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BLURRING THE LINES – POSTMODERNISM AND THE USE  
OF TRADITION IN THE WORKS OF YU HUA

by

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## Abstract

The modern Chinese writer Yu Hua (1960- ) uses and incorporates a wide variety of arguably postmodernist techniques and themes in his fiction. There are, however, parallels between these themes and techniques and various aspects of pre-modern Chinese literature and philosophy. Additionally, in an at times postmodernist manner, Yu Hua makes obvious use of mutated traditional Chinese literary forms in a number of his works. His incorporation of postmodernist themes and techniques and his use of tradition distinguish Yu Hua from the mainstream of contemporary Chinese fiction and characterize his most important works to date.

In an examination of four of his stories, “Leaving Home and Travelling Afar at Eighteen” [Shiba sui chu men yuan xing], “The April Third Incident” [Siyue sanri shijian], “1986” [1986 nian], and “One Kind of Reality” [Xianshi yizhong], a number of themes, many of which are characteristically postmodernist, are identified. The prominent themes among these are that the individual is alone in this world, there are many different modes of perception, humans are often cruel and vicious, and the world is a bizarre and bewildering place.

Following this, the focus shifts to stylistic techniques. Yu Hua’s use of different modes of perception and description, magic realism, novel and incongruous metaphors, and ambiguous and contradictory narratives is examined in detail. Finally, “The Affairs of the World Are Like Smoke” [Shishi ru yan], “Fresh Blood Plum Blossoms” [Xianxue meihua], and “Classical Love” [Gudian aiqing] are examined with particular attention paid to the parodic reincorporation of genres of pre-modern Chinese fiction in these stories. Parallels are then drawn between aspects of Chinese tradition, in particular Buddhist and Daoist thought, and certain postmodernist themes and techniques.

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## Chapter One

### Introduction

In recent years, a new and quite different crop of writers has emerged in the People's Republic of China. In the late eighties, a young writer named Yu Hua, along with others such as Su Tong, Ge Fei, and Ye Zhaoyan, began writing literature that was often radically different from the bulk of fiction published in China since 1976. He abandoned the mainstream of socially concerned realism and experimented with a wide variety of subject matter and descriptive techniques, turning to Chinese tradition and foreign models as a source for new ideas and different modes of expression. Yu Hua's weaving together of dreams, the fantastic, and the possible is, in fact, far more reminiscent of Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* or Gabriel García Márquez's *100 Years of Solitude* than it is of the stolid realism of other post-Mao Chinese writers such as Zhang Xianliang and Wang Anyi. However, Yu Hua rarely engages in the experimental, surrealist writing that is the hallmark of writers such as Can Xue.

Yu Hua is too young to have adult memories of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and, unlike others only a few years older than him, was not shaped by the experience of being sent away from his home to the remote countryside during this period. He was born in 1960 in a seaside town called Haiyan, located about halfway between Shanghai and Hangzhou. His parents were doctors, and he himself worked as a dentist for a while. He published his first story in 1984, but it was not until he published "Leaving Home and Travelling Afar at Eighteen" [Shiba sui chu men yuan xing] in 1987 that he began to receive much attention. Since then, he has published a number of stories of varying lengths in literary journals and has had one collection of his stories published on the Mainland and two collections published in Taiwan.

Yu Hua's stories incorporate a wide variety of styles and influences, ranging from traditional Chinese tales of the fantastic to Franz Kafka. The combination of bizarre modes of description, black humour, extreme violence, the questioning of the dividing line between reality and fantasy, and the rejection of realist principles combined with the parodic use of elements of Chinese tradition can perhaps best be examined within the general framework of postmodernism.

Before attempting to show that any of Yu Hua's works are postmodernist, it is first necessary to provide a working definition of this rather nebulous term, to come to a basic understanding of how and where postmodernist literature fits in in a Chinese context, and to examine some of the implications of being a postmodernist writer in contemporary China.

#### Postmodernism – definition and discussion

In his *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, M. H. Abrams writes that, "A familiar undertaking in postmodernist writings is to subvert our accepted modes of thought and experience so as to reveal the 'meaninglessness' of existence and the underlying 'abyss', or 'void', or 'nothingness' on which our supposed security is precariously suspended."<sup>1</sup> As he sees it, modernism was an anti-traditionalist reaction to the First World War, and postmodernism was simply modernism pushed to further extremes by the atrocities of the Second World War and much of what followed. One can also see postmodernism as a reaction to technological breakthroughs in communication and transportation that have, on the one hand, pulled the world together while, on the other hand, allowing access to an array of information so large as to be bewildering.

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<sup>1</sup> M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1988), p. 110.

After reading works by some postmodernist authors (Jorge Luis Borges, Salman Rushdie, Günter Grass, etc.) and delving into some of the critical writings on postmodernist literature (in particular, Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism*), one can generate a short list of important aspects common to most postmodernist literature: the representation of the world as an often bewildering and vicious place, the undermining of epistemological, ethical, and metaphysical foundations (especially by blurring the boundaries between real and unreal and good and evil) coupled with self-conscious explorations into the nature of perspective, and intertextuality and the parodic re-incorporation of elements from tradition.

With regards to views of perspective in postmodernist literature, Linda Hutcheon writes that, "Another consequence of this far-reaching inquiry into the very nature of subjectivity is the frequent challenge to traditional notions of perspective... The perceiving subject is no longer assumed to be a coherent, meaning-generating entity."<sup>2</sup> The postmodernist writer often attempts to show that what we see as being logical or common sense ways of viewing the world are nothing more than constructs, potentially useful but also potentially misleading and even dangerous. In the context of postmodernist literature, words such as "good" and "real" become remarkably ambiguous.

Admittedly, all this is not a new phenomenon in philosophy (e.g., idealism), religion (e.g., Buddhism and notions of the physical world as illusion) or even in literature, for that matter. This kind of questioning of perspective is also an important part of many modernist works, and the question of what is right and what is wrong has been a part of literature since earliest times. However, it should be emphasized that in postmodernist works, unlike most earlier literature, it is not the location of the dividing line between good and evil or real and unreal that is being contested but, rather, its very existence. Perhaps,

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<sup>2</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism – History, Theory, Fiction* (Routledge, 1988), p. 11.



less dramatically, one could say that postmodernist writers tend to emphasize the artificiality and arbitrariness of such concepts. Modernism does share this outlook, and, in this regard, the difference between modernism and postmodernism is often more a matter of degree than anything else. Where postmodernism perhaps differs most from modernism and other kinds of writing is in its use of and relation to history and literary tradition.

Linda Hutcheon writes that, "... most of these postmodern contradictory texts are also specifically parodic in their intertextual relation to the traditions and conventions of the genres involved. When Eliot recalled Dante or Virgil in *The Wasteland*, one sensed a kind of wishful call to continuity beneath the fragmented echoing. It is precisely this that is contested in postmodern parody where it is often ironic discontinuity that is revealed at the heart of continuity, difference at the heart of similarity."<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that what she means here by parody is different from the traditional definition of it as a form of burlesque humour. Parody in her sense is far more than mockery.<sup>4</sup> She redefines parody as, "repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity... this parody paradoxically enacts both change and cultural continuity..."<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps the best way to illustrate what is meant by the parodic re-incorporation of elements of tradition is to, as Hutcheon does, look at postmodernist architecture. A good, concrete example of this kind of architecture is Cathedral Place, an office tower located directly across from the Hotel Vancouver in downtown Vancouver. The Hotel Vancouver is a classic example of what might be called the Canadian railway hotel style. It is sort of a mock chateau complete with patinaed copper roofing. Cathedral Place is capped with a large green copper "hat" that does not function as a roof and really serves no utilitarian purpose. Thus, the architect of Cathedral Place pokes fun at the designers of the earlier

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<sup>3</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth Century Art Forms* (Methuen, 1985) cited in *Ibid*, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> Hutcheon (1988), p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

building while evoking the same tradition they did, paradoxically ridiculing and paying homage at the same time.

