body still remains in the world, but your soul or spirit does not belong to this world any more. Here, through the revelation of the working of the "power relations" in the household, Su Tong, just as the critics who adopt either the feminist approach or the approach of "culture criticism" have done, as

mentioned earlier, also points to the highly unequal and oppressive nature of the traditional Chinese hierarchy.

### ***Homosexuality as Social Allegory***

In a story mainly focusing on females, it is only natural that the male images are put in a relatively obscure light. However, the creation and characterization of the Eldest Young Master Feipu are an exception. In comparison with the major male image in the story, the Old Master Chen Zuoqian, whose existence in the story amounts to no more than a stereotype silhouette, Feipu is depicted in a much more detailed way, and consequently his image is much better developed, and conveys some much more profound implications.

In the story, Feipu is mainly associated with two thematically interrelated things: his somewhat ambiguous and lukewarm love with Lotus and his homosexual love with the Young Master Gu. Actually the juxtaposition of the two conveys some highly significant social and cultural implications.

Even readers with merely basic knowledge of Chinese literature might know that homosexuality is not an uncommon theme in traditional Chinese fiction. For example, both in *The Golden Lotus* and *Dream of the Red Chamber*, there are descriptions of homosexuality. In the former, homosexuality is treated either as a natural sexual orientation or as sexual abuse on the part of the lustful and tyrannical patriarch, exemplified by the sexual relationship between Ximen Qing and his two boy servants Shutong and Wang Jing, and between Chen Jingji and the monk Jin Zongming. In the latter, it is treated as transgressive and mischievous behavior performed playfully by

juveniles, as in the case of Jia Baoyu and Qin Zhong. Unlike both Chinese fiction classics, which, as just analyzed, mainly focus on the physical dimension of homosexuality in their interpretations, Su Tong's novella however, emphasizes the cultural and social connotations of homosexuality.

In "Proliferation of Wives and Concubines," through his vivid and detailed description of the ambiguous love between Feipu and Lotus, Su Tong actually subtly rejects the interpretation that Feipu's homosexuality is natural sexual and psychological orientation, or a pure physiological phenomenon. On the contrary, by emphasizing repeatedly the fact that Feipu's homosexuality is the result of his long-standing, incurable "fear of women," especially the women of his own family, whose human nature is distorted in the life-and-death domestic struggle, and who actually become embodiments of cruelty, duplicity, and other evils, Su Tong adeptly interprets Feipu's homosexuality as a form of sexual distortion, an inevitable reaction to and logical result of the distorted environment in which he was born, brought up, and continues to live.

In my understanding, by treating homosexuality as a sexual and psychological distortion or an anomaly imposed by one's distorted living environment—as social and historical phenomenon, rather than as natural sexual orientation—Su Tong actually attempts to convey to us some of his observations of and reflections on human society and history, something concerned with but far beyond pure sex and gender relations.

The first point Su Tong tries to make with Feipu's homosexuality in the story is concerned with power. Power, Su Tong thinks, just as Foucault argues, is not a substance or thing which is possessed by the dominant in a given society or community; actually it always reveals itself as and in varied relations, in the interactions between the dominated

and the dominant in the society. In other words, in any society, the dominant or the people at the top of the hierarchy, just like the dominated or the people at the bottom of the society, also have to bear pressure from their power relations; their thought and behavior are also regulated, confined, and restricted by these relations. The unhappiness, bitterness, and even sense of helplessness of the patriarch and the would-be patriarch of the Chen household—Feipu's distortion in sexual and psychological orientation and his desperate feeling about his family and the world, along with Chen Zuoqian's complaints of and disappointments with his wives and family—are actually both consequence of and evidence to the existence of the "multidirectional" power relations.<sup>30</sup>

The second point Su Tong attempts to make with Feipu's homosexuality in the story is concerned with the ever-lasting topics of gender relations and society, the universal human condition, and the power of discourse. The fact that Feipu's somewhat distorted sexual orientation—his willingness to retreat and confine himself to the world of the same sex for warmth and support—is actually a direct result of and reaction to his incurable "fear of women;" fear of his alienated living environment necessarily leads to such a conclusion: The gender problem is never a purely physiological phenomenon, and sexual distortion is always linked with social alienation. Moreover, the fact that Feipu's sexual orientation and activity are deeply shaped, if not controlled, by his own idea of gender and sexuality—fear of women, the other gender—further testifies to the "power of

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<sup>30</sup> Intriguingly enough, in his highly influential critical introduction to *The Golden Lotus*, C. T. Hsia also points to Ximen Qing's "surprising timidity" in the face of "Lotus' power over him" in the late years of his life (1968: 193). The shared feeling of powerlessness and frustration by the two supposedly "powerful" patriarchs in the two works in confrontation with their wives, who are definitely inferior to them in the family hierarchy, might be viewed as a testimonial to Foucault's notion that power is interaction between two subjects, and it exercises upon both the dominant and the dominated in the power relation.



discourse" in human activity and human history, a notion that is repeatedly emphasized in Foucault's work.

If we put Foucault aside, we would find that the story of Feipu's homosexuality actually leads us to a seemingly trite yet eternal phenomenon: In a world consisting of the two genders of male and female, the distortion or damage of either actually means disaster to both. When women are distorted and no longer "true women," as it happens in the story, then inevitably and absolutely, men will not be "true men" any more. The reverse is also true. Therefore, the objectification, distortion, oppression, and mistreatment of either gender actually means injustice and detriment to human beings as a whole. It makes very clear here that the story conveys some profound implications with which the pure feminist approach, I believe, is incapable of revealing.

### ***The Well: Domination through Control of Space***

In the story, apart from human images, an inanimate image is also highly significant and therefore not negligible. It is the abandoned old well beneath the wisteria vine in the corner of the back garden wall of the Chen family, widely called the Well of Death by the people within the compound.

When reading the story carefully, readers might find a phenomenon concerning the well very interesting, impressive, and even surprising—in the whole Chen household, Coral and Lotus are the only persons who are disturbed and frightened by the existence of the well; they are the only ones who have some sort of relation with the well, while all the other people in the household simply ignore its existence.

In several places of the story, the narrator provides us with some vivid and highly impressive descriptions of Lotus's terrifying encounters with the well. In the beginning of the story, during her first visit to the well shortly after entering the household, she is frightened by "the broken reflection of her face in the water," and shocked by the "awfully strange" and "abrupt" fall of the wisteria flowers growing around the well. At another moment, she is terrified by the sight that "a pale white hand, dripping wet, reaching out to cover her eyes from the unfathomable depths at the bottom of the well," and by the voice from the bottom of the well calling her to come down into the well (*Trilogy*: 54). Finally towards the end of the story, the hearing of a "deep hollow sound" made by Coral being thrown into the well causes her final insanity. Here we find that Lotus's life and fate in the Chen household are closely associated with her awareness of the existence of the well.

In the story, Coral is the other person disturbed by and obsessed with the well. In sharp contrast with Lotus's feeling of enormous fear and horror towards the well, Coral, compatible with her extremely defiant and rebellious attitude towards the patriarch, displays an unbelievable composure and contempt while facing the well. In the story, the narrator provides a detailed and meaningful account of a meeting between Coral and Lotus, which sheds some light on Coral's consciousness of the well. One winter morning, after Coral finished her performance of Peking opera, she and Lotus gathered in the back garden and talked. Lotus walked to the side of the abandoned well and suddenly found there were ghosts in the well. In response to Lotus's question of who the ghosts in the well were, Coral told her calmly that "One of them is you, and one of them is me," which

greatly terrified Lotus. Obviously Coral is highly conscious of what the well represents, and chooses to disparage and fight against it.

While examining the significance and implications of the image of the well, a real place or site used to murder the women in the household who commit adultery, we should be surprised by the notion which interprets the well as a feminine symbol representing "the sterile womb" (Lu 1995: 137). However, in my understanding, the image of the well and all the stories related to it contain something far beyond merely functioning as an isolated and abstract symbol.

In light of my reflection on the story, the significance of the image of the well cannot be fully understood if we fail to recognize and link the two important facts that Coral and Lotus are the only two transgressors of orthodoxy, and that the well of death, with its enormous power of deterrence, real and imagined, is the real site and weapon to punish the transgressors, actual or potential. Through the creation of the image of the well and the description of the relationships of the well to the two defiant women, Su Tong, in my understanding, attempts to convey some important observations and assumptions on the exercise of power in a society.

First, the fact that Coral and Lotus, the two actual and potential transgressors, are the only persons in the household who can feel the terrifying power of the well, while all the others in the family seemingly remain unaware of its existence, evidently reveals that power, as Foucault argues, is interaction between the opposing parties involved. The very reason why the well remains "powerful" only to Coral and Lotus lies in that they are the only persons performing some actual or potential actions against the laws, regulations, and values symbolized and guarded by the well—transgression of the boundary

prescribed by the hierarchy. In other words, power is generated from the relation or interaction between transgression and punishment.

Second, the well of death provides a wonderful exemplar of dominating through the control of space. The well, with all its actual power as the real site and weapon to punish the transgressors and its imagined and exaggerated power as symbol of punishment, attached to it by the imaginations and fears of the potential transgressors, proves to be an effective device for deterrence and control. Due to the severity and certainty of the punishment—no transgressor could escape the death penalty—the well becomes so powerful and effective in deterring the potential transgressions that finally the potential transgressor becomes his/her own guardian, preventing the potential transgression from turning into reality. The life experience of Lotus, a potential transgressor who finally fails in turning the potential into reality, is a perfect case testifying to the effectiveness and power of the device. Towards the end of the novella, it is the horrible sound made by Carol being thrown into the well that drives an already extremely depressed Lotus mad. Through the punishment of an actual transgressor, the remaining capability of a potential transgressor is completely destroyed. Here the enormous deterring effect of the well as a real site and weapon and symbol of punishment and death is made quite clear. Moreover, the very last scene of the novella that Lotus confesses over and over to the well "I won't jump, I won't jump" while walking around it after her insanity further testifies to the effectiveness and endurance of the deterring power of the well to a potential transgressor. In this sense, the seeming unconcern and silence towards the well of the other people low in the Chen house can be appropriately read as a deliberate posture or disguise to cover up their actually tremendous and unspeakable fear of the well—they are so horrified by

the well that they even don't dare to talk about it, or, fear of the well has already become part of their unconscious. Under the tremendous pressure of the well, they, like Lotus and Coral, also become their own guardians.

To sum up, in "Proliferation of Wives and Concubines," through his penetrating observation and vivid description of the different existential patterns of Chen's four wives and the profound implications underlying the patterns, and the varied relations existing in the household, which determine the encounters and fate of the women, Su Tong attempts to explore the truth behind the workings of power in traditional Chinese hierarchal society and in human history in general. The story not only reveals the "multidirectional" nature of power, which always embodies itself as relations or interactions between the dominant and the dominated, but also sharply exposes the actual unequal effects of the "power relations" in a highly hierarchal society and the oppressive nature of the society of this kind. Through his detailed description of the different kinds of relations between the patriarch and his wives, the story also discloses a secret of history: domination through the control of body. By treating homosexuality as social, historical phenomenon rather than as natural sexual and psychological orientation, the story emphasizes the importance of gender equality: In a world consisting of two halves, male and female, the distortion and mistreatment of either means the injustice and damage to the other, and finally means disaster to human beings as a whole. Through his impressive description of the well and the stories related to the well, Su Tong exposes another strategy of rule: dominating through control of space.

### **Fictionalizing History: Technique as Discursive Device**

When talking about avant-garde fiction of any country, one should never neglect its textual iconoclasm, its striking linguistic and technical experimentation and innovation, which not only constitutes one of the most preeminent and characteristic features of this school, but also accounts for its being so named in the first place. Contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction is no exception to this rule.

However, as far as contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction is concerned, despite its remarkable experimental character and its unfailing pursuit of newness, it might be oversimplified and even erroneous to assume that, as many critics in mainland China do, contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction represents a total break with the long-standing Chinese literary tradition and the wholesale borrowing and adoption of the Western literary conceptions and techniques. Quite to the contrary, upon a close investigation, it becomes very clear that the originality and uniqueness of contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction actually lie in its recovering and incorporating into its texts many traditional Chinese literary conceptions, techniques, and devices, which, interestingly and ironically enough, seem "new" and "alien" only to the Chinese readers who had for more than half a century been nurtured on Communist ideology and exposed to the so-called "revolutionary romanticism" advocated by Mao Zedong. These readers had become so accustomed to and comfortable with the Communist conceptualization and configuration of literature and so ignorant of the long-standing Chinese literary and cultural tradition that they mistook the time-honored pre-Communist tradition for the "new" and the "alien". By saying this I of course don't mean to deny the foreign, especially the Western,

influence on Chinese avant-garde fiction, which obviously constitutes one of the most important components and one of the most preeminent features of this genre. In my understanding, the tremendous success of Chinese avant-garde fiction—its remarkable thematic profundity, aesthetic appeal, formal uniqueness, and linguistic revolution derives from its harmonious blending of these two literary traditions, Chinese and Western, despite the fact that, while the Western influence in the texts of Chinese avant-garde fiction is often manifested and can be easily discerned in most cases, the legacy of Chinese literary tradition, however, is often latent and can be pinpointed only under close examination.

### ***Western Influence***

Representative of contemporary Chinese avant-garde writers, Su Tong, just like all other writers of this literary genre, massively employs in his novels Western literary techniques and devices, and therefore his novels reveal clear marks of Western influence. For example, structurally and technically, "Nineteen Thirty-four Escapes," Su Tong's first and foremost experimental novella, is a typical fictional work constructed on the fundamental principles and strategies of metafiction.<sup>31</sup> Specifically, at the very beginning of the story, the narrator subtly refers to his true identity as a "self-conscious" storyteller by claiming that he is not the author Su Tong, and at the same time he makes clear the imagined and fabricated nature of his story. As he testifies, "I imagined the glorious years of my clan's past; I imagined also the red and black lines of misfortune slashed across

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<sup>31</sup> In her widely cited book on metafiction, Patricia Waugh lists some most characteristic features of metafiction: the celebration of the power of the creative imagination together with an uncertainty about of the validity of its representation; an extreme self-consciousness about language, literary form and the act of writing fictions; a pervasive insecurity about the relationship of fiction to reality; a parodic, playful, excessive or deceptively naive style of writing (1984: 2).

their veins" (*Trilogy*: 102-3). In the story, the narrator repeatedly emphasizes in many other places the fabricated nature of the story, which is further highlighted, for instance, by the huge discrepancy between his imagination of Grandmother Jiang as a moving, sexy rural beauty and the very fact of her ugly physical appearance as a real countryside woman (107). In the story, while narrating the story, the narrator also shows great enthusiasm in discussing the principles, techniques, and difficulties he faces in composing and narrating the story—something about the storytelling itself, another characteristic feature of metafiction. The narrator simultaneously points to the autonomy and unlimited power he enjoys as storyteller to manipulate the characters and to arrange the plot structure freely on the one hand (122, 161), and to the uncertainty, the lack of confidence in his representation as a young man who actually is unfamiliar with the history he is describing (164), and the moral predicament and emotional uneasiness he feels in presenting the immoral activities of his ancestors on the other (173). There is also an element of magic realism both in this story and in "Opium Family": The mysterious house mice of the Chen family dance joyfully while Grandmother Jiang is giving birth to Dingo (113); when Huanzi is tripped up by a rock on the yellow mud road and suffers a miscarriage, she sees a child with Chen Baonian's square face "flying nimbly up into the sky above Maple Village" (172); the first four children of the landlord Liu Laoxia all look like fish, having sword-shaped tails rather than legs and arms that human beings normally should have (185). In "Nineteen Thirty-four Escapes," Su Tong also plays with the device of unreliable narrator in both its epistemological and moral sense of the term.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Culler provides a clear definition of unreliable narrator, as he points out, "Narrators are sometimes termed unreliable when they provides enough information about situations and clues about their own biases to make us doubt their interpretations of events, or when we find reasons to doubt that the narrator shares the same values as the author" (1997: 88).



This is indicated both by such apparently contradictory statements made by the same narrator, "I have not seen, nor could I ever see, that white jade crock. But right now I see Chen Wenzhi's family in 1934; I see that white jade crock placed on a long table in the living room" (123), and by the tremendous gap in values and worldview between the narrator, who basically agrees with the "primitive anthropocentric thought," the animalistic way of life, and the biological explanation of history held by the people of old Maple Village, and the implied author, who obviously upholds a much more complex, more comprehensive, and more dialectical view of history, which I will explore in more detail later in this section. Spatial and temporal dislocation is also among many literary techniques of apparent Western origin, adeptly manipulated by the author in the story for his own purpose. For instance, in "Nineteen Thirty-four Escapes," by shortening or erasing completely the spatial and temporal distance between the people of different generations, the author makes a great success in evoking and reinforcing in readers the sense of the continuity of such important historical phenomena facing modern China as the rural-urban confrontation and the identity and spiritual crisis (101-3, 140). In "Proliferation of Wives and Concubines," Su Tong, while describing the feelings of Lotus approaching the Well of Death, deliberately blurs or erases the line between illusion and reality, between psychological experience and objective phenomenal world—a literary device so adeptly manipulated and made famous by the great Western masters such as James Joyce and William Faulkner—to express the sense of transience and emptiness of life and its dreamlike nature (54).

If all the above-mentioned literary techniques and devices of apparent Western origin employed by Su Tong—metafiction, magic realism, unreliable narrator, spatial and

temporal dislocation, blurring of the line between illusion and reality, and the corresponding "radical use of language," etc— are shared, entirely or partially, by one Chinese avant-garde writer or another, another narratological feature is unique to his novels: the "occasional orphic intrusion by a [another] first-person narrator" into a text narrated by a normal third-person or first-person narrator<sup>33</sup>—strangely and interestingly enough, sometimes, there seem to be two narrators in one single story. The significance of this rhetorical and narratological device will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

### ***Inheritance of Chinese Tradition***

For all the significant impact of Western conceptualization and configuration of literature on Su Tong's fiction, it largely takes effect on the technical and structural level. In comparison, Su Tong's continuities with the Chinese tradition, which display themselves in his novels not only in the technical and formal dimension, but more importantly, on ontological, epistemological, and ideological grounds, seem much more profound and substantial.

Su Tong's continuities with Chinese tradition, in my view, first of all, lie in that he shares with his literary ancestors the common fundamental views and values in understanding the nature and the basic functions of literature and its relation to reality.

As mentioned earlier, obsession with history/historiography is the most predominant feature of Chinese literature, and Su Tong is obviously among the contemporary Chinese writers who are obsessed with history most. The analysis in the first three sections of this chapter reveals clearly that, thematically, all Su Tong's novels discussed here focus on

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<sup>33</sup> The quoted phrase is coined by Michael S. Duke, the English translator of the trilogy. See "Translator's Note" of the book.

some of the most important issues in modern Chinese history as well as in history in general: the Chinese Communist revolution, the rural-urban confrontation, the process of Chinese modernization, the identity and spiritual crisis in modern China, and the working and revelation of power relation in human history. Formally and technically, Su Tong tends to disguise his fiction as historical writing by employing or parodying some techniques or strategies usually adopted in the writing of official histories or historiographies in traditional China. For example, the whole story of "Nineteen Thirty-four Escapes" is asserted by the narrator an honest presentation of his genealogy or family history. He also matter-of-factly quotes the records from the fictional local history *Immoral Isle Gazetteer*, and the "Secret Report of Chen Baonian" from local news—some of the oldest devices in official historiographies in China—to enhance the sense of history of the novella. Towards the end of the novel *My Life as Emperor*, the narrator once again imitates or parodies the language, style, and even the tone of traditional Chinese historical writing to narrate the fates of the major characters in the novel. This reminds us of the stereotyped ending of the Tang *Chuanqi* 传奇 stories, where the narrator—or precisely, the recorder, as claimed by these *Chuanqi* writers themselves—of the story seriously gives out his name, native place, and how he has obtained access to the story, in order to confirm and emphasize the authenticity or the historical nature of his narrative. According to these *Chuanqi* writers' claim, they don't create these stories; instead they, just as the official historians do, simply record these stories as they actually happened in real life and as they are told by the folk. The only difference, as asserted by these *Chuanqi* writers, between their writings and the official histories, lies in the respective nature of what they have recorded. While the official historians record things,

people, and events which are socially important and epistemologically normal, they (the *Chuanqi* writers) record something socially trivial and epistemologically strange, yet interesting and inspiring.

Through the above analysis, it is safe to say that Su Tong's strong desire and aspiration to create history and his painstaking efforts to imitate and incorporate into his texts the techniques and devices employed by traditional Chinese historians, undoubtedly testify to his unwavering belief that the sense of monumentality and the greatness of fiction are always linked, both thematically and aesthetically, with history or historiography, a legacy handed down from his literary ancestors (Plaks 1977: 322).

While commenting on the modern Chinese short story, many Western scholars enthusiastically point to its lyricism, a legacy of traditional Chinese poetry and prose, the mainstream of traditional Chinese literature (Duke 1991, Lee 1987). Actually all major contemporary avant-garde writers, with the only exception of Ge Fei, just like their May Fourth predecessors, also display an implicit or explicit tendency to integrate some lyrical elements into their texts, and to project their own emotions, feelings, thoughts, or subjective judgments into the basically objective presentation of history. In this respect, contemporary Chinese avant-garde writers are faithful scions of both their pre-modern grandfather and May Fourth father.

Among contemporary Chinese avant-garde writers, compared with Yu Hua's pretended objectivity in his linguistic style and his assumed calm narrative tone and Ge Fei's preeminent detachedness, Su Tong seems to be a more lyrical and sentimental novelist, though he shares with them the same calm and rational attitude and stance in observing and explaining social phenomena. The extremely lyrical, subjective, and

personalized language unique to Su Tong's novels, integrated with his fondness of and propensity to incorporating into his texts some highly sentimental paragraphs from some best-known traditional Chinese operas such as *The Hanged Woman* and *Tenth Sister Du* ("Proliferation of Wives and Concubines"), lyric poems ("Nineteen Thirty-Four Escapes"), and diary—one of the most introspective and self-expressive narrative forms ("Opium Family"), in effect, highly projects the lyrical dimension of his fiction. This, to a large extent, helps explain the experience many readers may undergo in reading Su Tong's novels: While highly obsessed with the seemingly objective and credible "history" constructed by Su Tong, the reader, at the same time, is always surrounded and seized by the varied strong feelings and emotions injected in by the author, and by the usually sentimental and tragic atmosphere of the novels. Su Tong is called with great admiration *nanfang caizi* 南方才子 (talent of the south) by many critics and readers in China, an honor never granted to Yu Hua and Ge Fei, despite the fact that they are as talented and brilliant writers as Su Tong. This can be partially explained by the fact that, in China, the honorable nickname *caizi* or literary talent, is usually associated with the greatest literary talents displaying a manifest fondness of lyricism and an unstrained style in their works such as Qu Yuan (340 BC-227BC), Li Bai (701-762), Li He (790-816), Tang Xianzu (1550-1616), Cao Xueqin (1715?-1763?), and some others.

Now it is general knowledge that simulated oral characteristic or "narratological 'mock' orality" is the most predominant feature of the narratological conventions of Chinese fiction, characterized by its "stereotyped narrative frame," and the linguistic and stylistic simulation of oral narrative performance (Zhao 1995: 43-4). Patrick Hanan coins

the term "simulated context" to designate this feature,<sup>34</sup> though the origins of the orality are controversial among the critics of Chinese literature.<sup>35</sup>

Setting Su Tong's stories against this grand narrative tradition of Chinese fiction, we find that the unique narratological feature of his novels—the occasional intrusion by a first-person narrator, who tends to address directly to his narratee—is far from "orphic" and alien. On the contrary, apart from its thematic and discursive implications, it can be appropriately regarded as a technical device deliberated by Su Tong to simulate the oral story-telling performance, consciously or unconsciously, and to create the illusive effect of the face-to-face communication between the narrator and his narratee—a renewal or recovery of a time-honoured literary tradition.<sup>36</sup>

In some cases, the "simulated situation" created by Su Tong is displayed in a very subtle and intriguing way, which can be illuminated by the ending part of the story "Proliferation of Wives and Concubines."

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<sup>34</sup> According to Patrick Hanan, the "simulated context" of Chinese vernacular fiction refers to the situation or phenomenon that Chinese fiction writers simulate in their texts the context of the oral storyteller addressing his audience face-to-face. "It is not only a mimesis of direct address, it is also a mimesis of direct reception. In fact, it imitates a complete linguistic situation." Hanan also makes a brief comparison between the Chinese-style "simulated context" and the Western one. He argues that, while the Chinese-style "simulated context" tends to be stereotyped and complete, the Western one is often individualized and partial. As he points out, "Whereas the Chinese novel uses the single simulacrum of a generalized storyteller and a generalized audience, endlessly modified to suit each writer's requirements, the European novel adopted a variety of simulacra, partial or complete, almost all of them individualized" (Plaks 1977: 87-8).

<sup>35</sup> While overwhelming majority of literary critics both inside and outside China uphold the conventional idea that the orality of Chinese fiction is a direct consequence of the influence of the long-standing oral story-telling performance, which emerged and flourished in Tang dynasty, culminated in Song dynasty, and never perished in the later times in China, Henry Zhao however, argues that it actually "the result of four centuries of rewriting, not of oral narrating" (1995: 44). Andrew Plaks also holds a similar opinion about it (1977:327). C. T. Hsia on the other hand, apparently takes a compromising stance. While agreeing that the Chinese short story directly stems from the oral story-telling, he insists that the Chinese full-length novel is fundamentally associated with the official historiographies (1968: 10).

<sup>36</sup> In an interview, Su Tong once confessed to his extreme fascination with the traditional Chinese oral story-telling art or *pingshu yishu* 评书艺术 as it is called in contemporary China, during the formative years of his life. It is only natural that this important artistic experience during his formative years will exercise some influence on his artistic taste, and the linguistic and narratological style of his fiction. See Su Tong 2004.

In the story, after the murder of his third wife Coral and insanity of his fourth wife Lotus, Chen Zuoqian takes his fifth wife Bamboo. When Bamboo first enters the Chen compound, she is very confused and surprised to see a "very clean, pretty, and refined" woman, the now insane Lotus, walking around the abandoned well and murmuring. She asks the maidservants around her who she is, and what she is saying. They tell her she used to be the Fourth Mistress, and:

They repeated Lotus's words for her: "I won't jump, I won't jump.' She says she won't jump into the well."

Lotus says she won't jump into the well (*Trilogy*: 99).

Judging from the context of these two quoted paragraphs, we have no difficulty finding that, while the first is the narrator's account of the maidservants' reply to Fifth Mistress Bamboo's question about Lotus, the second or the last sentence of the story—the repetition of Lotus's words—is obviously a sarcastic comment made by the narrator on Lotus's mentality and existential situation, addressed face-to-face to the narratee, though expressed in a highly subtle way. The sneering tone here is so manifest, as if we could see the narrator's derisive smile while he uttering these words: "*Kanguan* 看官 (respectful readers)! Lotus says she won't jump into the well. Look at how mad she is now, do you think her situation is any better than jumping into the well?"

The brief analysis above and my rewriting of the paragraph reveal clearly that the ending part of the story, viewed from a narratological perspective, actually represents Su Tong's effort to create a Chinese-style "simulated context" of oral storytelling in his text, a device which traditional Chinese readers are so familiar with and fond of.

A close investigation reveals that Su Tong's inheritance of and continuity with the Chinese literary legacy take place not only on the grand level of the nature and

fundamental functions of literature, expressive style, narrative frame, etc, but also in the basic, technical aspects of characterization, plot structuring, the use and arrangement of descriptive details, etc—the concrete techniques employed by a writer to compose a story.

While discussing the art of characterization, Andrew Plaks, based on his comparative research between Chinese and Western narrative, incisively points to "the general tendency of Chinese fiction to present what are essentially composite characters—groups and sets of figures, rather than concentrating on the delineation of the individual hero in isolation" (1977: 345). Actually, Plaks' insight into the conventions of the characterization of Chinese fiction is fully confirmed by almost all the greatest Chinese novels: *Golden Lotus*, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, *Water Margin*, *Journey to the West*, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, etc, where the main characters in a novel always appears as a group or groups, and where the characters are created mainly through the principle of comparison and contrast, through a series of strategies of juxtaposition, overlapping, analogy, and antithesis between different figures in personality, psychology, thought, behavior, etc. In this respect, some of Su Tong's novels can be appropriately regarded as a link in the long chain of this time-honored convention of Chinese narrative.

For example, Su Tong, in the novel "Proliferation of Wives and Concubines," a work claimed by many as presenting the author's technical retreat or return to the narrative conventions of traditional Chinese fiction, obviously adopts these Chinese conventional principles and strategies of characterization and makes a tremendous success. In the story, Chen Zuoqian's four wives, like most literary images in the Chinese fiction classics, come on stage also as a group. The relations, interactions, and connections of these women not only constitute an important part of the social



environment in which they live; the extremely intricate relations between them also, technically, provide a perfect opportunity for the author to observe, analyze, and portray the personalities, psychologies, and behavior of these women. In this sense, for each of the wives, the other three's existence and presence serve as a significant and inseparable life background, against which her own image and mentality can be projected. For example, through the juxtaposition of her personality, life attitude, and morality with both Cloud's slavish submission to the authority and Coral's fierce defiance against it—actually the latter two themselves constitute a sharp contrast—Lotus's somewhat compromising, fence-sitting personality and life attitude, and her adulterated moral standards mixing good and evil, are effectively highlighted and can be identified more easily by the readers.

For our purpose, another Plaks' observation of the characterization of Chinese fiction is also noteworthy. As he persuasively points out, in Chinese novels, the literal heroes in the Western sense—stalwart warriors, irrepressible captains of the van, or dauntless wise officials who submit to the axe sooner than accept dishonor—whose "steadfast singlemindedness" in personality and morality carries something of "the conceptual solidity" and "potential definitiveness," are often relegated to a secondary position in the texts. In sharp contrast, the central figures in the novels, characterized by the inconsistency in their personalities, psychologies, and behavior: wavering, backtracking, side-switching, mood-changing, etc, often show some kind of "unheroic ambivalence." According to Plaks, in light of the narrative conventions of Chinese fiction, "far from being a critical fault, this sort of flexibility, or fluidity, in character portrayal stands as a clear index of the greatness of a given work" (1977: 340-1).

The patterns of character portrayal in some of Su Tong's novels reveal that Su Tong is a loyal inheritor of this narrative convention. In his trilogy, for instance, the "lesser men" or secondary characters often bear some easily identified physical, psychological, or moral attributes—Yanyi's idiocy and his constant feeling of starvation, Liu Suzi's extreme physical beauty and her eccentric fondness of cats, Liu Laoxia's extreme thrifty and arbitrariness as a typical Chinese patriarch, Joy's stupidity and hypocrisy, Cloud's slavish subservience, Coral's unwavering defiance, Huanzi's image as a lustful woman, just to name a few—which remind us of certain character types, if not stereotypes, and therefore are relatively easier to be understood by the readers. On the other hand, the central characters—Liu Chencao, Grandmother Jiang, Chen Baonian, Lotus, and Feipu—however, as analyzed above, all display some kind of complexity, ambivalence, or ambiguity in personality, psychology, morality, worldview, etc, which subject to multiple interpretations from different perspectives. To some extent, we might say that, the relatively simple nature and singlemindedness of the "lesser men," technically, can be considered a literary device manipulated by the author to project the complexity and multi-facetedness of the central characters. In this sense, the attribute of each lesser man can be appropriately regarded as an integral component comprising an aspect or facet of the central character's personality, mentality, morality, or worldview. In other words, in Su Tong's work and many other Chinese novels alike, the image of the central character, in most cases, is a combination of the lesser men. For instance, the image of Lotus in "Proliferation of Wives and Concubines," can be considered a combination of the attributes of all the other three female figures in the novel: Joy, Cloud, and Coral, in terms of personality, life attitude, morality, and worldview.

Hao Chang, in his highly acclaimed study on four major first-generation Chinese intellectuals, insightfully points to "the traditional Chinese world view, which explained the cosmos in terms of such cosmological symbolism as the ideas of *yin-yang*, the five elements, and heaven and earth" (1987: 6). Historically, the worldview originated in the *Yi Jing* or *Book of Changes*, was systemized and perfected by the great Confucian master Dong Zhongshu (179BC-104BC) in the Han dynasty, and has exercised enormous impact on Chinese society and Chinese thought since its emergence. At the core of the worldview are the ideas and ideals of *tian ren ganying* 天人感应 (the interaction between Heaven and human beings) and *tian ren heyi* 天人合一 (the harmony or unity between Heaven and human beings). It conceives of the universe or cosmos as an organic system, where Heaven, human beings, and all the things on the earth interact, interdepend, and restrict one another, and comprise an inseparable whole.<sup>37</sup> In light of this worldview, no phenomenon in the world, in the last analysis, is isolated; underlying it there are always some moral or heavenly reasons associated with and accounting for it. Nothing in the world is pure natural either. Even such phenomena as flood, hurricane, earthquake, etc, which are defined as pure natural phenomena by modern science, are construed by Chinese people as index to moral corruption, especially on the part of the ruling classes, and as representing heavenly wrath and punishment for this corruption.

The traditional Chinese worldview of "cosmological symbolism" has, apart from its influence on Chinese society and Chinese thought in general, exerted a far-reaching and profound impact on the conceptualization and configuration of Chinese literature in many aspects. Practically, this impact displays itself most evidently and powerfully in a

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<sup>37</sup> For a more detailed, more incisive, and all-around analysis of the worldview, see Li Z. 1985.

figurative or allusive formula unique to Chinese literature, where a person's fate, or the vicissitudes of a household or nation, is often depicted as closely associated with the external natural world in a mysterious, invisible, yet inextricable way, and therefore can be positively predicted by such natural phenomena as seasonal cycle, changes in one's immediate living environment, shifts in the life trajectory of plant or animal, etc, especially by the radically unexpected natural changes and anomalies. This formula readily reminds us of some most famous descriptions in Chinese literature: using the flourish and withering of *xiangcao* 香草 or vanilla to refer to the prosperity and decline of *junzi* 君子 or virtuous gentlemen in Qu Yuan's poems; the association of the loss of fertility of women with winter in Tang *Chuanqi* stories (Yang and Adkins 1980: 35); the "flying snow in June" indicating the enormous wrong inflicted on an innocent woman in Guan Hanqing (1240?-1310?)'s widely circulated opera *Dou'e Yuan* 窦娥冤 (The Wrong of Dou'e); the communication between living people and ghosts through dream and the spooky "whirlwind" foretelling the death of Ximen Qing in *Golden Lotus*; the mysterious link between the untimely flourishing of the *haitang* 海棠 trees (Chinese flowering crab apples) in the Prospect Garden and the bad fortune and deaths in the Jia family in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, etc. Substantial evidence from Su Tong's fiction testifies to his profound continuity with this Chinese narrative convention.

In "Opium Family," for instance, the links between the shocking fact that Liu Laoxia has actually produced several fish-like, strange animals rather than normal human beings—an omen construed by Chinese people as indicating the severity of moral corruption and evils committed by the family—and the inevitable destruction of the Liu family, between the mysterious voice calling him to come up the bandit-controlled

mountain and the grim reality that in his last days Chencao actually is forced to climb up the mountain trying to find the bandits for refuge and finally dies a miserable death, undoubtedly are embodiments of the worldview of "cosmological symbolism" in literature. The convention demonstrates itself most manifestly in the novella "Proliferation of Wives and Concubines," where the central character Lotus's encounters and fate not only correspond perfectly with the seasonal changes, but also reveal a mysterious yet inseparable connection with the well and the wisteria flowers. I believe few Chinese readers would be unfamiliar with and neglect the significance of such a literary description: As the weather grows grimmer and grimmer, Lotus's existential situation in the household is gradually deteriorating. It is only natural, in light of the literary conceptualization under the influence of the view of cosmological symbolism, that Lotus's insanity happens in the winter after a "big snowstorm," when the weather reaches the summit of its severity. It is also natural for Lotus to be horrified by the strange, sudden drop-off of the wisteria flowers and the mysterious voice from the well of death calling her to come down, because from the eerie scene and the ghostly voice, she must have sensed the smell of death.

### ***Simulated Fusion of Objectivity and Subjectivity***

From the brief description and analysis above, we have no difficulty in finding that there are two seemingly contradictory forces or tendencies running through Su Tong's writings: On the one hand, by adopting the techniques and devices such as metafiction, unreliable narrator, deliberately blurring the line between reality and imagination, allegory, etc, he emphasizes the imagined nature of his writings and endeavors to project

the subjectivity of the narrator as well as the implied author; on the other hand, by employing or imitating the principles, strategies, and rhetoric of traditional Chinese historiographies, he takes great effort to disguise his writing as history and deliberately highlights the historical nature of his writings. Here arises a question: How and why does Su Tong manage to unify and make sense of these seeming technical and rhetorical contradictions? How should we as readers understand these contradictions?

Georg Lukács, based on his comparative study between realism and modernism and on his profound observation of some great literary masters such as James Joyce and Thomas Mann, incisively points to the inseparable relationship between the content and the form of a given literary text, between a writer's worldview and the techniques and rhetoric he employs in his writing. He argues, style is no mere formal category, rather, "it is rooted in content; it is the specific form of a specific content." He further stresses, it is the view of world, the ideology that constitutes the "formative principle underlying the style of a given piece of writing" (1964: 19).

In compatibility with Lukács's perception, I believe that the significance of the style of Su Tong's fiction, the strategies and devices adopted by him, and the seeming technical contradictions displayed in his writing cannot be fully understood if we do not have an adequate comprehension of the three important elements involved in his writings: (1) the view of history generally shared by Chinese people, which constitutes the broad intellectual context shaping the thought of individual Chinese writers including Su Tong; (2) the immediate social and intellectual setting of China around the mid-1980s, from which Su Tong's novels emerged; and (3) Su Tong's own view of history and the feelings and thoughts when he wrote these novels. As a matter of fact, as readers might

have seen, in the previous section of the thesis, I have already adopted this approach advocated by Lukács in exploring the intertwined relationship between the technical, rhetorical devices and the thematic, discursive significance of Su Tong's writings. The following discussion actually represents my attempts to continue and further the exploration in a relatively more systematic and more concentrated way.

When talking about the Chinese view of history, I think we must keep two things in mind: the emphasis or even overemphasis on history on the part of Chinese people, a topic which I have mentioned repeatedly in the previous discussions, and a didactic tendency in Chinese historical writing and the Chinese view of history. By the latter I mainly refer to two facts. First, Chinese historians and historiographers always intend to conduct moral judgment and moral indoctrination while transmitting knowledge and facts in history writing. Second, Chinese people, correspondingly, always intend to find some moral models to emulate or to learn some lessons from history—the tendency of *yi shi wei jian* 以史为鉴 or using history as a mirror. The didacticism in Chinese history understandably leads some people to assert an over-subjectivity of Chinese history and Chinese historiography.<sup>38</sup> Though didacticism in Chinese historical writing doesn't

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<sup>38</sup> For instance, Andrew Plaks, for all his many insightful perceptions of Chinese history and Chinese narrative, regrettably asserts that "The significance of the term 'truth' in the Chinese context is always something more subjective, more relative, more directly limited to a specific human context, than what it normally designates in the language of Western philosophy and logic" (1977: 313). Unfortunately this statement is simply not correct.

In his influential book on official history writing under the Tang, Dennis Twitchett provides an exhaustive and reliable description of how the Tang dynastic court painstakingly built up a whole set of strict and systematic procedures and institutions to guarantee the objectivity and authenticity of official history writing. At the same time however, Twitchett also points to another fact that the Chinese historiographer's dual status as both a court official and historian and his intention to convey Confucian moral teachings in history writing indeed inflict certain damage to the objectivity and authenticity of Chinese historical writing, this doesn't necessarily constitutes a powerful evidence of the over-subjectivity of Chinese historiography. See Twitchett 1992.

It is common sense that there is no absolute objectivity in any historical writing, and that history writing in any country will be limited or conditioned by certain factors, though the limitations might be

necessarily make historical truth in the Chinese context more subjective and more relative than that in the Western context, as some Western scholars claim, it does invest a highly subjective dimension into Chinese historical writing or historiography.<sup>39</sup> From here, it is not difficult to see that behind the combination of the two aspects of the Chinese view of history is the shared ambition of Chinese historians to fuse "objective historical truth" with subjective judgment, to combine objectivity and subjectivity in their writing.

Given the absolute superiority of history in Chinese cultural hierarchy, it is only natural to see that Chinese writers and Chinese literature have been deeply influenced by the view of history prescribed by the culture. Compatible with the duality of the view, the influence also proves to be double. On the one hand, the emulation of history, the pursuit of "historical truth"—a task which is universally regarded by Chinese people as representing the most important and most lofty mission of an intellectual—lures Chinese writers to the "fascination with fact" in their fiction. As a result, "In Ming and Ch'ing China...author and reader alike were more interested in the fact in fiction than in fiction as much. The barest story would do as long as the fact contained therein proved

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different from China's case. This is why I think that Chinese historiography, for all its didacticism, is not necessarily more subjective than other countries.

<sup>39</sup> Interestingly and intriguing enough, the Chinese view of history, especially its emphasis on the subjective dimension of history, for all its longevity, is by on means incompatible with Western discourses on history. Paul Ricoeur, for instance, in his highly influential book on time and narrative, argues that historical event has both an "inside face" (thought or historical consciousness) and an "outside face" (natural change). It is actually a combination of historical consciousness and natural fact. Citing R.G. Collingwood, he further points out, history is actually the "reenactment of the past." By "reenactment of the past" he means not only the act "to construct a picture of things as they really were and of events as they really happened," but also the "act of rethinking what was once thought for the first time." This will inevitably involve the "historical imagination" on the part of the historian (1988: 144-6). In another place of the same book, he makes the notion much clearer. He points out, "historical intentionality only becomes effective by incorporating into its intended object the resources of fictionalization stemming from the narrative form of imagination" (1988: 100). Here he actually emphasizes the fictionalized or imagined nature of history. Fredric Jameson, as mentioned earlier, also stresses the importance of the textualization of history. As he argues, except through "its prior textualization," history is actually inaccessible to us (1981: 31). To textualize history of course cannot be separated from the involvement of the subjectivity and imagination of the historian.



sufficiently arresting." "There is not a single *San-yen* tale which does not put its main characters in a particular locale and time and vouch for their historicity." Because "stories and novels could not justify themselves as art alone: they must justify themselves as truth, how allegorically disguised, to inculcate the kind of lesson history teaches" (Hsia 1968:16). By emulating historical writing or historiography in its texts, Chinese literature simultaneously confirms and consolidates the superiority of history in its cultural hierarchy and damages and subverts the objectivity and authenticity of history—it actually blurs the line between the true historical fact and the "fact or reality" fabricated by the novelist. On the other hand, we must see that moral didacticism in the Chinese view of history has exercised no less influence on Chinese literature than has its emphasis on factuality. Consequently, to teach or to inculcate becomes one of the most lasting and most preeminent characteristics of Chinese literature, though what it teaches or inculcates might change with time from Confucian doctrines and traditional beliefs to varied modern values. In modern times, didacticism in Chinese literature is largely displayed in the form of using literature to enlighten people and to promote democracy and science, as in the case of Liang Qichao and many May Fourth writers, or to impose on readers some radically subjectivized and individualized ideas, as in the case of contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction.

After a brief review of the Chinese view of history and its impact on Chinese literature, let's turn our attention to the social and intellectual milieu of China around the mid-1980s, the immediate historical setting from which Su Tong's novels emerged.

It is now common knowledge that, to get an adequate understanding of contemporary China, no one can bypass or ignore Mao Zedong and the "Cultural

Revolution." The impact of "Cultural Revolution" on Chinese thought and Chinese society is unprecedented and incalculable in both its extent and intensity; and its overwhelming negative consequences, along with Deng's economic determinism, now can be seen in every aspect of Chinese social life: the loss of traditional beliefs and values, nation-wide moral depravity and official corruption, money fetishism, cultural cynicism and nihilism, the alienation and estrangement of human relations, etc. As far as history or historical writing is concerned, Mao's China, through its uninterrupted indoctrination and distorted propaganda, in effect, not only successfully rewrote or fabricated a logically coherent and ideologically deceptive yet effective history of modern China, but also put ancient Chinese history in a dim light. In other words, Mao's regime, through its extremely strict political control over Chinese social life and the ruthless suppression of Chinese liberal thought, actually completely cut off Chinese people from both their true past and the outside world, and made them suspended in an artificially constructed, highly illusive historical void. To Mao's great surprise and disappointment, however, the sublime and beautiful aura around the history elaborated by him and the Chinese Communist Party was shattered almost overnight with the outbreak of the "Cultural Revolution," where all the violence, atrocities, absurdities, betrayal, etc, completely stripped off the veil covering the Party and the history established by it, and made the Chinese people see completely through both the tyrannical yet hypocritical face of the Party and the illusive and deceptive nature of the history constructed by it. Under such circumstances, it is only natural to discern the two closely interrelated and equally powerful forces or sentiments running through Chinese society in the 1980s: the strong disillusionment with the distorted and deceptive history and the strong desire for the

"objective historical truth" on the one hand, and the equally strong impulse to express one's own emotions, feelings, and thoughts on the part of individual Chinese people, which had long been suppressed by the Mao's regime on the other. In this sense, Deng's so-called "Thought Liberation Movement," the launching of the debate over "the criteria for evaluating truth," and the adoption of the "reform" and "opening" policy, can be regarded both as an official reflection of and reaction to the above-mentioned forces and sentiments of the Chinese people, and as a precondition for the release of these forces and sentiments. At this point, Wang Shuo, the most popular and most read writer among the general republic in 1980s' China, who has yet often been put in a pejorative light by the Chinese writers of "high literature," deserves our attention and respect. In my opinion, in contemporary China, no writer is better than Wang Shuo in presenting and representing the psychology and thought of common Chinese people. Wang Shuo's characters, who are famous for their *wan shi bu gong* 玩世不恭 (cynicism) and *pinzui* 贫嘴 (talkativeness) accurately and profoundly represent the deep moral and cultural skepticism and the strong desire for self-expression widely shared by Chinese people in the 1980s.

The immediate social and intellectual milieu and the general trends of 1980s' China obviously cast a clear mark on Su Tong's thought, which can be easily discerned in his fiction.

A close reading of Su Tong's trilogy clearly reveals that his profound skepticism of Communist propaganda and the Communist interpretation of history, and his strong impulse for self-expression and subjective judgment, are actually fused and displayed in his novels in a certain narrow form of empiricism and positivism, a belief and worldview insisting that only what is experienced or witnessed through our own senses is truly

reliable and credible. For instance, as mentioned earlier, the story of "Nineteen Thirty-Four Escapes" is repeatedly claimed by the narrator as a construction of his genealogy or family history based on his *personal* investigation. In "Opium Family," the narrator, when presenting his observations, feelings, and thoughts, tends to employ the sentences which are initiated or introduced by such phrases or expressions as "I heard", "I saw", "I discovered", "I think", "Grandfathers told me," etc, to convince the readers and to project the fact that all he narrates in the story is obtained *through his own senses*. The explicit tendency of positivism and empiricism displayed by Su Tong, if placed against the broad social and intellectual background of the 1980s' China, can be properly read both as an embodiment of his extremely strong disillusionment and disgust for the abstract, illusive, and deceptive nature of Communist propaganda and indoctrination, and as expression of his subjectivity and love for individualism, a legacy of his May Fourth father.

When talking about Su Tong's thought, as it is displayed in his fiction, we can't ignore his anti-humanitarianism, an important aspect of his thought, which is actually shared by both Yu Hua and Ge Fei, the other two major contemporary avant-garde writers. The tendency of Su Tong's anti-humanitarianism would be even more obvious if we compare his usually indifferent, sarcastic, and sometimes contemptuous attitude towards the weak or the "oppressed," such as Chen Mao and Lotus in this novels, with Lu Xun's and other May Fourth writers' basically sympathetic and merciful attitude towards underdogs and the unprivileged such as Sister Xianglin and Kong Yiji. Su Tong's and other Chinese avant-garde writers' anti-humanitarianist stance, in my understanding, is a natural product of their shared disillusionment with the Maoist "revolutionary

humanitarianism" (*geming rendao zhuyi* 革命人道主义),<sup>40</sup> as displayed in Hao Ran's novels, where a little dose of humanitarian sentiment only serves as a decoration or veil covering the cold logic of the Party line and the cold-blooded policies to carry out the line.

For all the intensity and eagerness of Su Tong's impulse for subjective judgment and self-expression, it is not the sole psychological and discursive force dominating his fiction. A close reading of his fiction reveals that another force running through his novels is equally important and dynamic. It is Su Tong's strong desire for "objective historical truth." In "Opium Family," for instance, the narrator claims that all he has done with the narrative is "honestly and realistically describe the unfolding of events in the Liu family history" (*Trilogy*: 255), a declaration emulating or parodying the voice of the traditional Chinese historian, who always claimed that he adopts in his historical writing the principle of *bing bi zhi shu* 秉笔直书 (to write honestly and straightforward). In "Nineteen Thirty-Four Escapes," the narrator, as mentioned earlier, explicitly indicates that, in order to provide a realistic and objective presentation of his family history, he has to force himself to endure the moral uneasiness when he honestly writes down the life-and-death struggles between his two ancestors and all the hatred and evils displayed in the struggles (173). In this sense, actually all the efforts Su Tong takes in his fiction to imitate or parody the strategies and devices of the traditional Chinese historical writing can be appropriately regarded as a dual attempt—simultaneously to express his sincere desire for authentic historical truth and to mock and subvert the Communist presentation of "objective historical truth."

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<sup>40</sup> At this point, Jing Wang's perception that the emergence of Chinese avant-garde fiction is "a timely response to the exhaustion of the utopian motif of the early 1980s" and "a direct reflection of the epochal disillusionment with humanism and heroism" proves both accurate and convincing, though basically, I think some other comments she makes in the Introduction to a collection of contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction are controversial and problematic (1998: 3-14).