The treatment of history in postmodernist literature is often similarly paradoxical. Postmodernist writers often mix real people or elements of historical “fact” into their fictional works. In one sense, by doing so they are showing that there is nothing sacred about history and are bringing attention to their belief that it is a highly artificial construct. However, the very fact that they choose to refer to history at all shows that they have not rejected it as totally meaningless and insignificant.

As a result of both the perceived paradoxes of life in the modern world (for example, as technological development increases the ease of communication and transportation, we become more aware of difference and of difficulties in communicating) and in an attempt to heighten the feeling that the world is stranger and less ordered than common sense would have us believe, postmodernist authors often deal with the topic of alienation. This subject is common in both modernism and postmodernism and takes many forms. In one sense, dealing with alienation is part of an attempt to show how truly strange human society and the world in general can seem from a particular, often marginalized, viewpoint (for example, the outsider in Franz Kafka’s modernist novel *The Castle* or the physical oddity in Günter Grass’s postmodernist novel *The Tin Drum* ). In another sense, alienated protagonists are often used as part of an effort to shock readers out of fixed ideas about the world by showing it in a radically different way. Alienation can also take the form of alienation between people and become part of an expression about a belief in the superficiality of communication in modern society and the inevitable aloneness of the individual.

The differences between postmodernist alienation and modernist alienation are, once again, more a matter of degree than anything else. However, in addition to the way that postmodernism deals with history and literary tradition, it also differs from modernism in other important respects. Referring to a book by Andreas Huyssen, Linda Hutcheon

points out that, "Postmodernism challenges some aspects of modernist dogma: its view of the autonomy of art and its deliberate separation from life; its expression of individual subjectivity; its adversarial status vis-à-vis mass culture and bourgeois life."<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, she also writes that, "...the postmodern clearly also developed out of other modernist strategies: its self-reflexive experimentation, its ironic ambiguities, and its contestations of classic realist representation."<sup>7</sup>

Finally, it should be clearly stated that in the area of literature (as opposed to literary criticism) postmodernism is neither an ideology nor a clearly defined movement in the sense that naturalism was. Consequently, any attempt to define it is bound to be difficult and be limited more to lists of characteristics common to those works considered postmodernist than to actual statements of principles. The word "postmodernist" is also used to describe all kinds of things other than literature, including visual art, historiography, architecture, and philosophy and it is not always clear that what is meant by this word in one sphere of discussion is the same as in another. To a certain degree this stems from a lack of imagination on the part of critics; new words should have been coined. The word itself also seems to imply some kind of "hyper-newness," but the reality is that many of the elements of postmodernist literature are not at all new. I would like to stress that in the context of this discussion the meaning of this word will be limited to that of a term describing aspects common to a certain group of writers and not necessarily anything else.

Additionally, it should also be stressed that literary movements do not proceed in orderly linear succession. Postmodernism did not completely replace realism or modernism and there are no clearly defined dates for the first appearance of postmodernist literature.

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<sup>6</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) cited in Hutcheon (1988), p. 43.

<sup>7</sup> Linda Hutcheon (1988), p. 43.

### Postmodernism in a Chinese context

In a Chinese context, for writers of Yu Hua's generation, the insanity of the Cultural Revolution as well as the upheavals and political campaigns that have followed has provided much of the impetus for postmodernist literature. The increasingly inconsistent nature of indoctrination and political control in China since the death of Mao Zedong has no doubt also had some influence on these writers. The same people who are reading Robbe-Grillet and quoting Roland Barthes are still, on occasion, supposed to find ridiculous, one-dimensional socialist heroes such as Lei Feng inspiring.<sup>8</sup>

In a literary historical context, if one takes a certain significant minority of Chinese literature of the late 1970s and early 1980s to be the analogue to post-World War I European modernism in the sense that it was a reaction to horrific events (the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution) and a radical break from the literature immediately preceding it (formulaic socialist realism), then one can see the newest wave of writers such as Yu Hua, Su Tong, Ge Fei, and others as in some senses analogous to Western postmodernist writers in that they have also gone further and subverted and rejected many of the conventions of works that preceded them and broke ground for them. It should be stressed that in both China and the West, this new literature is far from prevalent. The vast majority of writers in China still write either socially concerned realism or escapist fiction. In the West, postmodernist writers have received much attention in critical circles and do form a more substantial part of the contemporary literary scene than writers such as Yu Hua do in China, but the vast majority

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<sup>8</sup> The mythologized account of this selfless and unquestioning People's Liberation Army soldier who had dedicated his life to helping others in the name of socialism was first used for propaganda purposes in the early '60s. After 1976, he slowly faded from view only to be briefly resurrected following the events of 1989. In early 1991, I visited the Lei Feng exhibition at the Military Museum in Beijing. It was truly bizarre. A large exhibition hall was filled with items that he had supposedly used during his lifetime – everything from hammers to lunch boxes, and all in pristine condition.

of fiction published in the West is not at all postmodernist. It must be admitted, however, that this analogy is limited in several important ways. Unlike the modernists after the end of the First World War, after the end of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese writers initially looked *back* for models and did not break as fully from the style that was predominant before them. Furthermore, Yu Hua's generation of writers were not the first to break away from the realist literature of social concern.

However, it is not necessary to resort to analogies to justify using a Western term to describe Chinese writings. An important fact that should not be ignored is that contemporary Chinese writers are not isolated from world literary trends. Modernist and postmodernist writers and theorists have been translated into Chinese and published in the People's Republic, and writers such as Yu Hua are very much aware of Western literary traditions. In an article mostly devoted to a discussion of his own literary style and attitudes towards reality, Yu Hua refers to Proust, Balzac, Dickens, Joyce, Kafka, Faulkner, Robbe-Grillet, and Kawabata and sees himself as being a part of a world literary tradition.<sup>9</sup>

#### Some political implications of postmodernism

Certain implications of postmodernism become particularly important in a Chinese context. For example, Linda Hutcheon notes that postmodernism,

...exploits, but also undermines, such staples of our humanist tradition as the coherent subject and the accessible historical referent, and this may well be what is so irritating about it for Eagleton and Jameson. The contested concepts of artistic originality and

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<sup>9</sup> Yu Hua, "Xuwei de zuopin" ("False" works) in Yu Hua, *Shishi ru yan* (The affairs of the world are like smoke) (Taipei: Yuanliu chuban gongsi, 1991), pp. 8, 13.

“authenticity” and of any stable historical entity (such as “the worker”) would appear to be central to their Marxist master narrative. The postmodern blurring of firm distinctions is probably, by definition, anathema to Marxist dialectical reasoning...<sup>10</sup>

Postmodernism also implies a rejection of the orthodox modern Chinese literary form of socially concerned realism. This, in combination with its implied denial of the validity of absolutes (such as the party line at any given moment), makes writing postmodernist literature a potentially very political thing to do in contemporary China. Furthermore, Yu Hua’s darkly pessimistic view of humanity cuts across class lines and leaves little room for the unified utopianism of Marxism.

Despite this, however, writers such as Su Tong and Yu Hua have managed to write and publish basically without interruption since the mid-eighties without ever even being seriously criticized by the authorities. Most of the attention of the government seems to be on overtly political writings and not on less obvious and more difficult to understand “pure” literature.