At this point, it might be safe to conclude that the seemingly contradictory tendencies running through Su Tong's novels—his simultaneous emphasis on the imagined nature of his writings and the claim of objective historical truth in his writings—and all the seemingly controversial techniques and devices employed to achieve the two tendencies, are far from a technical and thematic failure on the part of the author; rather, it represents both Su Tong's sincere desire to fuse the pursuit of historical truth and self-expression—to combine objectivity and subjectivity—and his equally strong attempt to expose and subvert the Communist version of events: pretending to be history, but actually not.

Su Tong's view of literature and of the Communist presentation of history, judged from his fictional writings, seems to be like this: "I don't want to deny the imaginary dimension of my novels. But I surely believe that the construction of history *based on my personal experience and imagination*, provides no less historical facts and truth than the Communist 'realistic' novels do, and therefore is no less credible than them. I confess that the 'history' in my novels is fabricated, but the Communist 'realistic' novels either. The only difference is that while I admit my fabrication, the Communist novels always pretend to be true history." Indeed, in some sense, Su Tong does have reasons to be confident in the success of his own historical construction and interpretation. In fact, even a brief comparison of his fiction with the Hao Ran-style Communist novels reveals that, not only are Su Tong's understanding and interpretation of modern Chinese history obviously much more profound, complex, and convincing than the Communist version represented by Han Rao, which reduces all the complexity and richness of the social relations and agencies working in modern China to "class oppression" and "class

struggle," his claim of the trustworthiness in his description of the social reality of modern China is also confirmed by the Chinese experience—if asked, many old Chinese people who lived through the historical period described by Su Tong would tell you that what appears in Su Tong's novels is much more close to what actually happened in history than that in the Hao Ran-style Communist fiction, and therefore much more realistic and credible.<sup>41</sup>

If we understand Su Tong's assumed posture to fuse the "historical truth" and subjective judgment in his fiction to parody and subvert the Communist-style "fusion of objectivity and subjectivity," it becomes easier for us to grasp the "orphic" narrative feature unique to Su Tong's novels—the occasional intrusion by a first-person narrator. In my understanding, this device, apart from its narratological function—the creation of the "simulated situation" of oral storytelling—as discussed earlier, also represents Su Tong's efforts to strike a "simulated" balance between objectivity and subjectivity in his fiction. By imposing an authoritative outside voice not only upon the text narrated, but also on the normal narrator—in "Nineteen Thirty-Four Escapes," the intruding voice occasionally addresses directly to the first-person narrator—the author actually attempts to draw a boundary or sets up a limit on the liberty and autonomy of the narrator. It serves either to prevent the first-person narrator from going to the extreme of arbitrariness or over-subjectivity, as in the case of "Nineteen Thirty-Four Escapes," or to restrain the omniscient third-person narrator from going to the other extreme of

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<sup>41</sup> Here I feel it necessary to point out that, though Su Tong's version of modern Chinese history is definitely much more realistic and credible than Hao Ran's and that fabricated by Communist propaganda, it is not necessarily more true than that presented by some other Communist writers such as Wu Zuxiang (1908-1994), Mao Dun, Zhao Shuli (1906-1970), Ding Ling, and Zhou Libo (1908-1979). I think both Su Tong and these Communist writers seize only one side of the same coin of modern Chinese history. They both are accurate in some ways but quite inaccurate in others.

nonchalance or over-objectivity, as in the case of "Opium Family." In this sense, the intruding voice actually represents an outside force simultaneously to keep the narration under surveillance and to make judgment on it. Moreover, the existence of an outside voice, which is above the narration and completely out of the narrator's control, and which can intrude into the narration freely, also implies that storytelling, fictional or self-asserted "historical," can never be more than storytelling—there is always something existing in actual history, which can not be reached by the storytelling. Communist storytelling is no exception.

### **Conclusion**

From the above discussions, we might conclude that history is always Su Tong's foremost preoccupation in his fiction. By deliberately parodying the conceptualization, techniques, and devices of the Communist literary "models," Su Tong powerfully subverts the whole set of Communist ideology and the Communist presentation of modern Chinese history. Through his ruthless exposure of the varied strategies manipulated by the Communist Party and other ruling classes to establish their own interpretation of history, Su Tong discloses the secret of historical writing: struggle for ideological domination and political legitimacy. In his fiction, Su Tong explores such important social and intellectual phenomena as the Chinese Communist revolution, the rural-urban confrontation, the process of Chinese modernization, the spiritual and identity crisis in modern China, and the working of power relations in general human history. By blending harmoniously the traditional Chinese conceptualization of literature with



Western narratological strategies, techniques, and devices, Su Tong aims at fulfilling a dual goal in his fiction: both the pursuit of "objective historical truth" and the expression of "subjective judgment" towards history. The wonderful fusion of objectivity and subjectivity can be viewed as a great success of Su Tong's fiction. Su Tong's novels also show explicit tendencies towards empiricism, positivism, and anti-humanitarianism, a direct reflection of Chinese people's disillusionment with the deceptive Communist propaganda and the Maoist "revolutionary humanitarianism" and utopianism of 1980s' China—the immediate social and intellectual setting of Su Tong's fiction.

Here I feel it necessary to emphasize that, for all the apparent Western influence on his novels, Su Tong's continuities with the Chinese literary tradition, in comparison, are much more profound and intensive. He has not only inherited some of the most preeminent literary techniques, devices, and conventions prescribed by his tradition, but also shares with his ancestors the common fundamental views and values in understanding the nature and function of literature. Su Tong is profoundly influenced by the traditional Chinese worldview of cosmological symbolism or the notion of *tian ren ganying*, which conceives of the universe as an organic system, where Heaven, human beings, and all the things on the earth interact and comprise an inseparable one.

Su Tong insists that if history is the accumulated aggregate of human experiences which are merely oriented to and aimed at sensual pleasure and material gains—sometimes in vain—at the cost of the physical and moral degeneration and even destruction of human beings, then it is absolutely not progressive, and even retrogressive.

## Chapter 3

**Yu Hua: Limits of Transcendence**  
**Between Existential Truth and Historical Authenticity**

Only after a very long time, had I realized that actually she was not frightening. She merely immersed in her ego and solitude beyond my understanding for my age at that time; she stood on the boundary between life and death, and was simultaneously abandoned by both.

In fact, both in the past and in the present, I am not the sort of person who is willing to die for belief. I worship so much the voice of life flowing within my body. I cannot find any other reasons for living, but life itself.

---Yu Hua <sup>42</sup>

In contemporary Chinese literary circles, Yu Hua stands out as a unique and somewhat charismatic figure. The sharp contrast between the scarcity in amount of his writings and the magnitude of their impact on the contemporary Chinese intellectual world and the general public of China alike—powerful evidence of both his great magnetism as a writer and the enormous appeal of his writing—constitutes a preeminent and thought-provoking phenomenon. In my observation, if in contemporary China there is a writer who can stand side by side with Lu Xun and Zhang Ailing without any inferiority in linguistic exquisiteness, artistic originality, and ideological profundity of his writing, it is Yu Hua. Unlike either Su Tong's exceptional obsession with history or Ge Fei's rejection of history and fascination with metaphysical meditation on the universal human condition, Yu Hua aims at a dual and seemingly contradictory goal. In his novels, the pursuit of ultimate existential truth always goes hand in hand with the quest for

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<sup>42</sup> The Chinese original is: 直到很久以后, 我才感到她其实并不可怕, 她只是沉浸在我当时年龄无法理解的自我与孤独之中, 她站在生与死的界线上, 同时被两者抛弃。《在细雨中呼喊》, 《余华作品集》, 第三卷 164 页。Hereafter *YHZPJ* vol. 3.

事实上我过去和现在, 都不是那种愿为信念去死的人, 我是那样崇拜生命在我体内流淌的声音。除了生命本身, 我再也找不出活下去的另外理由了。 *YHZPJ* vol.3: 209-210.

historical authenticity, though stress is placed on different aspects of the goal from his first novel to the later ones.

Yu Hua has long been acclaimed as the most technically creative writer in contemporary China. Unlike both Su Tong and Ge Fei, whose fiction displays a relative consistency both in theme and style, Yu Hua's novels have in many important aspects—thematically, structurally, and linguistically—undergone dramatic changes from the first one to the later two. In his first novel *Screaming in the Drizzle*, Yu Hua seems to be more fascinated with the transcendental side of the world—the universal human condition—than with the pursuit of historical authenticity, though the latter element is by no means absent from the text. By deliberately obscuring the specific historical background of the novel, by ingeniously playing with complicated textual structure, temporal dislocation, and symbolism, and especially by highlighting “events” as existential and political allegories, Yu Hua expresses a strong impulse to transcend specific historical representation for universal existential truth. At this stage, history and historical consciousness are only presented as a remote and obscure background, and put in a dim light. His later two novels *To Live* and *Xu Sanguan Sells His Blood*, however, display both a rapidly swelling enthusiasm with history and a dramatic “retreat” to Chinese literary conventions. Unlike his first novel where history only appears as a remote and obscure background, as just indicated, the historical presence in his later two novels looms large and is mostly foregrounded, where an individual's encounters and fate are always tied fast to the vicissitudes of the nation and to contemporary historical events.

### Helplessness as the Universal Human Condition

It was in the year 1965 when a child began his unspeakable fear of night. I recalled that night of flying drizzle...a woman's sobbing scream arrived from far away; the hoarse voice suddenly sounded in the originally silent night, and made my childhood, which is now in my memory, shiver uncontrollably.

...that woman's scream lasted a very long time. I was so eagerly and fearfully expecting the arrival of another voice, a voice to respond to the woman's scream and able to appease her weeping; but the voice didn't appear. Now I am already able to understand the reason for my fear and shock at that time; it is because I never heard a responsive voice. Nothing can make people shiver more than a lonely, helpless scream, on an empty, boundless rainy night.<sup>43</sup>

Within my reading experience, I have never been so emotionally moved and intellectually enlightened by a novel as by Yu Hua's *Screaming in the Drizzle*, a novel which I believe sooner or later will be recognized as a classic of Chinese fiction. The ingenious beginning of the novel, which is partially rendered here, in my view, is not inferior to that of any world masterpiece in terms of its overall aesthetic effect, its penetrating ideological strength, and its dominating function in the whole novel. The extremely despairing and frightening scene described here—a woman screams on a boundless rainy night, desperate for help, and the only response she receives from the world is deadly silence, absurdity (as indicated by the fact that the nonsensical sound

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<sup>43</sup> 1965年的时候，一个孩子开始了对黑夜不可名状的恐惧。我回想起了那个细雨飘扬的夜晚...一个女人哭泣般的呼喊声从远处传来，嘶哑的声音在当初寂静无比的黑夜里突然响起，使我此刻回想中的童年颤抖不已。

...那个女人的呼喊声持续了很久，我是那么急切和害怕地期待着另一个声音的到来，一个出来回答女人的呼喊、能够平息她哭泣的声音，可是没有出现。现在我已经意识到当初自己惊恐的原因，那就是我一直没有听到一个出来回答的声音。再也没有比孤独的无依无靠的呼喊声更让人战栗了，在雨中空旷的黑夜里。YHZPJ vol.3: 4.

made by a male stranger's black clothes flying in the wind is understood by the narrator as a response to the woman's scream), and death (the narrator sees the black-clothed stranger's dead body by the roadside several days after he meets him)—actually can be read as both an existential allegory of the helplessness and absurdity of the human condition and an accurate presentation of the real historical situation under a totalitarian regime. A close investigation further reveals that the fact of human beings screaming desperately for help and the world's unresponsiveness and indifference constitutes not only the dominating theme running throughout the whole novel, but also the key to understanding its overall structure.

Like most classical Chinese novels, *Screaming in the Drizzle* is also an “episodic” novel composed of several subtitled episodes. It is common knowledge that, in the episodic classical novels, as a narratological and structural principle, episodes are usually either gathered together loosely under the same subject matter, as in the case of *The Scholars*, or strung together with a main character's personal experience, as in the case of *The Travels of Lao Can*, or arranged in a chronological order and unified with a common mission of the main characters—for example, going on a pilgrimage for Buddhist scriptures, rebellion, etc.—as in the cases of *The Journey to the West* and *The Water Margins*. Similar to these classical novels, episodes in *Screaming in the Drizzle* are also strung together loosely with the narrator and main character Sun Guanglin's personal experience. Unlike the earlier novels, the episodes in *Screaming in the Drizzle*, completely out of chronological order, seem to be arranged at random, and therefore are difficult to be construed and grasped as an integrated and unified whole at first glance.

For all the seemingly isolated and independent nature of the episodes in *Screaming in the Drizzle* and the superficially loose structure of the novel as a whole, the episodes are actually tightly interrelated at a deep symbolic level and unified into an coherent, integrated text by the shared theme underlying each episode: human beings screaming desperately (for help) in an indifferent and helpless world. In other words, unlike the classical episodic novels, which tend to employ a main character's personal experience or a shared mission by the main characters as the only narrative thread to string together all the episodes, in *Screaming in the Drizzle*, the theme or the deep meaning shared by all the events works structurally as a more solid narrative thread to unify the whole text, at a profound, metamorphic level. Moreover, the ingenious and unique arrangement in the plot—Sun Guanglin leaves his old home in South Gate in the beginning of the novel but returns to South Gate at the end, accomplishing a round trip—apart from its thematic connotations, also serves technically to return the otherwise open structure to closure.

In line with such a reflection, it becomes quite clear that the word “scream,” which appears in the title of the novel, constitutes the key to understanding the novel. Symbolically and metaphysically, each subtitled episode or event in the novel can be read as a fruitless “scream” on the part of the main character of the episode. The only differences these episodes have lie in the subject who lets out the “scream” and the existential situation in which the “scream” takes place. People of different nature and personality, of different social status and background, with different beliefs and life goals, in different existential situations, and for different purposes, make desperate “screams” to the world for help, but the world remains silent and doesn't make any response—this, in my understanding, is the most important perception Yu Hua attempts to convey by all

these seemingly isolated and independent episodes in his novel. Next I will examine two ordinary yet typical episodes chosen from the novel—the little boy Lulu’s life story and Su Yu’s death—to illuminate the points just made.

Let’s examine Lulu’s life story first. Lulu, a handsome little boy with bright black eyes, whose clear, crisp voice “links my imagination with the colorful butterfly-shaped hairpin on a maiden’s head,” is obviously one of the most touching and pitiful images in the novel. When Lulu makes his first appearance in the novel, he is fighting with two bigger boys. Given the obvious discrepancy in strength between the opposing parties—one little boy vs two bigger ones, Lulu naturally loses. However, even with a bleeding nose, Lulu refuses to give in. “My big brother will find you and get even with you!” He intimidates the boys before he leaves. After that, every time we see Lulu in the novel, we find he is fighting with some other boys. The situations and outcomes are always the same: Lulu is alone against several others; and he is always the defeated one. But each time after the fight, Lulu always assumes the pose of a victor and defiantly threatens his enemies, “My big brother will beat you!” “His confrontational attitude towards them all” and the confidence he displays in referring to his “big brother” serve for nothing but to testify to the truth of what he asserts. However, with the further unfolding of the story, it turns out that he actually does not have a big brother:

Not until some time later did I realize that Lulu actually didn’t have a big brother, but I kept this fact a secret, so that the child couldn’t detect that I had noticed his fabrication. When he was isolated and helpless, the child sought support from his imaged

big brother. I understood the significance and the necessity of imagination and hope to him; actually they were equally significant and necessary to me.<sup>44</sup>

Here arise the questions: Why does the little boy, who actually doesn't have a big brother, when facing miserable situations, repeatedly and matter-of-factly claim that he has a big brother? Why does the imagined "big brother" retain so important a position in the little boy's heart that the exposure of the fabrication makes him feel more depressed and disappointed even than being badly beaten?

Actually these seemingly puzzling questions can be easily understood and answered when we elevate our insight into the story from a purely phenomenal level to a metaphysical, allegorical level. If we look at the entire novel as an integrated, organic whole, and examine this episode as an indispensable link in the long narrative chain of the novel, especially when we juxtapose it with the allegorical scene rendered at the very beginning—a woman desperately crying in a rainy night—it suddenly becomes clear that Lulu's story, just like all the other episodes in the novel, is actually an existential allegory elaborated by the author to illuminate the helpless human condition. For the little boy, the imagined "big brother" represents his eager hope for support, for strength, a desperate "scream" for help to the world when trapped in miserable conditions. The exposure of the fabrication, on the other hand, implies the shattering of the hope, the fruitlessness and vainness of the "scream" in the little boy's eyes.

If the first half of the episode—the story of the fabricated "big brother"—unveils the spiritual and somewhat fantastic side of Lulu's life, the second half, on the other hand,

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<sup>44</sup> 后来我才知道鲁鲁其实没有哥哥，但我对这个事实一直保持沉默，这样孩子就不会感到我注意了他的编造。孩子在孤立无援的时候，寻求他想象中哥哥的支持。我知道想象和希望对于他的重要和必需，事实上对于我也同样如此。YHZPJ vol.3: 98.



ruthlessly displays the realistic side of the little boy's life: his extremely grim existential situation.

As Lulu's story further unfolds, we are surprised to find that his mother turns out to be Feng Xiuqing, the once plump, sexy, and shy beauty of South Gate, who now makes a living by selling her labor in the daytime and her body at night. Evidence shows that the beauty-turned-single-mother, under the despairing living condition, has lost not only her physical charms, but also her virtues. Despite the fact that Lulu is a lovely and conscientious boy, she, incompatible with her role as his mother, abuses him. Suffering unbearable starvation and her mistreatment, Lulu still loves her.

One night, Feng Xiuqing is unexpectedly taken away by the police during her sexual intercourse with a guest, and consequently Lulu suddenly becomes an orphan. Next morning, Lulu appears in front of the police station, declaring: "I come here to take my mom home." Defying the police who want to put his mom in prison, he warns them with surprising composure, "You can't send my mom away." He thinks his reason is sufficiently persuasive, "If you sent my mom away, who would look after me?" Unfortunately yet naturally, his reasoning and requests amount to nothing for the police; they simply ignore him and put his mom in prison. After spending several days with a young blind man, an old drunkard, and a paranoid woman in her fifties together in an asylum, Lulu starts his well-planned, long journey to the prison, trying to reunite with his mom. When he finally arrives at the prison with all his bedding and belongings, he requests the prison police to allow him to live together with his mom in her prison cell. Not out of our expectation, his request is rejected again. In the end, Lulu becomes a

homeless child living in the open outside the walls of the prison, in hopes of seeing his mother, who passes by him on her way to the fields every day.

At this point the implications of the episode as a whole fully come to light: If the imagined “big brother” cannot give Lulu a supporting hand, neither can his real mother. The grim reality is: For the pitiful little boy, not only is his hope, constructed by imagination, shattered, his realistic request is also rejected. Lulu’s life story proves to be a dual tragedy: all his “screams,” all his hopes, in imagination or in reality, fantastic or realistic, eventually turn into nothing in this indifferent and helpless world. For him, there is simply no way out.

Apart from its transcendental and metaphorical meditation on the universal human condition, Lulu’s story also casts fierce sarcasm on the absurdity of China’s prison system: A supposedly humanitarian and just system, which is purported to reform wicked people’s mentality and to better people’s lives, eventually puts innocent people into miserable situations without showing any justice and mercy. This theme actually reveals an important aspect of Yu Hua’s thought—the pursuit of historical authenticity, a topic which I will exploit later in this chapter.

Now let’s turn attention to the episode of Su Yu’s death, one of the shortest, but the most exquisitely depicted and most thought-provoking episode in the novel.

There is no doubt that Su Yu is the most touching and unforgettable image in the novel, the only person to whom the first-person narrator pays all his respect, praise, and sympathy without any reservation, despite the fact that he was once a juvenile delinquent

from a legal point of view, and that his story only lasts towards the middle of the novel and then suddenly ends due to his unexpected death.

For the country boy Sun Guanglin, Su Yu, the handsome, reticent, lonesome, shy, and good-tempered teenager from a doctor's family is both a trustworthy friend and a mentor. In the novel, not only has the pure and sincere friendship from Su Yu long warmed his heart, Su Yu's rich knowledge and profound thought of physiology, growth, and life have also encouraged and enlightened him. The narrator presents several occasions in the novel on which he is saved by Su Yu from feelings of despair and helplessness caused by his astonishing ignorance and isolation. Unfortunately, for all the superficial maturity in his thought and his calm and rational disposition, Su Yu encounters all the physiological and psychological pains that a normal male adolescent usually encounters during his growth. Like all his peers, he has also accumulated much curiosity with sex and is also confused with and tortured by strong sexual desires, which later turn his life into a tragedy. The darkest moment in Su Yu's life comes on a summer day in a secluded alley, where the young man, who has just reached his physiological maturity, under the strong drive of uncontrollable desire for female, is captivated by a plump, newly married young woman, and muddle-headedly holds embraces her. This action costs him one year in a juvenile labor-and-reform camp as well as his dignity and reputation. Actually in the novel, all the tragedy of Su Yu's life culminates in death. As with the unexpected and shocking effect of his death itself, the narration of his death also starts with suddenness and straightforwardness:

Su Yu, who habitually got up early, was plunged into a comma caused by a cerebral hemorrhage that morning. The remaining intellect and consciousness could only

make his eyes open slightly; with an extremely soft and dim look in his eyes, he let out his last scream for this world to help him.<sup>45</sup>

In the face of death, the ultimate destruction of life, Su Yu “silently” and desperately lets out his last “scream” to this world for salvation, with an “extremely soft and dim look in his eyes,” as well as all the strangeness and abnormality of his behavior—a person who habitually gets up early “unusually” stays all the morning in bed; moreover, he hasn’t done the work assigned to him: fetching back hot water for the whole family as he usually does. Under normal circumstance, such strange and abnormal behavior is sufficient to draw his family’s attention. Unfortunately Su Yu’s story doesn’t go this way. Then, in the face of the desperate “scream” from the hopeful teenager, what response does he get from the world?

The first person who passes by him that morning is his mother. The only response she makes to the unusual “laziness” of her usually obedient and dutiful eldest son is her many complaints after finding that he didn’t fetch the hot water back as usual. “She did not cast even one glance at my friend, who was struggling in his miseries” (*YHZPJ* vol.3: 90). Then comes his father. The responses he makes to Su Yu are nothing but many rude orders and reprimands. His son’s “slightly opened eyes,” silence, and reticence only evoke his irritation. Su Yu’s younger brother Su Hang is the last person to pass by him that morning. He does feel strange about his elder brother’s “unusual laziness” and “the unbelievable eyesight and the look on his face,” but he leaves indifferently anyway. “Su Hang, like his parents, walked towards the door of the house, without looking at his elder brother; he opened the door.”

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<sup>45</sup> 一贯早起的苏宇，在那个上午因为脑血管破裂陷入了昏迷。残留的神智使他微微睁开眼睛，以极其软弱的目光向这个世界发出最后的求救。*YHZPJ* vol.3: 89.

That was the influx of the last stream of light; it made Su Yu's life return to the last consciousness before his death. He screamed to his younger brother from his heart; the only response he got was the closing of the door.<sup>46</sup>

A human being standing alone on the brink of the horrible abyss of death, he makes desperate "screams" to this world for help; the only response he receives from the world is "the closing of the door"—within my reading experience, no other scene in modern Chinese literature is as touching and penetrating as the one described here, and no other allegory is as profound and incisive as the one elaborated here in presenting the helplessness and hopelessness of the human condition and the indifference of human relations and the world.

Su Yu's death as an existential allegory obviously has multi-layered implications. The episode, as just discussed, first points to the indifference of human relations, and to the underlying cause of the indifference: the selfishness of human nature. As displayed in this episode and in other episodes as well, human beings think and behave only for their own interests and good; their care, affection, and sympathetic sight never stretch beyond their own egos. In the face of Su Yu's extremely miserable and dangerous situation—on the very brink of death, none of his family, who are supposed to be the closest and dearest people to him in the world, ever tries to judge and consider the situation from his perspective and for his good; they are instead only concerned with and irritated by the damage of their interest—they can't enjoy hot water as usual, as a result of Su Yu's unusual and somewhat strange behavior. Their misinterpretation of Su Yu's highly dangerous existential situation as "laziness" is obviously both a direct result of their self-

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<sup>46</sup> 那是最后一片光明的涌入，使苏宇的生命出现回光返照，他向弟弟发出内心的呼喊，回答他的是门的关上。YHZPJ vol.3: 91.

centered thinking and an evident testimonial to their selfish human nature. The narrator does notice and mention the fact that all the sounds they have made—going up and down the stairs, opening and closing the doors, preparing breakfast in the kitchen, washing their faces and brushing their teeth, etc.—do objectively delay the process of his dying.

However, in light of Yu Hua's point of view, these unconscious "positive" actions are actually interference with the natural process rather than attempts or efforts of salvation. At this point, we actually arrive at an important point that Yu Hua attempts to convey with the story of Su Yu's death: In the despairing world, human beings can never count on their fellow men for salvation. The reason is quite simple—because humanity is by nature selfish.

If, trapped in the boundless darkness of a rainy night, our desperate "screams" cannot be heard by our fellow men, then naturally the questions arise: Can the "screams" be heard by nature? Can we expect Mother Nature or our "spiritual homeland," as it is so enthusiastically and devoutly named by many Chinese Nature Poets, to save us?

In the novel, Yu Hua provides an unequivocal answer to these questions. Here I feel it necessary to clarify a fact that, actually, in the preceding account of Su Yu's death, I ignored the involvement of nature in this course and the underlying implications of the involvement as well. In the course of Su Yu's dying, nature, the sunshine, seems to have played a much more impressive role than any human beings. In such a short episode of only two-pages, the narrator surprises us by mentioning four times how the sunshine slows down, blocks, and even temporarily reverses the course of the young man's fateful sinking into the abyss of death. To our great surprise, as revealed in the novel, nature

seems to be much more friendly than human beings in treating the innocent young life.

Here Yu Hua provides us with such a seemingly touching existential picture: Standing on the boundary between life and death, a human being makes his desperate “scream” to this world for help. While all other human beings keep silent and indifferent, nature gives him a warm “response,” though the “response” is too faint to save him from sinking into the fateful abyss.

Nature is not only “friendly,” but also beautiful. In this novel, almost all the charming and touching natural scenes are related to the sunshine, and the sunshine undoubtedly is the most unforgettable natural image in the novel. The glimmering sunshine seems to be everywhere in the novel, providing some decoration for this otherwise colorless, lifeless, and despairing world.

For all its physical beauty and charm and superficial friendliness, nature, however, eventually remains aloof from and inaccessible to human beings. It is beautiful for its own sake, and not intended to please human beings. As in the case of Su Yu’ death, the sunlight, like all the noise made by the human beings, does *objectively* constitute a powerful strength to check the course of his sinking into the fateful abyss of death, but it does this also for its own sake, and not intended to save the pitiful young man from his misery. To our great disappointment, the sunshine is also indifferent to human beings, just as all their fellow men are. Here we actually arrive at an important aspect of Yu Hua’s view of nature—his tendency to de-ethicize nature, a legacy of Taoism which basically holds a non-moralistic view of nature.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> As far as view of nature is concerned, traditionally there are two major trends in Chinese culture. While Confucians uphold a basically moralistic view, insisting that there is an ethical order behind nature, which expresses itself in the successive changes of Mandate of Heaven in the past political history, Taoists advocate a non-moralistic view and think Heaven and Earth are inhumane. Accordingly, there are also two

Compatible with traditional Chinese cosmology, nature in the novel is also represented as an organic system, with its own will—it can “swallow” human life and can “watch” people with its “eyes.” Unlike the mainstream traditional Chinese view which tends to conceive of nature as a refuge for human beings to escape disasters and suffering, nature is depicted here basically as a vicious force against human beings. It not only constitutes a source of human suffering and misery—the river claiming human life, the flood destroying the imminent harvest, the mountain disabling a healthy man, etc. but also is indifferent to human suffering and misery. After the river claims the narrator’s younger brother’s life, the novel reads:

The flowing sound of the river was as crispy and charming as usual. The river which just swallowed my younger brother’s life, did not change even a bit of its commonly assumed quietness. I gazed at the lamp light from the village in the distance, some noisy human sounds floated over with the wind. My mother’s howling cry interrupted now and then, along with the sobbing of several other women accompanying her. This is the remote setting mourning the passing of a life. The river which had just swallowed a life, however, seemed as if nothing had ever happened. It is at that moment that I knew a river has its life too; it swallowed my younger brother, because it needs other lives to complement its own life. The women crying in the distance and the men in their grief alike, need others’ lives to complement their own lives. They cut down vegetables growing happily in the fields, or slaughter a pig. Human beings who swallow

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main tendencies regarding nature within Chinese literature. While a majority of Chinese poets adhere to the Confucian view of nature and uphold the friendly quality of nature, some poets such as Li He and Yang Wanli (1127-1206), however, inherit the Taoist legacy and believe in the hostility of nature to human beings. For a balanced and exhaustive analysis of Chinese view of nature, see Schmidt 1976. Judging from the thought as displayed in the novel, Yu Hua’s view of nature is basically Taoist, though there are clear traces of Confucian influence.



other lives, would also look as if nothing had ever happened, just as the river did at this moment.<sup>48</sup>

In face of the death of a human being, while other human beings, maybe out of the sympathy for their own inevitable fate, at least shed some tears to indicate their sadness at the passing of a fellow man's life, nature remains indifferent and looks as if nothing had ever happened. It does not care. Therefore the seemingly "friendly" and "merciful" image of nature is nothing but a beautiful yet deceptive illusion constructed by human imagination to fulfill a psychological need. This readily reminds us of the perception of the great Taoist master Laozi, who insists that "Heaven and Earth are merciless, treating all the things as straw dogs" (*Dao De Jing*: Stanza 5).<sup>49</sup> Moreover, the scene depicted here, where human beings, nature, and all the things on the earth kill each other for their own good, and are completely indifferent to each other's suffering, might stun many Chinese people who are intoxicated with the wonderful picture of *tian ren he yi* or harmony between Heaven and human beings.

Nature, as demonstrated in another place of the novel, not only is indifferent to human suffering, but also, with all its mysteriousness, remoteness, and nothingness, imposes awe, pressure, and enormous restraint on human beings:

The sky at that time was so blue that it made people feel remote, deep, and bottomless; the sky was watching us. The three children were enshrouded by the

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<sup>48</sup> ...河水流淌的声音与往常一样清脆悦耳。刚刚吞没了我弟弟的河流，丝毫没有改变一如既往的平静。我望着远处村里的灯火，随风飘来嘈杂的人声。母亲嘶叫般的哭声时断时续，还有几个女人为了陪伴我的母亲所发出的哭声。这就是哀悼一个生命离去的遥远场景。刚刚吞没了一个生命的河流却显得若无其事。我是在那个时候知道河流也是有生命的，它吞没了我的弟弟，是因为它需要别人的生命来补充自己的生命。在远处哭喊的女人和悲痛的男人，同样也需要别人的生命来补充自己的生命。他们从菜地里割下欢欣成长的蔬菜，或者将一头猪宰杀。吞食了另外生命的人，也会像此刻的河水一样若无其事。YHZPJ vol.3: 28.

<sup>49</sup> 天地不仁，视万物为刍狗。《道德经 第五章》。

enormous emptiness and nothingness; a devout shiver arose in my heart. The wide sky gave me no place to hide.

...the reverence and awe to the sky are the first restraint I feel in my life. Even up to now, I still might suddenly feel I was being tracked by a pair of eyes, with nowhere to hide, and my privacy is not secure and reliable, it faces exposure at any moment.<sup>50</sup>

The dual and seemingly contradictory process of simultaneously personifying nature—to conceive of the sky as the personified Heaven, the land as the personified Earth, for example—and distinguishing the now personified nature from human beings, actually is one of the most important aspects of traditional Chinese thought. This can be seen in many Confucian masters such as Confucius, Dong Zhongshu, and some others, and has long been accepted by Chinese people as an important part of their worldview. Here we once again arrive at a profound continuity of Yu Hua's view of nature to the grand tradition of his culture.

At his point, the message that Yu Hua attempts to convey with his observation of nature becomes quite clear: In the hopeless and indifferent world, the attempt to take refuge in nature, as many Chinese Nature Poets advocated, is merely a self-deceptive illusion. In the despairing world, if human beings' "screams" for salvation cannot be heard by their fellow men, their appeal to nature will also fail. In the novel, actually all the doors to salvation—hope, fellow men's sympathy and compassion, and nature—are closed. The grim fact is: no matter how hard human beings try, their desperate "screams" can never go beyond the boundary of the despairing world.

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<sup>50</sup> 那时的天空蓝得令人感到幽深无底，天空在看着我们。三个孩子被一种巨大的虚无笼罩着，我内心升起一股虔诚的战栗，辽阔的天空使我无法隐藏。  
...对天空的敬畏，是我心里最初感到的束缚。直到现在，我仍会突然感到自己正被一双眼睛追踪着，我无处可逃，我的隐私并不安全可靠，它随时面临着被揭露。YHZPJ vol.3: 165.

### **Life as a Process of Successive Disillusionments**

When examining the novel as a whole, we are surprised to find that, despite its loose structure, the seemingly random order of all the episodes, and the employment of such narratological devices as temporal and spatial dislocation, symbolism, occasional blurring of the line between reality and imagination, etc., the novel actually provides an all-around account of the narrator and main character Sun Guanglin's personal history, as well as that of some other characters. When piecing together all the narrative segments scattered over the episodes, we have no difficulty in getting a clear line of Sun Guanglin's life story. He is born into an ordinary country family located in a border area between the countryside and the city, which provides him with a perfect opportunity to observe both sides of the world: the countryside and the city. He lives in a village called South Gate up to the age of six, then is adopted by an urban family: a strong national security officer and his extremely frail wife. After his foster father's suicide as a result of the exposure of his adultery and his ensuing fateful revenge against the woman who exposes him, and his foster mother's departure, he returns to his old home in South Gate when he is twelve years old. He stays there for another six years until he goes to college in Beijing.

Life, as demonstrated by Sun Guanglin's personal experience, is presented as a dual process in the novel. For Sun Guanglin, growth means at once a long, continuous journey from one disillusionment to another and a gradual course of being alienated from others. In the process of his growing, Sun Guanglin has not only experienced and witnessed the collapse or bankruptcy of almost all the positive and beautiful human relations and values, which are often enthusiastically lauded and even worshiped by human beings, he has also

gradually abandoned or been abandoned by almost all other human beings and become more and more alienated and lonely.

As presented in this novel, human life has never been treated with any sense of dignity and sublimity, even from its very beginning. The coming into being of a new life is viewed as nothing more than a by-product of the satisfaction of sexual desire, a by-product which is despised as burdensome and troublesome, evoking only aversion and rejection. In the novel, the author dedicates an entire episode to telling the story of Sun Guanglin's birth. Narrated in the form of an old Communist cadre's memoir, from the cadre's point of view, and in a half joking, half sarcastic tone, the episode is presented as less a story about a new life's birth than a funny anecdote about an unusual sexual intercourse. As the story begins, Sun Guangcai, Sun Guanglin's young father has just returned home from about half a month's trading vegetables. Being suppressed for so many days, his sexual desires have already reached the boiling point. He runs to the fields to call his wife as soon as he gets off the bus. In the mocking laughter of her fellow women farmers, his wife sheepishly follows him home. However, the man is not even patient enough to reach his own home; he drags his woman into a fellow villager's house at the far end of the village, "carrying on the mission of desires on a long bench." As the narrator testifies, "the sexual intercourse of my father and mother on the long bench, becomes the very beginning of my long life." As the fetus becomes bigger and bigger inside her belly, the woman temporarily loses the ability to work in the fields. Then she assumes the task of making food for her husband at home and then sending it to him in the fields. She doesn't miss her task even when she goes to labor. To our great surprise, that day the usually shy and obedient woman assists herself to deliver a baby boy; and

after that, she sends food to her husband in the field, only a little later than usual. She is harshly cursed by her husband because of the delay. The irresponsible, lustful, and tyrannical father, once talks about the process of his son's birth in a sneering tone. Pointing to a hen not far away, with strong alcohol breath, he tells his son: "Your mom pushed you out just like it lays an egg."

The story, if stripped the humorous and lightly sarcastic tone surrounding the narration, actually exposes a grim reality: Even from its very beginning, has life not been treated with the due respect it deserves. In the eyes of Sun Guangcai, the happiness and excitement that the birth of a new life brings about cannot even measure up to the strength of temporary hunger. Actually, with a new life coming into being, there is no happiness, no excitement, and no celebration at all. The only things we have here are indifference and silence, if not aversion and disgust.

During Sun Guanglin's growing process, the beautiful auras surrounding human relations and values generally viewed as "positive" shatter before him one by one. Therefore his life becomes a long, painful journey witnessing and experiencing an uninterrupted sequence of disillusionments.

Family, generally regarded as the most important and fundamental unit of a society, is the first image collapsing in Sun Guanglin's eyes. With all his personal experience in both his own family and his foster family, along with his observation and perception of the Su family, the beautiful aura surrounding family as a warm haven protecting its members from coldness, suffering, and hurt ruthlessly shatters before him. There are no such things as *qingqing* 亲情 or familial affections, *xiaodao* 孝道 or filial piety, mutual

understanding, mutual support, mutual trust, and mutual love among family members here. What are more often seen here are family members' nonchalance to each other's suffering, mutual suspicion, and even mutual hatred. Family here merely means several self-centered, selfish, and lonely individuals who have to live together due to their common blood or marital relation, and who have to endure each other's company.

At his own home in South Gate, his father Sun Guangcai is a tyrannical ruler of the poor family. As a son, not only does Sun Guangcai often humiliate, insult, and curse his own father, who is disabled by an accident, but also deliberately starves him—a behavior which deserves the highest punishment and condemnation in light of Confucian ethics and morality. As a father, the only care and affection he gives to his children are many reprimands and curses when they greedily watch him devouring the only luxurious food the family can occasionally afford: meat. The only education he gives to his children is many beatings which often “make their skin and flesh break.” Despite the fact that his wife is an obedient and pretty woman, he betrays her and keeps a long adulterous relation with Widow.

The narrator's grandfather Sun Youyuan, a ghost-like old man, who always sits in a dark corner of the house secretly watching every happening in the family, proves himself an unbelievably horrible person. The sharp antithesis between the usually kind expression on his face and the affectionate looks in his eyes and the viciousness and cunning of the old man's heart might stun many. When he makes any trouble, or in order to achieve his own secret goals, the old man always frames his innocent grandsons as responsible for the trouble to dodge the curses and punishments from his son, or tricks his naive

grandsons into doing things which can only benefit himself but brings severe trouble and punishment to them.

The relationship among the three brothers also proves to be chilling and awful. In the novel one occasion testifies to this awful relationship best. One day, Sun Guangping, the narrator's elder brother, for no reason cuts the narrator's head with a sickle, and causes "all his face to bleed." As a natural response to this brutal abuse, Sun Guanglin goes out of his house to report it to his father in the fields. Unexpectedly, after he leaves home, his elder brother uses force also to cut his youngest brother's face. The big brother doesn't stop there, he goes even further: he eventually forces his youngest brother to collaborate with him to frame the innocent narrator Sun Guanglin. Under the conspiracy of the two brothers, the reality is distorted into a completely opposite story: the narrator cut his younger brother's face first; for justice to his youngest brother, the big brother had no other choice but to cut the narrator's face. The distortion actually turns the victim into a criminal. As the outcome of the event:

My father bound me to a tree. The beating of that time was unforgettable to me all my life. When I was being beaten, the children in the village stood around watching me with great curiosity and satisfaction, and my two brothers kept order there with high spirits.

After that event, I made two signs on the last page of my Chinese notebook, one big and one small. Since then on, I have recorded every beating inflicted on me by my father and my elder brother.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> 父亲将我绑在树上，那一次殴打使我终生难忘。我在遭受殴打时，村里的孩子兴致勃勃地站在四周看着我，我的两个兄弟神气十足地在那里维持秩序。

这次事情以后，我在语文作业簿的最后一页上记下了大和小两个标记。此后父亲和哥哥对我的每一次殴打，我都记录在案。YHZPJ vol.3: 9.

If his own world—the life experienced by himself in his immediate living environment, in his family and his village—is cold and despairing, how is the outside world, a world belonging to others, which he can only peer into and imagine? Is there another kind of world which is different in nature from the one to which he belongs? Actually, in the novel, the existence of the Su Family and his intercourse with the family, constitute a perfect opportunity for Sun Guanglin to observe and speculate on another kind of world.

In the novel, the existence of the Su family actually constitutes an integral and crucial link in the long chain of Sun Guanglin's spiritual growth. His friendship with Su Yu leaves him long-lasting, warm memories and feelings. His short-lived intimate intercourse with Su Hang makes him experience an unbearable loneliness in the crowd. And more importantly, the life of the privileged doctor's family opens a window for the country boy to the other side of the world, or to another kind of world. To some extent, his observation of the Su family and all his findings derived from the observation, constitute a turning point for Sun Guanglin to his psychological and spiritual maturity.

Sun Guanglin's intercourse with the Su family begins when he first sees the family. In the eyes of the innocent and naive country boy, who has only experienced and witnessed indifference, coldness, and even bloodshed in his own family, the city family apparently lives another kind of life, a life which seems at first glance much happier and much more harmonious than his own. Rather than framing and beating each other, the Su brothers keep a friendly and kind relationship, and they often play a game which moves the narrator deeply—running back and forth under a big tree within their courtyard,



carrying each other in turn on their backs. In sharp contrast with the dirty, ugly physical appearance and the brutal behavior of the adults in his own family, the doctor is white-skinned, with a mild voice and an air of composure. The everyday life picture of the family in the young narrator's eyes is especially touching and warm—One day, the doctor returns home riding a bike on the country road:

After the Su brothers went out of the house, they cheered and jumped for the scene appearing before their eyes. They ran to the bike briskly and happily; their mother stood in front of the surrounding wall, watching her family smiling.

The doctor carried his two sons on bike and rode on the little country road. The two city kids sitting on the bike let out exciting cries, and the younger brother sitting in the front rang the bell continuously. The scene evoked endless admiration from the village children.<sup>52</sup>

The extremely warm and admirable impression that the Su family makes on the country boy is further consolidated by his first contact with Doctor Su and his two sons. One day the young narrator suddenly catches a bad cold, running a high fever. Coincidentally, his family's mother sheep is delivering a baby lamb at the same time. While the entire family are gathering in the sheep shed looking after the mother sheep, the badly sick boy is simply left there unattended. Only after a long time, does his mother finally call in Doctor Su. To feel the temperature of his body, the doctor gently puts his palm on the boy's forehead. Maybe out of child's strong desire for protection from adults, unexpectedly, the doctor's professional behavior—to put a hand on a patient's body to

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<sup>52</sup> 苏家兄弟从屋里出来后，为眼前的情景欢呼跳跃。他们欢快地奔向自行车，他们的母亲站在围墙前，微笑地看着自己的家人。

医生带着他的两个儿子，骑上了田间小路。坐在车上的两个城里孩子发出了激动人心的喊叫，坐在前面的弟弟不停地按响车铃。这情景让村里的孩子羡慕不已。YHZPJ vol.3: 11-12.

feel his body's temperature—makes the young narrator “experience an affectionate and moving touch,” and evokes in his heart a deep feeling of a child's dependence on adults:

In the days immediately after the event, I often waited on the road which led the doctor home after his work, watching him walking in this direction from the distance, imaging those affectionate words he would speak to me while walking close to me, and expecting he would stroke my forehead with his broad palm once more.<sup>53</sup>

Unfortunately, the beautiful illusion of ideal and warm human relations based on his observation and imagination of the doctor and his family shatters very quickly. To his great disappointment, the country boy's long, eager waiting never receives any response; he never even draws any attention from the doctor, let alone the care, warmth, and affectionate words that he long expects from him. Even if the doctor casts a glance at the boy occasionally, the look he assumes is no more than that of one stranger looking at another. Moreover, with the deepening of his observation of and intercourse with the family, Sun Guanglin is surprised and dismayed to find that the seemingly happy and harmonious city family is actually as cold and despairing as his own family. Not only does the well-educated and seemingly decent doctor commit adultery with Widow, just like his own abject father, but the relationship between the members of the family turns out also to be indifferent.

For the young narrator Sun Guanglin, the truth about families that he obtains from his observation of and intercourse with the Sus, spiritually and psychologically is more shocking and despairing than his personal experience in his own family. Because the Su family, originally, represents another kind of life or another kind of world in the eyes of

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<sup>53</sup> 最初的日子，我经常守候在医生下班回家的路上，看着他从远处走来，想象着他走到跟前对我说的  
那些亲切的话语，并期待着他再次用宽大的手掌抚摸我的前额。YHZPJ vol.3: 12.

the young narrator, a life or world filled with warmth, affection, and care for each other, the grim reality of the Su family, with all its coldness and indifference, ruthlessly shatters Sun Guanglin's dreams of ideal family and ideal life, and finally jolts him awake from his beautiful illusions. There is absolutely no other kind of family, no other kind of life in the world. Beyond this indifferent, cold, helpless, and hopeless world, there is no other world. To the long, desperate "screams" and "waiting," no response can be expected.

If his intercourse with the Su family provides an opportunity for the young country boy to "peer"—both in the real and metaphorical sense of the term—into another kind of family, his adoption by a city family obviously provides him with an opportunity to "enter" into the city family and to experience personally another kind of life. This experience only serves to further break his dreams and illusions of the existence of an ideal family.

Despite the fact that he receives more care and better protection in his foster family than in his own family, young Sun Guanglin is required to do some household work such as fetching hot water for the family, which is potentially dangerous to him due to his young age. He also occasionally encounters intimidations and beatings. In light of the narrator's account, the grimmest reality of the family is that because of his foster mother Li Xiuying's extremely frail health and somewhat distorted mentality, his foster father, the extremely strong national security officer Wang Liqiang's sexual desires cannot be satisfied. As a result, he has developed an extra-marital relation with a young woman, which finally costs him his life. After his foster father's suicide, his foster mother returns to her parents' home in another town. Young Sun Guanglin is suddenly left an orphan and has to return to his old home in South Gate.

In the novel, the living conditions and experiences of the boy Guoqing, one of Sun Guanglin's best friends in Sundang Town where his foster family is located, are no less miserable than his. One day when the nine-year-old boy wakes up in the morning, he suddenly finds himself deserted by his father, who moves out with all the family's belongings to remarry a shrewish woman after his wife's death. When the pitiful boy reaches the age of thirteen, he is forced to abandon his schooling to make a living by carrying coal and delivering it to families who need it as heating fuel in the winter.

In the novel, the simple fact is, during Sun Guanglin's growing process, he has never witnessed even one single truly happy family, from countryside to city; rather what he has seen or experienced in families is nothing more than nonchalance, mutual betrayal, misery, and tragedy.

School is the second image that collapses in the novel. Completely different from the normally lofty and sublime image of school, an institution designed to spread knowledge and to promote the universally accepted human values of justice, equality, compassion, etc., the school depicted in this novel is a place no less morally depraved, intellectually obscure, disgusting, and despairing than any other places in the world.

Almost all the teachers appearing in the novel are despicable, disgusting, and even frightening figures, among whom Zhang Qinghai, Sun Guanglin's elementary school teacher in Sundang Town, is the most notorious. The male teacher speaks with a feminine voice, acts with "frightening tenderness," and can weave sweaters dexterously like a woman. To our great surprise, he displays all "his brilliant talent and outstanding

imagination” not in teaching, but in his invention of many “severe and unique” means to punish his students. His punishments are always carried out in an “unexpected and unpredictable” manner. As a powerful evidence of the “genius” of the teacher, during his four years of elementary school life in Sundang Town, Sun Guanglin has never found the teacher to repeat a punishment. As testified by the narrator, the teacher feels “a profound pleasure once he finds a chance to punish his students.” His completely arbitrary judgment and his unexpectedly severe and unique punishment make his students “shudder with fear as soon as they see him.”

The teacher also proves himself a morally depraved and despicable person. In order to maintain his authority, he doesn’t show any hesitation to frame an innocent student, and to force him with intimidation and terror to confess to “wrongdoing” he actually didn’t commit. At the news of the arrest of one of his congenial colleagues due to her “landlord” family background, the teacher shows no trace of sympathy, mercy, and sadness, but only gloating and pleasure.

The teachers Sun Guanglin meets in his secondary school when he returns to his old home in South Gate are no better than those in Sundang Town. In the novel, the only teacher who is put in a basically positive light and who is talked of by the narrator in a respectful tone is his Music teacher. The teacher has a refined demeanour and little snobbery; he is the only teacher there who can instruct in standard Mandarin rather than the local dialect; and he can utter such beautiful sentences as “Music starts from where language disappears.” However, even such an excellent teacher is finally detected to have committed adultery with a female student. More sarcastically, after the adultery is exposed, all the male teachers in the school simply can’t wait to read the female student’s

“confession,” in which she is ordered to write down every detail of her sexual intercourses with the teacher. The extreme excitement and satisfaction that the male teachers show in reading the “confession” readily remind us of both Wu Jingzi (1701-1754)’s *The Scholars* and Qian Zhongshu’s *The Fortress Besieged*, where hypocrisy and dirtiness constitute the most predominant characteristic of the “intellectual” mentality.

Under the guidance and direction of such teachers, it is only natural to find that the students nurtured on such education behave immorally and shamelessly. They seem to lose the basic sense of right and wrong, good and bad, dignity and shame, etc.—the fundamental ethical principles to which every human being should adhere in a society. The universally accepted and respected human virtues of kindness, mutual respect, justice, etc. are ruthlessly trampled. On the contrary, such unsavory behavior as insulting or bullying the weak, finding trouble with teachers in classroom, imitating and learning the action and speech of the hooligan, talking about pornography in public, etc. is acclaimed here as the criteria of a hero. Like their teachers, betraying, deceiving, reporting, or trapping friends is common social practice of which no one is shamed or feels dishonoured. The female students’ physical beauty and sensual charms, their rude, vulgar speech and demeanour and their empty mentality constitute a stark antithesis. This may surprise and disappoint many.

Apart from the lack of moral promotion and elevation, the school system also reveals its astonishing weakness in spreading knowledge that is basic, necessary, and useful for a human being to live a decent life in a society. Ironically and shockingly enough, as demonstrated by many cases in the novel, an “educated” person by such a system has not been taught even such basic knowledge as that about human physiology,

growth, sexuality, and procreativity, let alone the psychological, moral, and spiritual issues related to this knowledge. As a result, a student under such education is often confused with or even spiritually tortured by normal physiological phenomena and changes. In the novel, the author takes great pains to provide a vivid and detailed description of how much confusion, tension, bitterness, fear, and even moral burden such normal physiological phenomena as masturbation and spermatorrhea can bring to an ignorant teenager like Sun Guanglin. In one case, when he has just entered puberty, Sun Guanglin mistakes spermatorrhea for enuresis. The thought of enuresis at such an age evokes in him feelings of enormous anxiety and fear; at the same time, he is also tortured by the thought that he might have contracted some serious disease. In another case, the habit of masturbation at night not only brings Sun Guanglin a strong feeling of guilt and sin and tortures him with a heavy moral burden, but also “plunges him into the tension of the extreme horror of physiology.” Much worse, his friend Zheng Liang’s astonishingly ignorant and ridiculous statement—the amount of the liquid (semen) is limited in the human body; the more often you discharge it, the quicker it is used up—further horrifies him: He thinks that he will become old soon due to his frequent masturbation and spermatorrhea.

If we put together all these stories and examine them as a whole, we have no difficulty in finding that behind these funny and ridiculous stories about growth and the extreme ignorance and obscurity lies a grim reality: School, an institution and place widely viewed as a source of knowledge and human wisdom, actually provides little, if any, enlightenment, direction, and support for a human being during his/her growing

process. Life, as presented in the novel, becomes a long journey of stumbling on the dark night, filled only with one disillusionment after another.

In the novel, love and women, the two most beautiful and most frequently lauded things in the world, are also stripped their dazzling aura. As a matter of fact, there is no such a thing as love in this novel at all. The ties to bind or connect people together are desires (especially as best demonstrated by so many adulteries and extra-marital relations in the novel), norms, rules, and varied social relations prescribed by a society rather than love and affection. Contrary to the usually innocent, tender, and lofty images, women appearing in the novel always stun and disappoint us by the stark antithesis between their physical beauty and mental ugliness, or by the drastic degeneration of their physical appearance, morality, or mentality. Feng Xiuqing, once the “beauty of South Gate” and later Lulu’s mother, is eventually transformed from a beautiful, shy girl to “an unrestrained and shameless mother” and a prostitute. This makes the now grown-up Sun Guanglin witness for the first time in his life “the cruel withering of beauty.” Su Yu’s mother, the seemingly cheerful and warm-hearted woman always with a smile on her face, later turns out to be a mother who shows unbelievable indifference to her sons’ suffering and often curses them for no reason. Cao Li, the prettiest girl in school with an angelic appearance, to whom teenager Sun Guanglin devotes his secret love and admiration, is actually a girl of vulgarity and low-interests. She is later to be found having adultery with the Music teacher. Readers cannot ignore the most “famous” figure in the novel—Widow, who has so many “lovers” that she doesn’t even know who climbed into her bed the night before. The image of the Poet’s young wife, a minor character who appears in the novel



only for a while, also proves to be unforgettable. The woman, “whose cruelty is as outstanding as her physical appearance,” might stun many by her unique and creative way of insulting and punishing her husband. She “sets up all the confessions, promises, and self-criticism letters written by her husband on a wall inside the house like decorations, and makes her husband’s friends read and admire these letters when they first come in.”<sup>54</sup> Though the narrator does make some positive comments on his foster mother Li Xiuying for her unreserved trust in him while all the other people don’t believe him, the extremely frail woman, who hates the wind too much but loves the sunshine in an equally crazy way, and who often eats some white worms as medicine to treat her illness, looks ridiculous and weird. The Black-Cloth Granny, who claims that she often communicates with dead people, is more than horrible. In the entire novel, we simply cannot find even one single woman who is put in a positive light by the narrator without any reservation, including his own mother. For all the gray and ugly images of women in his novel, I still insist that it is not fully justified to call Yu Hua a misogynist, because in his novel, the male images are no less disappointing and disgusting than female.

Actually Yu Hua’s meditation is far beyond gender and gender relations, instead it targets the universal human condition and the nature of human life. If in Qian Zhongshu’s *The Fortress Besieged*, human life is presented metaphorically as an endless process from one “besieged fortress” to another, in *Screaming in the Drizzle*, it is allegorically depicted as a long journey walking alone on a boundless rainy night, filled only with successive disillusionments.

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<sup>54</sup> 将她丈夫写下的忏悔书、保证书、检讨书像装饰品一样在屋内墙上布置起来，让丈夫的朋友来到时先去一饱眼福。YHZPJ vol.3: 74-75.

### Loneliness as Universal and Historical Life Experience

Just as hatred is the basic life experience of human beings in *Opium Family* and many other novels by Su Tong, loneliness, which overshadows every character's heart like dark clouds, constitutes the universally shared life experience of human beings in *Screaming in the Drizzle*. Moreover, loneliness, as we will see later, also becomes the base and starting point of human relations and social intercourse.

In the novel, when we take a close look at the narrator and main character Sun Guanglin's growing process as a whole, we have no difficulty in finding that his estrangement and alienation from his own family, from his fellow villagers, and his feeling of loneliness as a result of the estrangement and alienation, constitute the core of his life experience during his growth.

According to the narrator's account, in the novel, his estrangement and alienation from his family originate from a devastating fire which destroys their house and all their family belongings. As mentioned earlier, after his foster father's suicide and his foster mother's departure, Sun Guanglin is forced to return alone to his own family in South Gate at the age of twelve. Coincidentally, on his way home, he meets his grandfather, who happens to come back from his uncle's place. Unfortunately, when the grandfather and grandson arrive home together, they unexpectedly witness a violent blaze burn their family's house to ashes.

The coincidence of the devastating fire's outbreak with the simultaneous return of Sun Guanglin and his grandfather together makes his father Sun Guangcai suspect that the old man and the young boy are "evil stars" to the family. He believes that disasters

will come down on the family again when the doomed two get together: “Sometimes, when I casually stood by my grandfather, my father would shout anxiously, as if the thatched hut he just built was going to catch fire again.”<sup>55</sup>

My grandfather died the following year after I returned to South Gate. His disappearance made my father abandon his suspicions of us. But my situation in the family by no means improved as a consequence. My big brother’s disgust with me was from my father’s influence. Whenever I appeared beside him, he would order me to get away immediately. I was drifting away from my own brothers further and further; the children in the village were always with my big brother, and simultaneously I grew apart from them too.<sup>56</sup>

Unfortunately, with the passing of time, Sun Guanglin’s estrangement and alienation from his family become worse and worse, finally culminating in his refusal to join his family in a fight against the Wangs due to a controversy over their private plots. Sun Guanglin’s choice not to join his family in the fight against others, not only annoys his own family, but also evokes enormous aversion and distance from other villagers. In light of the ethics universally cherished and adopted by the villagers, it is natural, self-evident, and morally righteous behaviour that a person takes his family’s side in a fight against others, no matter whether his family’s purposes, claims, and actions in the fight are just or not. A person who refuses to help and support his own family in a fight is shameful and despicable, and deserves humiliation and punishment. Under such circumstances, it becomes quite understandable and inevitable that young Sun Guanglin is generally

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<sup>55</sup> 有时我无意中和祖父站在一起，父亲就会紧张地嗷嗷乱叫，似乎他刚刚盖起来的茅屋又要着火了。

<sup>56</sup> 祖父在我回到南门的第二年就死去了。祖父的消失，使父亲放弃了对我们的疑神疑鬼。但我在家中的处境并不一次得到改善。哥哥对我的讨厌，是来自父亲的影响。每当我出现在他的身旁时，他就让我立刻滚蛋。我离自己的兄弟越来越远，村里的孩子总和哥哥在一起，我同时也远离了他们。  
*YHZPJ* vol.3: 8.

viewed as “an anomaly” by both his family and all the other villagers. As a consequence, he is deserted by all the people in the village:

A long period of solitude, loneliness, and disregard, made people feel as if I had stopped existing as a human being in the village any more.

[I] found myself to have been completely forgotten. I was arranged in a position where all the villagers knew me, but at the same time denied me.<sup>57</sup>

Ironically enough, Sun Guanglin has finally become a stranger or outsider to his own home. In such a living condition, it is only natural that young Sun Guanglin always has the “strange feeling” of being adopted by his own family.

Sun Guanglin is not the only person in the novel who experiences estrangement and alienation and is tortured by feelings of isolation and loneliness. As a matter of fact, all the characters in the novel, regardless of age, social status, and life situation, are seized by a chilling feeling of loneliness, though the reason for their loneliness might differ from one person to another.

All the members of the Sun family are lonely. The narrator’s grandfather Sun Youyuan, who is always sitting alone in a dark corner of the house after being disabled in an accident, and who is betrayed and deserted as a financial burden by all the family, is lonely. The narrator’s father Sun Guangcai, who thinks that he himself alone supports and sustains the entire family but is only repaid by his sons with betrayal and distance, feels lonely. The narrator’s big brother Sun Guangping, once the proudest country boy, who finally realizes the grim reality that he has to stay in the village all his life as a

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<sup>57</sup> 长久的孤单和被冷落，使我在村里似乎不再作为一个人而存在。

[我]发现自己被彻底遗忘。我被安排到了一个村里人都知道我，同时也否定我的位置上。YHZPJ vol.3: 30-31.

farmer when he grows up and who often displays “looks of emptiness and sadness” as signs of his strong feeling of inferiority and dissatisfaction with reality, is lonely. The narrator’s younger brother Sun Guangming, the eight-year-old little boy who goes to death alone in the dazzling sunshine, must also have felt loneliness in his young heart. The narrator’s mother, the only female in the family, who is simultaneously betrayed by her husband and deserted by all her sons, undoubtedly is lonely.

Inferring from the narrator’s account, we have no difficulty in knowing that, apart from the Sun family, all the other people in the novel are also lonely. Su Yu, as mentioned earlier, the most touching and unforgettable person in the novel, actually is also the loneliest in the novel. Judging by Su Yu’s parents’ indifferent attitude towards each other and their mutual negative and even aggressive comments, especially by Su Yu’s father’s adultery with Widow—a betrayal signalling the precarious relation between the man and his wife, it is very easy to sense the carefully veiled loneliness in the hearts of the two people. The narrator’s foster mother Li Xiuying, the woman “with big, blank eyes,” who has been confined to her house all day by her extremely precarious health, and who is highly sensitive to humidity and always stands by the window deploring the setting sun, is obviously lonely. This can be inferred from the reason why the family adopts the young country boy: They hope the sounds the boy makes inside the house “could, more or less, appease a little of Li Xiuying’s sadness caused by her isolation and loneliness.” The narrator’s foster father Wang Liqiang, the strong national security official, whose sexual desires can never be satisfied due to his wife’s extremely frail health and who is forced to maintain an extramarital relation with a young woman which finally leads to the destruction of his life, is lonely. This can be testified and confirmed by

the cold tone in which he talks about his wife's health, his many heavy sighs, and his nostalgia for the past. In the whole novel, the feeling of loneliness is most highlighted by Black-clothed Granny's experience: The horrible old woman hangs many dead people's photoes on all the walls of her bedroom and asserts that she often communicates with these dead people. Her strong desire to communicate with the people in the other world clearly reflects and confirms her great loneliness. Actually, in Yu Hua's novel, loneliness is a basic life experience, a grim psychological reality that every human being has to confront and deal with; it is an inevitable consequence and product of the helplessness and hopelessness of the universal human condition. In Yu Hua's novel, loneliness not only is the core of human experience, but also constitutes the starting point or base of human relations and social intercourse.

In *Screaming in the Drizzle*, as discussed earlier, all the human relations generally viewed as positive and beautiful are discredited and smeared, except for one—friendship. In other words, friendship is the only human relation which is put in a positive light by the narrator, though friendship never lasts long in the novel—it is always broken for varied reasons: death, physical separation, or interference of authority. When we carefully examine the stories about friendship in the novel, we find a profound link between friendship and loneliness. In the story, it is the full awareness of loneliness as basic human experience and sympathy for their fellow men derived from this awareness—I am lonely, others are lonely too; lonely people should be compassionate to each other—that give rise to friendship. In other words, friendship is nothing more than the reflection of loneliness. In the novel, friendship between Sun Guanglin and Su Yu,

the most beautiful and most exquisitely depicted human relation, actually generates from their strong feeling of loneliness and their mutual awareness of the other's loneliness:

I didn't pretend to have many friends any more; instead I returned to the solitude and started the solitary life of my true self. Sometimes I also could hardly bear the torture of emptiness caused by loneliness, but I would rather maintain and protect my dignity in this way than trade it for some seeming friends at the cost of self-humiliation. It was from that time that I began to pay attention to Su Yu. The lonely looks Su Yu displayed while walking along the roadside made me feel very friendly and warm...Only later did I know that the expressions I showed at that time not to interact with any classmates moved Su Yu too.<sup>58</sup>

In light of such speculations, it might be no coincidence that the friendship between grown-up Sun Guanglin and the little boy Lulu is also initiated by the former's awareness of the latter's loneliness and his helpless situation.

Here we actually arrive at the uniqueness, insightfulness, and profundity of the way in which Yu Hua conceives of and deals with the relation between friendship and loneliness. Far beyond the hackneyed optimistic view that friendship or any other intimate human interaction would help overcome or eradicate the feeling of loneliness, Yu Hua thinks that friendship not only cannot overcome the loneliness of human beings, but much worse, it might also make us feel more lonely and make us realize more profoundly the helpless living condition of human beings, because our sympathy for our friends is actually deeply rooted in our awareness of and sympathy for our own miserable

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<sup>58</sup> 我不再装模作样地拥有很多朋友，而是回到了孤单之中，以真正的我开始了独自的生活。有时我也会因为寂寞而难以忍受空虚的折磨，但我宁愿以这样的方式来维护自己的自尊，也不愿以耻辱为代价去换取那种表面的朋友。我是那时候注意起了苏宇，苏宇走在路边的孤单的神态让我感到十分亲切...事后我才知道，当初自己表现出来的与任何同学都不交往的神态，曾经感动过苏宇。YHZPJ vol.3: 64.

situation. In other words, in Yu Hua's understanding, friendship is no more than an extension of our sympathy for our own loneliness and miserable condition:

The looks and expressions of unreserved confrontation overflowing on the child's face and the fact that he was always helpless, made me link this scene to my own situation and think of myself. It was precisely from then on that I began to take him seriously. Looking at the innocence and naivety this little boy displayed even in his walking, warm feelings often welled up in me. It seemed that I was watching my own childhood walked around.<sup>59</sup>

Under such circumstances, it might be no surprise to find that when two lonely individuals come together in hopes of overcoming their loneliness, they only end up with their loneliness doubled or deepened. In the novel, when the boy Guoqing, "who was deserted by living people, started his intimate intercourse with the granny living downstairs, who was deserted by dead people,"<sup>60</sup> he not only still has to bear loneliness and misery as an orphan in real life; he is also imposed upon by all the heaviness and darkness of the world of the dead introduced to him by the horrible granny. While Black-clothed Granny asserts that she communicates with the dead people every day, Guoqing is deserted by his mother even in his dreams and imagination. The only feeling he gets from his interaction with the granny is awe of the Buddha and fear of dead people. Paradoxically enough, his intimate intercourse with the granny not only does not appease or overcome his loneliness; on the contrary, it actually also doubles his loneliness and fears. According to Yu Hua's perception and meditation displayed in the novel, friendship or other human intercourse can only provide some charming illusions of

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<sup>59</sup> 这个孩子脸上洋溢出来的和所有人对抗的神色，以及他总是孤立无援，让我触景生情地想到了自己。正是从那时起，我开始真正关注他了。看着这个小男孩连走路时都透露出来的幼稚，我体内经常有一股温情在流淌。我看到的似乎是自己的童年在走动。YHZPJ vol.3: 95.

<sup>60</sup> 被活人遗弃的国庆，开始了与楼下那位被死人遗弃的老太太的亲密交往。YHZPJ vol.3: 178.



warmth and intimacy among human beings; actually it can never overcome or eliminate the feeling of loneliness experienced by human beings, because loneliness is a human experience ultimately prescribed by the helplessness and hopelessness of the human condition.

As discussed repeatedly before in this thesis, in analyzing Chinese writers and their writings, it would be dangerous if we overlook their obsession with history and their strong consciousness of history. Yu Hua is no exception to this rule. As a matter of fact, upon close investigation of the novel *Screaming in the Drizzle*, it becomes quite clear that in his meditation on loneliness, Yu Hua not only displays, as I just analyzed, the transcendental dimension of his thought—conceiving of loneliness as a basic life experience universal to human beings, but also demonstrates his strong intention to pursue historical authenticity—to expose the historical truth of loneliness as the dominating human experience in a totalitarian regime. Actually in *Screaming in the Drizzle*, through his many vivid and meaningful descriptions, Yu Hua deliberately highlights the fact that the strong feeling of loneliness experienced by the characters is closely associated with the Chinese reality under totalitarian domination, characterized by the unprecedented strict political control over social life, nation-wide political isolation, and the loss of moral sense and compassion for others on the part of the citizens.

Hannah Arendt in her highly influential book on the origins of totalitarianism, incisively points to the inseparable connections between loneliness and totalitarianism. In the book, though she admits that loneliness is “one of the fundamental experiences of every human life” in modern times as a consequence of the industrial revolution and the

rise of imperialism, she emphasizes the fact that loneliness is the dominating life experience under a totalitarian regime; because loneliness, “the common ground for terror,” constitutes the base of totalitarian domination. By distinguishing loneliness from isolation, totalitarian government from tyranny, Arendt adeptly points out, “While isolation concerns only the political realm of life, loneliness concerns life as a whole. Totalitarian government, like all tyrannies, certainly could not exist without destroying the public realm of life, that is, without destroying, by isolating men, their political capacities. But totalitarian domination as a form of government is new in that it is not content with this isolation and destroys private life as well. It bases itself on loneliness, on the experience of not belonging to the world at all, which is among the most radical and desperate experiences of man” (1979: 475). According to Arendt, totalitarian government, whose essence is terror, is a much worse and more “tyrannical” government than any kind of tyranny; because totalitarian domination not only destroys the public realm of life and isolates people as all tyrannies had done, but also destroys the private realm of life left intact by tyrannies, deprives people of their capacities to think and create, and turns the isolated craftsmen (who still have ability to create) to the lonely laborers (who are completely deprived of the capacity to create).

In the line of Arendt’s speculation and logic, it is not difficult to deduce that when people have been completely deprived of their abilities and capacities to create, the only thing they can do is destroy—to destroy the long established institutions, norms, and conventions, to destroy the universally cherished human relations, feelings, and values, etc. Moreover, under the overwhelming pressure of terror and anxiety it brings about, it is only natural to observe that the politically isolated people in a totalitarian regime, in order

to protect themselves from potential secret reports, surveillance, and persecution, or to show their loyalty to the regime, not only lose the basic trust, sympathy, and mercy for each other; they also often voluntarily work as guards or running dogs for the regime, and never miss any opportunity to spy on and attack their fellow men who are viewed or classified as real or potential betrayers or enemies of the regime. Contrary to our good will that isolation and loneliness would give rise to friendship, compassion, and other positive human feelings, actually the grim reality is that, in most cases, political isolation and the feeling of loneliness can only turn originally peacefully coexisting people into enemies. Actually, in *Screaming in the Drizzle*, some descriptions and perceptions made by Yu Hua, among which the event of Sun Guanglin's foster father Wang Liqiang's suicide is the most typical, fit Arendt's insight and my observations very well.

As I have already mentioned more than once Wang Liqiang's extramarital relationship with a young woman and his death in the previous section, I believe that even readers who have never read the original novel might have some knowledge of Wang Liqiang's story. What we are not familiar with in the story is how the adultery is exposed and the underlying implications of the exposure. The volunteer "detective" who discovers the secret and manages to catch the adulterous couple in bed turns out to be the wife of one of Wang Liqiang's colleagues, the man who shares the office with him. One night, the doomed national security official takes the opportunity of his colleague going on a business trip and brings his lover to his office to spend the night together. Right in the course of the couple's lovemaking, the colleague's wife, who asserts that she has been suspicious of and watched them for a very long time, suddenly unlocks the door using her husband's key, and enters into the office with unexpected swiftness. In spite of the

repeated supplication for mercy and the remorseful expression of the pitiful couple, the woman refuses to let them pass. As she tells them, “It was not easy for me to catch you.” The desperate national security official, in retaliation, blows up the spy’s house and then commits suicide. Ironically enough, the explosion actually only kills the woman’s two innocent children. The main target, the woman herself is left with only flesh wounded. Instead of feeling shame for her behaviour, the woman resumes her usual complacent looks shortly after she leaves the hospital. Half a year later, she is pregnant again, and the medical examination shows she is carrying twins. The woman proudly announces, “Two were bombed to death and I can produce two more.” In the woman’s behaviour and speech, no sense of shame, no regret and sadness for her own children’s death, and no sympathy and mercy for others’ suffering and death can be discerned at all.

Judging by normal logic, the woman’s action is more than foolish and absurd. Because her action, apart from inflicting humiliation and misery on others, could not bring any benefit to herself and her family, not even the illusive sense of honour—even in the totalitarian regime of the Mao era, such action as exposing something like adultery is scarcely associated with honour. Here the questions inevitably arise: What motivates and accounts for such an obviously foolish and nonsensical behaviour conducted by the woman? Are there any implications underlying this behaviour?

As the woman’s vicious behaviour can not be explained by concrete, personal reasons, the only thing we can do is seek answers in other areas or realms from a general and non-personal perspective. Actually, if we put such behaviour in the broad social and intellectual context of totalitarian domination, whose essence is terror, whose principle of action is the logicity of ideological thinking, and whose all-around political isolation

and hard-handed control only brings the feeling of loneliness to its people, our puzzlement can be easily resolved. First, as analyzed above, the all-pervasive terror of totalitarian domination completely destroys the basic sense of mutual trust among its people, let alone compassion and mercy for each other, and turns the originally peacefully coexisting people into enemies. According to Arendt, isolated people are “powerless” and “impotent,” because “power always comes from men acting together” (1979: 474). Powerless, impotent, and isolated people definitely cannot impose any possible threat on the regime; the only thing they are capable of is watching and fighting against each other—exactly what the regime hopes to see and achieve. Second, because totalitarian domination completely destroys people’s capacity to think independently, and consequently the “logicality of ideological thinking” prescribed by the regime naturally becomes the guiding principle for their thinking and action. This, in my understanding, mostly helps explain why so many people under the regime, just like the vicious woman in Yu Hua’s novel, are voluntary and willing to be the defenders, guards, and even accomplices of the brutal, inhumane regime, in spite of the fact that they themselves are its victims as well. Finally, prolonged isolation, loneliness, and immersion in such Communist propaganda as collective spirit, asceticism, etc., not only make the people under a totalitarian regime lose the experience and pursuit of personal happiness and pleasure—it is both morally despicable and legally dangerous, as fully demonstrated by Wang Liqiang’s case in the novel—in themselves, they also motivate the people, out of jealousy or as proof of their loyalty to the regime, to voluntarily act to prevent others from seeking personal happiness and pleasure. As a result, personal happiness and pleasure are simply absent from the human experience under a totalitarian regime. In this

sense, people living under the total terror of a totalitarian regime are people whose human nature is largely distorted and deformed. Through the above analysis, it is safe to conclude that in *Screaming in the Drizzle*, isolation, estrangement, and loneliness, far from being presented merely as universal human experience, are also depicted as the dominating life experience of the people under the totalitarian regime, tightly connected with the concrete historical reality under the regime.

In the novel, feelings of estrangement, loneliness, etc. are also presented as a direct consequence of the intervention of authority and abuse of power—another defining feature of totalitarian domination. This is most manifest in the novel by the “insulting slogan event,” which takes place in the elementary school Sun Ganglin attends when he lives with his foster family. One Saturday afternoon when Sun Guanglin is in grade four, Guoqing and Liu Xiaoqing—Sun Guanlin’s two best friends in Sundang Town—rush to his home, telling him the explosive news that someone has written a slogan on the black board in their classroom reading “Downfall Zhang Qinghai (their teacher).” They both believe that the person who wrote the slogan is Sun Gaunglin; they flatter him in nearly a worshiping tone that only he has the courage to do such a brave and encouraging thing. Sun Guanglin, who actually did not do it, in embarrassment, honestly denies his friends’ claims. But they don’t believe him and confess to their true feeling that they also have such an intention. Not to disappoint his friends, Sun Guanglin expresses the same feeling to show his respect and support for his friends. To our great surprise, however, his friends’ seeming flattery and confession are actually a carefully devised trap, a part of their teacher’s plot to dig out the hidden offender. As the story goes on, it turns out that his friends are secret agents assigned by their teacher to try him. Young naive Sun

Guanglin has no way to know that, due to his usually defiant attitude towards the teacher, he has already been pinned as the only suspect of the wrongdoing. In order to make the young boy confess to the crime he did not commit, the two teachers (Zhang Qinghai and a female teacher) use up all the means they can image in dealing with a suspect: repeated interrogation, unexpected questioning, humiliation, intimidation, and physical confinement—he is ordered to stay alone in a little dark room all day at school, completely separated from other people.

When they find that all the coercion and intimidation don't work, the teachers change their strategies. By fabricating a story that a child who confesses to a wrongdoing he commits eventually receives praise instead of punishment, the teachers try to convince the innocent boy that "confession to a wrongdoing one has made is more praiseworthy than not committing any wrongdoing at all." The boy who doesn't give in under the coercion and intimidation finally confesses to the crime he did not commit under the teachers' "inspiration." Here it becomes quite clear that in the eyes of the teachers, who represent the authority and power of totalitarian domination, the most important thing is to have the defiance, rebellion, wrongdoing, or crime punished, and to maintain the absolute authority and power of the regime undamaged—it doesn't matter whether the people being punished have really committed the wrongdoing or crime or not, whether they are innocent or guilty. For the teachers and the regime alike, human rights and dignity do not exist. As indicated by the behaviour of the teachers, who use their authority to shatter the friendship existing among three innocent boys rather than to help them consolidate the positive and beneficial connection, the totalitarian authority actually

takes every effort to cut off the conducive connections existing among its people, and to push its people further into the miserable condition of isolation and loneliness.<sup>61</sup>

In his internationally renowned book *One Dimensional Man* (1964), Herbert Marcuse links the alienation of human beings with the “advanced industrial society,” where individuals are attracted and incorporated into the highly advanced system of production and consumption by all the material comfort, smoothness, and pleasure it brings about, and therefore lose their individuality and critical thinking, and become one-dimensional men. One-dimensional men who lose the nature defining a man as a unique individual, are inevitably seized by the feelings of emptiness and loneliness. Hannah Arendt, as mentioned earlier, also associates the loneliness experienced by modern men with the Industrial Revolution and capitalism. In both cases, loneliness is conceived as a by-product of a highly advanced industrial society which is characterized by its high productivity and material richness.

Totally different from the Western context as described by both Marcuse and Arendt, where loneliness is always associated with the high productivity and material abundance of advanced industrial societies, in Yu Hua’s novel, estrangement and loneliness are deeply rooted in the extreme material scarcity of an underdeveloped society as a whole

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<sup>61</sup> Actually my observation and analysis of totalitarian domination above are strongly supported by the life experience of the people in Stalin’s Soviet Union. Vladimir Shlapentokh, a Soviet-born scholar, in the introduction of a book on fear in contemporary society, confesses to his personal life experience, feelings, and thoughts that he obtained under the totalitarian domination the Stalin era. As he testifies, “the most salient characteristic of Soviet society” is “fear.” “Life in the Soviet system taught us also to recognize how the authorities and the opposition (or the leaders of any social movement), however noble their ideologies, tend to exploit real fears or create imaginary ones to achieve their goals.” He also exposes “how fear can demoralize people, how it can degrade even the finest human beings and the closest human relations” in a totalitarian regime. He confesses that under Stalin’s totalitarian domination there were “numerous cases of betrayal between friends and colleagues.” See Shlapentokh 2006:1-8.



and the poverty and miserable living conditions encountered by every individual and every family under the Maoist totalitarian regime. Here Yu Hua once again points to the profound links between the feelings of estrangement and loneliness experienced by its people and the grim historical reality under the totalitarian regime of the Mao era. In *Screaming in the Drizzle*, the extreme poverty and material scarcity characterizing a totalitarian, underdeveloped country, constitutes a crucial factor for the estrangement and loneliness of the people. As mentioned earlier, in the novel the old man Sun Youyuan's alienation from his whole family starts from the very point when he has an accident and permanently loses the ability to work. From then on, viewed as a financial burden, he is constantly cursed, humiliated, and punished by his son Sun Guangcai. The unfilial son goes so far that he eventually forbids his father to eat his full by taking away his rice bowl, even if the old man still wants to eat. Being humiliated and despised by his son, it is only natural for Sun Youyuan to lose respect from all the other family members including his grandsons. Abandoned by all his family, the lonely old man is forced to live in his memories of the past, to communicate with himself.

The narrator-character Sun Guanglin's alienation from his family is for a similar reason. As mentioned earlier, his originally harmonious relation with his family is suddenly broken and replaced with feelings of estrangement after his return from his foster family because his father is suspicious that it is the simultaneous return of his grandfather and him together that brings about the devastating fire that devours all his family belongings. In the eyes of the tyrannical father, the reunion of the whole family is totally worthless compared with the material loss of the family's goods. In the novel, until her death, Sun Guanglin's mother can't forget all the things that her husband gives

to Widow as pay for their sexual intercourse—a nightstool, a washing bin, etc.—another powerful evidence of what an important part material gain plays in a poverty-ridden rural family.

From the brief analysis above, we have no difficulty in finding that material scarcity and poverty constitute a crucial element affecting human relations and feelings. The perception is also negatively testified to in the novel by other descriptions that, in materially better off urban families, material consideration weighs much less in affecting human relations and feelings. In both urban families of the Wangs and the Sus, it is another factor—sexual desire—rather than material consideration that works as the decisive element affecting human relations. Here again we arrive at the realistic and historical aspect of Yu Hua's thought: his metaphysical meditation on the universal human condition is always integrated with and based on his observation and perception of the specific historical reality of a totalitarian China in the Mao era.

### **Death as the Other Form of Life**

Life and death, to be or not to be, the two ultimate existential situations, constitute an ever-lasting enigma perplexing, haunting, and attracting human beings who, from the very beginning of their existence, have been preoccupied with both the meaning of life and the secret of death, more than eager to know who we are, what we are here for, and where we will go. Naturally, life and death have become an uninterrupted theme throughout the entire history of human thought and world literature. In the last analysis, all human discursive creativity including philosophy, literature, arts, etc, ultimately aim

at deciphering the eternal codes of life and death. If we limit our investigation to literature for the time being, we find that many great writers in the world have once explored the theme of life and death in different ways from different perspectives in their works. Yu Hua, one of the best writers in contemporary China, who has long been obsessed with the universal existential truth, is obviously no exception.

As mentioned earlier, in the allegorical scene presented at the very beginning of *Screaming in the Drizzle*—a woman screams for help on a rainy night and the only responses she receives from the world are silence, absurdity, and death—the author has already, though in a subtle way, pointed to one of the dominating motifs of the novel: meditation on death. To our great surprise, within a novel merely of moderate length—about 220 pages—the author eventually depicts in detail eleven deaths, which take place in different places, assume different forms, and connote different implications.

When we go over all the deaths described in the novel, we might be surprised by an intriguing and meaningful finding: For all the many differences of these deaths in terms of their causes, courses, and ensuing impacts, they display an astonishing similarity. The similarity is that a person's death—the dying course, the atmosphere under which it takes place, its aesthetic effects and social impacts, etc.—is always perfectly compatible with his/her life—his/her physical appearance, moral virtues, mentality, aesthetic taste, etc. While a physically attractive, refined, virtuous person always dies a beautiful, lofty death evoking only the feelings of respect, admiration, and boundless sadness for the loss of his/her life, an ugly, vicious, and vague person, on the contrary, always dies a miserable and visually ugly death arousing only disgust and disdain. In the novel, the two cases of Su Yu's and Sun Guangcai's death demonstrate the above observation best.

In the novel, the death of Su Yu, the most touching and virtuous character, displays all the beauty and dignity of human life and all the sorrow for its loss. The life is so beautiful and so cherished that, far from the usually macabre and even horrible scene related to death, its end actually becomes a fascinating picture, a charming process, and a ritual of celebration:

Su Yu's body finally was involved in the irresistible sinking, faster and faster, and began to revolve. After experiencing a tedious and long suffocation, he suddenly obtained the tranquility of disappearance, as if a gentle breeze had blown his body diffused in an extremely comfortable way; he felt as if he had turned into countless water drops, disappearing in the air with a crisp and charming sound <sup>62</sup>

The depiction here of the end of an innocent, beautiful life being just like some clear “water drops disappearing in the air with a crisp and charming sound” reminds us of both the famous allegorical anecdotes of Zhuangzi's butterfly dream (*Zhuang Zhou meng die* 庄周梦蝶) and his shocking action of “drumming a pan singing” in mourning his wife (*gu pen er ge* 鼓盆而歌). In both anecdotes, Zhuangzi promotes the notion that actually there is no essential distinction between dreams (illusions) and reality, between life and death, which is merely an imagined boundary fabricated by human beings to confine and shackle themselves. Through his vivid and highly impressive description of Su Yu's death, Yu Hua attempts to convey such a speculation: If death is like water drops disappearing in the air, or like air disseminating into nothing as construed by Zhuangzi, it is in no way less desirable than life, especially in a helpless and disgusting world with all its ugliness and darkness. For the innocent, warm-hearted, lonely young man Su Yu, who

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<sup>62</sup> 苏宇的身体终于进入了不可阻挡的下沉，速度越来越快，并开始旋转。在经历了冗长的窒息之后，突然获得了消失般的宁静，仿佛一阵微风极其舒畅地吹散了他的身体，他感到自己化作了无数水滴，清脆悦耳地消失在空气之中。YHZPJ vol.3: 91.

has only experience indifference and despair in his own family and isolation and humiliation as a juvenile delinquent in the outside world, death, in some sense, actually means relief and freedom. Departing this disgusting world in the prime of his life, just like a flower falling in its full blossom, the young man makes his physical beauty, moral virtues, and moving image eternal. The link between beauty and death in Yu Hua's novel also reveals his tendency to aestheticize death—another legacy of Zhuangzi.

In sharp contrast with the fact that the loss of a virtuous, innocent life is always linked with beauty and unforgettable scenes, in *Screaming in the Drizzle*, a vague person who lacks moral virtues, often dies a miserable and visually disgusting death. This is best illustrated by the death of Sun Guangcai, a main character who is obviously the most morally depraved and vulgar figure in the novel.

Sun Guangcai, a brutal father, an unfilial son, and a disloyal husband, is “led by his extremely beloved alcohol to the grave.” During the last year in his life, he becomes uncontrollably addicted to alcohol as a means to drown his loneliness and sorrow. One night, while extremely drunk, he walks into a manure pit on the edge of the village on his way home from the wine shop in town, and drowns. “Next morning when he was found, he was floating on the manure water with his face downwards, and his body was crawling with maggots. He died in the filthiest place.”<sup>63</sup>

The description that while a virtuous person always dies a beautiful death evoking respect and sorrow from other people and a morally depraved person dies in a filthy place arousing only disgust and disdain, once again reminds us of the long cherished and widely accepted traditional Chinese belief in moral retribution rewarding the virtuous and

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<sup>63</sup> 翌日清晨被人发现时，他俯身漂浮在粪水之上，身上爬满了白色的小虫。他葬身于最为肮脏的地方。YHZPJ vol.3: 50.

punishing the evil, though expressed in a disguised and allegorical form. This perception is further confirmed by another descriptive detail in the novel. That night after Sun Guangcai falls into the manure pit and drowns, another drunkard, Old Man Luo, happens to pass by. In the moonlight, he mistakes Sun's corpse for a dead pig. Motivated by the thought that he has found a big fortune, he makes great efforts and draws the dead body out of the pit. After finding that the dead body is Sun Guangcai, he kicks it back again into the pit in great disappointment, with dirty manure water splashing up over his face. This detail linking a vicious human being's corpse with an animal's, in my understanding, apart from reinforcing the disgusting atmosphere of an ugly death, also betrays another continuity with Chinese cultural legacy. In light of Confucian morality, an unfilial son is often despicably compared to a beast/bird (*qinshou* 禽兽).

The minor characters' lives and deaths also fit very well the rule just mentioned above. For example, the death of Liu Xiaoqing's big brother, the only romantic and optimistic figure in the novel, who has brought to this lifeless, grey world much pleasure and laughter with the wonderful sound of his flute and his many humorous and mischievous deeds, is very romantic and admirable. He dies of acute hepatitis contracted in the countryside where he works as an "educated youth." Two strong girls who both love him very much take turns carrying him home on their backs and he dies the night they reach his home. Sun Youyuan's wife, the narrator's grandmother lives in a secluded and quiet way—she confines herself to her house all her life. She also dies quietly—she never wakes up from a winter sleep. Both her life and death takes place in the least noticeable way in the world. Sun Guanglin's foster father Wang Liqiang lives a tragic life—his sexual desires are frustrated due to his wife's extremely frail health. He also

dies a tragic death—he blows himself up after his adulterous relation with the woman is exposed.

The most shocking and most attentively depicted death, which sheds most light on the Chinese view of the world and death in general as well as on Yu Hua's individual worldview and meditation on death in particular, obviously belongs to Sun Youyuan, the miserable yet cunning old man who is often talked about by the narrator in a pejorative tone. Considering it an important event, the author devotes a whole episode of ten pages to describing his death.

It is a scientific view and common sense that the phenomenon which is generally named "normal death," in distinction from suicide and accidental death, is construed as a passive, natural process completely beyond human control. It is a natural event or happening rather than an action or activity. In the novel, however, what makes Sun Youyuan's death shocking and unique is that it unfolds not as a passive and natural process as is generally assumed, but as an action which can be predicted, arranged, and controlled by the dying person himself.

Sun Youyuan's dying process starts from his astonishingly brave behavior of cursing and punishing the Buddha. Towards the rice harvest season of the year he dies, uninterrupted rain falls for days with no sign of stopping, the ripe rice is about to be flooded, and the villagers are extremely anxious. Some aged villagers secretly set out their clay-made statues of Buddha on the tables and contribute sacrifices to him, kowtowing and praying to him to exercise his magic power and stop the rain. At this crucial juncture, a totally unexpected person stands out, and his suggestion of how to

cope with the coming disaster stuns the whole village. The person is Sun Youyuan. Rather than being frightened by the imminent disaster like all the other villagers, the usually timid and frail old man instead seems to be rejuvenated by the disaster. Carrying an old umbrella, staggering in the heavy rain, he visits one household after another and demands that they “throw the Buddha out of the house and make him soak in the rain!” He adds, “The Buddha can’t stand being soaked in the rain for even a single day. He will request the Dragon King to stop the rain when he suffers. The rain will stop tomorrow.” Coincidentally and ironically enough, Sun Youyuan’s idea to stop the rain by punishing the Buddha is perfectly congruous with the Communists’ call for getting rid of superstition. That morning, the team leader, followed by three village security members, searches household by household for statues of the Buddha. As a result, at least a dozen of Buddha statues are thrown into the rain that morning. Unfortunately, the rain doesn’t stop as he expected next morning, and Sun Youyuan becomes extremely frustrated and angry. The ensuing deed performed by him shocks the whole village—he eventually begins to curse Heaven, a kind of behavior which is universally regarded by Chinese people as the severest sin a human being can commit in the world. He howls towards the sky, “The Heavenly God! You just rain! Just screw me to death!” Surprisingly and interestingly enough, the rain indeed does stop at the noon, and the old man’s prophecy finally comes true. Looking at the sunlight piercing through the black clouds and shining again on the earth, those superstitious old men in the village, who originally thought Sun Youyuan’s speech and deeds absurd and blasphemous, now begin to believe with reverence and awe that he possesses the nature and power of an immortal. And the saying that Sun Youyuan is an immortal spreads in the village for three days.



What happens afterwards proves to be quite dramatic and intriguing. Ironically enough, after the rain stops, while Sun Youyuan is unanimously elevated to the position of an immortal and worshiped by the whole village except his son Sun Guangcai, he himself however, is plunged into the abyss of fear—his seemingly brave behavior of cursing Heaven actually makes his heart shiver with horror and the sense of crime. “At the moment when Sun Youyuan opened his mouth and howled towards Heaven, he was surprised to feel that something inside his body was flying out of his mouth. That thing seemed to have wonderful wings fluttering just like a bird.”<sup>64</sup> He feels his soul has flown away from him. The feeling that his soul has separated from him makes him extremely frightened and sad. After crying for a very long time, he makes up his mind to die, or precisely, to put himself on the track to death, because he believes that the departure of his soul actually signals the very starting (or launching) of his dying process prescribed by Heavenly Mandate.

Driven by the thought that he might be free of a financial burden forever, Sun Guangcai is very delighted when he is aware of his father’s decision and determination to die after his conversation with him. The villagers, judging from Sun Youyuan’s attitude towards the Buddha, also believe he is about to return to Heaven, his real home, because they think that it is only natural for an immortal to leave this earthly world. However, to Sun Guangcai’s great surprise and disappointment, his father’s dying process is unbearably slower than expected. “My grandfather lay on the bed and prepared to die soon, but he got more and more spirited after lying on bed for three days.” Though Sun Youyuan declares every day that he doesn’t want to eat, he always eats up all the food his

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<sup>64</sup> 孙有元在张嘴吼叫的那一刻，吃惊地感到体内有一样什么东西脱口而出，那东西似乎像鸟一样有着美妙的翅膀的拍动。YHZPJ vol.3: 142.

daughter-in-law brings to him. “In the face of an ideal death and real hunger, my grandfather had originally had fierce hesitation; but finally he submitted to the power of hunger.” In the mean time, his son Sun Guangcai becomes more and more impatient and furious; he thinks his father’s decision to die is nothing more than another scheme deliberated to torture him:

Actually my grandfather was by no means like what my father thought he was; Sun Youyuan’s thought that his soul had already flown away was his real feeling, and he didn’t have any doubt that he was about to die. At that time, my grandfather had already died psychologically, and he expected that his body also entered the eternal carefree realm. When my father became more and more impatient, my grandfather was also worried that he still hadn’t died for such a long time.<sup>65</sup>

Finally Sun Youyuan figures out why he hasn’t died for such a long time. One day he calls in his son and tells him in a mysterious tone that the reason why he still hasn’t died is that his soul, captivated by the fragrance of rice, hasn’t flown far away and still lingers nearby hiding among a cluster of sparrows. He asks his son to make several straw men and put them around the house to frighten his soul away. Considering his father’s request absurd and superstitious, Sun Guangcai simply ignores it and begins to curse his father. However, the old men in the village don’t think so; instead they believe Sun Youyuan’s feelings and thoughts are credible. One day several old men bring in two straw men to the Sun family’s courtyard, “their devout expression bearing a strange solemnity in the sunlight.” They put one against the courtyard wall and the other beside the window of Sun Youyuan’s room. Intriguingly enough, after the straw men are

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<sup>65</sup> 事实上祖父并不像父亲人为的那样，孙有元觉得自己的灵魂已经飞走是确实的感受，他对自己即将死去坚信不已。那时的祖父在心理上已经死去，正期待着自己的生理也进入一劳永逸的境地。当我父亲越来越不耐烦的时候，孙有元也为自己久久未死而苦恼。YHZPJ vol.3: 147.

brought in, Sun Youyuan's condition drastically declines. He becomes so frail that he can hardly speak, and he eats less and less. Finally, one day when his daughter-in-law brings food into his room, he makes no response. At this moment both Sun Guangcai and his wife think he has died. Sun Guangcai calls in some villagers to help him bury his father. Then a shocking and horrible scene happens. Just as the villagers are carrying Sun Youyuan's body, trying to move him out of his dirty and fetid room, the old man, who is thought dead, suddenly grins at them. The villagers are almost frightened to death. They put Sun Youyuan down and all run away in great horror. Actually the old man is still alive. More surprisingly, one day the old man eventually sits up from the bed and totters out of his room after lying in for more than twenty days. Just at the moment when all the people believe he won't die soon, unexpectedly, the old man suddenly dies the next morning.

From a scientific point of view, Sun Youyuan's unbelievably strange death—a well person who, though frail in his body, doesn't show even the slightest sign of death in advance, eventually dies just as he himself expects, predicts and arranges—obviously violates the natural physiological law of human life. However, if examining it from a philosophical perspective, we have no difficulty in finding that, behind this apparent violation of natural law lies a law of a different sort—Heavenly Mandate or Fate. Life and death, in light of the popular Chinese worldview, are determined by Heavenly Mandate or Fate. The violation of the “natural” law just works conversely to confirm the invincibility and absoluteness of Heavenly Mandate or Fate. In spite of the fact that there is no physical evidence for Sun Youyuan's imminent death, his defiant and blasphemous attitude towards the Buddha and his ensuing feeling that his soul has flown away from

him however, demonstrates unequivocally the sign of his death prescribed by Heavenly Mandate or Fate. In light of this kind of worldview, both Sun Youyuan's prediction, determination, and arrangement of his own death and the old villagers' action of making the straw men to assist and accelerate his death—a kind of behaviour which might be judged as inhumane by other cultures or people of different worldviews—are unambiguous evidence for their awareness of Heavenly Mandate and their willingness to submit to it. Here again, Yu Hua sheds light on some important aspects of the popular Chinese worldview—fatalism and the belief in existence of a soul. If we link Sun Youyuan's bizarre death with his strikingly unfilial behaviour of using his father's dead body as a weapon to fight against his enemies, it is not difficult for us to detect the element of moral retribution here. Moreover, through his detailed depiction of Sun Youyuan's death, Yu Hua also points to the spiritual dimension of death. The fact that a person who is physically strong enough to continue his life eventually dies at will explicitly indicates that death is not a pure physical, biological phenomenon; instead it is closely associated with one's psychological, mental, and spiritual condition.

The depiction of Black-clothed Granny's life and death is also very significant and meaningful. One of the most impressive figures in the novel, Black-clothed Granny lives an extremely bizarre and secluded life. Instead of interacting with the living people, she deals with the dead. She hangs dead people's photos all over the walls of her bedroom, and asserts that she communicates with these dead people everyday. Many years after her husband's death, she still keeps the eating habit she established when she dined with him because she believes that he is still watching her. In sharp contrast with the easiness,

comfort, and pleasure she obtains from her interaction with the dead, it is a heavy burden for her to cope with living people and the world these living people reside in. Actually life itself is a burden for her. In her life world, nothing is more horrible than the yellow dog who always crouches in the middle of the alley beside her residence. It always barks at her and assumes postures to attack her when she passes by it on her way to buy her everyday necessities. What she is worried about most in the world is that the yellow dog might die before she does. As she believes, if the dog dies before her, it will wait for her on the road to the underworld, and consequently she might still be harassed and intimidated by it in the other world:

Fear of the dog made her kneel down before the clay Buddha statue every day and devoutly pray the Buddha to bless the dog and to confer longevity on it. Every time when Guoqing returned home from school, the first thing she asked was whether the dog was still there or not. After getting an affirmative answer, she would smile with relief and happiness.<sup>66</sup>

Granny dies on her way home from buying a bottle of soy sauce, accompanied by Guoqing, who works as her bodyguard to protect her from the dog's intimidation. That day when Granny walks back from the soy sauce shop, she suddenly feels she has difficulty moving her legs. Then she walks to a corner of a house, sits down there lazily in the sunlight, and closes her eyes to have a rest, holding her soy sauce bottle with two hands. She opens her eyes for a while and asks Guoqing with a very weak voice whether the dog is still there. After getting a positive reply, she signs with relief and contentedly

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<sup>66</sup> 对狗的惧怕，使她每天都要跪在泥塑的观音前，虔诚地恳求菩萨保佑那条狗长寿。国庆每次放学回家，她最先询问的就是那条狗还在不在，得到肯定地回答后，她就欣然微笑起来。YHZPJ vol.3: 181.

closes her eyes again. Thinking she has fallen in sleep, Guoqing stands beside her “watching happily how the sunlight shimmers in the wrinkles on her face.”

Later, Guoqing borrows the theory inculcated in him by Granny herself to explain her death. According to Guoqing’s explanation, on her way to the underworld, Granny gets lost and therefore is frozen to death:

When she left for the underworld, she was so hasty that she even forgot to put on her cotton-padded clothes and to bring an oil lamp. The road to the underworld was too long, as if never ending; and it was dark and cold. She walked on and on along the pitch-black road and finally got lost. The chilly wind howled towards her from the front, and the freeze made her shiver all the way. Finally she could hardly move and had no other choice but to sit down. So she was frozen to death.<sup>67</sup>

The story of Granny’s life and death, in my understanding, at least conveys dual connotations. First, the easiness Granny displays in crossing the boundary between life and death—she can communicate with the dead; she dies on her way home from shopping as if she was taking a nap in the sunlight—further confirms Zhuangzi’s idea that there is no distinct line between life and death. Second, it also sheds much light on a popular Chinese view of life and death, and on the Chinese conceptualization of this world and the underworld. As indicated by Granny’s imagination of the other world and of her relation to the yellow dog, and by Guoqing’s explanation of her death, death, as many Chinese believe, doesn’t mean the end of life; it actually is the very starting of a new life in a different place. And the life in the other world or underworld is no more than a copy or “mirror image” of the life in this world. If a yellow dog harasses a person

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<sup>67</sup> 她去阴间的时候他匆忙了，都忘了穿棉衣和拿油灯。阴间的路长得走不完，又冷又黑。她在漆黑不见五指的路上走啊走啊，结果迷路了。前面呼呼的寒风吹过来，她被冻得直发抖，她实在走不动路了，只好坐下来。她就这样被冻死了。YHZPJ vol.3: 182.

in this world, it will still do it in the other world if they meet there again. The notion of the undifferentiated nature of life in this world and in the other world, along with the view of moral retribution, actually constitutes one of the most important aspects of popular Chinese thought and belief.

In his description of the narrator's younger brother Sun Guangming's death, Yu Hua once again displays his strong historical consciousness and his critical speculation on the mentality of the people under a totalitarian regime.