#### Some Thoughts on the Artificiality of the Concept of Postmodernist Literature

To a very large extent the concept of postmodernist literature is an artificial one. But, isn’t this true with most, if not all, classification schemes for literature? Some, such as “realism”, do have a basis in a conscious literary movement. However, in these cases, often the main thing that makes a certain author belong to a certain school is that this author claims to. Furthermore, the usefulness of any grouping is generally limited by the inevitable variety within any group. Are there not great differences between Henry James and Fyodor Dostoyevsky? It really depends on what aspect of their writing is being examined. One problem with the concept of postmodernist literature is that it is very broad

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<sup>10</sup> Hutcheon (1988), p. 46.

and includes both style and theme. Realism, on the other hand, usually refers to a stylistic mode.

It really comes down to a question of utility. We apply artificial groupings to literature much in the way that we apply such groupings to objects. That's a chair; that's a couch; that's a horse; that's a white horse. Invariably, all such classifications are external. They are there simply to facilitate communication. Showing that Yu Hua or anyone else is postmodernist is not, in itself, of much interest. It is what is done along the way that counts.

### Postmodernism in the works of Yu Hua

In discussing postmodernist elements in Yu Hua's works, no attempt will be made to show that all of his works are postmodernist nor will there be any attempt to show that any given work has all of the previously mentioned characteristics of postmodernism. Rather, postmodernism will be used as a framework for discussion and analysis of some of Yu Hua's more important works. First, postmodernist themes will be identified and discussed and then the focus will switch to an analysis of style. Finally, Yu Hua's use of and relation to tradition will be discussed.

### Themes – alienation

The portrayal of alienation is very common in postmodernist literary works. Alienation certainly appears in the works of Yu Hua and it appears in many forms. *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language (Second Edition)* defines alienation to be, "the state of being withdrawn or isolated from the objective world, as through indifference or disaffection," alienate as, "to make indifferent or hostile," and alien as, "a person who has been estranged or excluded." Alien also means strange or foreign and we can take alienation to be the process of estrangement.

The description of this manifests itself in Yu Hua's works in different ways. His treatments of alienation can be divided into two main categories: the interpersonal and the personal. There are many ways in which he deals with personal alienation. In one approach, which is seen in his story "Leaving Home and Travelling Afar at Eighteen" [Shiba sui chu men yuan xing] the emphasis is on describing an alienating, strange world of randomness, violence, and cruelty that a solitary individual faces. In another approach used in "The April Third Incident" [Siyue sanri shijian], the emphasis shifts to the psychology of an individual facing a world *perceived* to be as it is described in the first approach. In a variation on this dealt with in "1986" [1986 nian], the emphasis remains largely on the psychology of an individual, but, in this case, the individual is clearly being excluded or ignored by society. In other stories, interpersonal alienation, the alienation of people from each other in society, is described. In "One Kind of Reality" [Xianshi yizhong] the description focuses on a bizarre world filled with senseless violence in which interpersonal alienation is so great that feelings of sympathy, empathy, or even the consciousness of others as thinking, feeling beings are almost totally lacking. Of the stories that will be dealt with in this section, this one, "One Kind of Reality," most closely fits the description of postmodernist literature given earlier. However, all of these stories have postmodernist elements.

Most of Yu Hua's examinations of these kinds of alienation are closely tied in with descriptions of the world as violent, vicious, and meaningless. Furthermore, the perspectives of the alienated individuals in his stories are often quite unusual, and this serves both to replicate the characters' alienation in the reader and as part of a typical postmodernist questioning of modes of perception.

#### The alienating world of "Leaving Home and Travelling Afar at Eighteen"

"Leaving Home and Travelling Afar at Eighteen" is a good example of the first category of personal alienation, wherein the focus is on the alienating world faced by an



individual. In this short story published in early 1987, the narrator, a young man who has just turned eighteen, is told by his father to leave home in order to, “go and get to know a little about the outside world.”<sup>11</sup> He walks a great distance into the mountains and, as the day grows longer, begins to worry about finding a hotel in this isolated area. He tries to hitchhike, but only one car passes by and it does not stop. Finally, he manages to force himself on a truckdriver and get a ride.

At first, the driver is annoyed by this youth, but eventually starts to become more friendly towards him. After driving for a while, the truck breaks down and is beset by waves of marauding peasants who steal the load of apples on the back of the truck, beat the narrator to a pulp when he tries to stop them, and then strip the truck bare before leaving. During this time, the driver just looks on from the sidelines and laughs at the narrator’s injuries. Finally, the truckdriver leaves with some of the peasants. The narrator is left all alone with the cold skeleton of the truck. He crawls back into the cab of the truck to hide from the wind that is howling outside. He then thinks back to when he left home, and the story ends.

As is clear from this summary, the world of this story is bizarre indeed. This sense of strangeness is heightened by the inexplicable, random nature of what happens and the simple, matter of fact way in which the narrator describes events. For example, when the peasants converge on the truck, no thought is given to their motivation and, aside from a single question about what the truck is carrying, they say nothing. The peasants are very animal-like, even insect-like. They are described as, “coming in swarms,” [p.26] and as, “squatting like toads while they picked up the apples.” [p. 26] Furthermore, at times, the narrator’s description of the violence that he suffers at their hands is surprisingly matter of fact. For example, “a few children threw apples at me. The apples smashed against my

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<sup>11</sup> Yu Hua, “Shiba sui chu men yuan xing” (Leaving home and travelling afar at eighteen) in *Shiba sui chu men yuan xing* (Taipei: Yuanliu chuban gongsi, 1990), p. 29. Until the next footnote, all page numbers given in the text will refer to this source.

head but my head was not smashed.” [p. 26] He is totally helpless in the face of the peasants and all his efforts at stopping them are utterly ineffectual.

Despite being surrounded by peasants and being quite close to his newfound supposed friend, the truckdriver, the narrator is helpless and alone. This sense of aloneness and helplessness in the face of the cruel world is underscored in the scene that follows in which he compares himself to the remnants of the truck:

The truck’s appearance was truly miserable; it was lying there covered with wounds. I knew that I was also covered with wounds.

The sky had become totally black. In all directions there was nothing at all, only the wounded truck and the wounded me. I looked at the truck with boundless grief and the truck looked at me with boundless grief too. I stretched out my hand and stroked it. Its whole body was ice cold. Then the wind started up. It was blowing very hard and the sound of tree leaves in the mountains was like waves by the sea. This sound made me afraid, made my whole body ice cold just like the truck’s. [p. 28]

He, like the truck, has been ravaged by the world and then abandoned. In this lonely world his only companion is a cold, inanimate object.

One can see this story, in a more general sense, as being a representation of coming of age and entering the cruel world. While there is nothing inherently postmodernist in such a theme, it is not inconsistent with postmodernism. In the first paragraph, the protagonist clearly identifies himself as being eighteen years old and much is made of his first facial hairs. [p. 19] Near the very end of the story, he thinks back to the time when he was sent out into the world and about what his father told him then: “Yes, you’re already eighteen. You ought to go and get to know a little about the outside world.” [p. 29] These references frame the story and set it in context.

In addition, the apples could be seen as having the standard Western symbolic values of temptation, loss of innocence, and knowledge of evil. The narrator makes it clear that the truck is loaded with apples and not bananas [p. 21] and although he wants to eat one, he never gets a chance to. In this sense, he remains innocent.