The boy Sun Guangming, under the influence of his proud eldest brother Sun Guangping, who is the leader of all the children in the village, obtains a sense of authority and power when he is little. In spite of his young age, he already has several followers. One summer noon, Sun Guangming, followed by one of his "subordinates," an eight-year-old boy, goes to the riverside to look for snails. While he is walking along the riverside seeking snails, the ignorant younger boy, fascinated with water, goes to the deep end of the river and suddenly starts to drown. He cries for help. Driven by the sense of authority and obligation to protect his "subordinate," Sun Guangming obviously exaggerates in imagination his own strength and thinks he can carry out the salvation easily. The actual process turns out to be completely different: While Sun Guangming pushes the younger boy out of the deep water and saves his life, he himself, after several fruitless struggles, is finally swallowed up by the water.

In the novel, while narrating the episode, the narrator deliberately highlights the difference in point of view between him and the other Sun family members in examining the implications of Sun Guangming's death. Incorporating the concept of time into his

discourse, the narrator views his younger brother's death as a pure existential event, not a tragedy in the common sense:

We do not live on the land; actually we live in Time. Fields, streets, rivers, and houses are our companions in Time. Time pushes us forwards or backwards, and changes our appearance... My younger brother carelessly goes out of Time. Once he breaks away from Time, he stops and becomes stagnant; we however, will continue to move forwards under the push of Time. Sun Guangming would see that Time has taken away the surrounding people and scenery from him. I have seen such a real scene: After the living people bury the dead, the dead will lie there forever, but the living will continue to move. This real scene is a hint Time gives to the people who are still drifting about in the reality.<sup>68</sup>

Completely different from the narrator's transcendent view of his younger brother's death, the other Sun family members, out of realistic, utilitarian considerations, deliberately wrap this event in political clothing, in an attempt to obtain some political capital and material gain.

After Sun Guangming's death, the saved boy's father comes to the Sun family and suggests on his own initiative to offer all his family's money to the Suns for compensation. However, at this stage, thinking that political capital is more important than material gain, the Sun family rejects this suggestion. Instead Sun Guangcai asks the saved boy's father to report his son's "heroic deed" of sacrificing his own life to save

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<sup>68</sup> 我们并不是生活在土地上，事实上我们生活在时间里。田野、街道、河流、房屋是我们置身时间之中的伙伴。时间将我们推移向前或向后，并且改变着我们的模样...我弟弟不小心走出了时间。他一旦脱离时间便固定下来，我们则在时间的推移下继续前行。孙光明将会看到时间带走了他周围的人和景色。我看到了这样的真实场景：生者将死者埋葬以后，死者便永远躺在那里，而生者继续走动。这真实的场景是时间给予依然浪迹在现实里的人的暗示。YHZPJ vol.3: 26.



another's to the authority and to request the county radio station to report on his son's "heroic deed." This request is soon satisfied:

Three days after my younger brother's burial, our cable radio speaker in our house broadcast Sun Guangming's heroic deed of sacrificing his own life to save another's. This was my father's most proud moment; for three days, as long as the speaker went on, Sun Guangcai always pulled over a little stool and sat under it. After my father's expectation was fulfilled at that moment, the excitement made him walk around like a happy duck. In the afternoon of a slack farming season, my father's stentorian voice sounded in the village's households:

"Have you heard of it?"

My big brother was standing under the elm tree in front of our door at that moment, gazing at his father with shining eyes.<sup>69</sup>

With their imagined status and aura as "a hero's family," the two men of the Sun family begin to design their dream-like future. While the father dreams of receiving an invitation from the government to ascend Tiananmen Tower as "a hero's father" on National Day, the young man hopes to be promoted as a government official as "a hero's big brother." For all the family's eager expectation and enormous effort to make their imagined status of "hero's family" recognized and rewarded, they fail completely. Much worse, contrary to their ardent expectation to be respected and honored, the family finally ends up being a target of ridicule by the whole village.

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<sup>69</sup> 弟弟葬后的第三天，家中的有线广播播送了孙光明舍己救人的英雄事迹。这是我父亲最为得意的时刻，三天来只要是广播出声的时刻，孙广才总是搬着一把小凳子坐在下面。我父亲的期待在那一刻得到实现后，激动使他像一只欢乐的鸭子似的到处走动。那个农闲的下午，我父亲嘹亮的嗓门在村里人的家中窜进 窜出：

“听到了吗？”

我哥哥当时站在门前的榆树下，两眼闪闪发光地望着他的父亲。YHZPJ vol.3: 31.

After the shattering of all their beautiful dreams, the two men of the Sun family “realize again the charms of money.” They go to the saved boy’s house on Chinese New Year’s Day, and demand RMB 500 for compensation. After their demand is rejected, the two Suns begin to destroy those people’s furniture. This event finally ends in Sun Guangcai being put in jail for fifteen days—the ultimate conclusion of his son’s death.

Through the above outline of Sun Guangming’s death and what happens afterwards, it becomes very clear that for the two Suns, their family member’s bereavement is less an existential tragedy arousing grief and the sense of loss than a useful instrument for their own purposes. For them, the excitement, happiness, and potential benefits the death could bring about far outweigh the sadness and bitterness they feel for the loss of a family member’s life. In this sense, the highly politicized attitude, thoughts, and behavior of the two Suns in dealing with their family member’s non-political death, can be properly regarded as a reflection of the highly distorted mentality of the people in a society where almost every aspect of social life is politicized and where the guideline for people’s feelings, thoughts, and behavior is “ideological thinking.” Moreover, the very fact that a human being’s highly virtuous and beneficial behavior of sacrificing his own life to save another’s finally ends in bringing to his family only ridicule, shame, and trouble, further testifies to the insanity and deformity of the society.

### **Personal Trauma versus the Iron Hand of History: to Live = to Die?**

When we take a careful overall examination of Yu Hua’s three full-length novels *Screaming in the Drizzle* (1991), *To Live* (1992), and *Xu Sanguan Sells His Blood* (1995),

we have no difficulty in finding that Yu Hua's novels undergo radical changes in many important aspects from the first one to the later two. Among all these changes, the shift in discursive or thematic focus is the most prominent. As I have made it very clear in the previous sections, the novel *Screaming in the Drizzle*, in spite of the fact that it is based on the author's observation and perception of the historical reality of Mao's regime, mainly focuses on the universal human condition and human experience. As I repeatedly emphasized earlier, in *Screaming in the Drizzle*, though history and historical consciousness are an integral part of the novel, they are only presented as remote and obscure social background, and are put in a dim light. In other words, in Yu Hua's first novel, the metaphysical and transcendental meditation on the hopeless, helpless, and absurd human condition far outweighs his concern with history.

In my understanding, as many other critics might also agree, *To Live*, Yu Hua's second full-length novel, which won him international fame through a prize-winning film adaptation with the same title, has essential differences from his first one in many ways. It actually constitutes a turning point in his novel writing career, though the novel was created only one year later than the first one. From *To Live* on, the calm, well-balanced, transcendental meditation on the universal human condition based on his personal experience and observation of the totalitarian regime in the Mao era is gradually replaced by the passions, anguish, and almost uncontrollable impulse to present the suffering and misery inflicted upon the Chinese people by the totalitarian regime, and to expose the brutality and insanity of the terrifying regime, though technically, Yu Hua deliberately maintains the same seemingly detached and calm narrative tone. In *To Live*, in spite of the residue of the speculation on universal existential truth, history looms large and in

most cases is foregrounded, where an individual's encounters and fate are always tied fast to the vicissitudes of the nation and to the historical process. In *Xu Sanguan Sells His Blood*, Yu Hua's obsession with history is expressed so intensively that the brutality, insanity, and absurdity of the regime and the historical process conducted by the regime become the sole source of the people's suffering and misery. In this novel, the transcendental dimension of his thought—his pursuit of existential truth—is almost completely removed from the text. To some extent, we might say that, from *To Live* on, the “sweeping historical vision” overwhelms the transcendental meditation in Yu Hua's writing.

As many critics have observed, the novel *To Live* represents an obvious “retreat” of Yu Hua's writing to both literary conventions and traditional Chinese values in many ways. Formally and technically, compared with the complicated and somewhat controversial structure of *Screaming in the Drizzle* and the highly experimental nature of the techniques and devices employed in it, *To Live* is a much more “simple” and conventional novel: Its main text is composed of a personal life story narrated in a completely chronological order and in a traditional oral “storytelling” pattern. Thematically and discursively, the dual effort to combine both a meditation on life, death, nature, loneliness, and the helpless human condition and the pursuit of historical authenticity in *Screaming in the Drizzle*, is reduced to one single purpose in *To Live*: to expose the suffering of the people under a brutal regime in a chaotic time. Though the transcendental dimension still remains in *To Live*, it is marginalized to the largest extent. Ethically and culturally, the heavily damaged traditional Chinese values such as filial

piety, family affection, women's submission to men, compassion, etc. in *Screaming in the Drizzle* are largely restored and re-established in *To Live*. And the highly iconoclastic and skeptical attitude towards life and the world expressed in the former, is also replaced by a self-contented, optimistic attitude towards life and the world in the latter. This is a topic which I will elaborate later in this chapter.

In *To Live*, the central character and narrator Fugui's personal history is divided into two distinct parts: life as a prodigal young master of a rich landlord family in his early years and as a poor farmer in his later years, with a fateful gambling loss as a watershed. The prodigal son ends up losing in a series of games all his family's property including their land and house to a so-called gambling master Long Er, who actually wins by dirty tricks rather than by skill and good fortune. This fateful loss not only makes the originally proud and rich landlord family utterly destitute all of a sudden, but also costs them the old master's life.

When investigating the causes of this dramatic event, which completely changes the destiny of Fugui and his family, we at first have no choice but to blame Fugui himself for all the tragedies. It is Fugui's moral depravity and weaknesses in character—his whoring, gambling, squandering, and such unfilial behavior as beating his own father, etc.—that is responsible for the tremendous suffering inflicted upon the family. However, with the further unfolding of the story, we are surprised to find that the actual historical process completely changes the nature of the “gambling event,” and turns it from misfortune to incredible good luck. Three years after Fugui loses all his family's wealth, the Communists win the whole country and seize power. While Long Er, who took over all the Xu family's properties from Fugui's hands, is classified and labeled a “despotic

landlord” and is executed, Fugui a poor farmer for only three years, narrowly escapes that miserable fate. Paradoxically and intriguingly enough, with the involvement and interference of national history, the fateful misfortune finally saves Fugui’s life. At this point it becomes quite clear that history—external social, political, and economic forces completely out of any person’s control—not only emerges from the remote and obscure background and comes to the foreground, but also constitutes the decisive agency in individuals’ encounters and fate. Here we actually arrive at the most prominent discursive or thematic difference between Yu Hua’s first novel and his later ones.

When comparing the two novels *Screaming in the Drizzle* and *To Live*, we find that, in spite of the fact that in both novels, human life is presented as a long journey filled with suffering, hardship, and misery, the two novels have essentially differ in their explanation of the causes of all the misfortune. Specifically, in *Screaming in the Drizzle*, as discussed earlier, adopting mainly an existential perspective, the author stresses the non-historical nature of the cause of all the characters’ miserable encounters. In light of the author’s speculation in this novel, it is the individual, family, natural disaster or accident that is largely responsible for all the human tragedy and misery. For example, almost all the crucial events accounting for the decline, poverty, hardship, and suffering of the Sun family—the fateful career failure of Sun Youyuan’s father as a leading local bridge builder; the accident befalling Sun Youyuan which permanently disables him; the unexpected devastating fire which devours all the family’s belongings; Sun Guangcai’s tyrannical control of the family and his immoral and disgusting behavior such as his adultery with Widow, humiliating and abusing his own father, molesting his son’s fiancée, and sexually assaulting his daughter-in-law; mutual suspicion and hatred among family

members, etc.—are scarcely linked to history or external political and social forces. In this respect, what happens to the two city families, the Sus and the Wangs, makes no difference. For both families, it is themselves who should be blamed for their unhappy and tragic lives. Both seemingly decent and well-educated Doctor Su's unexpected adultery with Widow, and Wang Liqiang's sexual frustration and his extramarital relations with the young woman as a consequence—the major sources of the two families' unhappiness—are more associated with personal desire than with any external forces beyond the family's reach.

Completely different from the personal and non-historical nature of the origin of human tragedy and misery displayed in *Screaming in the Drizzle*, in *To Live*, just as demonstrated by the “gambling event,” a person or family's rise and fall are closely linked to the actual historical process in the whole nation. In line with this view, another prominent difference between the two novels in characterization is also very significant and meaningful. In *Screaming in the Drizzle*, judged by traditional Chinese value system, almost all the characters have low moral standards, and almost all the families are split by alienation, mutual suspicion, hatred, or other morally negative behavior. In sharp contrast, in *To Live*, however, after Fugui's radical metamorphosis from a rich prodigal son to a poor yet affectionate and honest farmer, all the members of Fugui's family are inclusively people of decency and integrity. They are selfless, compassionate, and willing to sacrifice themselves for others; they love and support each other, and therefore the whole family is a highly cohesive and harmonious one. They are all hardworking and thrifty, and all try their best to make the family prosperous. For all their virtues and the effort they make to better themselves, they live a miserable and poor life. At this point, Yu Hua's logic seems

to come to light: If a group of people or a family are virtuous, cohesive, and restrain from any immoral behavior, gathering all their abilities, resources, energy, and strength to do their best for a decent life, and at last still can't escape the destiny of poverty, misery, and suffering, this is definitely not their own fault or their own failure. It is obvious that some external forces completely beyond their control are at work here. While the ill-educated, ignorant poor farmer Fugui easily and blindly attributes all this to fate, as most common Chinese people nurtured on the traditional Chinese worldview could, the writer Yu Hua on the other hand, incisively points to national history.

Just as demonstrated by the fact that the Communist seizure of power completely changes the nature of Fugui's fateful gambling loss, and consequently changes his whole family's fate, almost every crucial juncture or event in Fugui's family is directly linked to or even decided by actual historical processes: wars, political and social movements, the Party's policies, etc. In the beginning of the novel, shortly after his father's death and their moving into a thatched hut, Fugui's mother suddenly becomes sick. On his way to town for a doctor, he unfortunately runs into the wicked and brutal Nationalist troops and is forced into the army. After being warned of the deserters' terrible fate—being killed or caught by other units—Fugui gives up his attempts to run away. Staying in the army for nearly two years, and experiencing and witnessing the incredibly cruel battles between the Communists and the Nationalists, Fugui finally ends up being captured by the Communist troops as a war prisoner. Released by the lenient Communist troops, who even pay his travel expenses, Fugui rushes the whole way home. However, after he returns home, he only finds that his mother died shortly after he went missing, and that his daughter Fengxia has permanently lost her voice and hearing after running a high



fever a year before. Through the brief description, it becomes quite clear that all these tragedies inflicted upon the family are direct consequences of Fugui's accidental conscription by the Nationalist troops. Here the link between the family's fate and the historical process is manifest.

All the events occurring afterwards also help confirm and consolidate this link. For example, Fugui's son Youqing is actually murdered by an extremely brutal hospital—an event whose entire course and implications will be elaborated later in this chapter. Fugui's daughter Fengxia also dies in giving birth in the same hospital. By indicating that it is only a normal delivery, the narrator subtly blames the incredibly irresponsible hospital for Fengxia's death. Fugui's wife Jiazhen's death is also directly associated with Great Leap Forward movement and the ensuing great famine. She becomes ill due to physical exhaustion resulting from being overworked in the ridiculous "Backyard Steel Making" movement. The unbearable starvation during the ensuing famine further pushes her to the brink of death. As exposed by the novel, the inhumane regime which confiscates most of the peasants' grain product, actually refuses to stretch out a rescuing hand to the pitiful peasants when they encounter the unprecedented natural and social catastrophe, and as a consequence, many of them are starved to death in the great famine. Her two children's miserable fate—both murdered by the brutal hospital—constitutes the last straw leading to her own death. In the novel, both Fugui's son-in-law Erxi's and his grandson Kugen's deaths are at first glance merely accidental. While the former, who works as a porter, is crushed to death between two slabs of cement at work, the latter chokes to death on beans. To explain Kugen's death, the narrator stresses, "It wasn't that he was greedy and wanted to stuff himself, it was just that we were too poor." He adds,

“Things were so bad for us that Kugen hardly ever had the chance to eat beans.” If we keep in mind that in the novel, the author repeatedly emphasizes the fact that the poverty and hardship of the peasants are a direct result of the political and social movements conducted by the Party, we have no difficulty in realizing the link between the two deaths and the historical process, though in a loose and obscure way.

In *To Live*, the fact that the peasant’s poverty and misery are a direct result of the Party’s political follies and abuse of power is highlighted by the “lamb parable.” In the novel, the road to wealth and power for a family is vividly and metaphorically compared to the process of an animal’s growth and transformation. A poor family is originally just like a little chicken. When that chicken grows up it turns into a goose, the goose in turn grows into a lamb, and the lamb becomes an ox. In its most prosperous period, Fugui’s family does reach the stage of possessing two lambs:

When Youqing was about ten years old and had been going to school for two years, our life finally seemed to be going a bit better. Fengxia would work with us in the field, and she was at the point where she could carry her own weight. We were raising two lambs, and Youqing was in charge of cutting grass to feed them (*To Live*: 98).

Actually the time described here, when Fugui’s family was at the height of its propriety—the years before Great Leap Forward in 1958 after the Communist victory—is also the period during which the Party ruled the country in a relatively rational way, and as a result, the whole country temporarily enjoyed rapid development and stability. This fact also works to further confirm the Party’s absolute authority over and decisive influence upon its people’s fate. As it goes on in the novel, it turns out that Fugui’s lamb is never given the chance to grow into an ox under the interference of many political movements in the Mao era. After the People’s Communes were established in 1958, not

only these two lambs were confiscated and finally slaughtered for meat by the commune, their land and even their cooking pots were also turned over to the commune to make steel. Afterwards, the life situation of the family deteriorates gradually until the advent of the Deng Xiaoping era. Here the link between the family's poverty and material deterioration and the Party's Utopian and absurd policies is obvious. Ironically enough, in the Deng era, a now aged Fugui finally saves up enough money for an ox—the symbol of wealth according to the forementioned parable. At this time, the commune has already been dismissed and the land has been redivided and rented to the villagers. This means that if one doesn't do his field work, there is no one who is going to do it for him. Naturally life becomes even more difficult for Fugui, who is now too old to work in the fields, and who should be entitled to the right to enjoy his seniority. When watching the exhausted old man Fugui, who is bereaved of all his family and relatives by the uninterrupted social and political movements and catastrophes, and his equally exhausted old ox, which is saved by Fugui on the brink of being slaughtered due to old age, working painstakingly in the fields for a living, we as readers can't help but be sad about the old man's extremely miserable fate, and condemn all the wicked social and political forces responsible for his misery and tragedy. The grim fact that both Fugui and his old ox are near the end of lives implies that an individual's ambition for wealth and honor in a brutal society is no more than a beautiful yet deceptive illusion. Even if one's lamb finally turns into an ox, he still cannot escape the fate of poverty and emptiness.

When our speculation gets to this point, it is only natural to find that in the novel, just like so many other paradoxes in Yu Hua's writing, "to live" in such a brutal society simply means "to die." For the poor farmer Fugui, "to live" is not to enjoy all the

happiness, comfort, and pleasure of life with his family, but to experience all the suffering, hardship, and tragedy in life, and to witness the deaths of all his loved ones. According to Fugui's own narration, in his life, the only thing which makes him feel "a kind of peace" and solace is that he "takes care of the funerals for everyone in his family." Here we actually once again encounter one of the most important themes running throughout Yu Hua's writing: meditation on death.

Completely different from *Screaming in the Drizzle*, where death is mostly presented as an existential event, and treated as a device to meditate on the universal human condition, in *To Live*, death is presented as social and political incident and as the culmination of suffering and tragedy, of which Youqing's death is the most typical.

One afternoon when Youqing is in grade five, their principal, "the wife of the county magistrate, lost a lot of blood giving birth in the city hospital—they said she had one foot in the grave. The teachers from Youqing's school immediately called all fifth graders to the track and sent them to the hospital to donate blood" (*To Live*: 149). After an all-around examination, they find only Youqing's blood type a match. To save the magistrate's wife, the blood technician extracts "almost every drop of blood" from Youqing's body. Only after Youqing's lips turns blue and his head slumps and falls to one side is a doctor finally called in:

"I can't get a heartbeat," muttered the doctor.

The doctor didn't seem to think it was a big deal. He just scolded the blood technician. "You're really an idiot."

He then went back into the delivery room to save the magistrate's wife (*To Live*: 151).

The unbelievable cruelty and snobbery on the part of the blood technician and the doctor depicted here by Yu Hua, I believe, might stun many. Obviously in the doctor's and the blood technician's eyes, the life of a poor farmer's son is worth nothing compared with that of the magistrate's wife, therefore the brutal murder is "not a big deal." Actually the cold-blooded indifference of the blood technician and the doctor is absolutely not a case of particular and individual behavior; instead, as presented in the novel, they represent the attitude or stance universally shared by all the people working in the hospital. Not even a single person there shows any trace of sympathy and remorse for the boy's death; all they offer to the bereaved father are nonchalance and even sarcasm. Here actually emerges the enormous irony that a hospital, an institution supposed to cure the sick and save lives, actually is a source of tragedy and a place that destroys lives. After both his son and daughter are "treated" to death in it, the notion of hospital as symbol of death and source of traumas has been deeply ingrained in Fugui's mind. This helps explain why when Fugui hears that his fatally injured son-in-law Erxi was sent to the hospital, he immediately begins to cry in despair. He knows, "Once Erxi enters the hospital, there's no telling if he'll come out alive." It becomes very clear that for Fugui and other poor peasants alike, the hospital—symbol and representative of the Communist authority—is the very source of their suffering and their physical and psychological traumas.

As discussed earlier, though in *To Live*, the transcendental dimension of Yu Hua's thought—his meditation on existential truth—is mostly limited and marginalized, but it is not completely eliminated from the text. Actually Yu Hua's speculation on human

existence and on the meaning of life is conveyed effectively through the seemingly simple yet actually brilliant and pregnant structure of the novel.

Technically and structurally, the novel is involved with two narrators and two layers of narration. While the major or first narrator Fugui tells his past life story, the second narrator, whose job is going to the countryside to collect popular folk songs, records and mediates Fugui's narration and describes the surrounding country scenery and Fugui's expressions, feelings, and activities while narrating his story. The two narratives constitute a stark yet meaningful contrast. Fugui's narrative is filled with descriptions of all the traumas, miseries, and deaths, and is enshrouded with tragic and pessimistic atmosphere. The second narrator's narrative, in sharp antithesis, describes the beautiful, happy, and tranquil country scenery and life, the peaceful and harmonious coexistence of nature, animals, and human beings, and the self-contented, aloof, and optimistic attitude of human beings towards life and world affairs.

In my understanding, through this unique structure—the stark contrast between the two narratives—the author at least aims at a dual purpose. On the one hand, by eliminating all the social and historical signs which exist in the narration of the lower layer (Fugui's) from that of the higher layer (the second narrator's), Yu Hua implies that any historical event, no matter how important it might have been for the people who have experienced it, will be taken away by the endless river of time in the boundless universe; history in some sense is just like smoke or floating clouds. On the other hand, by setting all the human suffering and misery in the past (in Fugui's narrative), and all the happiness, harmony, peace, and tranquility in the present (in the second narrator's narrative), the implied author subtly expresses his strong belief in and hope for life. The fact that after

experiencing so many hardships and miseries, Fugui keeps on living with content and hope also serves unequivocally to demonstrate Yu Hua's worldview: Life itself is the ultimate goal of life. As Yu Hua puts it, "In fact, both in the past and in the present, I am not the sort of person who is willing to die for a belief. I worship so much the voice of life flowing within my body. I cannot find any other reasons for living, but life itself."

Yu Hua's third novel is *Xu Sanguan Sells His Blood*. Compared with *To Live*, *Xu Sanguan Sells His Blood*, written three years later in 1995, represents, according to Yu Hua, a major technical and linguistic innovation in his novel writing career, and a painstaking effort to approach the "vividness" and "reality" of life as close as possible.<sup>70</sup> There is actually little essential difference from *To Live* in terms of content, theme, and discourse.

After a careful comparison of the two novels, we have no difficulty in finding that, thematically and discursively, *Xu Sanguan Sells His Blood* can be appropriately regarded as a continuation of *To Live*. It actually inherits the core ideas expressed in *To Live*—the exposure of the miserable condition of the people living in a totalitarian regime, restoration and reaffirmation of traditional Chinese values, and a "sweeping historical vision"—and only manages to push them further.

The time span of the novel *Xu Sanguan Sells His Blood* is almost the same as that of *To Live*; it starting slightly later and lasting a little longer. It covers the forty years of modern Chinese history after the Communist victory in 1949, a historical period which was marred by uninterrupted political movements and social and natural catastrophes. In

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<sup>70</sup> Yu Hua, "Ideal in Narrative" (*Xushu zhong de lixiang* 叙述中的理想), postscript to the Chinese original *Xu Sanguan Sells His Blood* (*Xu Sanguan maixue ji* 许三观卖血记), Nanjing: Jiangsu wenyi chubanshe, 1996, p254-5.

the novel, the central character Xu Sanguan's life story is mainly involved with two things: how he deals with the relation with his eldest son Yile, who actually is not his biological child but the product of a premarital affair between his wife Xu Yulan and her ex-boyfriend He Xiaoyong, and how he helps his family overcome every calamity by selling his blood. With the description of Xu Sanguan dealing with these two things, Yu Hua actually pushes the ideas and views expressed in *To Live* to an extreme.

Specifically, through his vivid and humorous depiction of Xu Sanguan's relation with both his eldest son Yile and Yile's biological father He Xiaoyong's family, the author reveals his unreserved and all-around affirmation of traditional Chinese values, a stance which might surprise many readers of *Screaming in the Drizzle*. In depicting Xu Sanguan's relation to Yile and He Xiaoyong, Yu Hua actually displays both the complexity of his own thought and the diversity of traditional Chinese values. On the one hand, Yu Hua emphasizes the foremost position of blood relationship in the traditional Chinese value hierarchy. This is indicated by the fact that, in the novel, only after Yile fulfills his filial piety to his biological father He Xiaoyong by climbing up on the latter's roof and trying to call his soul back home while he is dying, does Xu Sanguan finally have the right to claim Yile as his real son. This description subtly implies that, in light of traditional Chinese values and worldview, a person's biological parents naturally and transcendently have more authority and right over one than any one else including a person's foster parents, even if they have done nothing for one's growth and life. On the other hand, Yu Hua also indicates that parental love and affection and human benevolence can break through the barrier of blood relationship. In the novel, Xu Sanguan treats Yile the best among his three sons, though Yile is the only one who



doesn't bear his blood. Towards the end of the novel, to save Yile's from dying of severe hepatitis, Xu Sanguan almost sacrifices his life by overselling his blood. If Fugui in *To Live* is a decent, affectionate, and responsible father and husband, Xu Sanguan can be said to be an extraordinarily great father, husband, and human being, and his moral standards are far beyond that upheld by most people. Moreover, totally different from the existential and social situation in *Screaming in the Drizzle*, where everyone is separated and isolated by estrangement and indifference, in *Xu Sanguan Sells His Blood*, apart from the Blood Chiefs (nickname for people in charge of buying blood in the hospital) who represents the Communist authorities, all the common people are benevolent, compassionate, and warm-hearted; they care about and help each other. Many other traditional Chinese virtues and views such as honesty, trustworthiness, righteousness, moral retribution, etc. are also confirmed and praised unreservedly.

Through his vivid and sometimes shocking description of how Xu Sanguan overcomes every family calamity by selling his blood, Yu Hua once again reveals his "sweeping historical vision." By eliminating all the non-factual elements—meditative or discursive digression, paragraphs directly expressing the narrator's or implied author's personal thoughts, feelings, and emotions, direct descriptions of characters' inner world or psychologies, etc.—from the text, the author deliberately makes the events "naked," and therefore highlights the links, interrelations, or interactions between the events. Taking advantage of these strategies and techniques, Yu Hua effectively highlights the link between Xu Sanguan's family calamities and the actual historical process. When looking back over Xu Sanguan's forty-year history of blood selling, we find that the frequency of his blood selling is directly related to the actual social and political reality

and the Party's policies. In the first part of the novel which spans roughly the first ten years of the period after the Communist seizure of power in 1949, when the whole country is run in a relatively stable and orderly way, Xu Sanguan's family, like most Chinese people, lives a poor yet stable and quiet life, and Xu Sanguan only sells blood a couple of times. However, since the Party launched the Great Leap Forward movement in 1958, social and political movements never stop in China, and consequently the whole country gradually plunges into enormous chaos and disorder. Under such circumstances, the existential situation of Xu Sanguan's family deteriorates steadily, and Xu Sanguan sells his blood more and more frequently. During Xu Sanguan's long history of selling his blood to the blood merchants at the hospital, he puts himself in an extremely dangerous condition or even on the brink of losing his life three times for selling too much blood. A close reading of the novel reveals that all the three times of fateful blood selling are closely tied to the Party's policies and to the situation in the whole nation.

The first case occurs during the great famine around 1960. During the famine, Xu Sanguan's family, like most people in the country, had nothing to eat but thin corn flour gruel all the day. His three sons were starved with only skin and bones left. To let his whole family eat some wheat flour noodles, the equally starved and frail Xu Sanguan chose to sell his blood. As made very clear by the narrator, the great famine is not only a result of the flood, but more importantly, is also a direct consequence of the uninterrupted political movements such as Great Leap Forward, Backyard Steel Making movement, the establishment of People's Communes, and the radically Utopian policies adopted by the Party at that time. The other two cases are both related to the Party's policy of "sending the city educated youth to the countryside to be reeducated by the middle and

lower peasants” in the Cultural Revolution. In one case, in order to curry favor with Erle’s team leader in hopes that the leader would send Erle home as early as possible from the countryside, Xu Sanguan sells blood twice in several days. He uses the blood money to treat the team leader to lavish meals and to buy him all kinds of gifts. Much worse, to keep the team leader’s company during a meal, Xu Sanguan, who has just sold blood and who is extremely frail, is ordered by the corrupt and cruel team leader to drink liquor until it nearly kills him. In the other case, to save Yile’s life when he contracts acute hepatitis in the countryside and is sent to the hospital in Shanghai for treatment, Xu Sanguan sells blood everywhere he can along his way to Shanghai. In the course of the journey, he sells his blood every three to five days, and he almost dies because of it. In the novel, blood selling is actually the only means that Xu Sanguan can rely on when he and his family encounter difficulties and disasters.

In the novel, the description of a detail concerning the teaching of blood selling proves to be very meaningful. In the beginning of the novel, Genlong and Afang, two good-hearted and honest farmers from Xu Sanguan’s forth uncle’s village, teach Xu Sanguan how to sell blood. Towards the end of the novel, Xu Sanguan himself becomes a teacher of blood selling—he teaches two brothers Laiwang and Laixi how to sell blood. By pointing to the fact that blood selling as a means for survival is actually transmitted from one person to another in China, and by linking Xu Sanguan’s experiences and fate with other people’s, Yu Hua subtly endows Xu Sanguan’s personal life experience with certain kind of universality. In light of Yu Hua’s interpretation, blood selling as a means for living is absolutely not a personal experience particular and limited to Xu Sanguan; actually it is a substantial method practiced by many Chinese people for survival under an

inhumane regime. The grim fact that Xu Sanguan and many other ordinary Chinese people alike, can only survive by selling blood at the cost of damaging their health, as in Afang's case, and loss of life, as in Genglong's case, conversely helps testify to the degree of the brutality of the regime. Moreover, in the novel, Yu Hua unequivocally relates the many political movements and follies directly to Chairman Mao, the most powerful symbol and representative of the Party—a depiction which can be appropriately regarded as an embodiment of both his courage and conscience as a Chinese intellectual and his “sweeping historical vision” as a modern writer.

Through the above brief analysis, we have no difficulty in finding that the two novels *To Live* and *Xu Sanguan Sells His Blood* actually maintain a remarkable consistency in their shared affirmation of traditional Chinese values and pursuit of historical authenticity. The only thematic difference between the two novels, in my understanding, lies in the different attitudes of the two central characters towards life. In the face of the inescapable, miserable experiences and fate, while Fugui chooses to bear all the suffering, misery, and the heaviness of death submissively and passively, Xu Sanguan, however, stands up to fight against them. But the grim fact that the only weapon or instrument Xu Sanguan can rely on in the fight is his blood serves negatively to confirm the impotence and insignificance of individuals in relation to the crushing power of social and political forces and the invincibility of history.

### **Violence as Narrative and Aesthetic Principle**

In contemporary China, no other writer is so obsessed with violence as Yu Hua. Readers of Yu Hua might be stunned and irritated by the many sensually and psychologically shocking, discursively pregnant, and rhetorically powerful descriptions of violence in his novellas and short stories. For example, in “1986,” all the violence and cruelty experienced and witnessed in the Cultural Revolution by the main character, a high school teacher who is highly obsessed with researching the most brutal punishments in ancient China and eventually inflicts all the unbearably cruel punishments—originally the subject of his research—upon his own body. Shockingly enough, here self-punishment and violence against oneself become an irresistible temptation to the character, just as money, women, power, and all the other “attractive” things do to most ordinary people. The description of the many extremely violent and bloody scenes of self-mutilation in this story might be regarded as psychologically unacceptable and intolerable by many. The story reminds us of Kafka’s story “In the Penal Colony,” where the Officer is so fascinated with the marvelously devised, intricate execution machine as well as the execution itself that he finally manages to execute himself with the machine. In “One Kind of Reality,” violence seems to be some kind of human instinct, an inborn impulse and capacity to destroy things and lives. In “An Accident,” the unbelievable spell of the “logic of violence” finally turns a witness to murder into a murderer. It is safe to say that we cannot fully understand Yu Hua if we don’t take a thorough and intensive examination of the description of violence and the underlying social and political connotations of the description in his writing. It is clear that, in Yu Hua’s short stories

and novellas, violence draws our attention more as a substantial existence than as a narrative and aesthetic principle.

Compared with his short stories and novellas, violence in Yu Hua's full-length novels is not only reduced drastically in both quantity and discursive significance, but the function or role of violence also changes radically. If in his short stories and novellas, the presence of violence, as just discussed, is significant mainly as a substantial existence, in his full-length novels, however, it mainly functions as a narrative and aesthetic principle. In other words, violence in Yu Hua's writing has undergone a radical shift in role and function from the thematic and discursive level in his short stories and novellas to the formal and narratological level in his full-length novels.

As far as Yu Hua's view of literature and its relation to reality is concerned, I think no other expressions can demonstrate it better than his statement that "powerful imagination creates reality." Actually, this statement constitutes the very core of his view of literature. In light of this view, "reality" in literature sometimes is no more than something created by human imagination. Obviously here Yu Hua emphasizes both the importance of imagination in creative writing and the imaginative nature of literature. A careful examination reveals that this view actually works as the fundamental guideline for Yu Hua's literary practice, and in return, his novels are an honest implementation and embodiment of the view.

After grasping the core of Yu Hua's view of literature, it becomes much easier for us to understand the reason why Yu Hua is so preoccupied with violence in his writing and thought. Historically and ideologically, as mentioned earlier in the Introduction, Yu Hua has spent most of his formative years in Mao's China, and witnessed the entire course of

the Cultural Revolution where violence is the dominating aspect of social life of that time. For Yu Hua and many other Chinese people alike, violence has become a nightmare or ghost which they can never get rid of during their lifetime. Therefore, it is only natural to observe that Yu Hua has long been haunted by violence and that the presentation and exploration of violence become a recurring theme in his writings. More importantly, from a technical and formal point of view, the “arbitrary” nature of violence (Arendt 1970: 3)—the multiplicity, flexibility, and freedom of the forms in which violence displays itself—in practice provides ample scope for the wielding of “powerful or wild imagination” on the part of the writer. In some sense, technical and formal considerations constitute no less convincing and powerful a reason than thematic import in explaining Yu Hua’s obsession with and love for violence. This is even truer when applied to reading his full-length novels where, as just discussed, the ideological and thematic significance of violence as substantial social and political existence is reduced to a very limited level.

A close reading of Yu Hua’s full-length novels demonstrates explicitly that, in these novels, violence works mainly as a narrative and aesthetic principle. In practice, the violent nature of Yu Hua’s narrative displays itself both in the striking unexpectedness of the course and outcome of the event narrated and in the almost unbearable sensational and psychological stress the unexpectedness brings about in readers. Actually in these novels, the violent sensational and psychological stress that the reader feels in the course of reading is merely a result and manifestation of the many multi-layered literary tensions which are deliberately and painstakingly created by Yu Hua. Specifically, there are tensions between the basically realistic nature and orientation of the narrative as a whole

and the obviously unscientific and surrealistic depiction of detail,<sup>71</sup> between the seemingly valid and credible logic governing the characters' behavior and speech and the actually deceptive and misleading nature of the reasoning and the playfulness and even absurdity of the conclusion that the reasoning leads to,<sup>72</sup> between the wildly imaginative nature of the "reality" presented in the novel and the seemingly honest and creditable tone of a trustworthy narrator, between the narrator's effort to defamiliarize the tiresome and dull reality as perceived and experienced by ordinary people on the one hand and his equally painstaking endeavors to disguise the imagined "reality" as real on the other, and between the seemingly calm and aloof attitude the narrator assumes in telling the story and the tremendous passion and anguish that the narrator and the implied author harbor behind the narrative. In my understanding, all Yu Hua's effort and genius and all the brilliant devices and techniques he employs in these novels mainly aim at one single purpose: to lure readers into voluntarily plunging into the torrent of literary tensions he elaborates, and to make them experience the strikingly unexpected and dramatic changes in the characters' experiences and fortunes.

In these novels, the highly impressive narrative and aesthetic effect is accomplished mainly through the clever manipulation of the narrator. On the one hand, the narrator unfolds, with no hesitation, a stream of extremely weird, and sometimes impossible or barely possible things to us: A young man swings his father's frozen dead body as a weapon against his enemies; a person who is physically well enough to continue his life

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<sup>71</sup> This characteristic of Yu Hua's novels seems to be the reverse version of Kafka's "The Metamorphosis," where the basically surrealistic atmosphere of the narrative as a whole and the accurate and realistic presentation of detail constitute a sharp contrast.

<sup>72</sup> This feature is more manifest in *Xu Sanguan Sells His Blood* than in Yu Hua's other two novels. It is best demonstrated by such episodes as "Xu Sanguan tries to persuade He Xiaoyong, Yile's biological father, to pay Smith Fang's son's medical treatment fees" and "Xu Sanguan calls a family struggle meeting against his wife Xu Yulan" in the novel.



dies just as he wishes and predicts (*Screaming in the Drizzle*); a blood technician ruthlessly murders a teenager by simply extracting almost all the blood from his body; a seriously sick woman who is already half-dead suddenly recovers (*To Live*); a person can sell blood at an unbelievable rate with little serious damage to his health (*Xu Sanguan Sells His Blood*), just to name a few. While uttering these “realities” which are obviously based on his “powerful or wild imagination,” the narrator seems to completely forget the real facts related to his narrative: an average adult’s body is too heavy for an ordinary person to swing like a sword or spear; no one can control the natural dying process; few medical professionals would go so far as killing a person by simply extracting all his blood just to curry favor with their superiors; unless a miracle befalls, the chance for a half-dead person to recover from a grave disease without any medical treatment almost equals zero; a human being can’t discharge blood at will without causing serious damage to his/her health—the human body is not really a “money tree” as believed by the Chinese peasants appearing in *Xu Sanguan Sells His Blood*. For all the highly imaginative nature of the events in the novels, the creditable and honest tone of a trustworthy narrator—an serious, scholar-like, meditative narrator in *Screaming in the Drizzle*, an simple-minded, honest farmer in *To Live*, or a naive, childish unidentified third-person narrator in *Xu Sanguan Sells His Blood*—on the other hand, works effectively to prevent us from seeing through the fabricated or unreal nature of the narrative, or at least, to deliberately weaken our consciousness of or to distract our attention from its fabricated nature.

The two obviously conflicting forces involved in the narration inevitably evoke continuous tension and anxiety in our psychology. Much worse, the naive narrator proves

to be so simple-minded—or as in the case of *Screaming in the Drizzle*, the scholar-like narrator pretends to be simple-minded—that he simply can't understand or fails to realize the intensity of the reader's sensual and psychological stress. He not only tries nothing to relieve or alleviate the reader's psychological stress, on the contrary, he also deliberately brings in new material deliberately to further intensify the reader's already highly vehement psychological tension. As a result, as the reading proceeds, the psychological pressure the reader feels inevitably becomes more and more intense, sometimes even to the point that the reader can hardly bear it. Moreover, some episodes in Yu Hua's novels are so shocking and their processes are so tortuous and unexpected that while reading them, we experience some feelings and emotions as stimulating and tense as reading a suspense novel or watching a horror movie. For example, when we see these scenes—an old man who is thought dead suddenly sits up from the plank on which he is lying and grins to the people who are carrying him out for a funeral ceremony; an old woman lives in a dark room with all its walls covered with dead people's photos and only speaks to these dead people every day; a young man flees from his home carrying his sick mother on back. After a long way he stops, puts his mother down against a tree, and tries to find some water nearby. When he comes back, he only sees his mother's badly eaten corpse and the wild dog which committed the atrocity staring at him—we might be more shocked and horrified than reading them in a thriller or watching them in a horror movie. When we are reading a "serious" and "realistic" novel like this, we are not at all psychologically prepared for seeing scenes as horrible and unbelievable as these.

It is only normal that a fictional work attempts to elicit a certain psychological tension in the reader to achieve its artistic effect. But the degree of the intensity of

psychological tension produced in the reader by Yu Hua's narrative is far beyond normal. Actually the violent nature of Yu Hua's narrative lies in the deliberateness of his intention to arouse as much as psychological and sensual tension as possible in the reader, in the enormous gap between the highly imaginative and even fantastic quality of the events narrated and the narrator's pretended honest, trustworthy, and serious tone, and in the increasingly accumulated and finally almost unbearable psychological tension that the narrative imposes on the reader. This observation, I believe, can be best witnessed by reading such episodes as "Sun Youyuan's death"—an event of which I have already given a detailed account and careful examination—in *Screaming in the Drizzle*; Jiazhen's surprising recovery from her half-dead condition in *To Live*; and "Xu Sanguan treats Erle's team leader to dinner at home" in *Xu Sanguan Sells His Blood*.

Having established the notion of the violent nature of Yu Hua's narrative, then two questions naturally arise: Why does Yu Hua choose violence instead of other thing as the guiding principle for his narrative and aesthetic? What are the underlying implications of the choice?

Actually both questions concern the long-lasting and intriguing issue of the relation between the form and the content of a literary work. To answer these questions, I believe, one can use the Platonic epistemology and ontology that art is by nature mimesis of the sense world (though the sense world itself is mimesis of the Form) and Luckcs' theory that style is no mere formal category, but rather is rooted in content and is the specific form of a specific content, and that worldview or ideology is the "formative principle underlying the style of a given piece of writing" (1964: 19).

If we keep in mind the Platonic notion of mimesis and Luckcs' concept of the relation between form and content, we have no difficulty in realizing that the violent nature of Yu Hua's narrative and aesthetic actually is mimesis of the violent nature of the human experience as undergone by his characters. Actually, the violent action in his narration by which the narrator imposes continuous psychological and sensual stress on the reader is simply mimesis of the fact that the violent world mercilessly inflicts uninterrupted misery on innocent human beings like Fugui and Xu Sanguan. The violent nature of the narrative is actually intended to remind the reader, though in a somewhat coercive and unpleasant way, of the violent nature of the human world and the historical experience of human beings in a totalitarian society where the leaders encourage violent and wide spread "class struggle." This observation is also indirectly supported by Yu Hua's own comments on the textual structure of his novel *Screaming in the Drizzle*. As he confesses in his preface to the Italian edition of the novel, "its structure derives from the sense of time, precisely, from the sense of time known to us, or time in our memory."<sup>73</sup> Here Yu Hua actually emphasizes the fact of the dependence of the textual structure of a novel on human experience. Coincidentally and meaningfully enough, Ge Fei, another representative avant-garde writer in contemporary China, when talking about the composition of his famous novel *The Enemy*, makes it very clear that the novel's a structure is actually a loose imitation of the external human experience. Marston Anderson in elsewhere also points to the morality of the form of Lu Xun's short stories (1981: 32-53). All the cases cited above help explain why Yu Hua, a writer who is highly obsessed with violence, endows the narrative of his novels with a violent nature.

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<sup>73</sup> 它的结构来自于对时间的感受，确切地说是对已知时间的感受，也就是记忆中的时间。

## Conclusion

Discursively profound, technically innovative, and linguistically exquisite, Yu Hua is widely acclaimed as one of the most important and most influential writers in contemporary China. By treating “events” as both existential and political allegories in his novels, Yu Hua aims at a dual goal—the simultaneous pursuit of both universal existential truth and historical authenticity. In other words, in Yu Hua’s novels, his desire to transcend history and his obsession with history are equally strong. While in his first novel, the desire to transcend specific historical presentation is more pronounced, in the later two, however, obsession with history becomes preeminent.

On the one hand, through his scrupulous, critical examination of such important existential and social phenomena as family, school, love, friendship, nature, life, and death, Yu Hua points to both the hopelessness and helplessness of the human condition and the selfishness of human nature. In Yu Hua’s novels, life is presented as a perplexing, bitter, and lonely process filled only with successive disillusionments. Loneliness not only constitutes the core of human experience, but is also the starting point of human relations and social intercourse.

On the other hand, like most Chinese writers, Yu Hua displays an increasingly strong desire for historical authenticity. In his novels, through his incisive observation and highly impressive and vivid description, he not only exposes the miserable, helpless, and hopeless living condition of Chinese people and their highly politicized and distorted mentality under a totalitarian regime, he also sheds much light on some important aspects of traditional Chinese worldview and values—moral retribution, view of this world (life)

and the other world (death), concept of nature, etc. Our above analysis makes it quite clear that Yu Hua's writings reveal both profound continuities and discontinuities with his cultural tradition. This helps further confirm my observation of the extremely complicated and intertwined relation of contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction with its grand tradition.

When talking about Yu Hua, we cannot afford to ignore his treatment of violence. Unlike in his novellas and short stories where violence is mainly depicted as substantial existence, in his novels violence works largely as the dominating narrative and aesthetic principle. In my observation, the violent nature of Yu Hua's narrative is actually a mimesis of the violent nature and structure of the human world as experienced by his characters. Yu Hua thinks it normal and moral to impose continuous psychological stress on the reader just as the merciless world inflicts such misery and injustice on human beings.

As indicated earlier, both Su Tong and Yu Hua are highly obsessed with history. Unlike Su Tong, who seems to be more attracted by such general aspects of history as objectivity and subjectivity in history, strategies adopted by the ruling class in historical writing, power relations in history, etc., Yu Hua focuses more on the specific aspects of history. In his novels, Yu Hua mainly explores and examines how a specific historical period influences the people's life and mentality of that time. Different from the somewhat mysterious features of history in Su Tong's novels, history in Yu Hua's novels is displayed as a mix of external social and political forces that are perceptible but uncontrollable and merciless to human beings.

## Chapter 4

### Rejection of History: Fear, Broken Memory, and Ultimate Incommunicability in Ge Fei's Fiction

Fear cannot be forgotten. In some sense, it is both history and reality.

I do not know where the rapidly flowing time finally will lead me to. Reality is loathsome and boring; it is merely a tedious and lamentable repetition of the past. And at a certain moment, memory is destined to make some necessary modification to it.

--Ge Fei <sup>74</sup>

There is no doubt that, among the three major contemporary avant-garde writers, Ge Fei is the most defiant and exotic, judging by Chinese literary and cultural tradition. Unlike either Su Tong's fiction, whose continuity with tradition can be readily discerned, or Yu Hua's fiction, where the characters' seemingly bizarre and alien thoughts and behavior actually are quite congruous with the traditional Chinese worldview on a deep ideological and epistemological level, Ge Fei's fiction represents a radical break with the grand tradition of Chinese culture. As we will discover later in this chapter, not only does Ge Fei reject certain most important narrative modes long cherished by traditional Chinese novelists, but more strikingly, he also powerfully deconstructs some ideas and views which have long been regarded as fundamentals of the Chinese worldview and belief.

If, in both Su Tong's and Yu Hua's fiction, story or storytelling is given the first priority while idea or discursive formulation is the second, this is not the case with Ge Fei's fiction, where the order of priorities is to a large extent reversed. In Ge Fei's novels,

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<sup>74</sup> 恐惧是无法被忘记的。从某种意义上来说，它既是历史，也是现实。《自序》，《格非文集 寂静的声音》，2页。Hereafter *GFWJ*.

我不知道疾速流淌的时间最终将把我带到一个什么地方去。现实是令人厌倦的，它只不过是过去单调而拙劣的重复，到了某一时刻，回忆注定要对进行必要的修改。《边缘》，*GFWJ*: 389.

the labyrinth-like “reality,” the deliberately obscured plot line, the extremely diversified perspectives, and the highly subjectivized narrative style and language might disappoint many Chinese readers who are so familiar with conventions of traditional Chinese storytelling, and who are so eager to get a “story” from a novel. Moreover, by the clever manipulation of many narratological devices, Ge Fei succeeds in creating a timeless and imperceptible world shrouded with a macabre atmosphere of death and Kafkaian absurdity and uncertainty. The Kafkaian world of absurdity and death presented by Ge Fei might also shock and irritate many Chinese people who are nurtured on the Confucian teaching that it is a shame to discuss strange phenomena, physical exploits, disorder, and supernatural things (*Analects* 7:20). Chinese people, as demonstrated by Fugui’s experience and life attitude in Yu Hua’s *To Live*, are so fascinated with life—even a miserable one—that they are reluctant to confront face-to-face the horror and mystery of death. They tend to, under any existential circumstances, hold an optimistic attitude towards life and to aestheticize death, as indicated most manifestly by Zhuangzi’s thought and practice. In this respect, Ge Fei, who is so obsessed with the horror and mystery of death, and whose novels are always shrouded with a hellish, macabre atmosphere, is a true anomaly to the grand tradition. At this point, Ge Fei constitutes a sharp contrast with Yu Hua. Though Yu Hua’s world, as discussed in the preceding chapter, is also filled with deaths, bizarre things, and even horrors, it is unmistakably a world belonging to us, the world of human beings, where the aura of life always overwhelms the flavor of death. In sharp contrast, Ge Fei’s world seems to be a world of others, where the laws and the logic guiding human behavior, thinking, and feeling are not only strange, but also incomprehensible to us ordinary human beings.