In the course of the story, the protagonist is faced with rejection and violence in his search to find an inn to spend the night. The protagonist sees the inn as safety, almost like a surrogate home. When he finally manages to force himself on the truckdriver and is riding in the safety of the truck and talking to his new "friend," his worry about the inn subsides. However, as soon as the truck breaks down and the driver finds it cannot be fixed, the narrator's desire for an inn becomes acute. Yu Hua employs some fanciful imagery to illustrate this, "And so, once again, the inn came into my mind and gradually expanded. Soon it filled up my head and then my head was no more. In its place an inn had sprouted up." [p. 24] Finally, he finds refuge in the cab of the wrecked truck and thinks, "...its heart is still whole, still warm. I know my heart is also warm. All along I've been looking for an inn. I never thought you'd be right here." [pp. 28, 29] As has already been shown, the protagonist is closely identified with the truck. His suffering and aloneness is paralleled by its. In the end he finds refuge in the warmth of its heart. In the end, the only warmth that is left is his own.

In this, one of Yu Hua's first stories to gain wide recognition, many of the aspects of the alienating world that will reappear in his later works have already surfaced. There is great violence, and it is sudden, unexpected, and random. This violence and other bizarre things are also described in a generally detached, matter of fact manner. In a story published later in the same year, "The April Third Incident," Yu Hua continues to describe both alienation and coming of age. However, unlike in "Leaving Home and Travelling Afar at Eighteen," the emphasis in this story is less on the alienating world and more on perception and the flowing together of fears, dreams and imagined happenings in the mind of a person whose paranoia alienates him from the world.

Alienation and perception in "The April Third Incident"

"The April Third Incident," a mid-length short story first published in late 1987, describes a few days in the life of a young man who has recently graduated from high school and is just turning eighteen. The story, told by an uninvolved third person narrator, deals exclusively with this one protagonist and allows access only to his thoughts. It follows him as he wanders about the dark alleyways of his hometown, visits friends from school, and becomes increasingly convinced that almost everyone is plotting against him. He sees people laughing and he is convinced that they are laughing about him. He sees people talking and he is convinced that they are talking about him. He sees hints and threats in people's eyes and finds every action to be suspicious. Soon his paranoid imaginings and dreams fill his life. He overhears his neighbour asking his mother if she is ready. Later, he overhears his father and, at a different time, his mother talking about something which will happen on April Third (which, interestingly enough, just happens to be Yu Hua's birthday). Slowly he becomes convinced that they are plotting to kill him. In his mind he concocts two scenarios: his friends will burst into his room early in the morning, drag him outside and force him out onto the road to be struck by an oncoming car or, if this fails, his father will lure him near a construction site where he will be killed by a falling brick.

On April Second, he visits his friend, White Snow, and, in the course of their conversation, she hints that the next day something interesting will happen. She seems quite happy about this and it seems probable that it will be a surprise birthday party or something of that sort. The protagonist has, after all, just turned eighteen and has yet to have a real party. He, however, thinks back to how earlier, on separate occasions, he overheard his mother and father mentioning this date and becomes convinced that on that day they will carry out a plot to kill him. He is so afraid that he hides until late at night and then leaves town by sneaking onto a freight car on a coal train that is passing through.

Thus, as Zhang Yiwu points out, regardless of whether or not there originally was going to be an “incident,” his leaving has, in fact, ironically become the incident.<sup>12</sup>

In an article on perception and reality in Yu Hua’s fiction, Zhang Fu, points to the protagonist’s creation of what she calls “a second kind of reality” as perhaps the most important aspect of this story.<sup>13</sup> She pays particular attention to a short passage at the beginning of “The April Third Incident” where the protagonist and the world of his perceptions are first introduced. In this passage, Yu Hua uses the technique of describing the familiar in unusual, even shocking, terms (what could be called “naive description,” in the sense that it deals with the commonplace as if it were unknown or new) to mirror his protagonist’s different mode of perception. For example, using this method of description one might describe a toothbrush as a stick with a strange white growth at one end. The first passage to use this technique begins with a brief description of the main character standing by the window in the morning and then moves on to describe his thoughts and feelings:

He could only feel that there was a hot yellowness outside the window. “That’s sunlight,” he thought to himself. Afterwards, he put his hand into his pocket and, unexpectedly, it was filled with a cold, metallic feeling. His heart fluttered and his hand started to shake ever so slightly. He was amazed at his agitation. However, when his fingers slowly stretched out along the edges of the metal, that kind of strange feeling did not grow but, rather, stabilized. Then his hand also quickly settled down. Gradually, it started to warm up – warm like lips. But, not long afterwards, this warmth disappeared. At that point,

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<sup>12</sup> Zhang Yiwu, “‘Ren’ de weiji” (The crisis of “man” — reading Yu Hua’s fiction), *Dushu*, 1988, no. 12, p. 44.

<sup>13</sup> Zhang Fu, “Xianshi yizhong – pinglun Yu Hua xiaoshuo” (One kind of reality — a review of Yu Hua’s fiction), *Dangdai zuojia pinglun*, 1991, no. 2, pp. 40 – 42.

he felt that it had fused with his hand and, as a result, it was as if there was nothing there at all. Its moving splendour was already a thing of the past.

It was a key...<sup>14</sup>

By showing the protagonist's very different perception of the everyday act of reaching into one's pocket and coming across a key and by describing the strange overblown emotions that he has about this, both the protagonist's "second kind of reality" and his high-strung, fearful nature are introduced.

Other unusual ways of looking at familiar things appear throughout the story. This aspect of his perception is more a case of focus than of actually seeing something entirely different from what others would see. Perception is, after all, primarily a matter of focus. What information is filtered out, what information is focussed on, and what mental links are made with this information governs what is seen. The nameless protagonist of "The April Third Incident" focuses differently and the results are often unusual. For example, "He [the protagonist] watched her walking over pulling that black shadow along." [p. 153] Later, as he looks at reflections in a shop window, he sees a group of people as, "...a number of legs moving..." [p. 160] He also often makes strange mental links. For example, midway through the story he notes that, "...the buttons on father's clothes were not the same as those on mother's." [p. 173] Earlier, when he hears White Snow's footsteps, he feels that their sound is as emotionally moving as dripping water. [p. 171] His paranoia and his unusual mode of perception extends even to himself and, when he looks into a window and sees his reflection he feels that his own eyes are, "...like a pair of someone else's eyes watching him." [p. 160]

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<sup>14</sup> Yu Hua, "Siyue sanri shijian" (The April Third incident) in Yu Hua, *Shiba sui chu men yuan xing* (Leaving home and travelling afar at eighteen) (Beijing, Zuoja chubanshe, 1989), p. 141. Until the next footnote, all page numbers given in the text will refer to this source.

Of course, stream of consciousness writers often do break standard realist conventions and describe the world in such ways in an attempt to more accurately mirror the jumbled way in which people process information. In "The April Third Incident," however, the narrator's "normal," conventional mode of description clashes with the protagonist's and highlights it as strange.

Using the aforementioned method of description is one way in which the protagonist's alternate reality can be shown and by which a degree of confusion, even alienation, can be induced in the readers. However, although this kind of perception is a part of his reality, it does not, in itself, create most of the ambiguity and confusion in the story. Most of the protagonist's fear of and consequent alienation from those around him is generated by his pervasive fantasies and dreams, and much of the ambiguity in this story is created by the blurring of divisions between these and the "real" world.

As the story progresses, the distinction between the first, commonplace reality and the reality of the protagonist's imagination becomes increasingly indistinct. If his paranoid fantasy about his friends knocking on the door in the morning, charging in, and then taking him out to be killed in a staged accident is followed as it develops, it can be seen how the separation between different realities becomes more and more ambiguous as the story progresses. A reference to this knock on the door fantasy about one third of the way through the story is preceded by, "According to what he had imagined yesterday evening..."[p. 157]. However, by the middle of the story, in the sixteenth section, a very detailed account of his friends bursting into his room is presented with no mention of imagining or dreaming. Only later, at the beginning of the eighteenth section, is it made clear that, "...all that [the sixteenth section] had happened in a dream." [p. 184] When, in the eighteenth section, some of his friends do indeed come to his house and persuade him to go out for a walk, despite the fact that there is nothing at all sinister or strange about their behaviour, the tendency is to believe that this is yet another one of his fantasies. Only later,

when it is referred to in another scene, does it seem like it probably happened. [pp. 191,192]

An interesting metafictional reference occurs in the scene in the eighteenth section when the protagonist's friends really do come to his house. While they are walking along outside, they begin a familiar circular story in which each person says one sentence. It proceeds as follows:

There once was a mountain... on the mountain there was a temple... in the temple there were two monks... one old monk and one young monk... the old monk said to the young monk: ... there once was a mountain... on the mountain there was a temple... in the temple there were two monks... <sup>15</sup>

This is a clear reference to stories within stories and, in a sense, that is what the author's fantasies of the protagonist's fantasies within fantasies is.

The technique of describing a scene and then revealing that it was only a product of the protagonist's imagination is used so extensively that by the end of the story one comes to expect that everything will be followed by such a revelation and, as a result, our uncertainty about what is real and what is not is nearly total. Even the final scene could, in fact, just be a creation of the protagonist's imagination. Of course, as with all fiction, we know that it is the creation of *someone's* imagination.

The distance provided by the use of an uninvolved third person narrator is what allows this story to be about the kind of alienation that it is about and to have the postmodernist ambiguity and questioning of perception that it has. First, as has already been mentioned, the conventionality of this narrator's perceptions acts to set off the unusualness of the protagonist's. In the previously quoted passage dealing with the key, for example, the description of the protagonist's strange perceptions is followed by the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 185, 186. Also see Ah Cheng, "Haizi wang" (The king of children) in *Qi wang, shu wang, haizi wang* (The king of chess, the king of trees, the king of children) (Taipei: Xindi chubanshe, 1986), pp. 166, 167 for the use of the same circular story.



narrator's matter of fact statement, "that was a key..."<sup>16</sup> The use of a third person narrator not only allows for contrast to heighten the strangeness of the protagonist's mode of perception, but also allows for the distance that is necessary to make this a story about paranoia and perception and not about hatred and viciousness. Had this story been told using first person narration, the lack of outside perspective would have made it difficult to see "the second reality" as being anything other than the only reality. The third person narrator that is actually used in this story is limited in such a way that ambiguity is produced. We are never told what the others are really thinking or what is being planned for April Third, yet, at the same time, there is sufficient undercutting to seriously doubt the reasonableness of the protagonist's fears.

The final way in which third person narration adds to the story is by creating a false sense of security or certainty which can then be smashed. There is a tendency to believe third person uninvolved narrators to be more reliable than involved first person narrators. Furthermore, the tone of the narration in this story is such that the narrator does seem quite reliable. As a result, when an imagined episode is related in the third person narratorial voice, as does happen in the story, and only afterwards is it revealed that "...so he imagined," the confusion and surprise is greater than had the entire story, including this episode, been related in the first person. This kind of trickery can, however, become tedious and quickly lose any capacity for surprise. Fortunately, the previously mentioned escalation of ambiguity avoids tedium.

This story could, perhaps, also be seen as akin to Lu Xun's "Diary of a Madman" [Kuangren riji], and the protagonist's paranoid perception of hatred and immanent violence could be seen as a reflection of feelings that lurk below the surface in Chinese society.<sup>17</sup> Lu

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<sup>16</sup> Yu Hua, "The April Third Incident," p. 141.

<sup>17</sup> Wang Binbin "Can Xue, Yu Hua: 'zhende esheng?' — Can Xue, Yu Hua yu Lu Xun de yizhong bijiao" (Can Xue, Yu Hua: "the true voice of horror?" — one kind of comparison of Can Xue, Yu Hua, and Lu Xun), *Dangdai zuojia pinglun*, 1992, no. 1

Xun's short story "Diary of a Madman," first published in 1918, was one of the seminal works of modern Chinese literature. In this story, Lu Xun took the topos of the enlightened lunatic and used it to expose what he saw as the viciousness and cruelty inherent in Chinese culture. In both "Diary of a Madman" and "The April Third Incident" there are protagonists who seem to suffer from paranoid delusions. Lu Xun's madman believes that those around him are cannibals who would very much like to eat him, while the protagonist of "The April Third Incident" believes that his friends and family are plotting to kill him. In "Diary of a Madman," however, the link between the delusions of the madman and external reality is made quite explicit. The madman sees the phrase "eat people" throughout the Chinese classics, and his horror is closely linked to this.<sup>18</sup> As a result, the reader cannot help but see the symbolic value of the madman's paranoia. In contrast, "The April Third Incident" contains no such explicit link, and the validity of the protagonist's fears is left quite ambiguous both in the context of the story's reality (do his friends really intend to kill him?) and in the context of possible symbolism. By writing a story about a paranoid man, Yu Hua inevitably evokes "Diary of a Madman," and by making this familiar topos as ambiguous as he does, he creates a discontinuity between this story and his own "The April Third Incident." This is exactly what Linda Hutcheon refers to when she defines parody as, "repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity..."<sup>19</sup>

#### The present ignores the past — madness and violence in "1986"

Yu Hua's story "1986" was, like the previously mentioned stories, also published in 1987. It too deals with alienation and the alienating world. The kind of alienation

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deals with it in this manner, although Wang Binbin certainly sees Yu Hua's world view as being different from Lu Xun's.

<sup>18</sup> Lu Xun, "Kuangren riji" (Diary of a Madman) in Lu Xun, *Lu Xun quanji* (The complete works of Lu Xun) (Beijing, Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1956), vol. 1, p. 12.

<sup>19</sup> Hutcheon (1988), p. 26.

depicted in this work is, however, somewhat different. First, it is the alienation of exclusion and active marginalization by society. Secondly, it is a product of a specific and real historical event, the Cultural Revolution, and it is set in the author's present, 1986. The return of family members lost or imprisoned during the horrors of the Cultural Revolution (or earlier political campaigns) and found or released in the years following the death of Mao Zedong and the end of the Cultural Revolution was an important and often very difficult part of the lives of many people during this time. The social and personal problems associated with this were depicted in many works of literature in the late '70s and early '80s (for example, Shi Mo's "The Homecoming Stranger"),<sup>20</sup> but, for Yu Hua, depicting modern social and political phenomena in such an obvious manner is entirely atypical. "1986" is perhaps the only one of his stories to date that does so.

This story follows the life of a high school teacher and his family during the Cultural Revolution (1966 - 1976) and during the year 1986. At the height of the Cultural Revolution, this high school teacher is taken away from his young wife and his three year old daughter by a group of Red Guards. He is not treated overly harshly when compared to others during this period and is taken to a classroom in his school, where he is left to write his obligatory confession. Later, he manages to escape and all trace is lost of him. In the years that follow, his wife receives no further information about him. She suspects that he has died, but she really does not know. In any case, a few years later she remarries, and her life continues on, slowly becoming happier and happier. Her daughter comes to fully accept her stepfather, and her real father is soon forgotten.