Like Su Tong, Yu Hua, and most other Chinese writers, Ge Fei also shows a certain interest in history. However, in dealing with history, he seems to take a direction opposite to that assumed by other Chinese writers. While obsession with history leads most Chinese writers to accepting a notion of history as it is commonly construed and to confirming the traditional view of history, Ge Fei's investigation into "history," however, finally leads him to totally rejecting the traditional notion of history as a useful conception to describe human experience. Human experience as a whole, as understood by Ge Fei, does not have any unity as the concept of history usually indicates.

To some extent, we can say that, compared with Su Tong's and Yu Hua's somewhat questionable and pseudo status as avant-garde writers, Ge Fei is a true avant-gardist and a true anomaly to the Chinese literary tradition and the Chinese worldview.

### **Who is the Enemy?**

In the contemporary Chinese literary world, Ge Fei's first novel *The Enemy* is undoubtedly among the most enigmatic and incomprehensible. Since its publication in 1991, the novel immediately attracted Chinese literary critics' attention and has become a target of heated debates. Actually, in contemporary China, few novels ever evoke as much confusion, controversy, and conjecture as *The Enemy* does, in terms of the scope and intensity of the disputes and the magnitude of the discrepancy between the views of the debating parties involved. Critics and readers not only contradict each other on the implications or deep meanings the novel attempts to convey, but they also quarrel over such basic issues as what the novel's nature is, whether it belongs to high literature or is

just something playful to cater to the popular taste for stimulation and the strange, etc. The comments on the novel also prove highly polarized. For some, the novel represents a masterpiece of Chinese avant-garde fiction, which explores existential predicament, the relation between history and individuality, and the truth of human experience (Zhang Q. 2004). For some others, the novel is nothing more than a “literary riddle” or “game” created with some “postmodernist” narrative strategies for entertainment purposes (Gan 2005). Ironically and intriguingly enough, in its 2001 *Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe* edition, the novel is repacked and relabeled “mystery fiction,” and “the first Chinese detective novel and horror novel.”<sup>75</sup> For all the controversies and sensation that the novel has stirred among critics and readers, it establishes its author’s fame as one of the most creative and influential novelists in contemporary China.

Before starting my reading of the novel, I feel it necessary to remind the reader that, due to the extremely enigmatic nature of the novel in characterization, plot, narration, etc.—the author, employing a variety of narratological devices, deliberately and systematically creates numerous “narrative traps” such as paradox, allusion, illusion, etc. to diversify the understanding of the novel—even to provide a coherent and reasonable description of what the novel is about constitutes a great challenge. Under such circumstances, trying to give an individualized and consistent description of the content

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<sup>75</sup> In order to make the novel read more like mystery fiction and to lure readers in that direction, in this new edition of the novel, headings are deliberately added to each originally untitled chapter to highlight the features of mystery fiction. For example, the second chapter is entitled “Mysterious Woman: Aunt Cui.” Most other chapters are entitled in such a pattern “Disappearance: Name of the person who dies in the chapter” as “Disappearance: Houzi,” “Disappearance: Zhao Long,” etc. The repacking and relabeling of the novel to popularize it obviously risk reducing its social, cultural, and intellectual implications. Surprisingly and ironically, the author Ge Fei, now already an established critic and Professor of literature, who is probably the only major novelist with a doctorate in contemporary China, approves and supports the new edition and its popularization or vulgarization of the novel. To account for this obviously unwise treatment, we cannot help but think of the commercial consideration.

of the novel becomes a foremost and indispensable part of our analysis, because in this case, “descriptive” to a large extent means “analytical.”

Structurally, the novel is composed of a preliminary story (*yingzi* 引子), a main story, and an epilogue (*weisheng* 尾声). While the epilogue is of little thematic importance, both the preliminary and main stories are highly significant in conveying the novel’s multilayered connotations.

In the preliminary story, like a conventional detective novel, a fateful family calamity is introduced that is suspected to be rooted in crime. Over five decades ago, on Tomb-sweeping Day, an unexpected, fierce fire suddenly broke out and befell the Zhao family, the richest and most powerful household in Ziwu Town. “The flame turned up roof after roof of the workshops, lasting from dusk to dawn.” It devoured almost all of the Zhao family’s property and turned their workshops to ruins. Though the narrator and the main character Zhao Shaozhong, for different purposes, both deny the claim that the fateful disaster is arson, all the evidence at the scene and all the ensuing misfortunes inflicted on the family as consequences of the devastating fire prove the truth of the claim. As an aged servant testifies, the fire broke out *at the same time* from the family’s blacksmith workshop, woodcraft workshop, and footwear workshop. It is common sense to assume that, if it were not arson, there would be little, if any, possibility for the fire to break out simultaneously in different sites. Moreover, the fact that the originally well-functioning water pump simply did not work at the crucial moment, and that the fire hose connected to the pump seemed to be clogged with a wood stopper also serves to further support the claim of arson, indicating that an enemy of the family exists.

The unexpected family calamity seems to completely destroy the patriarch Zhao Boheng's will power, courage, and confidence in life and in rebuilding his household, and he turns much older almost overnight. His health deteriorates so rapidly that half a month later the originally quite healthy old man finally becomes bedridden. In the last days of his life, lying in bed, the old man launches the grand family mission: to dig out the arsonist(s) and to pin down the enemy of the Zhao family. He writes down almost every villager's name on a piece of paper and then rules out the impossible suspects one by one in an attempt to ascertain the criminal(s). For all his eagerness and painstaking effort to find the enemy, Zhao Boheng fails to complete the grand family mission in his lifetime and dies with his eyes unclosed—a sign which is universally construed by Chinese people as indicating the dead person's everlasting regret for not accomplishing his most important mission in life. After his death, his son Zhao Jingxuan takes over the unfinished family cause. Like his father after the calamity, Zhao Jingxuan regards pinning down their family's enemy as the sole content and goal of his life. During the last years of his life, he also spends all his time and energy investigating the details of the fire and endeavors to reduce the list of suspects to three people before he dies.

As the novel stops at this point, we have no difficulty in finding that its preliminary story, viewed as an isolated section, seems to be a slavish copy of the beginning of the conventional detective or revenge novel. If the novel unfolded in this way, according to the conventions and the reader's expectation for this type of fiction, we would easily predict the development and outcome of the story: The Zhaos of the next generations, through much intensive and tortuous investigation into the clues, traces, and remains related to the devastating fire, finally ascertain the enemy from the three suspects and

take their revenge. Moreover, the existence of such subject matters in the novel as adultery, conspiracy, murder, clan feud, intra-family conflict and struggle, bloodshed for property, land, power, women, etc.—things that are almost indispensable for a detective story to cater to readers' taste for stimulation and sensation—seems to further confirm the claim and expectation.

For all the novel's apparent resemblance to the conventional detective novel in the beginning section, Ge Fei rejects this popular narrative pattern without any hesitation. This is actually quite compatible with his identity as an important writer preoccupied with serious existential, social, and intellectual issues. Completely different from the plot in a conventional detective novel, in *The Enemy*, the main character Zhao Shaozhong refuses to carry on the grand family mission passed down to him by his ancestors. He throws the paper carrying the three suspects' names into a fire as soon as he gets it at his father's funeral. It is common knowledge that transmission and acceptance of information concerning the crime and suspects are an indispensable link in the long chain of the criminal-searching process in the conventional detective novel. By making his main character reject his inherited family mission, Ge Fei actually abandons a long-standing Chinese narrative tradition.

There is an unusually huge time gap—over five decades—between the preliminary story and the main story in the novel. The huge temporal abyss structurally divides the whole novel into two clear-cut worlds: the past and the present. While the preliminary story, as just introduced, mainly describes the devastating fire that Zhao Shaozhong witnessed when he was a four-year-old boy, the main story tells of the everyday family life of aged Zhao Shaozhong, who has already become a grandfather himself and who is

now preparing for his sixtieth birthday anniversary. Instead of dealing with such subject matters as suspect-hunting and criminal-ascertaining—the content which is usually indispensable in a conventional detective novel—the main story of *The Enemy* chiefly narrates the mysterious and tragic occurrences befalling the family around Zhao Shaozhong's sixtieth birthday. Contrary to the outcome of a conventional detective novel, by the end of the novel, no specific enemy of the family is found. Even if we overlook the unreliability of the narrator's account and believe what he attempts to lead us to by his description in the last scene of the main story—Zhao Shaozhong himself rather than any actual enemy kills his son Zhao Long—it is still erroneous for us to conclude that Zhao Shaozhong *the person* is the enemy of his own family. This conclusion is even truer when applied to judging young Zhao Shaozhong. The reason is quite simple: A four-year-old boy has no intelligence, capability, and more importantly, no motivation to plot such deadly arson against his own family. Moreover, according to Zhao Shaozhong's reasoning as well as common sense, nearly sixty years have passed after the devastating fire, thus the arsonist(s) may no longer exist in the world. It almost becomes an impossible mission for the family to find out the enemy—in the original and substantial sense of the term.

Though the enemy of the Zhao family retains hidden and anonymous throughout the novel, it does exist. Actually all the evidence—the members of the family are murdered one by one in mysterious ways, calamities are continuously inflicted on the family, and every member of the family is seized by an inauspicious feeling of the inescapable fate and imminent calamity—works to confirm the existence of the enemy.

Then naturally a question arises: Who is the enemy? Because the narrator, as just discussed, refuses to identify the enemy with any individual human being, logically the question is changed to the following: What is the “enemy?” or, What brings all the calamity and death to the family? If the novel is not about criminal-searching and revenge as the conventional detective or revenge novel is, then what is it about? What does the author try to convey by first imitating or parodying the conventional detective novel and then rejecting the narrative mode characteristic of this type of novel?

To answer these questions, the most important thing, I think, is to find a starting point to cut in. Actually, upon a close investigation into the novel, we realize that Zhao Shaozhong’s mentality, behavior, and feeling constitutes a key, or at least provides some kind of clue, to these questions, because he is the focus of the whole novel and is the only character whose existence runs from the very beginning to the last scene in the novel, and who experiences and witnesses all the calamities and tragedies inflicted on the family,

Zhao Shaozhong undoubtedly is the most mysterious, incomprehensible, and thematically pregnant image in the novel. In the course of reading the novel, I believe many readers might be disturbed by an obviously contradictory and puzzling description of Zhao Shaozhong. In spite of the fact that Zhao Shaozhong *the person*, as just discussed, cannot be the arsonist or the enemy of his family, the narrator repeatedly hints at the link of all the family’s young generations’ deaths and tragedies to his existence.

Specifically, in the early part of the main story, the narrator subtly points to Zhao Shaozhong’s suspicious behavior and speech in relation to the death of Houzi, who is nominally his grandson but actually his biological son—the product of his adultery with

his daughter-in-law (his son Zhao Long's wife). All evidence indicates that Houzi's drowning in a huge vat in the family's courtyard is actually a murder rather than an accident because the vat is too tall for a little child to climb up into by himself. The only suspect of the murder, Mazi, a notorious hoodlum from another village, turns out to be secretly invited to the house by Zhao Shaozhong. More strangely, after Houzi's death, while all the other family members, relatives, and friends are suspicious of Mazi, Zhao Shaozhong alone vindicates him and denies any suggestion to investigate the case. In addition, he is the only person who blames Houzi himself for his own death. To our great surprise, in spite of all the other family members' fierce opposition, he marries his eldest daughter Meimei—one of the prettiest women in the village—to Mazi. Meimei receives from the brutal hoodlum and his equally wicked brothers nothing but many unbearable cruelties. Here the somewhat mysterious and suspicious relation of Zhao Shaozhong to Mazi and to Houzi's death and the fact that Zhao Shaozhong is the very source of Meimei's marital tragedy are made quite clear.

The narrator also hints at the link of Zhao Shaozhong's existence with all his other three children's death, though the link is often presented in a subtle and obscure way. Zhao Shaozhong is the first person who finds his youngest son Zhao Hu's dead body immediately after the latter is murdered; he even catches a faint view of the murderers' backs. However, Zhao Shaozhong's reaction to and treatment of his son's murder and his behavior afterwards, judging by normal logic, are simply more than surprising and perplexing. Instead of calling people to chase the murderers, as most people would do under such circumstances, Zhao Shaozhong, for some unknown reason, takes great effort to surreptitiously bury his son alone at night in an attempt to hide the murder from other



people. At this moment, the narrator deliberately incorporates a sentence pretending to describe Zhao Shaozhong's feeling, "in the fluster, he felt as if he himself had killed Zhao Hu."<sup>76</sup> This description, construed as an integral part of the novel as a whole, actually is less a reflection of Zhao Shaozhong's psychology at the moment than a subtle exposure of the mysterious link between his extremely incomprehensible behavior and his son's murder. The link becomes even clearer in the case of Liuliu's murder. The narrator repeatedly emphasizes the fact that Zhao Shaozhong's youngest daughter Liuliu is always haunted by the same nightmare of her father attempting to rape her. Moreover, before she is murdered, she sees the killer's "familiar face" and feels a "familiar smell surrounding her, as if it were the never-dissipating tobacco odor in her father's study."<sup>77</sup> The link finally becomes explicit in Zhao Shaozhong's eldest son Zhao Long's murder. At the end of the main story, at the very moment Zhao Long is murdered, he "lit a piece of flint in a fluster; in the transient light, he saw his father's pale face clearly."<sup>78</sup>

Not only does the way in which the implied author treats and interprets Zhao Shaozhong confuse us, but Zhao Shaozhong's own behavior, speech, and mentality also perplex us. Judging by normal logic and common sense, Zhao Shaozhong seems to behave, think, and speak in an incoherent, nonsensical, and illogical way. Besides, throughout his life, he seems to be engaged in nothing but three seemingly independent, unrelated, and meaningless activities—watching around, destroying the living things within his courtyard, and refuting the claims of the existence of the Zhao family's enemy.

<sup>76</sup> 慌乱之中他感到好像是自己亲手将赵虎杀死的一样。《敌人》，GFWJ: 118.

<sup>77</sup> ...一种她所熟悉的气味，它仿佛是父亲那间书房中经年不散的烟草的气息。《敌人》，GFWJ: 161.

<sup>78</sup> 他在慌乱之中划亮了一块火石，在那道一闪即逝的光亮中，他看清了父亲那张苍白的脸。《敌人》，GFWJ: 204.

Zhao Shaozhong first strikes us with his habitual behavior of watching, and keeping watching seems to make up the most important content of his life. The main story actually begins with the very scene of Zhao Shaozhong watching over his courtyard. There are many similar paragraphs in the novel dedicated to describing the scenes of Zhao Shaozhong watching. As demonstrated by the beginning scene and many other similar descriptions in the novel, the narrator repeatedly highlights Zhao Shaozhong's strong obsession with watching and the all-pervasive and far-reaching nature of his sight. His sight is never merely confined to his own courtyard; instead it stretches beyond.

Zhao Shaozhong's sight is not only broad and far-reaching, but also sharp and penetrating. This can be inferred from the fact that his sight can "sweep over" things (*GFWJ*: 105, 123, 140, 157). By employing the thematically and visually strong term "sweep over" (*sao guo* 扫过) rather than some more neutral and commonly used words to describe Zhao Shaozhong's sight, the narrator deliberately emphasizes its sharpness, swiftness, and intensity. More surprisingly, as Zhao Shaozhong grows older and older, while "his steps become unsteady and his reaction to outside stimuli blunt and slow," his sight, however, becomes "clearer and sharper," "shining like a knife blade with rust removed." All these depictions indicate that Zhao Shaozhong not only hopes to see as far and widely as possible, he also tries to see as clearly as possible.

Another activity which Zhao Shaozhong is engaged in with great enthusiasm is destroying the living things within his courtyard and blocking the ways that connect his house with the outside world. Intriguingly and strangely enough, in the novel, every time we see Zhao Shaozhong, if he is not watching around, he is destroying something within his courtyard for no reason, or more precisely, for reasons known only to himself. He

secretly eradicates the well-grown string beans beside his house but is reluctant to admit it; he has his family's two goats killed and destroys the pigeon nest under the eave of his house without giving any explanation; he cuts off the branches from the trees in such an unreasonable way that he almost makes the little trees die; he secretly poisons the family's faithful yellow dog to death; he immediately cuts down the family's old ginkgo tree after hearing two blind fortunetellers' random comments on it; he blocks the only door that connects his backyard to the outside world for no reason. In spite of the fact that the reasons or motivations behind these detrimental and seemingly unreasonable activities might be different from one case to another and also are unknown to outsiders, the effect of these activities is the same: to make the house and the family more inanimate, more unnoticeable, and more isolated from the outside world. Zhao Shaozhong not only tries to cut off the tie of his family to the outside world, but he also shows a strong tendency to isolate himself from the outside world. No other fact can be more manifest in revealing Zhao Shaozhong's intent to isolate himself than his somewhat incomprehensible decision to move to and live in a little dark windowless room which has been left unattended and unoccupied for many years.

Zhao Shaozhong's behavior and mentality of another kind also puzzle us greatly. While all the other people in the village, inside or outside the Zhao family, firmly believe that there is someone in the village working against the family, he alone repeatedly refutes the claim of the existence of the family's enemy. This phenomenon becomes even more disturbing when we are aware of the fact that, during all his lifetime, Zhao Shaozhong is always haunted by the ghost of the devastating fire, and that the suspicion of the existence of the enemy is actually part of the unconscious of his mind.

To solve all these questions, confusions, and contradictions, the most important thing, I believe, is to free ourselves from the confines of the stereotyped mode of thinking related to the reading of a conventional detective novel—for example, the expectation to find a personal enemy from the novel—and to adopt the strategy of “reading out,” a narratological term so aptly coined by Seymour Chatman. According to Chatman, “reading out” distinguishes itself from ordinary reading lies in that it elevates reading from “the surface manifestation level” to “the deeper narrative level” (1978: 41). In compatibility with Chatman’s perception, I believe that, for all the complexity, perplexity, and the multiplicity of the questions, confusions, and contradictions within the novel, actually they are not difficult to be answered and solved if our sight penetrates through the superficial phenomenal world into the inner world of human mentality.

For our purpose, another of Chatman’s perceptions of narrative is also highly significant. In his influential book on narrative structure just cited, Chatman makes a clear and meaningful distinction between traditional narrative and modern narrative in plot structuring as well as in meaning-making. Citing Roland Barthes, Chatman argues, traditional narrative emphasizes the importance of “resolution”; it tends to “articulate in various ways a question, its response and the variety of chance events which either formulate the question or delay its answer.” He further points out, “in the traditional narrative of resolution, there is a sense of problem-solving, of things being worked out in some way, of a kind of ratiocinative or emotional teleology.” Modern narrative, according to Chatman, adopts “revelation” as its guiding principle for plot structuring. As he argues, “in modern plot of revelation,” “it is not that events are resolved (happily or

tragically), but rather that a state of affairs is revealed” (1978: 48). Despite a tendency to oversimplify, Chatman’s perception does shed much light on a significant difference between traditional narrative and modern narrative. Chatman’s insight, I believe, provides us with a useful perspective to look at *The Enemy*, a novel which is typical of “modern narrative” as defined by Chatman.

Upon a close reading of the novel, especially after an intensive investigation into the characters’ inner spiritual worlds, we realize that the novel, for all its superficial imitation or parody of the conventional detective novel, actually does not intend to “solve” a puzzle as “who is the Zhao family’s enemy?” Rather, it means to expose a human condition, or precisely, to “reveal” the disastrous consequence of the negative human mentality. What Ge Fei attempts to convey by the novel is that sometimes a distorted human mentality or evil idea can be more destructive and horrible than any vicious, personal “enemy.” More specifically, the novel actually is intended to expose how fear on the part of aged Zhao Shaozhong—his fear of the existence of the family’s enemy, actual or imagined, fear of the upcoming calamity, and fear of the assertedly inescapable fate, as an ineradicable psychological trauma left by the terrifying fire he witnesses as a little child—brings one calamity after another to his family. The fact that throughout the novel no human being can be identified as the Zhao family’s enemy subtly indicates that it is the overwhelming feeling of fear rather than any human being that constitutes the “enemy” of the family. At this moment, it becomes clear that the dominating theme of the novel is to reveal or expose what shocking consequences a negative mentality or evil idea can bring about to human beings. Actually our observation of the novel is confirmed by

Ge Fei's own words. As he confesses, "as far as my original intention to create *The Enemy* is concerned, the core idea that it attempts to express is a kind of fear."<sup>79</sup>

All the depictions in the novel also testify to the above perception. The narrator repeatedly emphasizes the fact that, Zhao Shaozhong, like all the other family members, actually never psychologically goes out of the devastating fire and the overwhelming feeling of fear it brings about. During all his life, the fire and the fear always haunt him like a ghost or nightmare, and become part of his memory and consciousness:

Ten years later, Zhao Shaozhong married a woman from some other place in the village's ancestral temple, and the shadow of the fire disaster had already become obscure and remote. However, once the names on the Xuan paper [the list of suspects] skipped his mind, he would feel impotent from head to foot; the happiness of being newly-married and the fear hidden in his heart intertwined together and formed a huge knot in the deep recesses of his memory.<sup>80</sup>

The fear proves to be so powerful and lasting that it eventually becomes part of his unconscious, dominating his behavior, thinking, and speech in a way that is unnoticeable even to himself, just like the blood flowing within his body. After his daughter Liuliu is murdered, he goes to the village's graveyard alone and sits there, gazing at the surrounding wilderness, and recalls the past:

He nipped with his hand a broken dead branch, gazing in a daze at the desolate and silent surrounding wilderness, and stirred the burnt sandy soil. At dusk, when his sight skimmed at random over the sandy soil, he was astonished to find that the surface of the sandy soil was full of obscure writing; under the cover of a layer of snow, he was able

<sup>79</sup> 就《敌人》创作的初衷而论，它试图表达的核心是一种恐惧。《自序》，GFWJ: 2.

<sup>80</sup> 十年之后，赵少忠在村中的祠堂和一个外向女子结婚，那场火灾的阴影已经变得模糊而遥远了，但是他的脑中一旦掠过那些宣纸上的人名，就感到浑身无力，新婚的喜悦和内心潜藏的恐惧纠合在一起形成了记忆深处的一个巨大的组结。《敌人》，GFWJ: 6.

to discern the people's names on the ground; he was scared of losing his head by his own behavior, as if the writing on the ground had been created by another person. Before his eyes gradually appeared the confused looks imprinted on the faces of his father and grandfather...

Zhao Shaozhong gazed at the burnt black sandy soil in front of him stunned, and felt the unfathomable, enormous fear that the passing of time brought to him.<sup>81</sup>

Why is Zhao Shaozhong so scared by his own writing? Because the writing exposes the greatest secret hidden in the deep recesses of his consciousness, a secret which is usually even unconscious to himself and which is so horrible to him that he even dares not to admit it, let alone to face it. This description makes it quite clear that the sense of the existence of the enemy and the enormous fear it brings to him already become part of his unconscious and an incurable psychological trauma which he can never get rid of. Moreover, the description also implies that, despite the fact that Zhao Shaozhong does indeed have no intention to carry on the family mission passed down to him by his ancestors and that superficially Zhao Shaozhong lives totally different a life from his father's and grandfather's, he actually undergoes exactly the same inner experience as undergone by his father and his grandfather. In this sense, the fateful fire and the fear it brings to them have become an everlasting and irresistible nightmare for generations of the Zhaos, no matter how hard they try to get rid of them. Here Zhao Shaozhong's personal dilemma—his original intention not only cannot be fulfilled in the reality, but much worse, it is also totally distorted by some mysterious and imperceptible external

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<sup>81</sup> 他手里捏着一根折断的枯枝，呆呆地注视着荒凉而沉寂的四野，拨弄着地上被烧焦的沙土。黄昏时分，当他的目光偶尔掠过那片沙土的时候，他惊异地发现沙土上写满了模模糊糊的字迹，他被自己的行为吓得不知所措，仿佛地上的字迹是由另外一个人写出来的一样。他的眼前渐渐呈现出父亲和祖父脸上镌刻着的迷茫神情...

赵少忠怔怔地看着面前的那片焦黑的沙土，感到了深不可测的时光流转给他带来的巨大恐惧。《敌人》，GFWJ: 169.

forces—clearly reflects the limitation of individuality or subjectivity in a society and the vulnerability and impotence of the individual in relation to the invincible and cold outside world. Actually, as we will discover later, exposure of and meditation on varied universal human predicaments constitute the dominating theme running throughout all Ge Fei's novels.

After the main theme of the novel that fear on the part of the patriarch constitutes the “enemy” of the Zhao family and Zhao Shaozhong's inner world are exposed, we have no difficulty in finding that the seemingly puzzling and contradictory description of Zhao Shaozhong and his seemingly bizarre and incoherent behavior and mentality are actually quite consistent, reasonable, and therefore, understandable. As many readers might have noticed, the above analysis already clarifies the confusion that, for all the impossibility of Zhao Shaozhong being the arsonist or enemy of his own family, he has repeatedly been hinted as having a certain kind of link with his family's calamities and deaths. The answer becomes explicit at this point: Though Zhao Shaozhong *the person* is not the enemy of his own family, but his fear of the enemy, his cowardice in front of the enemy, and his acquiescence and submission to the brutality of the enemy constitute the very source of his family's continuous calamities and deaths.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, if we understand the fact that fear is Zhao Shaozhong's dominating life experience and constitutes the very

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<sup>82</sup> As I have repeatedly emphasized in the preceding chapter, as convincingly demonstrated by Hannah Arendt's perception and the Soviet-born scholar Vladimir Shlapentokh's life experience in Stalin's Soviet Union, and especially by Yu Hua's presentation of the miserable living condition and life experience of Chinese people in Communist China, fear and cowardice before the authority are the dominating life experience of the people under totalitarian domination rather than the dominating experience of all human beings. It becomes quite clear here that in his presentation of Zhao Shaozhong's mentality, Ge Fei actually universalizes his personal life experience and perception derived from the specific social reality in Mao's China. In this sense, Zhao Shaozhong's story in *The Enemy* can be read as an allegory of the life experience of the people in Communist China, though the novel bears no markers designating any specific historical period.



psychological drive for all his behavior and mentality, it is quite easy for us to find that his original, seemingly independent, unrelated, and meaningless activities actually are logically coherent and teleologically united.

In light of this speculation, we have no difficulty in realizing that Zhao Shaozhong's habitual behavior of watching is by no means any meaningless habit nor any kind of pastime. Instead, it is an expression of his never-slacking vigilance for possible dangers, threats, and enemies, and an unnoticeable sign of the fear hidden within the deep recesses of his heart. Rather than watching for fun, he watches for warning signs or premonitions of potential threats, calamities, and enemies. His all-pervasive, far-reaching, and sharp sight actually is a tool he can rely on to carry out this secret yet critical mission. Our perception can be testified first by the many descriptions that Zhao Shaozhong's watching is always simultaneously intertwined with his act of thinking and judging and then by the fact that he is the only person who is able to detect all the tragic events befalling the family.

All Zhao Shaozhong's destructive activities within his courtyard are also directly associated with his overwhelming feeling of fear and his painstaking effort to overcome it. Actually the things which he destroys, damages, or blocks are all regarded by him as signs of or traces to possible threats and as sources of fear, real or imaginary. He eradicates the string beans and has the goats killed because he thinks they are inauspicious things. More specifically, the seeds of the beans, which highly resemble sheep dung in color and shape, and the two goats both remind him in a secret yet painful way of his adultery with his daughter-in-law (which takes place in his family's sheep shed), a sin which he is always afraid would be used by his enemy to work against his

family and which is considered a potential source of danger to his family by him. His fear proves not to be baseless. Actually at his son's wedding ceremony, San-laoguan and Boss Qian do use this to humiliate him in a half-serious, half joking way, hinting that he both has adultery with his daughter-in-law and is cuckolded (*GFWJ*: 34).<sup>83</sup> He poisons his family's faithful yellow dog to death because he thinks the dog knows too many of the family's secrets, especially the secret of Zhao Hu's murder. Actually after Zhao Hu's murder, the extremely bizarre behavior of the dog—its incomprehensible anxiety, fury, and extremely strange and disturbing howling at night—does stir up much fear and suspicion within the household. He cuts down his family's old gingko tree because the blind fortunetellers convince him that the tree is linked with his eldest son's death and therefore is inauspicious. In other words, the tree is another source of fear. His act of blocking the only door connecting his backyard with the outside world is done out of the same psychology. The door through which his son Zhao Hu's dead body is thrust into the courtyard is viewed by Zhao Shaozhong as a gateway to death and to the unpredictable calamity. Moreover, the fact that the door is directly across from Boss Qian's wreath shop also makes Zhao Shaozhong feel uncomfortable and inauspicious because he can sense "a smell of dead people flying [through the door] into the courtyard now and then." From

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<sup>83</sup> It seems that Ge Fei's descriptions of Zhao Shaozhong's adultery with his son's wife are somewhat contradictory and confusing. Judged by the description presented here that people have already known of the adultery at his son's wedding ceremony, the adultery should have happened before his son's marriage. However, another description in the novel indicates the adultery actually occurs after his son's marriage (*GFWJ*: 135-137), because it takes place in their family's sheep shed after the two finish their work in the fields and return home. According to traditional Chinese rituals and customs, only after marrying into his husband's family can a woman begin to work for the family. Some might suggest that this contradiction in descriptive detail can be explained by the possibility that the adultery starts before their marriage but continues after the marriage. This explanation is obviously based on the ignorance of traditional Chinese marital conventions and therefore is highly flimsy. In traditional China, an engaged girl is even not allowed to meet alone with her would-be husband, let alone meets and commits adultery with her would-be father-in-law. Actually in the novel there are still some other similar contradictory descriptions (*GFWJ*: 115). These contradictions in description actually confirm my observation of Ge Fei's novels made in the beginning of this chapter that Ge Fei is so obsessed with discursive formulation that he sometimes overlooks story-telling itself.

the above discussion, we have no difficulty in finding that Zhao Shaozhong's destructive activities within his courtyard represent his strong desire and enormous effort to eradicate the sources of fear and to prevent the advent of disasters and dangers, though only in a psychological and self-deceptive way. Actually all the destruction conducted by Zhao Shaozhong works merely as a means to psychologically relieve or eliminate his feeling of fear; it never touches the substantial or real threats facing his family.

The enormity of Zhao Shaozhong's fear and the self-deceptive and ostrich-style nature of the means he employs to prevent potential threats and dangers are made most manifest in the most contradictory behavior of his. For all his secret yet firm belief in the existence of the enemy of his family, he never admits it openly—not even once. Instead, whenever someone makes such a claim, he always refutes it unreservedly and unequivocally. This contradiction actually explicitly reflects the magnitude of the fear he feels: it is so tremendous and frightening that he even does not dare to admit it. At this point, it becomes quite clear that the Zhao family's "enemy" turns out to be nothing but the fear of the existence of an enemy, real or imagined, on the part of the family's patriarch. As in a conventional detective novel, the "enemy" of the Zhao family is finally found out.

### **Fear as Human Imagination: Mental Shrinking and Distortion**

In *The Enemy*, fear not only constitutes the dominating life experience of human beings and the underlying drive for their behavior, thinking, and speech, it also transforms and twists their mentalities. The narrator provides us a vivid and all-around

description of how fear works to shrink and twist Zhao Shaozhong's originally innocent soul and turns him from a normal person and the family's guard to a spiritual dwarf and the murderer of his son.

If we piece together all the fragmented descriptions of Zhao Shaozhong scattered throughout the novel, we have no difficulty in finding that his mentality or inner world undergoes a drastic shrinking under the unbearable heaviness of fear. Actually in the preceding discussion, we have already touched this topic by pointing to the fact that in the main story the content of the aged Zhao Shaozhong's life seems to be reduced to nothing but three activities related to relieving fear, with real or imagined effects. The following discussion will extend and deepen the exploration of this theme.

From the retrospective chapter narrating Zhong Shaozhong's life in his youth, which mainly focuses on his experience when he first meets Auntie Cui and on his relation to her, we are informed that when he is young, he travels back and forth along the Grand Canal doing business just as his son Zhao Hu later does. Like all his fellow workers, during the long business trips, he also occasionally stays over night at a whorehouse, though from the very beginning he is not as eager for women as his fellow workers. Whoring, a sort of behavior which is viewed as immoral and illegal by most modern cultures but a common practice in traditional China, at least proves the normality of both his body and mentality. To some extent, his admiration of and adultery with his son's wife can also be viewed in the same way. Compared with his fellow men, those vulgar villagers, Zhao Shaozhong, an offspring of a powerful and rich household—though in decline—is a person of higher taste and with a more refined sense of beauty. He knows how to admire the tranquil and beautiful natural scenery along the river during his long

business trip; he knows how to enjoy food, wine, leisure, and rest in the intervals of work; he knows how to appreciate women's company from a perspective other than merely sexual intercourse; he knows how to play *erhu* 二胡 a traditional Chinese stringed musical instrument. In addition, he also proves himself a man of compassion and dignity. The reason that he takes young Auntie Cui back to his home, apart from his admiration and desire for her, is actually out of his sympathy for her miserable living conditions and his motivation to free her from the abuse of the whorehouse's procuress. When Wang Huzi, a hoodlum and one of his fellow workers, offers him a bag of coppers to buy Auntie Cui, Zhao Shaozhong rejects the suggested deal without any hesitation—an act both showing his dignity and pride as a real man and sowing the seeds of hatred in Wang Huzi's heart. In short, as presented in the retrospective chapter, though haunted by the nightmare of the disastrous fire and the tremendous fear it brings about since he is very young, originally Zhao Shaozhong shows no obvious signs of mental abnormality or distortion; he seems to be a human being with normal feelings, desires, and anticipations, as well as normal human virtues and vices.

With the further unfolding of the novel, however, we are surprised to find that, with the passing of time, under the pressure of the “hostile looks” from all directions in the village, almost all the qualities and virtues Zhao Shaozhong once possessed as a normal person—his enthusiasm for work, his enjoyment of beautiful scenery and music, his courage to take challenges and capacity of coping with difficulties and troubles, his compassion and dignity, and even his somewhat immoral desires and behavior—go away from him completely with the passing of time, and that his originally broad inner world has shrunk greatly. He eventually becomes a man “losing interest in anything.” As the

narrator testifies, an originally hardworking and responsible man, Zhao Shaozhong finally changes into a person who does not even care about the affairs of his own household and “seems to forget all the crops in the fields already.” He puts aside his *erhu* so long that one day when he tries to play it again, a string suddenly breaks. He seems to lose all his courage and capacity to take challenges and to protect his family, let alone his pride and dignity. He becomes so frightened and timid that he slavishly submits to all the threats, extortion, and oppression inflicted upon his family without any attempt to fight back. For example, in one case, Mazi, the notorious cold-blooded hoodlum, in collaboration with his seven or eight equally wicked and strong brothers, who actually form a local gang, forces Zhao Shaozhong to marry Meimei to him, or precisely, to them, because Meimei later becomes the sex slave not only to Mazi, but also to all his barbarous brothers. To threaten and warn Zhao Shaozhong of the potential consequence if his requirement cannot be fully fulfilled, Mazi brutally murders Zhao Shaozhong’s grandson Houzi. In the face of such unbearable humiliation and brutality, Zhao Shaozhong, instead of standing up and leading his whole family to fight back, chooses to surrender to the hoodlum’s violence and brutality. More shockingly, even when he sees with his own eyes the wounds all over Meimei’s body, evidence of the cruelty of Mazi and his brothers, and knows of the fact that Meimei becomes the sex slave to all the brutal brothers, he pretends to know nothing about it and still entertains Mazi at dinner in a subservient way. In another case, Zhao Shaozhong is forced to sell his family’s most cherished plot of land to San-laoguan, now the richest and most powerful person in the town, though he is extremely reluctant to do so, because the plot (the site of the ruins left after his family’s workshops were burnt by the devastating fire) records the wealth,

power, and glory once possessed by his family. Another phenomenon further confirms our observation. In spite of the fact that after the fateful fire the Zhao family goes on the path of decline, it still remains quite wealthy and influential. This can be inferred from the fact that the family still can afford to employ long-term hands, that Zhao Shaozhong offers a very costly jewel to a *Fengshui* 风水 master for his advice on his wife's grave site and arranges a "sumptuous banquet" for her funeral, and that he gives a large amount of money to the blind fortunetellers for their divining service. For all the remaining wealth and influence of the family in the village, we are surprised to find that the family's offspring become targets of abuse and humiliation by the villagers. Shockingly enough, on two occasions, we even see that Liuliu is molested by Cobbler in her own courtyard. On another occasion, Mazi surprises us with his very act of insulting Meimei in Zhao Shaozhong's presence by calling her "shameless whore." It becomes quite clear that in the outsiders' eyes, cowardice and shrinking in front of intimidation and threat constitute a most prominent feature and label of Zhao Shaozhong and his family.

As mentioned before, Zhao Shaozhong also shows a strong tendency of self-confinement, which can be appropriately regarded as another symptom of his mental shrinking. He not only physically confines himself to a dark, windowless, little room, but much worse, he also painstakingly covers, restricts, and suppresses his natural feelings, emotions, and desires. This is made most manifest by his relation to and treatment of Auntie Cui. When he first meets young Auntie Cui in a whorehouse during a business trip, he is very satisfied with her comfortable care and pleasant company. The "uncontrollable excitement" he displays while touching her body also testifies to his strong desire for her. His fascination with her is further confirmed first by his unambiguous rejection of Wang

Huzi's attempt to buy her from his hands and then by the incident where in order to keep Auntie Cui in his house, Zhao Shaozhong mercilessly kicks out his family's old servant who has worked there for over thirty years. Despite the intensity of his desire for the woman in the first place, apart from a failed attempt at sexual intercourse and occasional bodily contacts, the relationship between Zhao Shaozhong and Auntie Cui never goes beyond the confines of a master and a maidservant. Moreover, with the passing of time, Zhao Shaozhong not only seems to abandon the attempt to establish an intimate relation with her, his attitude towards her also becomes more and more indifferent. The reason is actually not too complicated. After Zhao Shaozhong's wife commits suicide, the villagers unanimously blame Zhao Shaozhong and Auntie Cui for her death, in spite of the fact that they are innocent. Under tremendous pressure from the villagers, whose opinions represent traditional ethics and all the prejudices and vices attached to it, Zhao Shaozhong finally abandons all his attempt and effort to deepen his relation with Auntie Cui, even after his wife's death. It becomes quite clear that what is at work here is still Zhao Shaozhong's fear and cowardice. It is his fear of the villagers' opinions and rumors and his fear of transgressing the traditional ethics that truncate his inner world and turn him from a normal human being to a spiritual dwarf.

Zhao Shaozhong's mentality is not only shrunk, but also distorted. Actually the two processes of his mental shrinking and distortion are concurrent, interrelated, and inseparable; to some extent, they can be properly viewed as an integral one. The only difference between the two processes lies in that, while mental shrinking mainly inflicts harm on oneself, the disastrous consequences of mental distortion for the most part is



directed towards others. Under the dual force of mental shrinking and distortion as a consequence of the irresistible feeling of fear, Zhao Shaozhong gradually transforms from a man of dignity, pride, and compassion to an extremely self-centered person and finally to a cold-hearted murderer.

Actually in the beginning of the novel, from Zhao Shaozhong's extremely strange and incomprehensible reaction and attitude to the molestation of Meimei by Mazi and Houzi's death, we can already detect some traces of his mental distortion. Surprisingly enough, in the face of his daughter Meimei's miserable marriage and his grandson Houzi's mysterious death, Zhao Shaozhong not only does not show any sign of sadness, but he also feels a kind of satisfaction and relief:

These days, Zhao Shaozhong seemed to change to another person. Houzi's death and Meimei's marrying off several months ago by no means plunged him into the confinement of loneliness; on the contrary, they brought him unspeakable satisfaction. As the air grew hotter and hotter day by day, his steps also became lighter and quicker day after day. At humid night of the rainy season, Auntie Cui could hear the humming of a ditty sent forth from his bedroom now and then.<sup>84</sup>

At this unusual phenomenon, we cannot help but ask: How can a father and grandfather react to his children's misery and death in such a cold-hearted and bizarre way? How to explain this obviously abnormal and absurd phenomenon?

Again the answer lies in Zhao Shaozhong's psychology—his overwhelming feeling of fear and his desperate struggle to overcome it. As mentioned before, in the deep recesses of Zhao Shaozhong's mind, both Meimei's and Houzi's existence is regarded by

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<sup>84</sup> 这些天，赵少忠仿佛变成了另外一个人。猴子的死和几个月前梅梅的出嫁并没有使他陷入孤独的包围之中，相反却给他带来难以说清的满足。随着空气一天天变热，他的脚步也一天天变得轻快起来。在潮湿的雨季的夜晚，翠婶不时可以听见他的卧室传来一两声哼哼唧唧的小调。《敌人》，*GFWJ*: 80.

him as a latent threat to his family and as a source of fear in his heart. After Meimei becomes the target of the cruel hoodlum Mazi's hunting, in Zhao Shaozhong's eyes, she has *objectively* become a source of trouble to the family, no matter how innocent and reluctant she is. Besides, Mazi's murder of Houzi makes Zhao Shaozhong realize more clearly Mazi's resolution to get Meimei, and his extreme cruelty further consolidates his already intense feelings and belief. Therefore marrying Meimei off to the hoodlum to satisfy his greed is considered by Zhao Shaozhong a necessary step to eliminate the latent threat and the source of fear, though this means a lifelong nightmare for his daughter. Zhao Shaozhong's "satisfaction" with Houzi's death comes from the same psychology. As discussed earlier, the existence of Houzi, his nominal grandson but actually the product of his adultery with his daughter-in-law, has long been regarded by him as a potential threat to the reputation and peace of the family. Actually judged by San-laoguan's seemingly random comments on this, Houzi's existence has already become a weapon used by other people to attack the family, and it already ignited the mutual suspicion and hatred between the lustful father and the cuckolded son. From the brief discussion, we have no difficulty in finding that, at this point, fears and the effort to eliminate the sources of the fears have already occupied the entire space of Zhao Shaozhong's mind and left no room for anything else. This constitutes the ultimate reason that he loses his sense of compassion to others and becomes a more and more indifferent and self-centered person. A human being who loses the basic sense of compassion—one of the fundamental moral qualities which make a human being human—is naturally a mentally distorted person. Actually in the quoted paragraph, the narrator already hints at

Zhao Shaozhong's mental distortion by pointing to the fact that he "seems to change to another person."

Zhao Shaozhong's "satisfaction" or psychological peace achieved at the cost of his grandson's life and his daughter's lifelong happiness does not remain long. His beautiful yet naive dream to placate his enemy through his submission and meekness is quickly shattered when he finds that his son Zhao Hu is brutally murdered right by his backyard door. After furtively burying his son alone at night, he becomes badly ill. For all the severity of his illness—he runs a fever so high and dangerous that his words eventually become indistinct and incomprehensible—he rejects his family's suggestion to call in a doctor for a medical examination. He knows quite well of the secret or source of his sickness. It is not caused by any physiological dysfunction or disease; rather, it is merely a physical symptom of his inner disturbance—his feeling of tremendous fear.

When examining the course of Zhao Shaozhong's mental distortion as a whole, we find that his son Zhao Hu's murder constitutes the turning point in the process. If, as just discussed, before the incident, Zhao Shaozhong still holds an illusion to placate his enemy through his submission and meekness, the bold and brutal murder, however, ruthlessly shatters his beautiful yet naive dream. Unfortunately, the shattering of his illusion does not jolt him awake from his feeling of fear and his self-deceptive way of "salvation," let alone propels him to stand up to the enemy; rather, it pushes him into the unfathomable abyss of fear even further and makes him more inclined to internalize the cause of his fear than ever. As a result, his mental world is further distorted. Liuliu finds that, after his recovery from the sickness caused by her brother Zhao Hu's murder, her father "has completely changed to another person." Auntie Cui also suddenly realizes that,

after Zhao Hu's murder, Zhao Shaozhong, the man with whom she has been living under the same roof for dozens of years turns to "a stranger" to her. Moreover, she sees for the first time in her life the "ghastly look" in his eyes, which makes her feet shiver all night during sleep.

After his son Zhao Hu's murder, an already highly dismayed and depressed Zhao Shaozhong finally becomes desperate, and his mentality and behavior begin to go to extremes. He seems to be completely controlled by a dual force. On the one hand, his indifference to his family's misery and suffering, his cruelty, and his reluctance and impotence towards coping with the real, external threats befalling his family become more and more obvious. This can be easily captured first by his act of secretly poisoning his family's faithful and innocent dog to death to hide the news of his son's murder, then by the fact that he does not at all care about his daughter Liuliu's safety even if plenty of evidence indicates that her life is in great danger, and finally by the fact that after Liuliu indeed is murdered mostly due to his neglect of his duty as her father and the protector of the family, he does not show any trace of remorse and sadness. He seems to be deprived of all the feelings, emotions, and thoughts he once possessed as a normal human being and turns into a walking corpse. On the other hand, quite contrary to his image of an extremely impotent old man in dealing with family calamities, the burst of his vigor, strength, and enthusiasm when destroying things and even people, who he regards as sources of his internal fear, proves extremely shocking. This is made very manifest in his action of cutting down his family's old ginkgo tree.

One winter day, just after a fierce snowstorm, two old blind fortunetellers happen to pass by when Zhao Shaozhong is sitting under his family's old ginkgo tree and watching

around. Hitting the tree with his walking stick by accident, a fortuneteller casually remarks that the tree, which already enjoys a life of two or three hundred years, actually is dead. Amused by the fortuneteller's seemingly ridiculous remarks, Zhao Shaozhong smiles and tells him that the tree's branches and leaves had never ever been as exuberant as this year and that the tree just yielded a full basket of fruits this fall. Completely ignoring Zhao Shaozhong's refutation, the fortuneteller insists that the tree will not sprout again next year because its roots have already rotten. While the blind man is calmly and casually uttering his prediction, "the eerie yet composed expression on his face makes Zhao Shaozhong shiver uncontrollably."

Obviously the blind fortuneteller's remarks trigger new fear and tension in Zhao Shaozhong's already highly suppressed and distorted mentality. To our great surprise, the fortuneteller's remarks and the fear it brings about, instead of weakening him, actually rejuvenate him. To test the fortuneteller's prophecy, the old man, who usually looks so weak that he needs a bamboo stick for support seems to suddenly recover from his half-dead state and resume his strength and will power. He eventually saws the huge tree down by himself. To accomplish this task, he continuously works for more than two hours, and his shirt is soaked with sweat. The tremendous trunk of the tree, after knocking down the tall chimney on the cooking house and destroying numerous tiles on the roof, finally falls on the courtyard wall. The enormous noise and sensation the falling tree makes evoke a sharp scream from a frightened Auntie Cui, who is working in the cooking house at the moment. From this depiction, we have no difficulty in discerning what astonishing energy and determination that the aged and seemingly weak old man displays in eradicating things regarded by him as sources of fear.

Actually all the family's tragedy and Zhao Shaozhong's mental distortion culminate in the incident of his killing his son Zhao Long—the finale of the main story—which is obviously the most significant scene in the novel.

After Zhao Shaozhong cuts down the tree, the scene that unfolds before him almost frightens him to death:

It seemed that Zhao Shaozhong's consciousness was still not relieved from the shock and fright before him; he had seen a flock of mice rushing out of the hollow trunk. Those grey mice, like the flood out of a breached levee, moved in all directions and scuttled everywhere on the snowy ground, squeaking; after leaving a huge stretch of disorderly claw traces, they disappeared within a minute.<sup>85</sup>

The scene proves so frightening that the sight of it eventually makes Zhao Shaozhong fall to the ground uncontrollably, as if paralyzed. The blind fortuneteller's prophecy is finally confirmed, and the tree is indeed dead.

“The accuracy of the blind man's words he uttered at random under the ginkgo tree makes Zhao Shaozhong feel a terror he never experienced before.”<sup>86</sup> His attitude towards the fortunetellers turns quickly from suspicion to devout belief. He offers a bag of coppers to the blind men as the pay for foretelling his family's experiences and fate. Using a handful of yarrow stems and adopting the theory of The Eight Diagrams (*bagua* 八卦) that originate in the *Yi Jing* or *Book of Changes*, the blind man provides an accurate and exhaustive description of all that the family experienced in the past—the

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<sup>85</sup> 赵少忠似乎还没有从眼前的惊悸之中缓过神来，他看到空洞的树干中钻出了成群结队的老鼠，那些灰色的老鼠像决堤的洪水一样四处蔓延开，在雪地上到处乱窜，他们吱吱地叫着，在积雪中留下了一大片散乱的爪迹之后，不一会儿就消失了踪影。GFWJ:175.

<sup>86</sup> 瞎子在白果树下随口说出的那些话的灵验使赵少忠感到了一种前所未有的恐惧。GFWJ: 175.

devastating fire, the mice panic, and Zhao Shaozhong's three children's death. Stupefied with shock, Zhao Shaozhong mechanically asks the blind man about his eldest son Zhao Long's future. At first, the fortuneteller is reluctant to speak. However, after being informed that the ginkgo tree is cut down, his face suddenly darkens. He finally divulges the horrible prophecy about Zhao Long's fate. He tells Zhao Shaozhong that the tree's life actually interacts with his son's in a mysterious way. Because Zhao Shaozhong cuts the tree down, the fortuneteller says with enormous regret, his son's life now is already near its end. The fortuneteller further predicts that Zhao Long cannot live beyond his upcoming birthday, December 28, the last day of the year according to the lunar calendar.

Due to the accuracy of the previous prophecies made by the fortunetellers, the villagers unanimously believe that this time the prediction will also come true and that Zhao Long will soon die. Moreover, an eerie occurrence that takes place recently in the village helps further consolidate the villagers' belief in the prophecy. One day at dusk, the witch of the village comes into the family's courtyard intentionally to tell Zhao Long the shocking news that an old man who lives at the western edge of the village has suddenly returned to life from death—an anomaly which is universally regarded by Chinese people as an evil omen of imminent calamity. Naturally, all the villagers view the anomaly as a premonition of Zhao Long's death. As powerful evidence of their full confidence in the fortuneteller's prediction, the witch testifies, many villagers have already reserved wreaths from Boss Qian's shop for Zhao Long's funeral. "In all the villagers' eyes, it seemed as if he had already become a ghost who has been dead for many years as a human being."<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> 在村中所有人的眼中，他似乎已经成了一个死去多年的幽灵。GFWJ: 182.

Under such circumstances, it is only natural to see that all of the Zhao family are suddenly plunged into a huge panic. Every one in the family seems to be controlled by the spell of the ominous prophecy. Zhao Shaozhong, perhaps out of the consideration of reducing the chances of external invasion, blocks the only door connecting the backyard to outside. Besides, he also cuts down the well-grown bamboo grove in front of his courtyard, through which the murderers of his youngest son Zhao Hu fled. Auntie Cui, sharing Zhao Shaozhong's worries, locks the door to Zhao Long's bedroom from the outside every night. She prohibits Zhao Long to do anything potentially dangerous. For instance, one day when Zhao Long tries to climb up onto the roof to remove the block in the chimney, Auntie Cui immediately stops him. Zhao Long, the target of the prophecy and now the focus of all of the village's attention, naturally becomes the person who is under the greatest pressure. Though a physician, after a careful medical examination, assures him that his health is good enough to live to the age of one hundred, Zhao Long does not feel even a little bit of relief. Even he himself "thinks that maybe his days are really numbered." To escape Fate, an extremely frightened Zhao Long confines himself to his family's courtyard all day except for occasionally visiting the village's wineshop or taking a walk along the river bank. In order to get some theurgy or magic to break the curse, the desperate young man climbs over a high mountain and manages to find the fortunetellers' thatched hut. But all his effort and anticipation finally end in vain because the fortunetellers have drifted to some other places, and no one knows when they will return.

In spite of the panic overwhelming the family, with the passing of the time, however, nothing serious really happens, apart from a trivial incident of Zhao Long being bullied



and extorted in the wineshop. Moreover, to Zhao Long's great delight, when December 28—the asserted last day of his life according to the prophecy—eventually arrives, he “does not feel the doomed day marked by the prophecy makes any difference from all those past.”

Zhao Long sat beside the wall outside the courtyard, watching the sun rising inch by inch to the middle of the sky and then slowly setting in the west, and felt some sort of uncontrollable excitement. All the things under the sky looked serene, auspicious, and tranquil; he seemed to feel that the dark clouds overshadowing the entire compound were quietly dissipating with the deflecting of the wind; the time of uninterrupted bad fortune finally showed some sign of stopping on this passing day.<sup>88</sup>

Greatly relieved, that evening Zhao Long has a good appetite for the first time in days. Motivated by the warmth and affection from his father, Zhao Long drinks a lot. Extremely drunk, he returns to his bedroom and lies down. Seized by a strange feeling, he cannot sleep for a long time. However, the sound of Auntie Cui locking his bedroom makes him feel safe again; he finally falls asleep.

Just as Zhao Long rejoices at the thought that the curse is broken and he is safe now, doom falls all of a sudden. After midnight, the wind suddenly blows outside. When he arises to close the window, he faintly sees a shadow skimming across the window like a bird. Amid the howling of the wind, he hears the sound of someone unlocking the door. Then a black shadow lurks into his room:

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<sup>88</sup> 赵龙坐在院外的墙边，看着太阳一寸寸地升到中天，然后慢慢西沉，感到了一种抑制不住的激动。苍穹下的一切都显得安详而静谧，他似乎觉察到笼罩在院落上空的晦暗的阴云正随着风向的偏转悄悄散开，接连不断的倒霉的日子在这即将过去的一天终于显出了中止的迹象。《敌人》，GFWJ: 203.

Zhao Long felt the blood all over his body was frozen; when the black shadow approached him, he felt that an unbelievable fear was tearing his body little by little into pieces.

Zhao Long sat at the end of the bed frozen stiff, in heavy intoxication, the fright and the desire for sleep interwoven in his heart made him pull over a corner of the quilt to cover his face.<sup>89</sup>

At the last moment in his life, Zhao Long lights a piece of flint, “in the transient light, he sees his father’s pale face clearly.” The murderer turns out to be no one else but Zhao Shaozhong. After so many twists and turns, the prophecy finally comes true. Like Oedipus, a doomed Zhao Long also cannot escape the curse of Fate.

When we carefully examine the event of Zhao Shaonzhong killing his son as a whole, with his act of cutting down the old ginkgo tree as the starting point, we find that the event is highly meaningful. First, the psychology and behavior that Zhao Shaozhong displays in the process further confirms a well-established perception in literature as well as in real life that a mentally distorted man is sometimes also a dangerous man, especially when the distortion is a direct result of long-term brutality and suppression of desires. The reason is quite simple. Psychoanalytically, a heart which has long been immersed in brutality tends to be brutal itself, and the repressed desire often turns strikingly destructive once released. One of the most familiar cases of this phenomenon for Chinese readers is Zhang Ailing’s *Golden Cangue*. Zhao Shaozhong’s life story obviously provides another outstanding example to this phenomenon. Second, and more importantly, through the description that the prophecy is finally made true by Zhao Shaozhong himself,

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<sup>89</sup> 赵龙觉得自己周身的血液都被冰冻住了，当那个黑影悄悄朝他走近的时候，他感到一种令人难以置信的恐惧正把他的躯体一片片撕碎。

赵龙僵直地坐在床头，在浓浓的酒意中，心头交织的惊恐和渴望入睡的欲望使他拉了一下被角，遮住了自己的脸。《敌人》，GFWJ: 205.

rather than by any real or imagined “enemy,” Ge Fei makes it very clear that it is not so-called Fate but the blind belief in and unreasonable fear of Fate that constitute the true “enemy” of human beings. As demonstrated by Zhao Shaozhong’s behavior and mentality in the event, the seeming invincibility of Fate actually does not derive from any magic power it possesses but from the blindness and irrationality of human belief. The fact that Zhao Shaozhong’s own action is the guarantee of the trustworthiness of his belief—if Zhao Shaozhong ignored the fortuneteller’s prophecy and did not kill his son, then the asserted fate of his son’s destined death simply would not exist—powerfully reveals that even the concept of Fate or Heavenly Mandate is created by human beings themselves. Here it becomes quite clear that Ge Fei’s view of Fate is obviously contradictory with the traditional Chinese worldview, according to which, Fate or Heavenly Mandate is a “substantial existence” rather than a creation of human mind. In light of this speculation, we can imagine that when Zhao Shaozhong carries out his well-planned scheme of taking his son’s life, he might justify his killing by arguing that he is just following or materializing what Fate or the Heavenly Mandate prescribes, and that if he did not follow the mandate of Fate, greater calamities would fall. He seems to be completely controlled by the fear of Fate and becomes a slave of his own belief. At this point, it becomes quite manifest that, by parodying the traditional Chinese worldview of fatalism, as indicated by the descriptive detail of the accuracy of the fortuneteller’s prophecy about the ginkgo tree and about the Zhao family’s past experiences, Ge Fei actually aims to subvert and discredit its validity. Actually, as discussed earlier and as we will further discuss later, to reexamine and subvert the traditional Chinese views and conventions by parodying them constitutes one of the most important themes of the novel.

In *The Enemy*, fear, as the dominating human experience, not only can cause destructive consequences to human beings, but more surprisingly, it also has some “positive effects.” Prolonged immersion in intense fears makes every member of the Zhao family highly sensitive to threats and endows them with a foreboding of the future. Each of them can sense and even accurately predict upcoming disasters in some way—usually through dream or hallucination. As a favorable consequence, the premonition of imminent threats can somehow prevent them from being devoured by calamity. In other words, ironically and absurdly enough, fear constitutes an indispensable condition for the safety of human life. Once they lose the feeling of fear, they lose the presentiment of the upcoming threats, and consequently they put their lives in danger. In this sense, it is definitely no coincidence that Zhao Hu, Liuliu, and Zhao Long all die at the moment when they are temporarily intoxicated by the feeling of safety or when they temporarily lose the torturing feeling of fear.

Zhao Hu, the straightforward and imprudent young man, after returning from a dangerous business trip, is eager to leave home again, because he feels a greater danger—threat to life—from within the village. Unfortunately the ship by which he will make his escape is temporarily under repair. In tremendous fear and anxiety, he hides in a dilapidated thatched hut far from the village, impatiently waiting for the ship repair. After a long anxious wait, the ship is finally fixed. The last night before his departure, he “feels so relaxed and easy for the first time” in his long wait, and “the uneasiness hidden in his heart turns to nothing in light intoxication.” He decides to return home to fetch some everyday necessities for travel and to say good-bye to his family. He is murdered on his

way home as he is approaching the back door of his family's residence. Liuliu, the most sensitive person in the novel, seems to possess an instinct for foreboding the upcoming calamity. In the last days before she is murdered, "her once irrelievable anxiety gradually sinks to the bottom of the riverbed of her memory with the disappearance of the sound of frogs in the summer," and the "suspicious looks of fright and uneasiness which often can be seen on her face already do not exist any longer." Though at the last moment in her life her instinct for premonition comes back, it is already too late to prevent her ultimate tragic fate. Zhao Long, as described in detail earlier, on the very night he is murdered, feels greatly relieved and regains his "good appetite for the first time" since knowing of the fortuneteller's prophecy about his imminent death. Moreover, he also senses, for the first time in his life, affection from his father, who murders him only hours later. The perception that fear constitutes a condition for one's life safety is also testified by the fact that Zhao Shaozhong, the person who always remains vigilant and never slacks his nerves, is also the only one who does not lose his life in the Zhao family. At this point, it is quite clear that fear actually becomes an integral part of and basic condition for human life in Ge Fei's world.

### **Fear and Absurdity as Social and Existential Phenomena: *On the Margin***

As discussed earlier, unlike Yu Hua, whose novels undergo radical changes stylistically, thematically, and linguistically, Ge Fei's novels display a relative consistency in both style and content, especially in their shared theme of meditating on the universal human predicament. By saying this I of course do not mean to deny the

particularity of each of his individual novels and their thematic shifts. Actually, when we take a careful, overall examination of his three novels, we have no difficulty in finding that his second novel *On the Margin* (1992) stands out as a unique work and that it differs greatly from both *The Enemy* (1991) and his third one *Flags of the Desire* (1995) in many ways. Moreover, we can also discern that, from *On the Margin* onwards, Ge Fei's fiction also undergoes certain "realistic return" as seen in Yu Hua's novels, despite the fact that the thematic change in Ge Fei's fiction is much more insignificant compared with that in Yu Hua's and that the realistic dimension in Ge Fei's fiction never overwhelms its transcendental, metaphysical perspective.

When we put together all the narrative segments scattered throughout the whole novel, we find that the story of *On the Margin* is actually quite simple. The content of the novel is mainly composed of the life story of an unidentified first-person narrator and character, from a young master of a rich family to a low-ranking military officer in the KMT army in the Republican period and finally to a "counter-revolutionary element" in Communist China. Around the major narrative thread, interwoven into the text are stories of some other people who are closely related to the narrator in certain ways—his parents, his tutor Xu Fuguan, his wife Azalea, the three kind and beautiful women Little Button, Flower, and Butterfly, his lifelong friend Zhong Yuelou, and the lustful and wicked Communist village head Rogue Song—as well as the narrator's emotions, feelings, and his meditations on history and on the universal human predicament. The novel covers a time span of over eighty years of modern Chinese history from the early Republican period to the early 1990s. Compared with Ge Fei's other two novels, *On the Margin* differs in at least four aspects.

First, *On the Margin* is the most “realistic” novel by Ge Fei. As discussed earlier, Ge Fei’s first novel *The Enemy*, by erasing all temporal marks designating a specific historical period from the text, deliberately highlights its unrealistic and transcendental quality. Quite similarly, his third novel *Flags of the Desire*, though set against the specific historical background of contemporary Chinese academic circles, also focuses on the unhistorical side of reality. Unlike both novels, in *On the Margin*, the reality bears a basically specific and historical nature, and there an individual’s personal feeling and experience are firmly rooted in the specific social reality.

Second, it is also the “simplest” novel by Ge Fei. Compatible with its apparent “simplicity” in content, the novel also displays certain conventionality in technique and form. Abandoning the many narratological “traps” so adeptly manipulated in Ge Fei’s other two novels and replacing the unreliable narrator with a reliable one, the novel adopts the traditional storytelling as its basic narrative pattern and provides readers with a basically realistic, reliable, and integral story, though the story is not narrated in a completely chronological order, and the narrative thread is interrupted now and then. Furthermore, by rejecting the narratological experiment of diversified and often opposing perspectives and adopting a basically unified and relatively objective one, the “reality” presented in the novel is, for the first time in Ge Fei’s fiction, endowed with some sort of unity, certainty, and perceptibility, though some “events” in the novel remain kind of mysterious and elusive.

Third, it is also the most “lyrical” novel by Ge Fei. Unlike the seemingly detached tone usually assumed by the narrators in Yu Hua’s novels, in most of Ge Fei’s fictional works, the implied author and the narrator both display a truly indifferent and critical

attitude towards the people and things narrated in the novel, where the momentum of detached, metaphysical meditation on universal human experience is so overwhelming that concern with and expression of personal feelings and emotions for the most part are removed from the text. In this respect, *On the Margin* is truly an exception to Ge Fei's fiction. The novel, which is partially inspired by the author's longtime contact with a peasant poet in his native town who used to be a brigadier in the KMT army, and especially by the "silent sound" he "heard" and the special "atmosphere" he felt when he sat together with the former high-ranking military officer in his deep courtyard, displays both an explicit nostalgia for the past and a strong impulse of self expression in quite an emotional way, though the transcendental dimension of Ge Fei's thought—his metaphysical speculation on universal human predicament—remains the dominating theme in the novel. As many readers might also discern, the personal emotions and feelings displayed by the narrator in eulogizing the virtuous and condemning the evil invest a lyrical dimension in the novel—a legacy of Chinese literary tradition—and make it the most touching novel by Ge Fei. Sometimes the emotions and feelings expressed by the narrator are so intense and profound that many readers who are accustomed to the detached and calm tone assumed in Ge Fei's other novels might be surprised.

Finally, I have to say, *On the Margin* is also the most "conventional" of Ge Fei's novels in terms of characterization and other specific literary techniques, apart from the above mentioned conventional elements. Completely different from both the explicit tendency of misogyny displayed in Su Tong's fiction and the basically nonchalant and even negative attitude towards women assumed in Yu Hua's fiction, the foremost contemporary Chinese avant-garde writer Ge Fei surprises us by his basically admiring



attitude towards women, as demonstrated by the creation of many beautiful and virtuous female images in his novels. This tendency is made especially manifest in *On the Margin*, where such kind-hearted, vigorous, and beautiful young women as Flower (*hua'er* 花儿), Little Button (*xiaokou* 小扣), Butterfly (*hudie* 胡蝶), and Azalea (*dujuan* 杜鹃) readily remind us of the many innocent, intelligent, and beautiful girls living at the Grand Prospect Garden in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. More interestingly, the intimate and somewhat romantic relationship between the young narrator and the young woman and the fact that all these young women—except for Flower, who commits suicide at a young age—lose both their physical beauty and moral virtues with the passing of time also remind us of the image of Jia Baoyu and his famous perception that girls are made of water; when they grow older and are touched by men, they become contaminated and turn ugly and vulgar.<sup>90</sup>

Robert C. Solomon, in his influential book on passions, argues that “what all passions have in common is their ability to bestow *meaning* to the circumstances in our lives” (*italic in the original*). He distinguishes between two different species of passions: moods and emotions. As he points out, “Moods are generalized emotions: An emotion focuses its attention on more-or-less particular objects and situations, whereas a mood enlarges its grasp to attend the world as a whole... Depression, for example, is aimed at the world in general, but it is constructed upon a base of particular emotions which

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<sup>90</sup> Intriguingly enough, there are also some similarities in minor descriptive details between the novel and the greatest Chinese fiction classic in presenting the relationship between the young master and the women surrounding him. For example, in the novel, the description that Flower leads the young master through her long courtyard filled with honeybee hives into her bedroom full of the smell of flower and lures him into a sexual intercourse readily reminds us of a similar detail in *Dream of the Red Chamber* that Qin Keqing, one of the most sexually charming women, leads Jia Baoyu through many rooms into her own sensual bedroom to sleep, where the young master dreams of making love with the charming woman.

remains at its core, visible but on longer distinctive” (1976: 132, 133). In other words, according to Solomon, a mood is less a reaction to a particular object or a specific situation than a reflection of a human being’s overall attitude towards and understanding of the world as a whole. Congruous with Solomon’s perception, Heidegger also regards mood as “the expression of an essential human trait” and “a particular way of being tuned into the world.” He thinks of mood as “the interpretation of the world” (Ballard 1991: 1, 6).

Obviously, as demonstrated by our previous discussion on *The Enemy*, Ge Fei deals with fear exactly as a mood as defined by Heidegger and Solomon. In other words, in his fiction, fear is mainly treated by Ge Fei as a medium to express his interpretation of the world. This, I believe, can be best witnessed by reading *On the Margin*.

Entering into the fictional world of *On the Margin*, we find that, as it happens in *The Enemy*, fear also constitutes the dominant inner experience of the characters. In this sense, the novel can be appropriately viewed as a continuation and the deepening of *The Enemy*. For all the thematic continuity between *The Enemy* and *On the Margin*, the two novels have great differences in interpreting the origin of fear. Specifically, while in the former, fear, as discussed in the previous sections, is depicted mainly as an illusion or as a product of human imagination, in the latter, fear is interpreted largely as an “objective” psychological state deeply rooted in and authentically reflecting the specific social and existential reality from which it emerges. In other words, while *The Enemy* emphasizes the imagined nature of fear, *On the Margin*, in sharp contrast, highlights its objective, substantial quality.

As discussed in the preceding chapter, violence, the dominant aspect of social life in Mao's totalitarian China, becomes the most pronounced social phenomenon in the fiction of Yu Hua, who spent most of his formative years in that era. In the same way, there should be no surprise that Ge Fei, who is only four years younger than Yu Hua and who underwent a similar experience during his formative period, is preoccupied with fear, the dominant inner experience of the people under totalitarian domination. Like both Su Tong and Yu Hua, Ge Fei reveals a strong tendency to universalize his personal experience derived from a specific historical background in his novel. In other words, the personal experience Ge Fei obtained in Mao's China provides him with a vantage point to meditate on the predicaments facing all human beings sometimes in some places.

Readers of Yu Hua might remember that in his later two "realistic" novels *To Live* and *Xu Sanguan Sells His Blood*, in order to highlight the link between the characters' misery and the specific social and political forces, the "reality" is deliberately politicized and reduced to a narrow sphere of totalitarian domination. Completely different from the way in which Yu Hua defines and deals with the "reality" presented in his novels, Ge Fei construes the "reality" as a broad social and existential background of which totalitarian domination—a form of abuse of power—as well as other social evils and existential predicaments such as wars and all the cruelty and tragedy they bring about, the stupidity and darkness of human thoughts as exemplified by superstition, evil human nature and behavior, and death are merely its integral parts. In Ge Fei's own words, the "reality" presented in the novel is actually this absurd and terrifying world itself, "a world which is boundless, unreasonable, and mysterious and makes people shudder." At this point, I

believe many readers might agree with my perception that even Ge Fei's most "realistic" novel still possesses a highly pronounced "transcendental" dimension.

According to the narrator's account, he is haunted by the shadow of death since he is very young, and death constitutes the first source of his "ingrained fear" in his long life. Through his growing process, the first death the narrator witnesses which brings enormous fear to him is that of his father. As a little child, not only do the extremely horrible physical appearance of his dying father and the horrible sight of his dying process frighten him (GFWJ: 218), but more terrifyingly, he is also haunted by his father's ghost—he often sees his dead father, who is in shinning golden clothes with his hair soaked by rain, appearing in his family's "eerie courtyard" or quietly entering his bedroom at night (222, 227-228). Much worse, the sight of the mysterious rite conducted by a Song family to exorcise the asserted evil spirit which is believed to have entered into the family's young mistress's body further consolidates his belief in the existence of ghosts and consequently greatly aggravates his fear of death. Under the unbearable weight of the fear of death, the young narrator contracts somnambulation and becomes severely sick. Even after he grows up and gets married, fear of death still oppresses him like a heavy stone in his heart. This can be inferred from his feeling of the "horrible sounds" his mother makes before her death. To the narrator's ears, his mother's dying screams are "macabre, as if they were sent here from an empty graveyard" (244). In the novel, no other descriptive detail is more manifest than the one that follows in demonstrating what a profound and magnificent fear that the shadow of death brings to the narrator's heart.

In the novel, as occurs in many classical Chinese novels, the newly grown-up narrator establishes a sexual relationship with his family's attractive and sensible maidservant, Little Button. Unfortunately, the relationship is finally exposed to his mother, and one day in the morning she calls in the narrator and initiates a conversation with him. After a long hesitation and nonsensical verbal detour, his mother insinuates and warns the narrator of the impropriety and unacceptability of his behavior by subtly referring to the fact that Little Button used to be his father's secret mistress:

Finally my mother once again concentrated the topic of our conversation on my father; the more I was frightened, the more frequently she mentioned him. The conversation between us which lasted less than an hour left an obstinate impression on my life afterwards: She made use of my father's horrible ghost to draw a distinct and profound boundary between me and Little Button.

The boundary finally made the resolute promises I made in Little Button's bedroom last night collapse in a moment.<sup>91</sup>

The description that a dead person can still exert some decisive influence on living people by taking advantage of their superstition, or even through their normal sense of ethics is really impressive to us. Actually, as confessed by the narrator, to dodge the haunting of the dark shadow that death casts on his heart—his father's horrible ghost and the mysterious and terrifying rite related to death as exemplified by that performed by the Song family—constitutes the key motivation for his unwilling separation with his loved wife and fleeing his old home.

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<sup>91</sup> 最后，母亲又将话题集中到了父亲的身上，我越是害怕，她越是频繁地提到他。我们之间不到半个时辰的谈话在我日后的岁月中留下了这样一个顽固的印象：她利用父亲的可怕的幽灵在我和小扣之间划出了一道清晰而深刻的界限。

这条界限终于使我昨夜在小扣卧房里发出的坚定的誓言顷刻之间土崩瓦解。《边缘》，GFWJ: 277-288.

Compared with death, which makes up a major existential source of the narrator's feeling of fear, social unrest, which displays itself most manifestly in the form of war, constitutes a far more significant and decisive factor in causing the narrator's feeling of tremendous fear. Actually, the novel starts with the very depiction of the young narrator fleeing with his family from the city to the relatively safer and quieter countryside to avoid war. On their way of flight, one day at deep night they suddenly hear some shootings from somewhere not far away and realize that a battle is taking place nearby. To avoid the potential molestation, extortion, and harm from the troops, they hurriedly hide into the haystacks by the side of a pond:

No sooner had we blown out our hurricane lamp and pushed our way into the heavily wet haystacks than the sounds of horse hoofs splashing water arrived here. Sporadic shootings let out wave after wave of eerie sounds over the empty and vast wilderness; each shooting retained suspending in the air for a very long time, as if waiting for the next shooting to join it. My body shivered now and then, as if every shot had right hit me. My mother's body trembled much harder, the wet rice straw continuously let out an uneasy and faint sound, and consequently she did not pay any attention to my fear at all.<sup>92</sup>

Here the causal link between the feeling of fear and social unrest is obvious. The psychological trauma that the escape brings to him proves to be so profound and lasting that many years later the narrator can still feel its bitterness—for the now middle-aged narrator, “the shootings on that rainy night seems to last up to now” (*GFWJ*: 255).

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<sup>92</sup> 我们刚刚来得及吹灭马灯，钻进湿漉漉的草垛中，马蹄溅踏着水花的声音跟着就过来了。稀疏的枪声在空旷的荒野上发出一阵阵怪叫，它久久地滞留在空气中，好像等着下一声枪响和它汇合在一块儿。我的身体不时地抽搐着，仿佛每一枪都打中了我。母亲的身体抖动得更厉害，潮湿的稻草连续不断地发出窸窣窸窣的喧响，所以，她一点儿也没有理会我的恐惧。《边缘》，*GFWJ*: 213-214.

Moreover, the description that, in a dangerous situation caused by social unrest, a frightened mother loses all her sympathy and care for her equally frightened child further highlights the fact of social unrest as a cause of human being's psychological traumas: it deprives human beings of their basic sense of morality and responsibility and therefore further alienates the already isolated individuals.

While the fear caused by war for the narrator during his childhood as merely an outsider and observer already proves to be far from fleeting and superficial, it is only natural that the psychological trauma that war brings to him as a participator is much more profound and lasting.

In the novel, by deleting the origin, purposes, and the wholeness of its process of a war from the text, by excluding even such basic information as when and where a war takes place, the identities of the fighting parties involved, etc., and especially by removing the political and moral clothing and the grand collective labels from the war—in the novel even the anti-Japanese war, which is usually wrapped in thick patriotic and nationalistic covering, is de-ethicized and depoliticized—Ge Fei deliberately obscures the specificity and the political and moral dimension of war and endows it with a transcendental, existential quality. This tendency is made most manifest by the fact that the atrocities perpetrated by the Chinese troops on their fellow countrymen—they collectively rape their fellow women to death; they burn or bury their heavily injured fellow soldiers alive; etc.—are by no means less shocking in both severity and amount than that committed by the Japanese invaders to Chinese people. War is presented in the novel more as a way of life or existential pattern—awful, though not without any positive quality—imposed upon the individual by one's grim living environment than as

something with a sublime moral and political aura. War, as construed in the novel by Ge Fei, is more meaningful to the individual rather than to any “imagined community” (Anderson 1991). Here the individualistic implications behind Ge Fei’s existential perspective of war are obvious. It makes a sharp contrast with the nationalistic and highly politicized vision that most Communist novelists assume in presenting war.

War, with all its political and moral covering stripped, is presented as a sort of meaningless human activity of one group against another characterized only by its cruelty and absurdity. The only impact that war brings to human beings is the ever-lasting and inerasable feeling and memory of fear. In the novel no other descriptive detail is more powerful than the following in demonstrating the cruelty and absurdity of war and its disastrous effects on human psychology.

During an extremely bloody battle, the battalion to which the narrator belongs is assigned a task to bury the bodies of their dead and heavily injured fellow soldiers. The purpose for this assignment serves for nothing but to assure the recruits who go on the battleground for the first time in their lives that “battle does not cause any death at all:”

The task of burying corpses was not as simple as we originally imagined, and it was so tiring that it often made our arms disjointed; besides, we also had to watch out for the unexpected shootings from the city gate tower now and then. The most terrible problem is with those heavily injured soldiers. Sometimes, just after we buried them in the earth, they would break through the soft soil and crawl out like cicada pupae sloughing off their hardened cases, unless we used a large amount of soil to press them down.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> 掩埋尸体的任务并不像我们原先想像的那么简单，它常常使我们累得胳膊脱了臼，还要提防城楼上不时打来的冷枪。最糟糕的难题莫过于那些身负重伤的士兵。有时，我们刚刚将他们在地里埋



The cruelty of the war and the crime he is forced to commit haunt the narrator like a ghost and bring him horrible memories and ineradicable psychological traumas:

Those dead people we buried by the side of the city moat several days ago now haunted me; I often saw in my dreams their bluish glimmering faces, saw the desolate white moon hanging over the city walls and piles of campfire, and saw those buried soldiers suddenly stretched their hands out of the sandy soil; I cut them off with my shovel, but afterwards they would sprout out again like spring bamboo shoots after the rain.<sup>94</sup>

Within my reading experience, no other writer in contemporary China is more powerful and incisive than Ge Fei in exposing the cruelty of war and the tremendous psychological trauma it brings to human beings. This is made even more manifest when compared with the Communist novels, where the fearless proletarian heroes or heroines who fight in “just wars” against the KMT “reactionaries” or the Japanese invaders always hold an optimistic attitude and heroic spirit. Far from imposing fear and trauma on them, the “just war” only brings pleasure, satisfaction, and courage to the Communist heroes and heroines. Completely different from the Communist version of war, the presentation and interpretation of war in *On the Margin* readily remind us of many of Hemingway’s war novels, where a lonely hero always fights in some purposeless wars and the cruelty and absurdity of the war bring him only incurable physical damages, lifelong psychological traumas, and endless nightmares.

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好，他们就会拱出松软的泥土，像脱壳的蝉蛹一样自己爬了出来，除非我们用大量的泥土将他们压住。《边缘》，GFWJ: 279.

<sup>94</sup> 几天前在城外护城河边埋掉的那些死人如今缠上了我，我常常在睡梦中看到他们蓝莹莹的脸，看到城墙上挂着的惨白的月亮，营地里一簇簇的篝火，看到那些埋入地下的士兵突然从沙地里伸出手来，我用铁锹将它们砍断，它们随后又像雨后春笋般地重新长了出来。《边缘》，GFWJ: 280.

Like Yu Hua and many other conscientious writers in contemporary China, exposure of the tremendous evil of totalitarian domination and the enormous terror it brings to human beings is among the most pronounced themes in *On the Margin*. In a world where everything goes upside down, while a vicious person like the Communist village head Rogue Song enjoys a comfortable and unrestrained life, the kind-hearted and unprivileged people, however, only suffer humiliation, misery, and tragedy. Here we see the innocent and weak people are raped, tortured, wronged, and humiliated; they are put in jail for some absurd or fabricated reasons; some of them simply cannot endure the brutality and absurdity and choose to take their own lives. Here almost every originally virtuous person undergoes a profound mental distortion and moral degeneration and is left a never-ending and incurable psychological trauma. In the novel, the tremendous terror the totalitarian domination casts on human hearts is demonstrated most manifestly in the narrator's wife Azalea's mental transformation.

Azalea, originally a beautiful and sensible woman with a "carefree air characterizing the women from a water-affluent region" and with an "unsuspicious disposition," is "as composed as well water and as free and lighthearted as the wind" and always has a "serene look" on her face, when she is just married into the village (*GFWJ*: 236-237). However, with the passing of time, after experiencing a long time of separation with her husband and so much hardship and misery alone—she is raped and repeatedly humiliated and tortured by the Communist village head Rogue Song and has to endure all the insults and suffering as the wife of a "reactionary element"—Azalea gradually loses all the "composed and resolute" qualities she once possessed and instead turns "suspicious, hesitant, and timid." After Rogue Song and his fellow Communists seize power, an

already highly fearful Azalea finally becomes so frightened that “every pore in her body is opened vigilantly, in order to cope with the calamity which might fall at any time” (352). Under the unbearable terror and darkness of Communist domination, an originally innocent person finally loses all her self and dignity as a normal human being.

In tracing the origin of Azalea’s increasingly intensified feeling of fear, the narrator unambiguously points his finger at Rogue Song, the representative of Communist domination. As just mentioned, the notorious hooligan not only takes the opportunity of her husband’s departure from home and rapes her, but also repeatedly and brutally tortures her. On one occasion, when Azalea attempts to put body of stake in pleading Rogue Song to release her husband from the labor camp, though the vicious village head finds a now no longer young Azalea already sexually unattractive, he keeps her in his place that night, ties her on a chair, and pierces her with a sewing needle. He never misses any possible chance to intimidate, humiliate, and torture her. Given the extreme cruelty and the unchallenged power of the Communist village head, it is only natural to see that whenever Azalea catches sight of him, she “displays a timid look like a frightened lamb” (*GFWJ*: 344). Under such circumstances, there is no coincidence that the narrator, just like his wife Azalea, also “instinctively feels frightened and uneasy as soon as he thinks of his [Rogue Song’s] gloomy and uncanny face” (369). The Communist village head’s authority over the unprivileged couple and the couple’s fear of him prove to be so overwhelming and far-reaching that, even after he is dismissed from his official post and when he is dying, his command still works on the narrator—towards the end of the novel, when an already half-dead Rogue Song sends for the narrator, the narrator, in spite of his extreme reluctance, submissively answers the call (369-371). At

this point, the image of Rogue Song as the symbol of totalitarian authority and absolute power is fully established. After going over this descriptive detail, I believe, many readers, while being frightened by the almightiness and invincibility of the totalitarian authority, must also be shocked by the extreme slavishness and conformity of the oppressed and unprivileged as exemplified by the narrator's behavior. In a reflection on his own thoughts and behavior, the narrator confesses:

Cowardice and slavishness are just like a cancer cell; once intruding into the human body, it is ineradicable forever. The scenes of burying the corpses during the years of war once again emerged before me: Those dying people who had been buried into the earth were unwilling to accept the death imposed upon them by fate and, in the ice-cold moonlight, they would suddenly protrude their sharp teeth or stretch out their hands to tightly clutch your ankle...on your way to drag them into the grave, they would unexpectedly bite you on the shoulder.<sup>95</sup>

Here, by juxtaposing the “cowardice and slavishness” that totalitarian domination brings to human beings with the psychological trauma and horrible memory that the cruelty of war inflicts on human minds, the implied author deliberately highlights the fact that totalitarian domination is actually as cruel and horrible as war.

As mentioned above, unlike Yu Hua's two later novels, where totalitarian domination is mainly presented as an aggregate of utopian and absurd political policies and movements conducted by the Party and as the only content of the “reality” confronting the characters, *On the Margin* construes totalitarian domination as merely a

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<sup>95</sup> 软弱和奴性就像癌细胞一样，它一旦侵入人的肌体就永远无法消除，我的眼前又一次浮现出在战争年月掩埋尸体时的情景：那些被埋入泥土的濒死者不会安于命运给予他们的死亡，在冰凉的月光下，他们会突然露出利齿或者伸出手来，紧紧拽住你的脚踝...在你将他们拖入坑穴的途中，他们会出其不意地在你的肩上咬上一口。《边缘》，GFWJ: 369.

dark corner of the human existential world and as an embodiment of evil human nature. In the novel, Rogue Song's life story illuminates this perception best.

Rogue Song, the notorious Communist village head, like many Communist leaders in real life with Mao Zedong as the most prominent representative, comes from a declining landlord family. Shortly after his mother's death, a lone Rogue Song sells up all of his family's remaining property and plans to leave his hometown to make a living in another place. Right at this moment, the mysterious itinerant Pedlar, an underground Communist, appears for the first time in the village that summer. Rogue Song suddenly gives up his idea of drifting to another place and decides to stay in the village. He is appointed the village head by the Party in 1939—ten years before the Communist seizure of power all over the country in 1949—and remains in the position after the Communist victory until the end of the Mao era in 1977. This means that the rogue rules the village for nearly four decades, where he actually becomes a “local despot” openly bullying and oppressing the unprivileged in the name of the Party.

As indicated by his name, like Chen Mao, the chairman of the Peasant Association in Su Tong's “Opium Family,” and most Communists in real life, Rogue Song, rather than being corrupted by power, is an inborn hooligan. As the narrator comments, the rogue's personality is characterized by “venomousness, brutality, and the viciousness of his intention.” Even before he establishes any association with power, he already fully reveals his evil nature in molesting women and bullying the weak. The rogue's behavior proves to be so abject and shocking that he even rapes his own daughter and makes her give birth to a baby girl, whose identity confuses all of the villagers because they simply don't know whether she is his daughter or his granddaughter. At this point, we arrive at

one of the most important perceptions Ge Fei attempts to make in the novel. Totalitarian domination, like all the other social evils, is actually generated in and supported by evil human nature and, in return, provides perfect soil for the development and proliferation of the evil in human nature. The fact that the Pedlar, a relatively more virtuous and sensible person who becomes the Party secretary after the Communist victory, finally is brought down and kicked out of the Party serves to further confirm the incompatibility between an evil social system and good human nature.

As interpreted in *On the Margin*, absurdity constitutes no less desperate a social evil and existential predicament than death, social unrest, and abuse of power, and the sense of the absurd no less chilling a human experience and feeling than fear. In the novel, absurdity exists everywhere and sense of the absurd haunts everybody like a ghost. Here almost everything is upside down. Life and death are absurd. While a person's face looks "macabre," emanating a smell of death when he is in good health (*GFWJ*: 213), he assumes a "majestic-looking" expression and seems to be "full of vigor and energy" when he is dying (218). Flower, the seemingly most optimistic person in the novel, who "smiles all day and always bears a carefree look," suddenly hangs herself on a tree for no reason. In the narrator's words, "Flower smiles and smiles, and one day the thought of death suddenly seizes her" (343). The bitter look on the face of a Chinese woman who is brutally murdered by the Japanese invaders looks like a "casual smile" (288).

War is absurd. This is made most manifest by a conversation between the narrator and an old soldier. In response to the narrator's question of what they are fighting for, the old soldier tells the recruit, "The sort of thing like war is unspeakable for everybody, and

even up to now I still don't know against whom and for what we are fighting...maybe somebody on the top made enemy with the other party.”<sup>96</sup> The narrator's best friend Zhong Yuelou also tells him that, in the war, bringing about massive casualties or burning the soldiers who are heavily injured or contract some contagious diseases to death is merely a trivial thing compared with seizing the enemy's position or with our own position being seized, and it is even more insignificant than the sort of mission like transporting the top officers' wine. During his long military career, the only medal the narrator is awarded is for standing in the winter river with his fellow soldiers for two hours and setting up a bridge which is rumored to transport the Commander's mistress back to town to celebrate Spring Festival (*GFWJ*: 272-3), though he participates in so many life-and-death battles which have decisive influence on the whole nation's fate. The absurdity of the reason for the medal being awarded once again reminds us of Hemingway's short story “In Another Country,” where the first-person narrator is awarded a medal for no reason but his identity as an alien (American).

Fate is absurd. In opposition to the popular Chinese belief in moral retribution rewarding the virtuous and punishing the evil, in *On the Margin*, almost all the characters' fates are at odds with their moral virtues and behavior. While all the virtuous people like the narrator, his wife Azalea, Flower, Butterfly, Little Button, and the Pedlar suffer all the humiliation, misery, and tragedy, the vicious people like Rogue Song enjoy lifelong comfort, respect, and superiority. Here virtues are always lost, the cherished is always trampled, and beauty and nobility always turn to ugliness and vulgarity. No one could imagine that Butterfly, originally the most beautiful and dignified woman in the

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<sup>96</sup> 战争这桩事情谁也说不清，我到现在也弄不清我们在和谁打仗，为什么要打仗...也许上面的头头和对方结下了什么仇。《边缘》，*GFWJ*: 265.

novel, is in the end changed to a person with the ugliest appearance, who even breaks wind in front of her guest. Readers might also feel it surprising and strange that a romantic affair and true love between a young master and his maidservant is later distorted by the maid herself to a story of “class oppression” full of coercion and humiliation.

In the novel, the sense of the absurd is expressed most explicitly and emotionally in an episode entitled “To Endure.” By deliberately juxtaposing the doctor’s nonsensical talk of the process of luring a prostitute in a whorehouse with the serious process of his treating a heavily injured soldier—sometimes, even the minor details of the two processes are juxtaposed. For example, the doctor’s description of how to take off a prostitute’s pants is deliberately put side by side with his order to take off the injured soldier’s pants—the implied author attempts to convey dual implications. While the soldier cannot “endure” the physical pains that the injury and especially the doctor’s careless treatment bring to him, the narrator cannot “endure” the doctor’s cynical and indifferent attitude towards the soldier, his nonsensical talk, and the tremendous sense of absurdity that generates from the juxtaposition of the two essentially different processes. At the end of the episode, as the doctor’s talk culminates in the description of the guest successfully conquering the prostitute, his medical treatment, however, ends in bringing the soldier’s death. Judging by the fact that the doctor sweats constantly and breathes heavily during the surgery and that after the soldier’s death, his hands tremble so badly that he cannot even light his tobacco, we have no difficulty in concluding that the seemingly carefree, indifferent, and cynical doctor must also have endured something,



though we are not clear about what this might be. Maybe he is also shocked by all the absurdity behind his own talk and behavior?

Confronted with a world full of existential predicaments and social evils such as death, social unrest, vicious human nature, abuse of power, and all sorts of absurdity, it is only inevitable that human beings will shudder with tremendous fear.

### **History (Reality) as an Aggregate of Isolated Events**

After a brief reading of *On the Margin*, let's put it aside for the time being and turn back to *The Enemy*, Ge Fei's most controversial and meaningful novel, for another discussion on a deeper epistemological level.

As I have emphasized several times earlier, it is only natural that a novel as enigmatic as *The Enemy* is open to diverse interpretations and different perspectives. The interpretive diversity, which is in part invested in by the author's elaboration when he creates the novel, to a larger extent constitutes the source of both its thematic significance and aesthetic appeal. Actually the reading provided in the first two sections of the chapter is merely one of the many possible interpretations that the novel might evoke. Much worse, the rather "conventional" reading, which adopts a purely rationalistic mode of thinking and which, in order to make the analysis logically consistent, deliberately ignores both the unreliability of the narrator and the complexity and multiplicity of the perspectives employed in the narrative, is not only superficial but also disputable. As a matter of fact, in the preceding discussions, some more profound themes of the novel—

its meditation on the truth of history, memory, human experience, and the complicated and intertwined relations between them—are left untouched.

As mentioned in chapter one, it is a time-honored tradition in Chinese literature to use a household as a miniature or epitome of the society as a whole to reflect the history of a certain period, as best exemplified by *The Golden Lotus*, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, and some other great “family fiction” (*jiating xiaoshuo* 家庭小说) classics. As a generally adopted narrative pattern, a typical novel prescribed by this tradition usually focuses on a powerful household with complex internal structure and extensive external connections. By describing both the everyday life within the household—especially those socially or culturally important occasions or events—and its relations to the outside world—the court, other powerful households and personages, relatives, business and commercial activities, etc.—the novel often aims at providing a panorama of the society of a given time, including almost every important aspect of social life: politics, economy, culture, social ethos, family life, and so on. As a rule, in this type of novel, the focused household is never depicted as an isolated unit but rather as a point in a huge social network—though put at the center of the network—and its vicissitudes and fate are closely connected to the outside world. Actually in this type of novel, society is always presented as an inseparable whole, where all people, things and events are interrelated and connected to each other in certain ways.

When we enter into the main story of *The Enemy*, we first might take it as a conventional “family novel” because it possesses the basic structure and narrative elements characterizing this type of fiction: a rich family coexists with two other rich

families—though they are obviously much less wealthy and powerful than those in the classical “family fiction,” and their structure is also much less complicated—in a competitive environment, and it is also connected to the remote outside through nuptial ties and commercial activities. The interactions between the contending families and the commercial activities provide perfect materials for a panorama of the society of a given period.

However, as the novel further unfolds, we quickly realize the falseness of our original thought and find that, just as he rejects the narrative mode of a conventional detective novel, Ge Fei also relinquishes the stereotyped narrative pattern characterizing a traditional family novel. It is common knowledge that technical and formal innovations always aim at and, on most occasions, often bring about, thematic creativity because the content and form of a given piece of writing are actually inseparable. Upon a closer investigation, we find that Ge Fei’s fiction, quite compatible with its radically defiant attitude towards traditional narrative patterns, represents a violent strike on the traditional view of history.

Traditional or mainstream views of history, Western or Chinese, for all the variety of the schools and the diversity of their perspectives, at least have one thing in common. They all accept the notion of history as a unified, accessible, and perceptible whole. For instance, classical Western historicism, as represented by Marx, Hegel, and some other master thinkers, upholds the notion that history is determined by some laws, objective or subjective, and that these laws can be grasped by human beings through some “scientific” approaches and methods. Thinkers of varied “new” historicism like Collingwood, Foucault, Jameson, Ricoeur, and some others, in spite of the differences in their views of

history and their shared reluctance to accept the direct accessibility of history to human beings, also insist on the perceptibility of history. Pre-20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese people and Chinese thinkers, who are well-known for their obsession with history, though basically viewing history as a process of cyclical return rather than as a course of linear progress as construed by Westerners, share the notion of history as a unified one and believe that history is determined by some mysterious laws or Heavenly Mandate, which are accessible and perceptible to us by learning from past events.

Readers who are nurtured on traditional views of history might be shocked by the “reality” or history—in the conventional sense that “history is the reality in the past”—presented in Ge Fei’s novels. The “reality” constructed in Ge Fei’s fiction strikes us first by its absolute imperceptibility and inaccessibility as a result of the “ontological absence of truth” (*zhenxiang de benyuanxing queshe* 真相的本原性缺失), as a Chinese scholar adeptly puts it (Wang Hong, 2005).

Entering into the fictional world of *The Enemy*, we feel as if we were arriving in an alien planet, a world belonging to others, where everything is an enigma to us. Here all the events, ranging from trivial ones such as whether the pair of jade bracelets Zhao Liben returns to Zhao Shaozhong is the authentic ones or just fakes, whether the woman who is running after and cursing her when Auntie Cui tries to escape the whorehouse is her real mother or the procuress, etc. to crucial ones such as the truth of all the murders befalling the family’s descendants, is open to multiple possibilities and therefore uncertain and imperceptible to human beings. Here no fact or truth can be expected to reveal or unfold to us; the only things available are some “traces” or “clues” to the truth

or reality. To our great disappointment, in Ge Fei's novel, the "traces" or "clues," which are supposed to be the bridge to reality, are themselves ambiguous and enigmatic. As a consequence, the task of realizing reality inevitably turns to certain kind of guesswork and ultimately becomes an impossible mission. For example, here we can only guess the abnormal relationship between Mute, a long-term hand of the family, and Zhao Shaozhong's wife, the family's mistress, through the suspicious excessiveness of sorrow he expresses to her death, which is obviously incompatible with his identity as a servant, or through the rumors about their asserted adultery that widely spread over the village. In the same way, only through San-laoguan's half serious, half joking comment that Houzi is a bastard, and through the blind fortuneteller's somewhat divine statement that Zhao Shaozhong has three sons—though nominally he only has two—can we guess that Houzi, his nominal grandson, is actually his biological son. When investigation of reality becomes guesswork based purely on human reasoning and imagination rather than on facts, it is only natural that no certainty of fact can be established. The uncertain and imperceptible nature of Ge Fei's fictional "reality" is also symbolized by its description of landscape. Inanimate imagery appearing in the novel—streets, the wilderness, mountains, and rivers—often "half bathes in the sunlight and half immerses in dark shadows," just like the obscurity of "reality" itself. Next let us take Liuliu's murder, an ordinary yet typical event in the novel, as an example to illuminate the perception just made.

Liuliu, the beautiful young girl, though endowed with an instinct for predicting the future, also cannot escape the fate of being murdered which befalls all the Zhao family's offspring except Meimei. On day at sunset she is killed by the side of a pond on her way

home from her worship in a distant temple. As it happens in all the other events in the novel, the identity of the killer and the cause of the murder remain unknown. There are only some traces or clues left of the murder.

Judging from the descriptions of what Liuliu experiences and witnesses at the last moment in her life, which constitutes “traces” or “clues” to her murder—she sees the killer’s “familiar face;” the killer is a “person who haunts her in her dreams for many days” (as mentioned earlier, the narrator repeatedly mentions that Liuliu is often tortured by the same nightmare that her father attempts to rape her); “Auntie Cui’s old face shakes before her and then disappears in the twinkling of an eye;” and she feels a “familiar smell surrounding her, as if it were the never-dissipating tobacco odor in her father’s study”—it is not difficult for us to induce and conclude that it is Zhao Shaozhong and Auntie Cui who collaborate and kill Liuliu. Moreover, the conclusion is also supported by evidence gathered elsewhere in the novel. Specifically, judging by Zhao Shaozhong’s distorted psychology, his cold-hearted attitude towards his other children’s misery and death, and his somewhat absurd and unpredictable logic of killing, either of the facts—it is rumored that Liuliu is not his biological daughter but actually a product of the adultery between his wife and San-laoguan, and Liuliu’s premarital pregnancy ruins his family’s face—constitutes a sufficient reason for his taking Liuliu’s life. The conclusion becomes more convincing when we take into consideration the fact that in the novel Liuliu is often identified by many people as the substitute for Zhao Long’s runaway wife, Zhao Shaozhong’s secret lover. Equating Liuliu with his secret lover, though only in an imagined and unconscious way—in a paragraph typical of stream of consciousness, the process of Zhao Shaozhong’s lovemaking with his daughter-in-law is deliberately put

side by side with the act of his giving both the family's highly valuable bracelets to Liuliu instead of dividing them equally between his two daughters (*GFWJ*: 168)—Zhao Shaozhong naturally becomes mad when he is aware of her adultery with other men.

However, the seeming credibility of our conclusion or rather our guesswork, is immediately shattered when we juxtapose the “positive” traces or clues just mentioned with other information provided in the novel. Actually in the novel there also exist some counter or “negative” traces or clues, which can easily deconstruct the above perception. For example, according to the narrator's account, the male killer is a man with a “tall and big shadow” (*gaoda de shenying* 高大的身影) (*GFWJ*: 160). This message works to powerfully refute the claim that Zhao Shaozhong is the killer, because only several pages earlier the narrator mentions that Zhao Shaozhong is a man with a “thin and small body” (*shouxiao de shenti* 瘦小的身体) (155). Moreover, the description that the killer runs so fast that he can easily keep up with the young girl Liuliu, who gathers all her strength “running crazily” (*kuangben* 狂奔) and desperately to escape the upcoming killing, serves to further discredit the claim, because no one believes that an old man who usually needs a bamboo stick to support himself while walking can run that fast.

In light of this speculation, when we look back again at the seemingly “positive” traces or clues employed to support the claim, we find them actually quite suspicious. A face “familiar” to Liuliu does not necessarily belong to her family. Likewise, the person who often appears in her nightmares is also not necessarily identified with her father, because one of the hooligans in the village like Wang Huzi and Zhao Liben, who are always more than eager to get her, and especially Cobbler, who repeatedly molests her, is more likely to be the villain haunting her in her nightmares. More importantly, as

common sense, psychologically, the image of Auntie Cui which appears in Liuliu's mind and the smell like the tobacco odor in her father's study which she senses at the last moment in her life might be appropriately construed as a hope or a psychological illusion of hers. She wishes Auntie Cui, the person who usually treats her best in the family, and her father, who is supposed to be her guardian and protector, would come here to save her when she is on the very brink of the ultimate destruction.