Years later, in the Spring of 1986, haggard and crazed, the schoolteacher returns to his home town and wanders the streets. At the same time, his wife becomes filled with an inexplicable dread and often imagines that she hears his footsteps and his cries. She

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<sup>20</sup> Shi Mo (Zhao Zhenkai), "Homecoming Stranger" translated by Susette Cooke in Michael S. Duke, ed., *Contemporary Chinese Literature — An Anthology of Post-Mao Fiction and Poetry* (M. E. Sharpe, 1985). It originally appeared in *Jintian*, no.1, 1979.

becomes so overcome with fear that she does not venture outside or even draw the blinds. Her husband forbids her daughter to go out unless absolutely necessary. Even so, her daughter does manage to see her crazed father more than once in the course of the story, yet never recognizes him. While wandering about the town, her father first fantasizes about inflicting traditional Chinese methods of punishment on others and then actually performs them on himself. Both the reality and his fantasies are described in shocking detail. He moves from branding (*mo*), to the removal of the nose (*yi*), to removal of the feet (*fei*), to castration (*gong*), to death by slicing (*lingchi*). He knows about these punishments from his previous studies of classical Chinese punishment and execution methods, and before each punishment he shouts out its traditional name.

Throughout his wanderings and self-mutilation, he is generally ignored by the townspeople except during his most gruesome mutilations. Then, great crowds briefly gather to watch, only to disappear as soon as he finishes. Finally, the knife that he is using to slice up his own body is taken away from him, and he is tied up. During this scene he sees the people who are tying him up as his executioners preparing him to be pulled apart by wild horses. In a sense he is right about them being like executioners because after being tied up, he is left in the street, where he eventually dies of his self-inflicted wounds. After his death, his family's life returns to normalcy. However, a madman from another family arrives in the village, and the cycle continues.

By far the most striking aspect of this story is the graphic depiction of the extreme, shocking violence of both the madman's fantasies and his very real acts of self mutilation. The extent to which the description works to shock the reader is evident in passages such as this, in which the madman is sawing his nose off, starting from the bottom and moving up:

...the steel sawblade started biting in, and fresh blood started seeping out. His pitch black lips began to glisten red. Soon the saw had cut all the way through to the bone and had started to emit a faint, hoarse

rasping sound. By then he wasn't yelling like just before but, rather, was shaking his head ever so slightly and emitting hoarse sounds that matched those of the saw. The way he looked then, as the saw cut into his nasal bone, made people feel that he was joyfully playing a harmonica. However, not long afterwards he began to yell wildly. After the temporary numbness of the past moments had passed, the pain came on even heavier... he removed the saw and placed it on his leg... fresh blood flowed freely down, soon his lips and his chin were solidly red and uncountable rivulets of blood twisted their way down his chest... he extended his deformed, blood-covered fingernail and started to pick out the chips of bone embedded between the teeth of the saw. They were soaked through with blood and glistened bright red in the sun.<sup>21</sup>

In the context of this story, descriptions of shocking violence serve many purposes. In one sense, they are part of an attempt to shock readers out of their everyday complacency. More importantly, however, the madman's horrible self-mutilation is used to evoke the horrors of the past — both of the more immediate, specific past of the Cultural Revolution and the greater, more general past of Chinese civilization. The violence in “1986” is not random mutilation but, rather, proceeds in an ancient, rigidly prescribed fashion. Before beginning the implementation of any of these methods of punishment, the madman shouts out the classical Chinese name for it and, thus, makes this link explicit.

In a specific sense, he is a reminder of the Cultural Revolution and both its violence and the horrible effect it had upon so many people. He has suffered, been torn away from his family, and gone mad as a direct result of the insanity of that period. In a more general

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<sup>21</sup> Yu Hua, “1986 nian” in Yu Hua, *Shiba sui chu men yuan xing* (Leaving home and travelling afar at eighteen) (Taipei: Yuanliu chuban gongsi, 1990), pp. 74, 75. Until the next footnote, all page numbers given in the text will refer to this source.

sense, he is an embodiment of the past, a past that the people of his hometown have forgotten and refuse to face up to. The shocking, grotesque forms of traditional violence that a forgotten and discarded victim of history inflicts on himself and fantasizes inflicting on others is both a representation of his personal anger and a graphic reminder (à la Lu Xun) of the horrible aspects lurking within Chinese tradition. It forms a stark contrast to the idyllic, forgetful world of the village, and the third person narration regularly switches between pleasant descriptions of the coming of Spring, people out walking, and the commonplace social life of the people of 1986, the fears and bewilderment of a family faced with the spectre of the past, and the wild perceptions and fantastic violence of the madman.

Near the beginning of the story, the relation between the past and the present world of the story is made explicit: "That disaster of over ten years ago has now become but clouds and mist that had passed before people's eyes. The slogans left on the walls have been completely covered by repeated whitewashing. When they are out walking, they don't see the past any more. They see only the present." [p. 57] On the page before this passage, the reaction of people to the madman is described as follows: "They all saw him, but no one paid any attention to him. As they were looking at him, they were also forgetting all about him." [p. 56] For brief periods people do pay attention to him, or rather to his horrible actions, but even in the final scene where they expend the energy needed to tie him up, their attention is shortlived and they soon leave him. In fact, in this scene it is his horrible voice, the horrible voice of the past, which prompts them to tie him up and, thus, silence him. [p. 88]

However, the madman should not be thought of as serving only a symbolic function. His personal thoughts, emotions, and very different perceptions are an important part of the story. This story (like "The April Third Incident") is also very much about perception and different realities. The madman sees things differently, morbidly, and makes some rather strange mental connections. Descriptions of these strange perceptions

serve to bring into question commonsense perception, to titillate the imagination, to underscore the gulf between him (both personally and as a symbol of the past) and the society of the present, and to further add to the contrast in the alternating pattern of horror and commonplace contentment that makes up this story. Early in the story, when the schoolteacher is taken away, his perceptions start to change, reflecting both a change in his status in relation to society and a personal, mental change. An important feeling that he has is the perception of being distant from things that are really near at hand. The first time he has this feeling is when he is being taken from his home. Then, "...the sound of his daughter's crying made him feel extremely distant." [p. 48] This kind of feeling reappears at the end of the story when he is nearing death. It appears, however, from two perspectives. First, to the people on the street his horrible cries, "...seemed to be coming from a distant place..." [p. 88] but, a short while afterwards, he himself sees these other people as being distant. [p. 96] This feeling of distance is reflective of his very real removal from the milieu of society and his continuing alienation from it, as well as the distance from the events of the Cultural Revolution that the townspeople have created in their minds.

The shock of being removed from his home and his fears of what might happen to him change his way of perceiving the world and create a new reality for him. The process of changing perceptions, of moving from the commonplace to something entirely different, begins in the scene in which he is imprisoned in a classroom and is supposed to be writing a confession. At first, aside from his feeling of being distant, of seeing himself in the past and in the present as if from a distance, there is nothing unusual about his perceptions. However, after sitting in the classroom for a while, he looks at the windows and notices that,

...all the glass looked as completely clean as if it had been wiped a moment ago. It looked just like there was no glass there. He felt confused. The desks were covered with such a thick layer of dust, yet

the windows were so clean. At this point he noticed a piece of broken glass. That broken shape was truly wretched. He stood up and walked towards that piece of glass. One kind of wretchedness was walking towards another. He was shocked when he walked up to the window. He finally realized that this broken piece was really all that was left of the glass. [p. 50]

His confusion about why the windowpanes are so clean, followed by his discovery that this is because there is no glass left, to an extent, adheres to the pattern of naive description first identified in "The April Third Incident." Soon afterwards another, far less inventive use of this technique appears. He sees his shadow but is not fully aware of it as such. He runs at it and runs away and sees it shrink and expand. He is very suspicious and quite afraid of this "black hole." [p. 52] This kind of scene with his shadow is very clichéd (it, along with similar scenes about looking into mirrors, is a stock image in cartoons, for example), but it does serve the point of showing the nature of his perceptual changes and the growing darkness of his perceptions.