Furthermore, if we put together all the "traces" concerning Liuliu's death scattered over the whole novel and examine them from a more realistic and rational perspective, we find that the event is at least open to two other possibilities—another piece of evidence to refute the claim that Zhao Shaozhong and Auntie Cui are the killers.

One possibility is that Cobbler kills Liuliu. This can be supported by another important "trace." Before she dies, Liuliu sees the killer's "grayish smile" (*huihese de xiaorong* 灰褐色的笑容) (GFWJ: 160). Actually, in the whole novel, Cobbler is the only person who has this sort of "grayish smile" (*huiliuliu de xiaorong* 灰溜溜的笑容) (66). It should be no coincidence that he is also the only person who repeatedly molests and stalks her in an almost open and shameless way. Moreover, as common sense, Cobbler, the villain who harasses Liulu in the reality most likely is also the "person who haunts her in dreams"—one of the most important aspects of the killer's identity.

There is also another possibility that the two notorious hooligans Wang Huzi and Zhao Liben kill Liuliu. To expound this, we have to begin with Zhao Long's addiction to gambling. Zhao Long, the most despicable prodigal of the Zhao family, loses a large amount of money to the two hooligans in gambling games. Failure to pay the gambling debts makes him the object of beating and torture of the two villains. They go so far that



once they even threaten him by placing a piece of burning coal in front of him and forcing him to swallow it. Forced into a corner, Zhao Long steals Liuliu's highly valuable bracelets and gives them to the two hoodlums as a pledge. After knowing that the bracelets belong to Liuliu, the two lustful hooligans hint that the debts actually can be exempted if they can get Liuliu. As a narrative strategy so adeptly manipulated in the novel, there is a long ellipsis after the description that Liuliu is molested by the two hooligans when she goes to the wineshop for the first time in her life to look for Zhao Long. However, judging by Liuliu's radical changes after she visits the wineshop that night—she often does not return home all night, and she finally turns from a shy, vigilant, and timid girl to a “carefree” and “unrestrained” person often with a “broken smile” on her face—and especially by the fact of her premarital pregnancy, we have no difficulty in guessing that the two hooligans' dirty tricks must have worked. Moreover, on the night of the day Liuliu is buried, the two usually extremely greedy hooligans surprise us by voluntarily returning the pair of highly valuable bracelets to Zhao Shaozhong—they might think that Liuliu's life as the pay is enough for the debts. If we keep in mind of Wang Huzi's deep-rooted hostility to the Zhao family, especially his suspicious role in Zhao Hu's murder, and the fact that Zhao Liben always works as his accomplice, the conjecture that they kill Liuliu becomes more credible.

At this point, it is quite clear that the picture of Zhao Shaozhong and Auntie Cui killing Liuliu is actually a narrative device or “trap” elaborated by Ge Fei for an ideological or discursive purpose. Obviously the primary concern of Ge Fei here is not with the process of the event itself but with the epistemological implications underlying the event. By providing both “positive” and “negative” evidence simultaneously to

support and refute a perception, Ge Fei effectively illuminates his notion that the effort to ascertain fact, reality, or historical truth on the part of human beings is destined to end in vain, because the truth or fact, as construed by Ge Fei, is ultimately imperceptible and inaccessible to us.

The imperceptibility of reality, as presented in the novel, derives not only from the “ontological absence of fact” or the inaccessibility of the truth of the events, but also from natural or artificial interference that impedes the accessibility. This is best demonstrated by the fact that in the novel *Mute and the dog*, the two beings who know more secrets or facts of the family than any others, are deprived of either the ability of expression or the life. The combination of the inaccessibility of the truth to human beings and the varied interference that aims to block the human accessibility to the truth eventually make history or reality is imperceptible to human beings.

Obviously the conclusion of the inaccessibility and imperceptibility of historical truth or reality to human beings made by the implied authors in Ge Fei’s novels is, in most cases, untrue because it contradicts common sense and our everyday life experience. I doubt even that the scholar and the real person Ge Fei himself really believes it. But this is not important. What is really at issue here is why Ge Fei makes such an obviously problematic conclusion in the first place.

It is common knowledge that the essential difference between history and fiction is that while history always aims at historical truth or fact, fiction, by nature, does not. Unlike the historian whose duty is supposed to be to provide as accurate, all-around, and complete as possible a presentation of the historical facts of a past period and to make some “objective” and well-balanced judgments, the novelist seldom aims at completeness

and objectivity, and in most cases her/his presentation of reality or history also does not aim at accuracy. What interest the novelist most are often some particular issues, or some particular sides of issues in reality or history, especially the feelings, emotions, and thoughts behind the historical facts. In this sense, compared with a historian, a novelist has the “privilege” to be one-sided, inaccurate, and subjective. Some writers deliberately manipulate the one-sidedness, inaccuracy, and subjectivity of a literary work as a device to achieve their often unconventional ideological purposes and to produce some unusual artistic effects. For example, when the novelist Lu Xun makes the implied author of “Diary of a Madman” claim that traditional Chinese culture is cannibalistic and should be totally rejected, I believe, he does not mean to make an objective, scientific, and all-around assessment of traditional Chinese culture; rather, his true intention is to highlight the negative side and corrupt qualities of Chinese culture and to jolt Chinese people awake from their narcissist admiration of their culture. Similarly, the purpose for Qian Zhongshu in writing *Fortress Besieged* is also not to make a convincing, just, and overall judgment of (Chinese) intellectuals but to project the dark side of intellectual mentality and human nature. By the same token, I believe, the obviously problematic and highly polarized conclusion made by Ge Fei in his fiction of the inaccessibility and imperceptibility of historical truth is not meant to make a sound and well-balanced judgment of history but to project the mysterious side of history and to illuminate the sometimes uncertainty and inexhaustibility of the interpretations of some historical events. In my understanding, for Ge Fei and some other writers characterized by the radicalism of their thought like Lu Xun and Qian Zhongshu, the issues or problems they raise in their fiction are often far more significant and meaningful than the solutions or answers

they make to them. I think all the other obvious problematic perceptions and conclusions made by Ge Fei in his fiction, such as the ultimate incommunicability between human beings, should be looked at in the same way.

As mentioned earlier, in traditional Chinese “family novels,” compatible with their shared view of history as a united and perceptible process, the potentially competing households are always depicted as closely interrelated, where one family’s decline and prosperity often have causal links with the others’. Moreover, in these novels the causes and course of a household’s rise and fall are always clearly expounded. For example, in the *Golden Lotus*, the narrator provides a detailed and overall description of how Ximen Qing seduces Lady of the Vase, originally his sworn brother Hua Zixu’s wife and later his sixth wife, and how he collaborates with her and manages, taking advantage of Hua’s imprisonment, to seize all his money and property. Here the causality between the Ximen family’s rise and the Hua family’s bankruptcy is obvious. The novel also provides an exhaustive and vivid depiction of the decline and dismemberment of the Ximen household. After the despotic and lustful patriarch Ximen Qing’s death, almost all his relatives, stewards, servants, and friends, for different reasons—some out of the motive to retaliate his humiliation and oppression, and others simply out of their greedy and evil human nature—betray him. They manipulate to extort and dismember the once powerful household like a flock of ants hollowing out a huge tree. This depiction makes it quite clear that the connections, interrelations, and causality not only exist synchronically between the vying households but also diachronically between the past and the present.

Completely different from what happens in the classical “family novels,” in *The Enemy*, the household—the basic social unit—and the event seem to be cut off from the rest of the world and become isolated. In the entire novel, there is not even one piece of substantial evidence that can firmly prove the existence of interrelation or causality between the social units or between the events. What is available here are merely some “clues” to the possible causality between the social units or events. Specifically, though there are many “clues” in the novel hinting at the possible links between the Zhao family’s fall and the rise of San-laoguan and Boss Qian—San-laoguan is the major suspect who blocks the water pump, the only powerful tool available to fight against the devastating fire which devours almost all of the Zhao family’s property, because the pump is always placed in his residence; Traces indicate that San-laoguan and Boss Qian might have some links with Zhao Hu’s murder. This can be inferred from the fact that before Zhao Hu’s death, the young man who enters into the Zhao family’s courtyard to threaten him with a dagger turns out to be one of San-laoguan’s underlings and that Boss Qian seems to already know Zhao Hu’s murder even before it is made public; The fact that San-laoguan entrusts Boss Qian several times to persuade Zhao Shaozhong to sell his land to him and the seeming coincidence that Zhao Hu’s funeral takes place simultaneously as San-laoguan celebrates the completion of the building of his workshops, which are set up on the plot he buys from Zhao Shaozhong, also insinuate the possible collaboration between San-laoguan and Boss Qian in their common intent to undermine and dismember the Zhao family—not even one can be used as substantial evidence to testify to the existence of connection or causality between the two events.

The real problem is that, for all the plentitude of the “clues,” they never mean more than mere clues. As a result, the fact, the truth, or the reality still remains obscure.

Actually in the novel, no other case makes the isolated nature of “events” more manifest than the mysterious murders befalling the Zhao family. The murders, in spite of the obvious differences in their respective processes, have one thing in common. In all the cases except for Zhao Long’s murder, the identity of the killer and the cause of the killing are absent. Actually, even in the case of Zhao Long’s murder, where the killer seems to be identified, given the narrator’s high unreliability and his enthusiasm about making narrative “traps,” the fact of the murder is still open to question. With both its actor and cause—the ties that connect an event to the outside world—being removed from its process, the murder actually becomes an isolated and naked event and loses all its connections to the rest of the world. As a consequence, the reality composed of these isolated and unrelated events inevitably becomes a random agglomerate of events “that simply succeed one another but in no sense owe their existence to each other” (Chatman 1978: 47). In other words, reality, as presented in Ge Fei’s novel, is a random “aggregate” of isolated events rather than a “structure” which is characterized by the unity of its integral parts.

When the connection or causality between social units and events is cut off and human experience as a whole becomes a random aggregate of isolated events, then inevitably history will lose all its unity and meaning. Under such circumstances, it is only natural to find that in Ge Fei’s novel, time, the most important marker in history as well as in reality, turns still and loses all its significance to human beings. As a result, the present becomes “merely a tedious and lamentable repetition of the past.” Actually in Ge

Fei's novels, the feeling of the repeated reality and the stagnant time and is among the most profound inner experiences of all his characters.

In *The Enemy*, Liuliu often sees the past from the scenery unfolding before her eyes—from the shadows of fluttering branches or from a cluster of withered flowers. “She seems to see those people who died a long time ago still hidden in the shadows,” and “those nightmares remaining in her memory emerge before her eyes now and then.” Auntie Cui “feels that all the time she is repeating the past, repeating an act, a dream, or some insignificant words.” “She has lived in an alien Ziwu Town for nearly twenty years, but she still feels as if she just arrived here. This empty compound and the repeated silent nights always give her an unspeakable feeling: emptiness and nothing to depend on.”<sup>97</sup> Zhao Shaozhong always feels that his grandfather and father are still accompanying him and that his life is merely a replica of theirs, though in the deep recesses of his heart, he is extremely reluctant to accept this. He feels as if every act of his was “repeating a remote, vague day, and every morning when he sits on the guardrail stone in his backyard watching for the daybreak, he also has this kind of dream-like feeling” (*GFWJ*: 85). He believes that “what happened yesterday is destined to happen again today and perhaps the two occurrences have no big difference at all.”

When our speculation arrives at this point, the thematic significance of the novel's textual structure begins to come to light. We suddenly realize that the juxtaposition of the two seemingly unrelated parts of the novel—the preliminary story and the main story, which are separated by a huge temporal abyss of over five decades—is actually highly meaningful from an epistemological perspective. While what Zhao Shaozhong witnesses

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<sup>97</sup> 她在这个陌生的子午镇上居住了近二十年，她依然觉得好像刚刚到来。这个空落的院宅和日复一日的寂静夜晚总使她有一种无法说明的感觉：空空荡荡，无所依傍。 *GFWJ*: 21.

and experiences when he is a little boy in the preliminary story represents “the reality in the past” or history, what happens to the Zhao family when he becomes an old man in the main story, on the other hand, represents “the reality in the present.” The fact that in both the preliminary story and the main story, the truth of the events remains unknown to human beings—while the cause and arsonists of the devastating fire turn to an everlasting enigma in the preliminary story, the exposure of the killers of the family’s descendents and the reasons for the killings also becomes an impossible task in the main story—powerfully demonstrates Ge Fei’s idea that reality, both in the past and in the present, is imperceptible to human beings and that our effort to ascertain the so-called “historical truth” is destined to end in vain. In this sense, the preliminary story and main story actually constitute each other’s “mirror images.” They reflect each other. Through his clever manipulation of the events in his fiction, Ge Fei makes his view of “history” quite clear that history or human experience as a whole is a random aggregate of isolated events which are imperceptible and inaccessible to human beings. This obviously constitutes a sharp antithesis and true anomaly to the conventional view of history.

### **Conflict of “Reality” and Incommunicability between Human Beings**

As indicated by the contrary images of Zhong Shaozhong and Auntie Cui as both murderers and protectors in Liuliu’s murder while perceived from different angles, in *The Enemy*, the implied author simultaneously presents two sorts of “reality” with totally different nature in one single text. To achieve this, the implied author plays with varied narratological devices such as the unreliable narrator, temporal and spatial dislocation,



the blurring of the line between reality and imagination, hallucination, day-dream, stream of consciousness, and especially the clever manipulation of multiple focalizers and division of focalization.<sup>98</sup>

In the novel, there seems to exist two worlds. One is composed of the “objective” reality as perceived from without, from the standpoint of a detached outside observer, which is mainly presented by the external focalizer.<sup>99</sup> The other is a world of “lived life,” made up of the characters’ personal experiences, feelings, thoughts, inner monologue, unconscious, dreams, daydreams, and illusions, which are always presented from the views of the character-bound focalizers (internal focalizers) and narrated in a highly subjectivized pattern. In other words, while the “perceived world” exists as an object of

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<sup>98</sup> For all my reluctance to adopt the unnecessarily new terminology in the thesis, I prefer the term “focalization” coined by Mieke Bal to the more conventional and commonly used term “perspective” in analyzing Ge Fei’s manipulation of point of view in his fiction writing, which constitutes the most important narratological device in his fiction.

“Focalization” as a narratological term is coined by Gerard Genette and developed by Mieke Bal (Genette 1980). In Bal’s formulation, around this concept are derivatives “focalizer,” “focalized,” and “level of focalization.” According to Bal, “focalization” refers to “the relations between the elements presented and the vision through which they are presented,” “Focalizer” “the point from which the elements are viewed” or simply “the person who sees,” and “focalized” “the elements presented.”

Bal lists two major advantages of “focalization” over “perspective” as a narratological term in literary criticism. First, “perspective” as a narratological term, according to Bal, indicates “both the narrator and vision” in traditional narrative theory. It does not make a distinction between “those who sees (focalizer)” and “those who speaks (narrator).” This might evoke “ambiguity” and “imprecision.” “Focalization” as conceptualized by Bal, in sharp contrast, exclusively covers the action of vision and the agent performing the action (focalizer); it is completely independent from the action of the narration and the agent performing the action (narrator) and therefore avoids the “ambiguity” and “imprecision” the term “perspective” might elicit. Second, in contrast with the fact that “no substantive can be derived from ‘perspective’ that could indicate the subject of the action,” “focalization” can effectively designate both the subject and object of the action and the complex relation and interaction between the two. For a more detail discussion on “focalization,” see Bal 1985: 100-114.

The reason that I incorporate the terms “focalization” and “focalizer” instead of “perspective” in analyzing Ge Fei’s fiction is that the manipulation of multiple focalizers is the most important narratological device employed by Ge Fei in achieving his thematic purposes and that Bal’s formulation provides me with a perfect theoretical framework to interpret Ge Fei’s fiction. The notion of conflict of realities and between the interests and visions of different individuals is a recurring theme in Ge Fei’s novels, and the most important advantage of the device of multiple focalizers lies precisely in its “manipulative effect” to project the conflict of different visions.

<sup>99</sup> “External focalizer” is a term coined by Mieke Bal to designate an anonymous agent of vision who is “situated outside the fibula (or “story” in Gerard Genette’s and Seymour Chatman’s formulation).” It is an antithesis with “internal focalizer” or “character-bound focalizer,” which refers to a focalizer who is a character or actor of the story (fibula).

human perception and as an external background of human life, the “lived world” is an aggregate of events that human beings participate in and experience as actors. As presented in the novel, the two worlds or two sorts of “reality” are in violent conflict in terms of epistemology, view of human nature, and dynamics of human behavior and thought.

In the novel, the world as perceived from an outside standpoint actually represents the everyday form of life that unfolds before us with all its seeming normality, ordinariness, and smoothness. The Zhao family, as presented through the vision of the external focalizer, is merely a most commonly seen Chinese patriarchal household, which displays itself as a strict hierarchal system with the patriarch on the top of the hierarchy and controlling the whole household. Here the dominating guideline for the workings of the family is traditional Chinese ethics, and the primary concern of the patriarch is with keeping the family’s reputation or face intact. Almost all that Zhong Shaozhong has does—he rather remains a widower than takes in Auntie Cui as his second wife, due to her abject status as the family’s servant; he denies the fact that his eldest son Zhong Long’s wife has run away, claims that she will come back soon after her visit to her parents, and consequently destroys his son’s hope of establishing another marriage; he is indifferent to Houzi’s death due to Houzi’s identity as an illegal child as the product of an adultery; he is extremely angry with his daughter Liuliu’s premarital pregnancy; etc.—is related to his preoccupation to protect his family’s reputation in certain ways. Here, as it happens in real life, it is rationality and the sense of ethics rather than desire, emotion, or other irrational forces that constitute the driving force for human behavior and thought. The Zhao family members, for all their different personalities and moral standards, as it

happens in most ordinary families, display a kind of mutual affection and care towards each other—a rather normal relationship between family members. This positive human relation among family members is explicitly demonstrated by the fact that Zhao Hu strongly opposes his father's plan to marry his sister Meimei to Mazi, the notorious hooligan, and that Liuliu, after hearing the news of her brother Zhao Long being abused, eagerly goes to the wineshop to look for him in an attempt to help him out. Auntie Cui also testifies that Zhao Shaozhong, after witnessing and experiencing so many miseries and deaths inflicted on his family, is always worried about his children's situation and safety, which makes his health deteriorate rapidly. Obviously, behind these affectionate descriptions is the view of good human nature. Moreover, if we go over all the events presented by the external focalizer as a whole, we have no difficulty in discerning that here everything goes on following the common sense and natural laws. In short, the Zhao family, as perceived from the standpoint of an outsider, is an ordinary household cursed by a mysterious unfavorable fate. The two main characters Zhao Shaozhong and Auntie Cui also appear as two normal human beings with both virtues and weaknesses as defined by their respective roles. For example, Zhao Shaozhong is depicted as a typical Chinese patriarch with both the arbitrariness and the sense of responsibility prescribed by the role, and Auntie Cui is a warm-hearted, diligent, and optimistic maidservant, who, for all her nominal low status in the family, actually plays the role as the family's mistress.

The world that is normal and rational as perceived from an outside standpoint suddenly changes both its appearance and nature when one plunges into it and experiences it as a participant and actor. In the novel, there are plenty of passages dedicated to describing the characters' personal experiences, feelings, thoughts, and even

their unconscious—Liuliu’s ominous feeling of imminent calamity and her nightmares of the dead, of the continuously falling sheep turds, and of her father attempting to rape her (*GFWJ*: 25, 27); Zhao Shaozhong’s memory about his adultery with his daughter-in-law (134-6) and his many illusions and daydreams of the devastating fire and imaginations of his family’s enemy; Liuliu’s dying experience and feelings and her unconscious expressed in the form of stream of consciousness (160-2); Zhao Shaozhong’s feelings and unconscious expressed also in the form of stream of consciousness when he sits alone in the graveyard immediately after Liuliu’s burial (167-9); Zhao Long’s illusion of his dead brother Zhao Hu and his dying experience and feelings (183, 204). These personal experiences, feelings, and thoughts actually compose a “lived world,” a world ruled by totally different laws and principles than that dominating the “perceived world.” Rather than following the generally adopted ethical principles as in the “perceived world,” in the “lived world,” human beings act, think, and feel according to the desire and instinct. It is an irrational and somewhat insane world. Here even one’s own daughter or sister can be imagined as a potential sex object, as indicated by both Zhao Shaozhong’s and Zhao Hu’s contemptible desire for Liuliu. The fact that Zhao Shaozhong, the patriarch nurtured by Confucian ethics, has adultery with his daughter-in-law and even produces an illegitimate son with her, serves to best confirm the dominating role of libido in the world. The relation between Zhao Shaozhong and Auntie Cui also testifies to the fact that here the most solid bond between a master and his maidservant is sexual desire rather than any contractual relations or financial and social factors under the normal circumstances. More surprisingly, the descriptions that a sixty-year-old, weak man can easily catch up with a healthy young girl in running and can effortlessly kill a healthy young man also make it

quite clear that the “lived world” seems not to follow natural laws and common sense. In sharp contrast with their respective positive images of a Confucian gentleman and a dutiful and diligent maidservant in the “perceived world,” the images of Zhao Shaozhong and Auntie Cui, as constructed by the family’s children’s personal feelings and dying experiences, are two demonic, cold-blooded murderers motivated by sexual desires. Obviously, behind all these depictions is the view of evil human nature.

Unlike Yu Hua, whose primary concern in his fiction is historical authenticity and specificity, Ge Fei’s sight never stops at the phenomenal level; what concerns him most is the discursive implications underlying external phenomena. By presenting two sorts of highly opposing reality—perceived versus lived—in one single text, Ge Fei attempts to convey an important perception. As discussed repeatedly in the previous sections, in Ge Fei’s novel, the supposedly “objective” everyday life as it unfolds before our eyes is actually illusory and elusive. But the paradoxical act that in *The Enemy* the narrator is narrating other people’s dying experience, which is actually inaccessible to him and which ultimately cannot be transmitted due to the perishing of the people who experience it, makes it quite clear that the “subjective” form of the world as lived by human beings is no less unreliable and elusive than its “objective” everyday form as perceived from an outside point of view. Here again we return to one of the recurring themes that Ge Fei makes in his novels: the world or the reality of human life is ultimately imperceptible and elusive, whether it displays itself in a subjective or “objective” form.

Readers who have a full awareness of the evil nature of Communist dictatorship and who are excited by Yu Hua’s and some other Chinese writers’ exposure and condemnation of the darkness and brutality of Communist domination might find Ge

Fei's novels "unrealistic" or "escapist." For all its apparent credibility, the statement is merely a half truth. It is correct only when we take historicity as the sole or major criterion to assess the value of literature. However, when we examine Ge Fei's fiction against the broad background of China's long intellectual and literary history, we might conclude that, contrary to the above statement, it is just in its asserted "weakness"—its somewhat "unrealistic" quality—that lie the merit of Ge Fei's fiction and his ambition as a Chinese writer. It is common knowledge that obsession with history and "rational pragmatism" (*shiyong lixing* 实用理性) are among the most salient characteristics of Chinese culture and Chinese thought (Li Z. 1986). In practice, the cultural and intellectual characteristics prove to be a two-edged sword as far as their impact on Chinese fiction is concerned. While they endow Chinese literature with a strong sense of history and a highly remarkable ability to present the phenomenal world on the one hand, they simultaneously restrain its capability and potential for transcendental, metaphysical meditation on the other. As a result, being adept at phenomenal, factual description but relatively short in transcendental, metaphysical analysis becomes one of the most preeminent features of Chinese fiction. Jaroslav Prusek coined the term "factographic tradition" to refer to the feature of Chinese literature (Prusek and Lee 1980: 93-95).<sup>100</sup> In my understanding, confinement to factual description but lack of transcendental, metaphysical dimension constitute the most serious limitation to the development of Chinese fiction. China's long history of literature explicitly reveals that only after

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<sup>100</sup> In my observation, Prusek's adoption of "factographic tradition" to characterize Chinese literature as a whole is quite problematic, given the fact that Chinese poetry—the most important part of traditional Chinese literature, which is at the top of the Chinese literary hierarchy in ancient times—especially the nature poetry (*shanshui shi* 山水诗), philosophical poetry (*zheli shi* 哲理诗), and religious poetry (*zongjiao shi* 宗教诗), is obviously not confined to factual presentation. But the perception is quite accurate if limited to Chinese fiction.

overcoming this limitation can a Chinese writer ultimately become great, as exemplified by the writing career of Cao Xueqin, Lu Xun, Zhang Ailing, Qian Zhongshu, Yu Hua, and some others. In my opinion, all the three major contemporary Chinese avant-garde writers Su Tong, Yu Hua, and Ge Fei are talented writers,<sup>101</sup> but, as indicated by the previous discussions, they show their talents and merits in different ways. As far as Ge Fei is concerned, his merit as a writer lies in his strong desire to overcome the limitation of Chinese fiction to “factographic” presentation and in the fact that he takes more effort than any other contemporary Chinese writer trying to invest a “transcendental” and metaphysical dimension into contemporary Chinese fiction, though unfortunately, in practice the effect of his effort proves not so successful due to some apparent weaknesses in his narrative.<sup>102</sup> This can be best witnessed by reading his two novels *The Enemy* and *Flags of the Desire*.

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<sup>101</sup> Though I think that all the three writers are talented ones, I tend to believe that they are not of equal importance and excellence. Judging by the thematic profundity, technical and formal originality, overall artistic achievement, and the impact on the Chinese intellectual world and the general public of their writings, I believe both Yu Hua and Su Tong are great writers, though they are great on different grounds. In comparison, I think Ge Fei is not as good a writer as the two, and his fiction is also inferior to that of the two in overall artistic achievement and appeal due to some obvious weaknesses in his narrative, which I will specify in the following note.

<sup>102</sup> As mentioned at the very beginning of the chapter, unlike Su Tong, Yu Hua, and most other writers, who always give the first priority to story or storytelling in their fiction, Ge Fei tends to give the first priority to idea or discursive formulation in his novels. Ge Fei's tendency towards emphasis or even overemphasis on the discursive significance in his fiction is often achieved at the cost of storytelling. As a result, not only is the story told in his fiction often not interesting, his narrative also often shows some apparent flaws. For example, as I have pointed out earlier, in his novels sometimes there are obvious self-contradictory descriptions in plot—powerful evidence of purely fabricated nature of some of his stories. Of course stories in any writer's fiction are created by his/her imagination and therefore are fictional, but some stories in Ge Fei's novels are not in accord with the logic of life at all and ultimately impossible. This flaw inevitably damages the artistic quality of his fiction. In my observation, another major weakness in Ge Fei's fiction lies in the fact that, though it is quite wise for Ge Fei in his original intention to enrich the implications of his novels by deliberately diversifying the interpretations of the stories, he seems to be short in the ability to organize all parts of his novel into an united whole, and therefore, some of his novels often lack a sense of unity. Besides, despite Ge Fei's ambition to invest a “transcendental” and metaphysical dimension into contemporary Chinese fiction, some of his meditations are neither really transcendental nor original at all. Moreover, in my observation, Ge Fei's *Flags of Desire* reveals obvious traces of imitating Kafka's *The Trial* and *The Castle* in their common surrealist, absurd, and mysterious nature of the events and the open structure. Ge Fei's novel shares the sullen and boring atmosphere with Kafka's novels, but

As indicated by Ge Fei's speculation in his fiction, the splitting of the world and the sense of fragmented reality on the part of human beings, in the last analysis, are a result and manifestation of the singularity of each and every individual human being as an isolated existential subject and of the particularity of one's life situation. Like Zhang Ailing, who views her characters' "selfishness" less as evidence of evil human nature or moral depravity than as a necessary existential means employed by the frail individual to protect oneself against the potential threats from others and to confront the infinite, indifferent, and absurd world, Ge Fei also treats the singularity of the individual and the particularity of one's life situation from a basically amoral, neutral standpoint. Rather than equating the "singularity" of the individual and one's self-protective and somewhat other-resistant behavior that generates from one's particular life situation with such moral vices as "selfishness" and self-centered orientation from a moral point of view, Ge Fei defines the "singularity" of the individual and the "particularity" of life situation as a basic human condition that every individual human being has to confront and cope with from an existential and epistemological perspective. Under normal circumstances, as it happens in real life, understanding of the "singularity" of the individual and the "particularity" of life situation as a basic human condition usually leads us to realizing the necessity and importance of collaboration or cooperation among human beings. But in Ge Fei's novels, the story goes in a different direction. As presented in his novels, the "singularity" of human being—each individual acts, thinks, and feels for one's own good, out of one's own desires and interests, and from one's own standpoint that is based on

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lacks Kafka's ability to unite the realistic presentation of concrete reality with symbolic implications in harmony.



one's own particular life situation—eventually brings about the conflict of the individual with others and with the world. Much worse, the complex and contradictory nature of the inner world of human being even provokes the conflict of one with one's own self. The irreconcilability of the individual with others, with the outside world, and with one's own self, as presented in Ge Fei's novels, brings about the grim fact of the split world and evokes the feeling of fragmented reality on the part of human beings. Actually the irreconcilability of human existence is one of the most pronounced themes in Ge Fei's fiction, especially in his third novel *Flags of the Desire*.

When examining it as an integral link in the chain of Ge Fei's novel writing, we find his third novel *Flags of the Desire* both unique and provocative. It is unique because it simultaneously incorporates two seemingly irreconcilable qualities—highly realistic versus extremely metaphysical—in one single text and makes them coexist harmoniously. In this sense, it is a continuation of both his earlier novels. It inherits both the surrealistic and metaphysical quality of *The Enemy* and the realistic nature of *On the Margin* and manages to push both qualities even further. As a result, it is more realistic than *On the Margin* in phenomenal description and more transcendental than *The Enemy* in metaphysical meditation on the universal human predicament. The harmonious combination of the two seemingly opposing qualities makes the novel highly provocative and ultimately constitutes its artistic appeal and thematic profundity.

Set against the specific background of an important conference on philosophy held at a prestigious university in China during the early 1990s, the novel, on the surface, can be read as a “realistic” work aiming to provide a panorama of the contemporary

intellectual world with all its darkness and absurdity. The novel starts with the “introductory event”—the mysterious suicide of Professor Jia Lanpo, the organizer and the supposed host of the conference and a leading scholar in the field of philosophy in China, on the eve of the conference. With the proceeding of the conference and the deepening of the police’s investigation into the suicide, varied people—understandably, most of them are scholars—appear before us one by one, and the dark side of the contemporary Chinese intellectual world gradually emerges. For all the differences of the characters in personality, moral standards, life goal, etc., they impress us with their shared contemptible mentality. To our great surprise, the so-called intellectuals in the novel even exceed their ancestors in *The Scholars* and *The Fortress Besieged* in terms of their hypocrisy, their lack of the sense of morality, and their greed for fame, power, and women. Rather than pursue truth, the ultimate goal of their academic activity is to create something that can “make people surprised” and finally to obtain some material gain and sensual satisfaction. As indicated by the title of the novel, the intellectual world, as presented in the novel, is actually a dirty and corrupt place dominated by overflowing desires.

In spite of the realistic quality of the novel and the remarkable achievement it makes in exposing the darkness of the contemporary Chinese intellectual world, it is problematic and even erroneous to read it as a work of conventional realism. Actually after a careful examination of the novel as a whole, we have no difficulty in finding that the primary concern or preoccupation of the novel is not with historical authenticity but with metaphysical meditation. It is right out of such a consideration that the author Ge Fei himself warns us against overemphasizing the “sarcastic and didactic character” of the

novel. Obviously Ge Fei's warning is not baseless. In fact, after going through the whole novel, we discern that, as a narratological strategy that is so adeptly employed in Ge Fei's novels, the supposed important events such as the conference and the suicide of the professor actually do not play as important a role as expected. As a matter of fact, the seemingly significant events of the conference and the suicide work mainly as a narrative thread to string all the occurrences and the characters' stories together. At the core of the novel are not some happenings closely related to the conference or to the suicide, but the regrettable love story of two main characters Zeng Shan and Zhang Mo and the tragic life experience of another main character Song Zijin. Behind all these stories are the perceptions and speculations that the author attempts to draw from the stories. Actually, what interests the author most is the perceptions and speculations underlying the stories rather than the stories themselves.

As a fundamental narrative principle, fiction of traditional realism always makes clear the whole process of an event narrated—especially the major one—including its origin, development, and final outcome. Contrary to this principle, in *Flags of the Desire*, by restoring the many narratological techniques and devices which are so adeptly manipulated in *The Enemy* but abandoned in *On the Margin* such as temporal and spatial dislocation, the blurring of the reality and dream, the clever maneuver of multiple focalizers, stream of consciousness, etc., the events once again are presented as uncertain, fragmented, and open to infinite possibility. For example, in the novel, as it happens in *The Enemy*, the cause and course of Professor Jia's suicide—the structurally “central event” which runs throughout the novel—remain an unsolved puzzle. This reminds us of both K, the protagonist in Kafka's *The Castle*, who is never allowed to enter into the

castle to accomplish the task assigned to him for no reason, and Joseph K, the main character in *The Trial*, who is arrested and subjected to the judicial process for an unspecified crime. Though there is no substantive evidence showing that Kafka's *The Castle* and *The Trial* are an immediate influence of Ge Fei's *Flags of the Desire*, we still can easily discern the essential similarities between these works in their shared theme of meditating on the absurdity and uncertainty of the universal human condition and in their common artistic characteristic of combining the basically surrealistic atmosphere of the narrative as a whole and the accurate and realistic presentation of descriptive detail harmoniously in one single text. This coincidence is actually quite understandable, given the fact that Kafka is probably the most influential foreign writer among contemporary Chinese writers. In this sense, it is only natural to find that Ge Fei, one of the most erudite writers and also the most meditative one in contemporary China, emulates or seeks inspiration from a master who is obsessed with the same or similar issues and questions and who shows a similar artistic style.

In Ge Fei's novels, presentation of and reflection on the irreconcilability or conflict between men due to the singularity of each individual human being constitutes one of the most prominent themes. As evidence of ultimate incommunicability between human beings, in Ge Fei's fiction, the characters, rather than showing mutual sympathy and trust, always look at one another with suspicious and sometimes hostile looks. This is true even among family members. In *The Enemy*, there are several highly impressive and pregnant scenes dedicated to depicting the Zhao family members and their long-term servants looking at each other—Zhao Shaozhong peeks at his son Zhao Long while the latter

catches his adulterous wife and her secret lover in bed (*GFWJ*: 15-6); Zhao Shaozhong's wife stares at young Auntie Cui's naked body while the latter is taking a bath the night she is taken into the household (50-1); Zhao Shaozhong and Auntie Cui peer furtively or face-to-face at each other the night that Zhao Hu is murdered, on the occasion that the latter is searching for the poison in the former's study, and on the night that Liuliu is detected pregnant premaritally (116-9, 139-40, 155); Zhao Long stares at Zhao Shaozhong from the back after his father just finishes a sexual intercourse with his wife (136); Meimei peers at her father silently and coldly from the back while the latter is sitting in the graveyard lost in his thoughts (169); during the days immediately before his death, Zhao Long finds Auntie Cui always watching him in the dark (202). In all the cases, the look one assumes towards the other is suspicious and even hostile. Throughout the novel, we can hardly find even one single look full of sympathy, trust, and intimacy. Rather, there are plenty of passages scattered all over the novel that explicitly depict the mutual distrust and suspicion among the family.

For instance, both Zhao Long and Zhao Hu always "feel an unspeakable uneasiness while facing their father alone." On one occasion, looking at his father's pallid and withered face and imagining his father's death, Zhao Long, apart from the normal feeling of fear under such circumstances, feels a tremendous "joy." Liuliu, with the passage of time, feels that his father is more and more like a "stranger." Zhao Shaozhong's look is always "elusive," and "he is always afraid that the secrets hidden in his heart are seen through by others." Moreover, as mentioned above, he also shows shocking indifference to his children's suffering and death. Auntie Cui, for all her strong desire for Zhao Shaozhong and the fact that she has lived with the man under the same roof for decades,

also often feels him like a “stranger.” It seems that there were an invisible high wall separating and isolating the Zhao family members from one another.

Long immersed in a living environment full of mutual suspicion, distrust, and even hostility, it is only natural that each member of the family is seized by a strong sense of alienation and a strange feeling that he/she is an “outsider” or “stranger” to his/her own home. “Everything within the compound is decaying gradually. Shadows of decline and destruction spread over every corner of it.” And “everyone in the family longs to escape from it.” From Zhao Hu’s perspective, the narrator fully demonstrates the feeling of alienation:

It seemed that this desolate mansion had never been suitable for him to live in; it was just like a sinking ship. He always longed to escape from it or hoped that someday it would disappear on the earth. This nearly absurd feeling is even unspeakable to himself.<sup>103</sup>

As a matter of fact, in Ge Fei’s fiction, the ultimate incommunicability and irreconcilability between human beings can be best witnessed by reading the tragic love story and marriage life of the two main characters Zeng Shan and Zhang Mo in *Flags of the Desire*.

As discussed earlier, while reading *Flags of the Desire*, we should be cautious not to be deceived by its “superficial sarcastic and didactic character.” Actually, an overall careful examination of the novel reveals that its metaphorical and metaphysical essence is of more importance. When talking about his original intention of creating the novel, Ge

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<sup>103</sup> 这个荒芜的大宅好像从来都不适合他居住，他就像一艘即将沉没的船只，他总是渴望远离它，或者希望有一天它在地上消失。这种近乎荒诞的感觉连他自己也无法说清。GFWJ: 124.

Fei reminds us, “it [the novel] is merely a graduated scale. I intend to use it to measure the extent of the wasteland and to see to what degree it decays; in other words, I intend to see whether the varied fortresses we build to confront it such as love can perform some effective defense.”<sup>104</sup> If we understand that here “the wasteland” metaphorically refers to “the world we live in,” I believe no one can misunderstand Ge Fei’s intention to meditate on the despairing aspects of the world in writing the novel.

As a manifestation of the meditative and metaphysical nature of the novel, the love story and marriage life of Zeng Shan and Zhang Mo—the main content and most significant part of the novel—are treated largely as an existential and epistemological allegory or as a medium to express the author’s speculation on the universal human predicament. Therefore, there should be no surprise to find that, in the novel, the author’s primary attention is not focused on describing the course of the love story itself but on analyzing the psychology of the parties involved, and through the analysis, to examine the existential and epistemological implications underlying the story.

For a discursive purpose, the relationship between the two characters, from the very beginning, is presented as a dual phenomenon. On the one hand, it is depicted as “true love,” a pure and intense emotion and feeling between two human beings who display authentic and hearty admiration and desire towards each other, though, judging from their relation and mutual feelings towards each other during their marriage life, we might doubt whether they have love in the first place.<sup>105</sup> While Zeng Shan, an associate

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<sup>104</sup> 它只是一把刻度尺。我想用它来测量一下废墟的规模，看看它溃败到了什么程度，或者说，我们与之对抗而建筑的种种堡垒，比如爱情，是否能够进行有效的防御。《欲望的旗帜》，324页。Hereafter *YWDQZ*.

<sup>105</sup> As I mentioned several times before, in writing fiction, Ge Fei’s enthusiasm for conveying ideas with storytelling is far stronger than his interest in storytelling itself. As a result, stories told in his novels are often not only not interesting, but sometimes, they are also self-contradictory in describing details and

professor in Philosophy, is enchanted by his student's physical beauty, feminine charms, and her unique and lofty mettle, Zhang Mo is conquered by her young professor's broad knowledge, profound insight, and his simple, reliable, and honest character. In the novel the emotion between the two is depicted so strong and solid that even Zhang Mo's mother's violent opposition cannot separate the two lovers. The love finally leads the couple to marriage. On the other hand, their relationship, from the very beginning, is presented as a "war between two persons," as an all-around confrontation between two individuals with their respective singularity in every aspect of life from the trivial category like life habit, personal preference for food, clothing, smell, etc. to the important one such as life goals, beliefs, worldview, and so forth.

In Ge Fei's discursive formation, the duality of the two character's relationship as both authentic love and violent confrontation between two individuals is highly significant. The reason is very simple: Only if the love is true and pure, can its ultimate bankruptcy, its unreliability, and its vainness as an emotional and spiritual bridge to connect individuals be meaningful, because talking about something like the vainness of fake or pretended "love" as a channel for human communication is kind of nonsensical. In other words, defining the two characters' relationship as love is a discursive premise for Ge Fei to deduce his speculations on human relations. My speculation proves not baseless. Actually, as mentioned earlier, in his Epilogue to the novel, Ge Fei himself

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narrating plot. To me, his description of the relationship between Zeng Shan and Zhang Mo is a good example of the weakness of his storytelling. The relationship between the two as presented in the novel is quite confusing. If it is not love, how can we explain the fact that they two are unconditionally attracted and committed to each other, and that in order to marry Zeng Shan, Zhang Mo is even willing to cut off her relation with her parents, who strongly oppose their marriage. If it is love, then how can we account for the fact that even at her wedding dinner, Zhang Mo is seized by a feeling of "solitude, loneliness, and faint sadness." In his sense, we might say that the story of Zeng Shan and Zhang Mo is more an imagination by Ge Fei for a discursive purpose than a creation following the logic of real life.



claims that one subject matter of the novel is love. And the emotion between Zeng Shan and Zhang Mo is the only relation presented in the novel that can be defined as love.

Assigning Zhang Mo the role of a focalizer and from her perspective, the novel dedicates a whole chapter—the longest chapter in the novel, which occupies about one fourth of the novel's length—to describing her confused, bitter, and finally despairing feeling of love and marriage.

For Zhang Mo, the most despairing aspect of life lies in her awareness of the fact that love and marriage, rather than an ideal state of fulfilled dreams, are merely a compromise between ugly reality and beautiful dreams, between the body and the soul, and between two totally incommunicable individuals. Love and marriage, instead of encouraging the fulfillment of the respective freedom and potentials of the coexisting couple and bringing them happiness and mutual understanding, inflict bitterness and confusion upon them and finally alienates them from each other.

Under such circumstances, it is only natural to find that even at her wedding dinner, Zhang Mo is seized by a feeling of “solitude, loneliness, and faint sadness.” She feels as if “she had fallen into a deep bog.” “The unhappy and irritated expression she displays on her face” at that moment “greatly surprises” her husband Zeng Shan. With the passage of time, Zhang Mo is more and more shocked by the grim fact that gradually unfolds before her: Her relationship with her husband turns out to be a paradox. The deeper she penetrates his inner world, the more difficult and impossible she feels it to understand him. Mutual misunderstanding ultimately constitutes an invincible barrier between the two. For Zhang Mo, “every word Zeng Shan utters unconsciously constitutes some kind of obstruction to her. Even if one is deliberately to displease another person, the bitter

sarcasm he/she painstakingly elaborates cannot be more biting than it.”<sup>106</sup> Even in their bodily contact during lovemaking, “she feels that there is enormous emptiness existing between the two bodies.” During their short-lived marriage, Zhang Mo “sees a shocking fact: She actually knows nothing about the person who shares the same bed with her night after night.” She doesn’t know “from what time on, life turns into a life sentence that seems never to end.” Ironically and shockingly enough, for the couple, who are originally drawn together by philosophy on spiritual grounds, the only effective tie to bind them now turns out to be nothing but sexual desire. Much worse, in the last days of their marriage, even their sex life becomes too boring a thing for Zhang Mo to put up with, and her sexual desires can be ignited only by the many pornographic stories painstakingly fabricated by Zeng Shan. At this point, we once again encounter the feeling of absurdity, a recurring theme in all of Ge Fei’s fiction.

The couple’s highly precarious relationship caused by their desperate mutual misunderstanding culminates in the “breakfast incident,” a fateful event which finally leads their marriage to death only three weeks later.

One ordinary summer morning, after finishing her breakfast, with nothing to do, Zhang Mo remains at the dinning table watching her husband, who kept working throughout the past night and still works on his notebook while eating his breakfast. Finding her husband’s hand trembling, Zhang Mo declares in an authoritative tone that he has contracted neurosis. With a casual and suspicious response, Zeng Shan hides that hand of his under the table and continues concentrating on the notebook while taking his porridge. Right at this moment, Zhang Mo, not without any hesitation, makes a

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<sup>106</sup> 曾山无意中说出的每句话对她而言都构成了某种障碍。假如一个人蓄意是另一个人不快，挖空心思出来的冷嘲热讽也不过如此。YWDQZ: 236.

seemingly casual but actually poignant comment on Zeng Shan, which proves to be so fateful in their relationship that it constitutes the most decisive factor in their divorce later. To Zeng Shan's great surprise, in her comment, Zhang Mo compares him to his mother, the most influential yet despicable person in his life. After hearing Zhang Mo's comment:

Zeng Shan was stupefied for a while; he stared at Zhang Mo's face in astonishment, and a smile was gradually emerging from the corners of his mouth. It bore obvious implications of sarcasm and madness and froze on his face. His expression at the moment turned kind of ferocious and horrible. No sooner had she begun to feel frightened than she saw her husband calmly taking up a fruit knife from the compote and ruthlessly stabbing into the back of his hand.

In the ensuing period of time, they just kept staring at each other. The looks in their eyes were full of hostility.<sup>107</sup>

There is no doubt that this is the most frightening and violent scene in the novel. Many readers, I believe, as Zhang Mo does, would be puzzled by the question why a casual word of hers eventually evokes so violent a response and rage in him.

However, when we put this scene and examine it in the context of the couple's highly precarious relationship caused by their mutual misunderstanding, and especially when we link it with Zeng Shan's tragic childhood experience, we find his response and rage actually quite easy to understand. Zeng Shan's violent response and fierce rage are a direct result of the sense of humiliation and insult that Zhan Mo's grave misunderstanding of him evokes in him.

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<sup>107</sup> 曾山愣了一下，他吃惊地盯着张莫的脸，嘴角慢慢露出了笑容。它带着明显的嘲讽和疯狂的意味，凝结在他的脸上。他的面容在一刹那间变得有几分狰狞。她还没有来得及感到害怕，就看见丈夫冷静地从果盘里拿起一把水果刀，照着他的手背狠狠地扎了一刀。

在接下来的这段时间里，他们就这样彼此对望着。目光中充满了敌意。YWDQZ: 258.

In spite of the fact that Zhang Mo is quite familiar with the image and behavior of Zeng Shan's mother and that she knows of his hostile attitude towards her as well, Zhang Mo fails to understand what his mother really means to him and his true feeling of her in the deep recesses of his heart. For Zeng Shan, his mother, a scientist who spends all her time in some deep mountains designing missiles, completely ignoring her family, is merely a strange, crazy, and contemptible woman. Though not without any emotional dependence on her, Zeng Shan deeply hates and disdains her. In Zeng Shan's eyes, his mother not only represents a female failure, but much worse, she also embodies a kind of human selfishness, madness, and cold-heartedness. People like his mother are the last sort of human beings in the world that Zeng Shan wants to be. Therefore, it is only natural to see that Zeng Shan regards Zhang Mo's comparison of him to his mother as a most vicious offense and insult to him. Zeng Shan's act of stabbing himself in the hand is actually also linked with the sense of humiliation associated with his father. The pitiful basketball coach, who is completely neglected and abandoned by his wife throughout his life, on his dying bed, stubbornly and repeatedly pulls his wife's hand over and puts it on his penis, completely ignoring the presence of their neighbors. His father's hand with which he makes the shameful move has made an everlasting humiliating impression on Zeng Shan. As he confesses, he wishes that he had made a stab at that hand of his father at that moment. Actually, while Zeng Shan stabs his own hand, he does imagine that it were his father's. Intriguingly and meaningfully, after this event, Zhang Mo has several dreams about it. In all those dreams, the hand that Zeng Shan stabs into is hers. Obviously Zhang Mo's dreams are not true, but they do reflect a psychological reality: She is already well aware of Zeng Shan's harbored hostility towards her. At this point, it

is quite clear that the violent scene is a result and crystallization of the mutual misunderstanding or incommunicability between the couple.

At this point, Ge Fei's perception begins to come to light: If between a woman and a man who are in love, two human beings who are supposed to be dedicated and committed to each other wholeheartedly, mutual understanding and sympathy cannot be found, then the pursuit of human communicability is no more than a beautiful yet deceptive illusion. If we cannot count on love to break through the barrier of misunderstanding between human beings, then nothing else in the world can be expected to do so. Here the theme of ultimate human incommunicability is further emphasized. As Ge Fei confesses, in *Flags of the Desire*, he treats love as a "fortress" constructed by human beings and wants to see whether it can "perform some effective defense" against the "decay" of the world. The outcome, as demonstrated by the love story and marriage affair of Zeng Shan and Zhang Mo, must disappoint Ge Fei greatly.

In Ge Fei's fiction, the imperceptibility of reality and the incommunicability between human beings are the two sides of one coin, and in some sense, they constitute each other's cause and effect. It is the combination of the two that makes up the despairing existential background of human beings.

### **Broken Memory and Lost Identity**

It is common sense that, when talking about history, the importance of the role that memory plays in it cannot be overemphasized, either on the collective or on the personal level. As the actual historical process passes away permanently and never returns, the

only thing the past leaves behind is the memory of it and the traces to it—records, documents, historical photographs, etc. Therefore, what is at our command is always memories of history and traces to history rather than history itself. Only through the medium of memory or trace can history or historical truth be retrieved. It is right in this sense that Stephen Owen claims that “‘History’ is something we do to the collective memories of the civilization, just as memoirs and autobiographies are something we do to our own memories” (1986: 7). In light of this speculation, it is no wonder that memory and its relationship to history are among the heated topics for historians, philosophers, and writers who are all obsessed with history.

Because memory, just as historical documents do, constitutes “raw material” for historical writing and a path to history, naturally, the assessment of the reliability of memory and the exploration of what is involved on the way from memory to history become an indispensable topic for thinkers obsessed with the secret of history. In his influential book on history and memory, Paul Ricoeur reminds us that memory is not something still and passive but an active and creative process. As he points out, “remembering is not only welcoming, receiving an image of the past, it is also searching for it, ‘doing’ something. The verb ‘to remember’ stands in for the substantive ‘memory.’ What the verb designates is the fact that memory is ‘exercised’” (2004: 56). Ricoeur distinguishes between “artificial memory” and “natural memory.” While the former “methodically exploits the resources of the operation of memory,” the latter refers to “remembering in the limited sense of the evocation of singular facts, of events.” In other words, while the so-called “artificial memory” actually designates the resources or strategies employed to manipulate memory, the term “natural memory” coined by

Ricoeur refers to memory as the term is commonly construed. Ricoeur also reminds us of the “fundamental vulnerability of memory” or the high possibility of the abuse of memory. As he points out, abuse of memory may occur on three levels: “On the pathological, therapeutic level, the disturbances of blocked memory will emerge; on the properly practical level, those of manipulated memory; and on the ethico-political level, those of a memory abusively summoned” (57).

As far as Ge Fei is concerned, reflection on memory, on its possible abuse, and on its relation to history and to individual identity constitutes one of the most salient themes in his fiction. The theme is especially pronounced in the two novels *On the Margin* and *Flags of the Desire*.

In *Flags of the Desire*, there is a highly intriguing and thought-provoking description. Zhang Mo, the central female character, and her best friend Su Xin, a girl from a well-off city family whose father is a high-ranking local official, reach an agreement. They both promise that they will be honest to each other and will exchange every secret in life—including the most private ones—between each other without any reservation. Usually, the relationship between the two best friends is that of an enthusiastic narrator and a patient listener—while a haughty, extroverted, and somewhat narcissistic Su Xin speaks, a more introspective and reserved Zhang Mo listens. However, when they relate their respective love affairs, their roles are temporarily reversed. Su Xin, after finishing the narration of her own love affairs, asks Zhang Mo to tell hers. In spite of her extreme reluctance and embarrassment to do so due to her reserved disposition, Zhang Mo does not want to break her promise as prescribed by their agreement. This

time she becomes the narrator. Zhang Mo tells of a secret love affair between her mother and a pharmacist. In her narrative, the pharmacist is depicted as a rascal, and her mother's disloyalty as moral depravity. On a rainy night, the pharmacist took the opportunity of her father performing a medical operation at a hospital and furtively climbed into her mother's bed. Because of haste and fluster, he even broke to a vase.

After hearing Zhang Mo's narrative, a curious and speculative Su Xin immediately asks her what this story has to do with her, because they are supposed to tell their own love affairs. Su Xin's question puts Zhang Mo in a great fluster and embarrassment. Only after Su Xin's repeated questioning, does Zhang Mo finally confess to her own secret admiration for the pharmacist. After hearing Zhang Mo's confession, Su Xin offers her comments:

"Whether the situation was like this," Su Xin analyzed on behalf of her: "The bed that pharmacist climbed into was yours, and the skirt he lifted up on the sofa was also yours. But you were absolutely unwilling to admit this, and at this point, your memory made a mistake. Your mother, because of her detection of your dirty business, became the scapegoat of your humiliation and shame."<sup>108</sup>

Judging by the context of Su Xin's comments, we cannot tell whether they are serious or just joking. But this is not important. What makes Su Xin's analysis significant is that it points to the fact that memory is always vulnerable to potential modification, manipulation, tampering, distortion, and even total replacement to fit the present interests, situation, and point of view of the agent who performs the recollection. In other words, Su Xin's comments actually posit an important question of the reliability of memory. Her

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<sup>108</sup> “会不会是这样的情况，”苏辛替她分析道：“那个药剂师是上了你的床，他在沙发上掀开的是你的裙子。而你恰恰不愿意正视这一点，在这里，你的记忆出现了错误。你的母亲因为发现了你们的勾当，就成了你的耻辱的替罪羊。”YQDQZ: 71.



worry and suspicion prove not baseless; rather, they are merely an honest reflection of the reality. As a matter of fact, in her narrative, Zhang Mo indeed does lie or deliberately distort the fact in the name of her personal memory. For instance, the pharmacist, completely different from the loathsome image of a rascal in her narrative, is in reality a handsome, humorous, and highly attractive man. Moreover, contrary to her assertion that the pharmacist seduces her innocent mother, the fact is that he is attractive to both the mother and the daughter. And most likely, judging by all the information provided by the narrator, it is Zhang Mo's mother who induces the pharmacist into her bed rather than the reverse. By juxtaposing Zhang Mo's falsified narrative in the name of memory with the reality, the implied author deliberately exposes the distorted nature of her narrative and, through the exposure, leads us to possible reasons for the distortion. As common sense, it might be out of moral considerations to cover up her somewhat immoral and illegal desire for a married man and to vindicate her mother's innocence in the extramarital relationship that Zhang Mo chooses to lie or to deliberately distort the fact. No matter whether this conjecture is true or not, one thing is sure: She distorts the fact in the name of her personal memory to serve her present purposes.

In *Flags of the Desire*, Zhang Mo is of course not the only person who knows how to manipulate or abuse memory for present use. Actually her best friend Su Xin proves to be much more skillful and clever an operator in this respect. As mentioned earlier, Su Xin is an enthusiastic narrator, and narration even becomes an indispensable need in her life. As testified by Zhang Mo, Su Xin is so eager to expose and express herself that "in less than one month since Zhang Mo became acquainted with her, she has already known everything about her and her whole family's history." For Zhang Mo, what makes Su

Xin's narration surprising and even shocking is that "every time her narrative is radically different from the preceding one" in revealing the same fact, though she cannot tell what is true from what is fabricated in Su Xin's narrative. Su Xin obviously does not look at the question the same way. For her, the importance of a narrative lies not in what is narrated but in the narration itself. In other words, in Su Xin's eyes, historical fact or what really happened in the past is not important; what does matter to her is how to narrate the past for desired purposes. Su Xin's strategy in this respect is obviously successful. Her narrative indeed makes a remarkable impact on her best friend: The violence and horror narrated by her in the name of her personal experience always make Zhang Mo shudder uncontrollably in fright. It is through her skillful narrative that Su Xin establishes her dominant role in her relation to Zhang Mo. It becomes quite clear that, for Su Xin, the value of memory lies in its flexibility or changeability: It can be manipulated to label and justify any narrative of the past, real or fabricated, for varied purposes, taking advantage of the reliability and authenticity the term usually connotes.

In Ge Fei's fiction, the manipulation of memory on the part of Zhang Mo and Su Xin is absolutely not a case of particular and individual behavior; instead, it is the epitome of a common phenomenon. As a matter of fact, manipulation and abuse of memory, as presented in Ge Fei's fiction, can occur anywhere, at any level, and for any possible purpose.

While the story of Zhang Mo and Su Xin in *Flag of the Desire*, as indicated earlier, aims merely to posit the question of memory abuse, an episode elaborated in *On the*

*Margin* provides a perfect example of how and why a memory is manipulated in a given situation.

The two main characters in the episode concerned are the first-person narrator and Little Button, once his family's maidservant. As mentioned earlier, as it happens in many classical Chinese novels, in *On the Margin*, the young master and the attractive and clever young maidservant become secret lovers. The relationship remains unchanged even after the young master gets married. For all the longevity and solidity of their relationship, however, it cannot survive under Communist domination. The Communist victory in China completely changes their life trajectories and fate. After 1949, the two secret lovers, according to their respective social statuses in the "old society," are categorized into two opposing classes and become "class enemies." While the maidservant, one of the alleged oppressed and exploited class in the "old society," is entitled to the status as a member of the leading class in the "new society," the once privileged young master is now classified as a member of the "reactionary class" and a "bad element," subjected to the people's condemnation, punishment, and reeducation.

In Mao's China, one of the most powerful rituals invented by the Party to condemn the "exploiting class" and to "educate the masses" is the *yi-ku-si-tian dahui* 忆苦思甜大会 or "assembly to recall the suffering in the 'old society' and to meditate on the sweetness in the 'new.'" The main purposes of the ritual, as explicitly indicated by its name, are to expose and condemn the "cold-blooded oppression and exploitation" of the "reactionary class" and their evil nature and, through the exposure and condemnation, to meditate on, express indebtedness to, and eulogize the Party for its incomparable greatness and all-encompassing benevolence and for its "liberating" Chinese people from

the suffering and misery in the “old society” and bringing them “happy life” in the “new society.”

As a representative of the “humiliated and oppressed” in the “old society,” Little Button is designated as a member of the *xiangcun xunhui baogao tuan* 乡村巡回报告团 or “country itinerant reporting group,” whose sole mission is *yi-ku-si-tian*. Compatible with the group’s general mission, Little Button’s task is to recall and report the personal misery and suffering she is asserted to experience in the “evil” landlord family—her once secret lover’s family—and to expose their corrupt behavior, morality, and nature. Included in Little Button’s report is her recollection of a trivial family incident that she once witnessed. One scorching summer afternoon, the young narrator was dismissed from school much earlier than usual due to his teacher’s personal affairs. When he returned home and carelessly entered their bedroom, he happened to see her mother taking a bath in a big wooden basin. Not expecting that her son would appear at this moment, the naked mother felt extremely embarrassed and shamed; in a fluster, she stood up from the basin and threw a barrel full of water towards his son, and the cool water splashed all over him. This made the young narrator very depressed.

This incident, judging by normal logic, is merely a common family life scene with little, if any, social and political implication and, under normal circumstances, deserves no particular attention. However, in the Communist ideological formulation, the family incident is not trivial at all; on the contrary, it is construed as carrying some “significant” political connotations. In Little Button’s “ritualized remembrance,”<sup>109</sup> as prescribed by the nature of *yi-ku-si-tian* defined by the Party, the incident is deliberately singled out to

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<sup>109</sup> Paul Connerton, in his influential book mentioned earlier in the text *How Societies Remember*, argues that commemorative ceremonies and rituals, along with “bodily practice,” play a dominant role in constructing collective memories in a given society or community. See Connerton 1989: 41-71.

expose the landlord family's supposed vicious mentality and morality: In this corrupt landlord household, even a child is "transcendentally" endowed with a lascivious nature—he knows how to "peek" at a naked woman when he is very young. In other words, here the incident is recalled and cited as evidence and an epitome of the wicked nature of the landlord class. Our conjecture is not baseless; rather, it is supported by Little Button's own act. After finishing her remembering report, she does not leave the stage immediately; instead, she walks towards the narrator, once her secret lover and now a "bad element" defined by the Party, and slaps him ruthlessly in the face to show her deep hatred and condemnation towards the "class enemy."

From the above description and discussion, it is not difficult to discern that the truth of the incident undergoes substantive distortion and abuse in Little Button's "ritualized remembrance." First, there occurs the problem of the appropriation of subjectivity on the part of the agent who performs the remembrance. While the first-person narrator, one of the two actors in the incident, is deprived of the right of remembering his own life experience in public, Little Button, the witness and merely a peripheral figure in the actual process of the incident, plays the dominant role in the memory of it. This demonstrates the phenomenon of the appropriation of subjectivity quite clear. Behind the appropriation is obviously the working of power. It is the power which Little Button is entitled to as a member of the "leading class" by the Party that turns her from a peripheral figure in the actual process of the incident to the dominant figure and conductor in the remembrance of it. Second, Little Button's remembering narrative, by turning the incident from a purely personal and private occurrence to a highly politicized and publicized event, obviously distorts the nature of the incident. In his own retrospection,

the first-person narrator repeatedly emphasizes that the incident, in spite of the changing emotions it evokes in his heart from “fright and confusion” in his childhood to “tenderness and sanctity” in his old age, is meaningful only to himself and to his family; it does not carry any further implication beyond his family’s reach, social or political. Little Button’s “memory” obviously invests into the actually natural and neutral incident a political and moral dimension. Third and finally, the episode also provides a perfect example of the mechanism that the Party employs to create a “collective memory.” By means of the “mass assembly” organized by itself, the Party adeptly publicizes and ritualizes an ordinary maidservant’s personal memory, which has already been reshaped and reconfigured by the Party’s ideological indoctrination, and turns it into a “collective memory.” Actually usurpation and universalization of personal memory for political purposes in the name of collective is among the most frequently employed strategies by the Chinese Communist Party and other ruling classes as well in dealing with memory.

In Ge Fei’s fiction, abuse of memory is not the only problem facing human beings. For him, another problem is no less disappointing and pressing, that is, even if a memory is not subjected to any manipulation and distortion and is “honest” and “authentic,” it by nature is fragmentary and therefore often unreliable and even misleading.

Readers of *The Enemy* might remember that in the novel the devastating fire which destroys all of the Zhao family’s property is still a living memory among many Ziwu Town villagers. Unfortunately, throughout the novel, we simply cannot find even one person who can provide a relatively clear, reliable, and whole recollection of the event. All those villagers’ memories, without any exception, are fragmentary, obscure, and impressionistic. Therefore the gathering of all these fragmentary, obscure, and

impressionistic memories still fails in constructing a relatively reliable and integrated history of the event. This can be confirmed by the fact that throughout the novel the fire retains a mystery. The fragmentary and unreliable nature of memory is also testified by the character's feelings in the novel. For example, the main character Zhao Shaozhong always "feels as if he had merely experienced some beginnings and endings of things, some fragmentary segments" in his life (*GFWJ*: 34). In *Flag of the Desire*, the first-person narrator has a similar feeling. As he confesses, with the passing of time, life leaves him nothing but a "fragmentary memory" (223). In Ge Fei's speculation, it is the combination of the abuse of memory with the fragmentary nature of memory that constitutes the unreliability of memory and therefore the inaccessibility of human reality and history.

Today, not only does the relation of memory to history draw much attention from intellectual circles, its relation to human identity also constitutes a preoccupation for many thinkers. As a matter of fact, many modern theories point to the inseparable link between memory and identity, both on a personal (individual) and collective (national) level. For example, Paul Connerton, from a "cultural" perspective, provides an explicit and insightful analysis of the inseparable connection between personal identity and personal memory. As he points out, personal memory figures significantly in our self-descriptions "because our past history is an important source of our conception of ourselves; our self-knowledge, our conception of our own character and potentials, is to a large extent determined by the way in which we view our own past actions. There is, then, an important connection between the concept of personal identity and various backward-

looking mental states; ...Through memories of this kind, persons have a special access to facts about their own past histories and their own identities" (1989: 22). To make his perception more convincing, he bases it on philosophical grounds. As he argues, "in all modes of experience we always base our particular experience on a prior context in order to ensure that they are intelligible at all," and "prior to any single experience, our mind is already predisposed with a framework of outlines, of typical shapes of experience of experienced objects" (1989: 6). As discussed in chapter two, in Su Tong's famous novella "Proliferation of Wives and Concubines," the "flute incident" constitutes a turning point in the process of Lotus's mental transformation. For Lotus, the flute represents her beautiful memory of the past and serves as an important instrument to maintain her true self and identity intact. Here the connection between memory and identity is obvious. For all the pertinence and insightfulness of the perceptions of these thinkers and novelist, they, in my understanding, are far from "new" and "original;" rather, they merely points to the common sense that our present and our identity cannot be separated from our past because our past actually constitutes the foundation of our existence and identity and the starting point of our present feeling, thought, and behavior.

Like all these thinkers and novelist, mediation on the relation of memory to human identity is also a recurring theme in Ge Fei's fiction. For Ge Fei, the unreliable nature of memory caused by distortion and falsification not only constitutes an important source of the inaccessibility of human reality and history, but much worse, it also puts the wholeness of human identity in danger. In Ge Fei's fiction, distortion and falsification of memory always go hand in hand with the damage and loss of identity—a theme which is best demonstrated by a main character Dr. Song Zijin's life story in *Flags of the Desire*.



There is no doubt that Dr. Song is one of the most impressive figures in the novel. He is “unique” because, even against the dark background of the contemporary Chinese intellectual circles characterized by their members’ extremely dirty and abject mentality and astonishingly low moral standards, the brazenness of his behavior, his radically cynical and nihilistic attitude towards life, people, and the word, and his bold defiance of well-established moral and social norms make him too “outstanding” a figure to be overlooked. Moreover, he is the only character whose mentality is completely controlled by the desire, and pursuit of women and fame—he has countless women and always dreams to be awarded the Nobel prize in literature—constitutes the sole goal of his life. Borrowing the expression of the novel’s title, it can be said that he is the only person whose entire life is guided merely by a “flag of the desire.” He is “unique” also because of his highly unexpected life trajectory. While all the other characters, with a suicidal Professor Jia Lanpo as the only exception, for all their absurd, nonsensical, and somewhat pitiful life experience, remain “normal” and still struggle in this secular world for their variegated desires and dreams, he alone is thrown out of the “normal” track of human life and turns insane. Towards the end of the novel, when we see that the once complacent, popular writer and scholar Song Zijin, with his original rural name restored, dramatically changed into a mad peasant Song Fusheng, roaming around the village, naked, like a walking corpse, we cannot help but be seized by an inextricable feeling of the unbearable heaviness of life and the capriciousness of fate.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Unlike the Westerners, who usually do not pay much attention to things’ names, Chinese people have a long tradition of attaching importance to names, especially to people’s, as indicated by a Confucius’s teaching “*bi ye zheng ming hu* 必也正名乎” (Must rectify names). In Confucius’s ideological formulation, naming or rectification of name is so socially important an activity that it is ultimately associated with the

As discussed earlier, focalization is one of the most, if not the most, important literary devices employed in Ge Fei's fiction, especially in *The Enemy* and *Flags of the Desire*. In an influential book on narratology, as mentioned before, Mieke Bal incisively points to a remarkable advantage of "focalization" as a technical term over other similar terms such as "perspective" and "point of view" in its ability to highlight the relationship or interaction between the "focalizer" (the agent who observes) and the "focalized" (the events or people that is perceived). While the terms "perspective" and "point of view" define "perception" largely as a one-way process and emphasize the subjectivity of the observer, "focalization" identifies it as a reciprocal process between the observer (focalizer) and the observed (focalized) and highlights the interactive nature or "intersubjectivity" of the process. It is right in consideration of this advantage of "focalization" that Ge Fei enthusiastically employs it as a dominant narrative device to project the difference between the characters' modes of perception.

When we make a comparison of those chapters focalized by Zeng Shan and Zhang Mo (chapters 1, 3, and 6 by Zeng, chapters 2 and 5 by Zhang, respectively) and that by

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establishment and success of morality, ethics, and social order in a given society (*Analecets* 13.3). Given the fact that in traditional China one's name is always given or created by one's father or grandfather, it is only natural to find that a Chinese name often, more or less, carries information about the family background and identity of the person who is so named. Therefore, a name composed of very abstruse and rarely used characters often indicates the literate or elite status of the family. Likewise, a commonly seen name often suggests the illiterate or grass-roots status of the family. Because of the importance of a man's name, in ancient China, every literate, especially the distinguished one, apart from the original one given by his family, creates several other names—usually identified as *zi* 字 and *hao* 号. Some people have more than one *hao*—for himself to designate different aspects of his identity. In modern days, though the tradition is greatly weakened and some of its components completely vanish, some educated Chinese still manipulate their names to highlight their intellectual or elite status. Dr. Song Zijin's case in *Flag of the Desire* provides a perfect example of this phenomenon.

Compatible with the Chinese naming tradition, Dr. Song, after gaining some popularity and fame as a writer, changes his given name from Fusheng 富生 to Zijin 子衿. In comparison with Fusheng, a most commonly used Chinese male name in the rural area which means "wealthy life," Zijin, which is derived from a line of a poem in *Classic of Poetry* "青青子衿, 悠悠我心" (《诗经 郑风 子衿》), is obviously a much more refined and romantic name in highlighting an person's intellectual identity. Towards the end of the novel, after his insanity, hand in hand with the process of Dr. Song's self-created name being abandoned and his original rural name being restored is the loss of his identity as an intellectual.

Song Zijin (chapter 4), we find a remarkable difference in content between them.

“Reality”—things, events, and people—presented in the chapters focalized by Zeng Shan and Zhang Mo bears a basically “objective” and perceptible appearance and nature, as the world usually unfolds before us. There are also dreams, imaginations, and even illusions here, but there is always a clear-cut line between the inner world and the outside “reality.” In sharp contrast, what is presented in the chapter focalized by Song Zijin is rather a kind of “psychological reality” or a “reality” created by his own mind. The chapter is almost exclusively composed of his memories, dreams, daydreams, imaginations, illusions, and even delusions, with the outside “objective” reality being largely marginalized. Much worse, there is no clear line between what is created by his mind and the outside reality and between the past and the present. As a consequence, in the chapter technically focalized by him, we simply cannot tell what is real from what is fabricated and what happens in the present from in the past. Behind the difference between the “realities” presented in the chapters is obviously the distinction of mode of perception between the characters. While Zeng Shan and Zhang Mo, as most ordinary people do, perceive and engage in the world through a balanced way or mode that combines reasoning and emotions in harmony, Song Zijin, however, does it through instincts and intuition.

As presented in the chapter focalized by him and elsewhere in the novel as well, the only substantive thing left in Song Zijin’s life experience, with all the fantasies and lies created by his mind stripped, is his memory, especially his miserable childhood memory imposed on him by his father. In this sense, memory constitutes the most important part of his identity. This can be best witnessed by the fact that the only way he depends on to

cast his own image on the minds of his countless sex partners, apart from the sexual intercourse, is telling them many unexpected and stimulating stories about himself in the name of his “personal memory.”

When we look at the process of Song Zijin’s psychological growth as a whole, we find that the “searing iron incident” constitutes a decisive event in the formation of his personality, worldview, and values, judging by his behavior and thought in adulthood. This incident eventually becomes an ineradicable living memory which repeatedly emerges in his mind and immensely shapes his identity. To talk about the incident, we shall start with the life story of his father. The pitiful man, after his wife’s death, turns himself into a drunkard and a brutal father. During the last years of his life, the only things the widower does all day are drink, cry sadly towards his late wife’s picture embedded in a wooden frame hung on the wall after drunk, and beat his innocent children as a means to vent his sorrow and depression. Under such circumstances, it is no surprise to see that, when young Zijin accidentally burns the rope that ties the frame embedding his dead mother’s picture to the wall broken with a searing iron and smashes the glass covering the picture while playing around, the brutal father takes over the iron from Zijin’s hand and, without any hesitation and mercy, burns a scar on his young son’s buttock. Obviously the butterfly-shaped scar left to him by his father, as a witness of his nightmarish childhood, is a symbol of humiliation and bitterness to Zijin. The scar and his entire miserable childhood symbolized by the scar enormously shape Zijin’s life and mentality.

In spite of the extreme importance of the incident for him, Zijin, in order to impress and even to shock his sex partners, deliberately distorts the truth of the incident and turns

it at will into varied stimulating and romantic stories in the name of personal memory. As one of his sex partners testifies, each time he talks about the scar, he gives a “completely different” explanation. Instead of feeling embarrassed and reluctant to take about the scar as most people would do under such circumstances, Zijin, during his intercourse with the women, seems to be very willing and excited to discuss the “beautiful” butterfly-shaped scar on his buttock. Intriguingly and ironically enough, the scar seems to become a source of pride and attraction for him. In one case, the actually miserable event is verbally transformed into an interesting and somewhat romantic affair. One day in the third year of his college life, when he went to the female dormitory to perform his duty as the class’s *shenghuo weiyuan* 生活委员 (volunteer board and lodging manager) of delivering the *fan-piao* 饭票 (state-allotted grain coupons) to the girls, he carelessly sat on a burning electric stove. Through the ingeniously constructed narrative, the origin of the scar is adeptly linked with women. In another case, to make the story more stimulating and unexpected, he elaborates and adds a tragic and exciting context or background to it. When he was a college student, more than three months of insomnia almost beat him down. Unable to bear the bitterness any longer, in a snowy evening, after roaming around the campus for more than half a night, he climbed up to the top of a high building and prepared to jump down. Afterwards, only the thought of his younger sister, his only family left in the world, who loves him deeply, did make him abandon the crazy idea of taking his own life. He stood in the snow for a whole night. Next afternoon when he went to the female student dormitory to deliver grain coupons, he sat on a burning electric stove.

Stephen Owen, in his aforementioned work on remembrance in classical Chinese poetry, reminds us that memory can also become a “snare” or “trap of the living” (1986: 80). In other words, memory can be a “danger” or “threat” to our present life. Owen’s concern is primarily with that “too many memories may crowd the present” and that the “magnitude of things past” may shrink our present existence. Owen actually points to the fact that memory can be a negative factor in our present life and identity. This is exactly the case in *Flags of the Desire*, though the link between memory and human existence and identity is expressed in quite a different way.

Compatible with Owen’s insight, as repeatedly emphasized earlier, memory plays a crucial part in the formation of individual identity, especially for a person like Song Zijin, whose life experience is to a large extent composed of his childhood memory and many fantastic imaginations. Given this fact, it is only natural that, when memory fails to be an authentic trace to the actual life experience in the past and is distorted into some kind of fabrication or lie, the authenticity of human identity and self is put at risk. It becomes quite clear here that distortion and falsification of memory are less a sign of moral depravity than a truly serious existential and ontological problem.

Song Zijin’s life story fits this perception very well. His life seems to fall into a vicious circle. On the one hand, under the powerful drive of his desire for women, he has to lie and to continuously distort his memory into varied stimulating stories to please them, and as a result, his identity suffers gradual but significant damage; on the other hand, in order to cover up or to modify his previous lies and to restore his damaged identity, he has to tell even bigger lies and to fabricate even more bizarre stories in the name of his personal experience, and consequently his identity is even more seriously

damaged. Plunged into this inescapable and uninterrupted vicious circle, Song Zijin only finds that he is getting away from his true self further and further, and much worse, lying eventually becomes an indispensable need in his life. As his colleague Zeng Shan testifies, “in real life, Zijin is a person who refuses to cooperate with anyone and anything, and nonchalance and lying become his only amulet.”

He constantly discloses secrets to others, but he has no means to prevent himself from lying. He cannot control himself; he is too nervous. Lying is like a sort of lubricant, making his anxious mood alleviated while dealing with others. Even a slight exaggeration would induce him to tell an outright lie. Perhaps he has no other choice; just like a drug addict, the only way out for him is to constantly increase the dose of cocaine.<sup>111</sup>

When one's past fails in being a solid entity of one's true life experience but becomes a random aggregate of “falsified memories” or stark lies, the foundation or base of one's true self and identity inevitably suffers undermining and even total collapse. In other words, distortion and falsification of memory not only cost human beings moral integrity but also put the cornerstone of our existence and identity in danger.

This perception is once again confirmed by Song Zijin's mentality and life experience. Completely contrary to his beautiful expectation that excessive sex and fame would bring him the feeling of satisfaction and fulfillment, in reality, Song Zijin, a master women seducer and popular writer, realizes more than any other the “existence of nothingness,” is tortured more severely than any other by the “flame of boundless emptiness,” and is more frightened and shocked than any other by the unreality and absurdity of life. What he can see in life is only a “void” and “illusions.” He believes that

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<sup>111</sup> 他不断地向人吐露秘密，却没有办法不说谎。他控制不住自己，他太紧张了。谎言犹若一种润滑剂，使他在与人交往时的紧张情绪得以缓和。一个小小的夸饰之辞都会诱发他撒下弥天大谎。也许他只能如此。就像一个吸毒上瘾的人，唯一的出路是不断加大可卡因的剂量。YWDQZ: 154.

“nothing in the world is real.” He, just as his sex partners often cannot tell what is true from what is not in his stories, “cannot tell what is real from what is fabricated” in life. His many lies and fabrications confuse and deceive not only his listeners but also himself. He is lost in the stimulating and deceptive world constructed by his own imagination. In this sense, his insanity—the absolute loss of his identity as a normal human being in the world—is an inevitable and logical consequence of his thought, behavior, and mental progress. Intriguingly and ironically enough, his sanity is destroyed by the two things that he makes every effort to pursue in his life: women and fame. Towards the end of the novel, before he is sent to an asylum, two fateful events happen to him. First, he is badly beaten by two rascals who are hired by one of his previous sex partners. The beating brings severe physical and fateful psychological trauma to him, and after the beating, he begins to show some signs of insanity. Afterwards, a strong desire for the Nobel prize drives him to imitate T. S. Eliot to deliver a speech, which was actually written by the 1948 Nobel laureate, at the Philosophy conference. This act is unanimously regarded by the conference participants as a clear symptom of his insanity. “Flags of the desire” finally leads the talented writer and scholar to his ultimate destruction.

### **Conclusion**

The most defiant avant-garde writer in contemporary China, Ge Fei, tends to meditate on the world and the human predicament largely from an existential perspective, though realistic dimension and consciousness of history are by no means absent from his text. In his fiction, he takes fear, a mood as defined by Solomon and Heidegger and the



dominating life experience in Mao's totalitarian China that he underwent in his formative years, as the starting point of his meditation. Fear, as presented in Ge Fei's novels, constitutes not only the dominant experience and feeling of human beings but also an "interpretation of the outside world." Fear can be both imaginary and realistic. On the one hand, through his vivid description of how fear as a product of pure human imagination distorts and changes a normal human being into a cold-blooded murderer, Ge Fei demonstrates in a highly impressive way what disastrous consequences a deep-rooted evil idea and distorted mentality can bring to human beings. On the other hand, by treating fear as an existential and social event, Ge Fei exposes the many predicaments facing human beings: death, social unrest as displayed in the form of war, dark and foolish human thought, abuse of power as exemplified by Communist domination, absurdity, evil human nature, and conflict between objectivity and subjectivity, between desires and external norms, between reasoning and emotions, between imagination and reality, etc. Obviously, like the other two major contemporary Chinese avant-garde writers Su Tong and Yu Hua, Ge Fei also universalizes his personal life experience derived from Mao's totalitarian China and presents it as the universal human condition in his fiction.

By parodying and rejecting some long cherished popular narrative modes of Chinese fiction, by playing with varied literary techniques and devices developed by modern Western narratology, and especially by his clever maneuver of multiple focalizers in one single text, Ge Fei subverts the traditional conceptualization of history in an astonishingly radical way. Contrary to the conventional view of history as a perceptible and understandable unity characterized by the causality between events, Ge Fei thinks that history is actually not a useful concept to describe human experience because human

experience as a whole is no more than a random aggregate of isolated events and therefore has no unity as the term “history” usually connotes. In Ge Fei’s fiction, “historical truth or fact” is inaccessible to us, if such a thing does exist. What is available to us is merely some “traces” or “clues” to the fact, though the traces or clues are themselves ambiguous and unreliable.

Ultimate incommunicability or the lack of mutual understanding between human beings is another universal human predicament which Ge Fei is concerned with. For him, human incommunicability is a result and manifestation of the “singularity” of the individual human being and the “particularity” of one’s living condition. The lack of mutual understanding among human beings inevitably brings them the feeling of alienation, emptiness, and absurdity. In Ge Fei’s discursive formulation, imperceptibility of reality or historical truth and incommunicability between human beings are the two sides of one coin; they constitute each other’s cause and result.

For Ge Fei, another reason for the imperceptibility of history lies in that memory, the bridge to and “raw material” of history, is ultimately unreliable. As presented in his fiction, memory not only suffers potential distortion and falsification in a society to serve present purposes, it is also fragmentary or incomplete by nature even in its “authentic and honest” form. Because memory constitutes the foundation or base of human existence and identity either on a personal or collective level, its distortion, falsification, and damage inevitably put human identity in danger. Broken memory always goes hand in hand with the loss of identity on the part of human beings.

In Ge Fei’s fiction, the isolated nature of events, the “ontological absence of truth,” the imperceptibility and inaccessibility of reality and history, the ultimate

incommunicability between human beings, and the fragmentary and unreliable nature of memory constitute an enigmatic world with fear at its core.

## Conclusion

The above case studies make it quite clear that, though history constitutes the core concept and starting point of discussion for all the three major contemporary Chinese avant-garde writers, it displays a distinctive and unique pattern in each individual writer's fiction.

What makes Su Tong's fiction remarkable is the deliberateness and completeness of his attempt to subvert the whole set of Communist ideologies and the Communist interpretations of Chinese history and revolution. Su Tong's fiction deals with some important issues in modern Chinese history and general history as well: the Chinese Communist revolution, the rural-urban confrontation, the process of Chinese modernization, the identity and spiritual crisis on the part of modern Chinese people, and the working and revelation of power relations in human history. Formally and technically, Su Tong tends to disguise his fiction as historical writing by employing or parodying some techniques or strategies usually adopted in the writing of official histories or historiographies in traditional China. Su Tong aims at a dual goal in his display of history: the fusion of pursuit of "objective historical truth" and the expression of "subjective judgment" towards history. In Su Tong's fiction, history is presented as a basically rational and conceivable process determined by such factors as personal hatred, desires, and fate rather than "class hatred" as construed by the Party.

Unlike the relative consistency in both content and style of Su Tong's fiction, Yu Hua's novels undergo dramatic changes from his first one to the later two in almost every aspect. Correspondingly, his treatment of history and the underlying worldview also

experience a profound shift. In his first novel, though the pursuit of historical authenticity constitutes an indispensable dimension, Yu Hua's primary concern is with transcendental mediation on the helpless and hopeless human condition. At this stage, Yu Hua places more stress on the subjective and transcendental side of human experience, and history is presented mainly as a remote and obscure background of individual human existence loosely linked with the individual's experience and fate. History in his first novel, though severely damaged by the narrator's subjectivity and skepticism, with some links broken here and there in the long chain, remains a perceptible process of successive events. From his second novel *To Live* onwards, Yu Hua's fiction displays a dramatic "retreat" both to Chinese literary conventions and to the traditional Chinese worldview and values. Unlike his early novel where history only appears as a remote and obscure background as just indicated, the historical presence in his later two novels looms large and is sometimes even foregrounded, where an individual's encounters and fate are always tied fast to the vicissitudes of the nation and to the historical events. At this stage, history in Yu Hua's fiction is mainly presented as an external social and political force completely out of any person's control. Contrary to the Communist presentation that history brings happiness and satisfaction to the people under Communist domination, in Yu Hua's fiction, the external political and social forces only inflict endless suffering and death on human beings.

Unlike both Su Tong and Yu Hua, who at least accept the traditional view of history as a basically perceptible process, Ge Fei, the most defiant Chinese avant-garde writer, totally rejects history as a useful conception to describe human experience because he does not think human experience as a whole has any unity as the concept history usually

indicates. The fictional world created by Ge Fei is full of ambiguities, uncertainties, mysteries, and death. There, individuals' behavior, speech, and thought as isolated events may be meaningful and comprehensible, but they can never form a coherent unity because there is no reason or causality which could string them together as a unified and conceivable whole. History, as presented in Ge Fei's fiction, filled with all the fragmentations of isolated events, distorted and broken memories, ultimate incommunicability of human beings, and lost identity, opens to the future like an endless and meaningless black hole, where human beings are haunted by the feeling of alienation, loneliness, and absurdity.

The case studies also demonstrate that, in spite of the differences of the three writers in the presentation of history, they, widely viewed as representatives of the same literary trend, have many features in common. First, they display a shared intention to construct a "history" that runs counter to the Communist version. Second, they also reveal a shared pessimistic attitude towards life and history and a shared tendency to generalize the dark human experiences they derived from the specific historical reality of Mao's China—hatred in Su Tong's fiction, loneliness in Yu Hua's, and fear in Ge Fei's—and treat them as universal human conditions. Third, their fiction shows a common artistic feature characterized by the harmonious blending of the seriousness of the content with the popularity of the form in the text. From the emergence of their works onwards, Chinese fiction once again gains its dual nature, which it bore in the ancient period but lost in modern times.

The case studies further illuminate the complex and intertwined relations of contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction to all the previous traditions: Communist, the May Fourth, and pre-Communist.

First, for all the sincerity and eagerness of their intention to subvert the Communist interpretation of history on the part of contemporary Chinese avant-garde writers, the “counter-history” constructed by them, however, by no means represents a total break with and a direct opposition to the Communist version of history. On the contrary, the history constructed by the Party and the “counter-history” by the avant-gardists display obvious similarities or links in some aspects. This seemingly contradictory phenomenon can be explained partially by the grim political fact that in Communist China, as discussed in the chapter one, a writer—whoever you are, avant-garde or not—has to write his/her subversion “between the lines” and that the ideological distance a writer is allowed to deviate from the Party is actually quite limited, and partially by the limitations imposed by the writers’ own subjectivities. For instance, in Ge Fei’s case, in spite of his radically defiant attitude towards the traditional view of history, the basically unhistorical and unpolitical nature of his perspective actually constitutes little, if any, threat to the Party’s ideology. Moreover, given the extremely metaphysical and highly unreadable nature of his fiction, his subversive influence on the general public is greatly restricted.

In this respect, Su Tong and Yu Hua represent a different case. The two, by cleverly manipulating the differentiation or inconsistency between the surface, literal description and the deep, figurative meaning of a literary text, adeptly wrap the actually highly subversive and “reactionary” “deep meaning” of their fiction in a protective covering of superficial political conformity. In other words, though Su Tong’s and Yu Hua’s fiction,

on the deep level of narrative, constitutes a substantial and powerful attack on Communist ideology and the Party's interpretation of modern Chinese history, on the surface, the political and historical fact presented in their fiction, however, is by no means contradictory to the Party's orthodox presentation. For example, superficially and literally, the basic political and historical fact presented in Su Tong's "Opium Family" can be summarized as describing the "inevitable" destruction of the corrupt landlord family and the "inevitable" victory of the "exploited and oppressed" poor peasants under the Party's leadership. This description is politically not quite different from what is presented in the Communist "model" like *The White-haired Girl*. In Yu Hua's novels *To Live* and *Xu Sanguan Sells His Blood*, the sources of the peasants' suffering and misery are ascribed to such political movements as "Great Leap Forward," the "Cultural Revolution," and the "Backyard Steel-making" movement. All the movements are defined by the Party as manifestations of the "extreme left line" (*ji zuo luxian* 极左路线) and as some unfortunate deviations from the Party's "correct line." This depiction is actually quite congruous with the Party's presentation that it is the deviation from the Party's line rather than the Party's line itself—the line is always correct; only the deviation from it manipulated by some bad elements such as Lin Biao and the "Gang of Four" is harmful—that constitutes the source of the suffering of the people. In *Xu Sanguan Sells His Blood*, Yu Hua, just as the Party does, also explicitly attributes the origin of the "Cultural Revolution" to Chairman Mao the person rather than to the dictatorial Party and the corrupt and inhumane system. Chinese avant-garde writers' political conformity with the Party's ideology, though only on the surface level, is actually prescribed by their status as "establishment intellectuals." Moreover, as



discussed in chapter one, the avant-garde writers unwillingness to transgress the boundary drawn by the Party is also closely associated with their intention to maintain and protect their newly gained high social status and vested interests, and with their strong desire for personal fame and wealth in a post-totalitarian society where people are seized by money fetishism.

Second, the relation of contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction to May Fourth literature proves also to be complicated. When talking about modern Chinese literature, May Fourth literature, which is generally regarded as a literary summit of it, cannot be bypassed. By comparison, we find that Chinese avant-garde fiction has both profound continuities and discontinuities with its May Fourth antecedent. On the one hand, the avant-gardists inherit their May Fourth ancestors' critical sight, their iconoclastic and skeptical spirit, and their unfailing pursuit of originality—the core of the May Fourth legacy. On the other hand, they also show a strong desire and self-consciousness to distance themselves from their May Fourth forefathers in many ways. First, unlike the May Fourth writers, whose preoccupation of China's wealth and power leads them to level their iconoclasm and criticism at China's traditional culture or the "national character" shaped by the culture, the Chinese avant-gardists extend their skepticism and iconoclasm to the whole world, to the "universal human condition." Second, they totally reject the May Fourth generation's didactic and utilitarian view of literature and manage to push literary autonomy to the furthest point that the Party allows them to reach. As a consequence, the avant-garde fiction is the most aesthetically autonomous literary genre which is least contaminated or shaped by the Party's ideology in contemporary China so far. Third and the most importantly, the avant-garde writers completely abandon

humanitarianism, a sentiment which is generally accepted as one of the defining features of the May Fourth spirit.

Third and finally, though Chinese avant-gardists are greatly influenced by Western intellectual and literary trends and practices, their continuities with the pre-Communist Chinese tradition are much more profound and substantial. While the Western influence mainly takes effect on the technical and structural level, their inheritance of Chinese tradition occurs largely on ontological, epistemological, and ideological grounds. As discussed repeatedly earlier, to prove the continuity of Su Tong and Yu Hua to their grand tradition is not a difficult task. For example, apart from their shared obsession with history—the most predominant feature of Chinese literary tradition—and their common confirmation of such traditional Chinese views and values as moral retribution, fatalism, and women's submission to men, we can easily discern an element of “cosmological symbolism” in Su Tong's fiction and the traditional Chinese view of life, death, and nature, the confirmation and recovery of the traditional Chinese values such as filial piety and family affection, and the Taoist influence in Yu Hua's fiction. Even in the fiction of Ge Fei, the most defiant Chinese avant-gardist, we still have no difficulty in finding traces of fatalism and the inheritance of Confucianist divination culture (*Chen-wei wenhua* 谶纬文化). Like all other Chinese writers, Ge Fei also displays an interest in history, though this interest, ironically, only leads him to the total rejection of the traditional view of history. The historical dimension of Ge Fei's fiction becomes even more manifest when compared with some Western modernist masterpieces of similar theme and style such as Kafka's fiction and Camus's *The Stranger*.

The ideological limitations of contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction and the inconsistency between surface description and deep meaning of its texts imposed by both the external political pressure and internal subjectivity on the part of the writers do not necessarily mean the inferiority of its literary quality. On the contrary, the intricate and intertwined relations of Chinese avant-garde fiction to all the Chinese traditions, Communist, the May Fourth, and pre-Communist, to some extent enrich its social, intellectual, cultural connotations. The narrative inconsistency of its texts and the literary tensions the inconsistency brings about also work to diversify the interpretation of the text and therefore enhance its aesthetic appeal. After all, fiction cannot be equated with either true historiography or pure political propaganda. Actually, as mentioned earlier, the literary accomplishment of Chinese avant-garde fiction is so overwhelming that they have already drawn much attention from literary critics and been highly evaluated. As demonstrated convincingly by the case studies of the three major Chinese avant-garde writers, I believe that contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction represents another summit in modern Chinese literature after the May Fourth fiction.

Like most critics and readers, I accept the widely shared notion that May Fourth literature is a summit in modern Chinese literature, though at the same time I also uphold the idea that it is not appropriate to overemphasize its overall literary achievement.<sup>112</sup> Taking May Fourth fiction as a referential point, we find that contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction as a whole is by no means inferior, if not superior, to its May Fourth

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<sup>112</sup> Personally, I think that the greatness of May Fourth literature lies mainly in its historical values, namely, in its ground-breaking effort to create a new form of Chinese literature with modern quality in both content and style which is essentially different from its past form, rather than in its overall literary achievement. As far as May Fourth fiction is concerned, for example, with Lu Xun's short stories as the only exception, it is composed almost exclusively of artistically mediocre works. Therefore, it is only natural that the overall artistic achievement of May Fourth fiction as a whole is not so high as usually expected.

antecedent in terms of thematic profundity, stylistic and technical originality, linguistic exquisiteness and expressive power, and overall artistic achievement. This perception is actually quite congruous with the actual process of literary development in modern China.

The historical fact is, after the ebbing of the May Fourth fiction, apart from the works by some great individual writers such as Zhang Ailing, Qian Zhongshu, and Shen Congwen, there are no Chinese novelists as a school or group in any give period whose writing can measure up to contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction in artistic excellence and discursive power. Obviously, neither the so-called “Liberated Area Fiction” (*jiefangqu wenxue* 解放区小说) in the Yan’an period nor the fiction of Maoist “revolutionary romanticism” after 1949 is a match; nor is the so-called “New Era Fiction” including “Scar Literature” and “Educated Youth Fiction,” which only tells a different story but has the same “historical grammar” as the “revolutionary fiction” advocated by Mao. Even if compared with the two other outstanding contemporary forms of fiction, “Native-roots Searching Fiction” and “New Realism” fiction, the avant-garde fiction shows obvious superiority to them in some ways. For instance, Chinese avant-garde fiction transcends “Native-roots Searching Fiction” in that, while the latter, like its May Fourth antecedent, driven by the century-long grand mission of the pursuit of China’s wealth and power, still adheres to a didactic view of literature in an attempt to seek the “roots” of Chinese culture and nation, the former, committed to the value of literary autonomy, completely abandons the narrowly didactic view and displays a strong concern for the universal existential condition in a purely aesthetic way. Chinese avant-garde fiction surpasses the “New Realism” fiction in that, while the “new realists” confine their writings to a narrow, naturalistic description of the grey life of the “small

citizen” and the grey social and political reality in a post-totalitarian China, the avant-gardists invest a philosophical dimension into their texts and endow their fiction with certain discursive profundity. The thematic depth is something that the “new realists” lack in their fiction.

As discussed emphatically in the Introduction, the emergence and its dazzling success of Chinese avant-garde fiction in the 1980s are a natural result of one century of development of modern Chinese literature. The social, cultural, intellectual milieu of the 1980s, one of the most exciting and creative periods in modern Chinese history, with all its openness, ideological tolerance, rebellious spirit, and cultural pluralism provides the most comfortable and favorable soil and atmosphere for its efflorescence. Contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction is merely a fruit of the efflorescence.<sup>113</sup> As far as the writers’ subjectivity at that time is concerned, on the one hand, the social and political reality in Mao’s China, especially the experience of the “Cultural Revolution,” a disastrous event which is significant not only to Chinese people but also to humanity as a whole, provides them with both abundant “raw material” for their writings and a sharp insight to look at things. It is common knowledge that abundant personal experience, physical or psychological, and a penetrating insight on the part of a writer are necessary conditions for the thematic profundity and power of a literary writing. On the other hand, influxes of foreign literary trends and techniques provide the writers with a perfect opportunity to select the ideas, forms, and devices which they think are the most powerful and suitable to express their long accumulated experience and newly released feelings. More ideally,

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<sup>113</sup> In this sense, it is also no accident that “Misty Poetry,” an important part of contemporary Chinese avant-garde literature, with Bei Dao, a poet who is selected several times as a nominee for the Nobel prize in literature, as its most accomplished and renowned representative, is considered another summit in modern Chinese poetry after May Fourth poetry and the “Symbolist Poetry” (*xiangzheng shipai* 象征诗派) represented by Li Jinfa in the early 1930s.

fascination with China's pre-Communist tradition as the negation of the Maoist negation of Chinese legacy makes the Chinese avant-gardists blend the long-standing Chinese tradition with the newly obtained foreign conceptions and techniques in harmony in their texts. The harmonious combination of the two traditions, Chinese and Western, actually constitutes the technical originality and aesthetical appeal of Chinese avant-garde fiction.

When we look back over the whole history of modern Chinese literature, we find that contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction actually stands out as a milestone or turning point in the course. It is from its emergence onwards that modern Chinese literature began to dismiss itself from the grand mission of pursuing national wealth and power and ceased to be a servant or subordinate of the Party's ideology and line. In other words, its birth represents the start or the discovery of literary autonomy in modern China. Deeply rooted in Chinese tradition and at the same time earnestly embracing foreign cultures, contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction is the true "Chinese" fiction with an international dimension after May Fourth literature. It is from its emergence onwards that contemporary Chinese fiction began to attract serious and massive attention from the outside world and to win true respect from both the domestic readership and the international community.<sup>114</sup>

Given the dazzling achievement of contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction and the highly remarkable position it occupies in the history of modern Chinese literature, it

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<sup>114</sup> To the best of my knowledge, Su Tong, Yu Hua, and Mo Yan, another highly accomplished contemporary "experimental" writer, are among the most translated, most read, and most highly acclaimed contemporary Chinese writers in the English-speaking world. It should be no coincidence that some prize-winning Chinese movies made by some famous "Fifth Generation" directors are closely associated with Chinese avant-garde fiction. For example, the three world famous movies *Red Sorghum*, *Raise the Red Lanterns*, and *To Live* directed by Zhang Yimou are adapted from works of Mo Yan, Su Tong, and Yu Hua, respectively. This makes up another piece of evidence of the excellence and high popularity of contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction.

is only natural to see that it has made and is still making a significant and far-reaching impact on Chinese literature. In my understanding, the most cherishable contribution contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction makes to Chinese literature is that it jolts Chinese writers awake from the Maoist mechanical understanding of the relation between content and form of a literary work and the corresponding stereotyped expressive form of the “revolutionary” novels and invests into Chinese literature a high consciousness of expressive form. Enlightening Chinese writers to attach importance to form, style, and language in their literary practice and to make a good balance between the profundity of content and the originality of form in a literary work, I think, is the most eminent legacy that Chinese avant-garde writers leave behind. As mentioned earlier, Chinese avant-garde fiction did benefit greatly from the relatively unrestrained and highly creative overall literary atmosphere of the 1980s, but in return it was also the most important contributor to the high creativity, profundity, and originality of Chinese literature at that time.

Of course the influence of Chinese avant-garde fiction is not always positive. Sometimes it can be misleading and even harmful. For instance, some writers of the so-called “New Generation Fiction” (*xinshengdai xiaoshuo* 新生代小说)—a major fiction genre after the avant-garde fiction in contemporary China since the middle 1990s onwards—push the avant-gardists’ notion of the importance of literary form to an extreme and turn fiction into something with empty and nonsensical content wrapped in an “originally” devised and highly flamboyant form. The writers of so-called “Beauty Writing” (*mienü xiezuó* 美女写作), which, just as indicated by its name, can be properly regarded as a literary practice of extreme feminism in contemporary China at the turn of the century, inherit the avant-gardists’ existential perspective and their common interest

in sexuality and only manage to push them to another extreme.<sup>115</sup> Instead of adopting the existential perspective to meditate on the universal human condition, they turn writing into something about purely personal feelings, emotions, and thoughts. Rejecting any historical consciousness, their writings actually become an exhibition of overflowing desires, variegated stimulating sexualities, an astonishing moral nihilism, and a strong sentiment of female narcissism (Yu Z. 2002).

A milestone in the history of modern Chinese literature, contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction, with Su Tong, Yu Hua, and Ge Fei as its three most accomplished and distinguished representatives, like May Fourth literature, becomes another literary summit, whose existence, I believe, cannot be bypassed by the Chinese writers of later generations.

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<sup>115</sup> As discussed earlier in the Su Tong chapter, usually we construe “existential” on two different levels. By “existential” we mean both the concrete individual living situations, “typical situations of human life everywhere, such as death, suffering, and love,” as Hao Chang construes it (1978: 4), and the philosophical meditation on the universal human condition as understood by famous Western Existentialists such as Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, and some others.



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