From that point on, in the scenes in which the narrator focuses on the schoolteacher turned madman, the imagery is bizarre and highly reflective of the madman's new, morbid sensibility. For example, he sees the sun as a, "a radiant head spitting forth fresh blood," [p. 59] streetlights during the day as, "... human heads drained of blood...", [p. 60] and when he sees some boats, he feels that they are floating on the river "like corpses." [p. 61] In another scene, a bizarre circular metaphor is used in which fire is described as blood, and the drops of "blood" as feeling like sparks: "...he saw a blazing pool of blood... He walked up beside the flaming blood and felt that, in the spitter spatter of blood splashing out in all directions, a few drops struck his face and were hot as sparks." [p. 65] At times the readers are forced to view the world through his eyes in this bizarre manner, and it is not always self-evident what he is actually seeing.



However, his violent extended fantasies, as opposed to his unusual thoughts about reality, are clearly distinguished from the reality of his disgusting self-mutilations. Unlike in “The April Third Incident,” however, this distinction is not made by phrases such as “so he imagined” or “so he had dreamed” or anything as clear as that. Nonetheless, despite this relative absence of any explicit identification of fantasies as such, the distinction is much clearer in “1986” because in this story the fantasies are so absurd, so filled with black humour, that they are entirely removed in style and tone both from the very gritty, naturalist descriptions of the real violence that they usually parallel and from the idyllic scenes of Spring that are interspersed amongst them. For example, after he has vividly imagined decapitating a crowd of people and cutting their bodies in two, he thinks that:

...pairs of legs without bodies were blindly walking along in a line.  
From time to time, some of them would smack into each other and fall  
to the ground... He reached out his hand and started to peel the skin  
off the people who were still walking towards him... it gave off the  
incomparably beautiful sound of satin being ripped. [pp. 84, 85]

Contrast this with the previously given detailed description of him trying to cut his nose off. Further clarifying the distinction between fantasy and reality is the fact that he only fantasizes being violent to others but always carries out his fantasies on himself.

In conclusion, “1986” deals with far more than the subjective alienation of an individual cast out and ignored by society. It also deals with the larger theme of the relation of the past to the present and modern Chinese society’s unwillingness to fully face up to its past. This narrative also toys with the readers’ senses, forcing them to see the world in radically different ways and brutally shocking them out of everyday complacency with hellish scenes of graphic violence. In this sense, it is very much a part of the modernist and postmodernist effort to break through commonsense mindsets.

Senseless violence in a nightmare world– “One Kind of Reality”

Yu Hua’s “One Kind of Reality” is a shockingly bizarre story of cruelty and brutality. In it the worst aspects of humanity are both clinically exposed and darkly satirized. The characters in this story are extremely distant from each other and lack empathy, sympathy, and the ability to engage in introspection. This kind of mutual alienation and personal numbness is an important part of the absurd, senseless world of this story.

When the story begins, we are introduced to a family living under one roof, consisting of a hypochondriac grandmother, her two sons Shanfeng and Shan’gang, their wives, and their two sons. The oldest of her two sons, Shan’gang, has a four year old boy called Pipi. One day, when the only adult in the house, his grandmother, is in her room worrying about her illnesses, Pipi tortures his infant cousin, Shanfeng’s baby boy, and then carries him outside where he unwittingly drops him. The baby falls to the ground, splits his head open, and dies. Later, after this has been discovered and Pipi admits to having done it, Shanfeng kills Pipi in revenge. The day after, Pipi’s father, Shan’gang, ties his brother to a tree, smears his bare feet with grease and sets a dog on him causing him to be tickled to death. After Shanfeng’s death by tickling, his wife reports this incident to the police and Shan’gang is arrested and eventually executed. As part of her revenge, Shanfeng’s wife also donates Shan’gang’s body to science to ensure that his important organs will be removed and that he will not be buried whole. Chinese tradition attaches great importance to being buried whole. According to Confucian tradition, one’s body is given to one by one’s parents and to fail to preserve it intact is unfilial. In an obvious

reference to the meaninglessness of the individual and in an attempt to shock, in the final scene the dismemberment of his body is described in extreme and irreverent detail.<sup>22</sup>

As is clear from this short plot summary, “One Kind of Reality” is about the brutality and viciousness of human beings. This brutality and viciousness is closely tied to the mutual alienation of the characters in the story. They are often portrayed as being distant from each other and the world, and they are generally lacking in any concern for the feelings of others. The coldness of this reality is further emphasized by the use of a very detached mode of narration.

The scene in which Pipi unthinkingly drops his baby cousin and thus causes his death forms the impetus for the revenge killings that are to come, and in its senselessness is typical of much of what is to come. As might be expected of a four year old, Pipi has neither a full consciousness of what he is doing while he is doing it nor an understanding of the implications of what he has done after he is finished. All he knows is the violence of his family, his reality. When he hears the raindrops falling on the roof, to him they are like “his father’s index finger rapping away at his head,”<sup>23</sup> and when he sees water trickling down the window he thinks first of roads and then of cars crashing into each other at high speed. [p. 188] This becomes all the more evident when he starts to “play” with the baby:

...he stroked his cousin’s face with his hand. That face was as soft as cotton and he couldn’t help but give it a good tweak. As soon as he did, his cousin let out a “wa” sound and started bawling away.

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<sup>22</sup> Quite successfully disturbing some Chinese readers – for example, see Wang Binbin (1992), p. 37.

<sup>23</sup> Yu Hua, “Xianshi yizhong” (One Kind of Reality) in Yu Hua, *Shiba sui chu men yuan xing* (Leaving home and travelling afar at eighteen) (Taipei: Yuanliu chuban gongsi, 1990), p. 186. Until the next footnote, all page numbers given in the text will refer to this source.

The sound of crying made him feel inexplicably joyous. He took a look at his cousin and gave him a smack to the side of his face. He'd often seen father slap mother like that. [p. 187]

As this continues, Pipi becomes more and more vicious, yet throughout he never feels any empathy at all. He never thinks about what it would feel like to have someone torture him in the same manner that he is torturing his cousin. In fact, sometimes he does not even think of his cousin as a human being. When he is carrying his cousin about outside, Pipi feels like "he is carrying a big piece of meat," [p. 188] and soon forgets that this "piece of meat" that he is carrying is a living person: "He felt that this heaviness was originating from *the thing* that he was holding in his hands, so he let go. When he heard that *thing* fall to the ground...[emphasis mine]" [p. 189]. He sees that his cousin's head has split open and he sees the blood come out, but he is totally unconcerned. He goes back inside and falls asleep unaware of the significance of what he has done.

The narrator has coldly described what Pipi sees in graphic detail:

...there was a small pool of blood on the concrete around where his cousin's head was... then he saw a few ants quickly crawling over from all directions, and stopping as soon as they came to the blood. There was only one ant who went around the blood and crawled up onto his hair. It crawled up along a strand of blood-encrusted hair right up to his cousin's head and into the place where the blood had flowed out of. [p. 190]

However, neither Pipi nor the narrator seem any more emotional than the ants.

Both Pipi's lack of concern or even basic awareness for the suffering of others and his inability to grasp what he has done are paralleled by the thoughts and actions of all the killers that follow, including the executioners. This is particularly evident in the description of Shanfeng on the day after he has killed Pipi for killing his son. Shanfeng seems to have totally lost awareness of reality and can only think about his headache. When the family

has gone to the crematorium for the funeral of the children, he sees a group of mourners coming out and “their weeping and wailing as they walked out made him feel disgusted.” [p. 218] Shan’gang refers to “two unfortunate accidents,” and Shanfeng finds it funny. [p. 218] Furthermore, Shanfeng cannot even remember what happened. He remembers that two children died and that there was some link between them but he simply cannot figure out what it was. Only after he has acquiesced to being tied to a tree for one hour to make up for having killed his brother’s son and has been firmly tied up, does he remember.

Indeed, much of both Shan’gang and Shanfeng’s concern over the loss of their respective sons seems to have very little to do with sorrow and anger over the loss of a loved one. In a Chinese context (as is common elsewhere) sons are highly valued for their ability to carry on the family line. These two characters relate to their losses more in this and a related sense than in a sense of sorrow. This, as well as the almost mechanical nature of the chain of revenges, is part of Yu Hua’s exposure of a cold-hearted formalism in Chinese society.

In addition to this kind of distance and the almost total absence of emotions other than hate, fear, and disgust, the characters in this story often feel distant, act as if they do not recognize each other, and consistently ignore each other. For example, when the two brothers were walking to work together, it “...looked as if they didn’t know each other.” [p. 186] Their two wives, after returning home from the funeral for their respective sons are described as follows: “They [the two wives] were as quiet as they’d always been, as if nothing had happened or as if everything that had happened was incredibly distant, so distant that it had already dropped from their memories.” [p. 219]

Consistently throughout the story characters are ignored by other characters. This is especially so with Shan’gang and Shanfeng’s mother, who despite her incessant attempts to be noticed, has long since completely dropped from the other characters’ thoughts. As has already been mentioned, all of this is underscored by the narrator’s uninvolved, cold, even uncaring tone. The narrator never expresses emotion or judgement and consistently

describes scenes through a character so as to add on an extra layer of distance. For example, in the description of ants crawling into Pipi's cousin's brain the phrase "he saw" punctuates the description. [p. 190] As the story progresses the increasing use of black humour adds yet another layer of distance.

"One Kind of Reality" is not a simple condemnation of violence and brutality. The absurdity that permeates it precludes simplicity and highlights the ambiguities of human life and the meaningless of the world. In addition, the use of black humour creates a kind of internal tension between horror and humour that further underscores this ambiguity. The events of "One Kind of Reality" increase in absurdity as the story progresses. The death of Shanfeng's baby boy is described in a detached, starkly realist manner and is in itself horrible and by no means either ridiculous or improbable. By the middle of the story, however, absurdity has taken over. What could be more ridiculous than death by tickling? Nonetheless, during this scene, the tone of the narration generally remains both detached and serious, with the result that this patently absurd murder by tickling seems both possible and horrible.

Shanfeng and Shan'gang's mother's ridiculous worries and bizarre thoughts form the link between the brutal realism of the first scenes of violence and the horrible absurdity and black humour that comes to dominate the story in its second half. Her degeneration and eventual death also parallel the degeneration and eventual destruction of her family. In the opening scene, when the whole family is sitting around the table eating breakfast, she complains that, "It seems like moss is growing in my stomach." [p. 184] This leads her sons to think of, "...the kind of moss that earthworms have crawled over, the kind that grows around the edges of wells and in the corners made by broken down walls, the kind that has a bit of shiny green to it." [p. 184] At the same time that Pipi is killed in revenge by Shanfeng, she begins to feel that her innards are rotting. Pipi's head smashes "down onto the pavement with a heavy thud," [p. 204] and, at roughly the same time, she hears a strange sound coming from within her stomach. Two more sounds follow this and then

she begins to think that her, "...intestines have already completely rotted through. She couldn't imagine what colour they'd be after having rotted away, but she could come up with an image of them [the bubbles] — bubbles given off when the thick slime in there squirmed about." [p. 206] After this, she decides not to eat anymore. She feels that, "...eating is truly a dangerous thing because her stomach is not a bottomless pit. There would come a day when every little space inside her body would be stuffed full, and then her body would burst. She'd be just like a bomb exploding. After her skin and flesh were blasted onto the walls, they'd be just like slogans pasted up there..." [p. 206]. On the one hand, this is revolting and nauseating, but on the other hand it is ridiculous and even a little funny. It is this kind of tension that makes up black humour. This passage sets the scene for what will follow, when the grotesque and disturbing become more and more closely linked with the ridiculous and the absurd, eventually becoming superimposed in the final scene, in which Shan'gang is cut up for spare parts.

Black humour can be loosely defined as the humour of morbid absurdity. There is a natural tendency to laugh at the absurd and the bizarre, those things that are exaggerated or are radically different from what is expected. Part of this simply stems from the nature of humour. Many jokes rely on surprise to elicit laughter, and the audacity of black humour often has the same effect. However, in another sense, the laughter is a sort of defense mechanism that allows us to deal with the truly different and disturbing and yet somehow avoid facing it directly. There is a certain degree of uncomfortableness and even guilt that accompanies finding such things as death, violence, and the grotesque to be amusing, even when they are described in overblown or absurd ways. Partially this stems from societal norms. One is not supposed to ever laugh at death. Most importantly, however, the violent and the grotesque are never fully or inherently funny. Furthermore, especially in "One Kind of Reality," many of the episodes of black humour are distinctly horrible. Paradoxically, the horror of such scenes can be such that the desire to avoid facing it increases our emphasis on the absurd aspects of it. Thus, black humour does have

the potential to force us out of conventional modes of thinking (or, at the very least, confuse us), to give us the double shock of seeing the horrible and then, despite ourselves, seeing the amusing aspects of it. Paradox is a staple of postmodernism. Black humour is the height of paradox and certainly is an important part of many postmodernist works.<sup>24</sup>

The tension between the horrible and the absurd is used to particularly good effect in the execution scene and what follows it. In the execution scene, Yu Hua almost seems to be toying with his readers and trying to see how bizarre and disgusting this scene can be made while, at the same time, showing the complete dehumanization of Shan'gang and illustrating the real worthlessness of a person in this horrible world. Additionally, in this scene both the executioners and the crowd that has gathered to watch are shown as being much the same as Shan'gang and Shanfeng in their brutality and lack of concern for the suffering of others. Shan'gang even remembers being a part of such a crowd on many past occasions. This short episode that occurs shortly before the completely tied up Shan'gang is about to be executed is particularly effective in illustrating what this scene is like:

...he [Shan'gang] said to the militiaman at his side, "Squad leader, I've gotta piss."

"Okay," replied the militiaman.

"Could you please take that thing out for me?"

"Just piss in your pants," said the militiaman.

He [Shan'gang] could feel that the people around him were smiling away. He didn't know why they were so happy. He spread his legs apart a little ways and started to twist his face up into an expression of discomfort.

After a few moments had passed, the militiaman asked, "Better?"

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<sup>24</sup> See, for example, the black humour in Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (Viking, 1988).



“The piss won’t come,” he replied in agony.

“In that case, forget it.”<sup>25</sup>

This kind of horrifying description continues, with the balance increasingly shifting to the absurd, and the events start to follow the twisted logic of a bad dream. For example, the first attempt at executing Shan’gang fails, and the second attempt only results in his ear being shot off. After each of these two attempts, Shan’gang asks, “Am I dead?” When, after the second attempt, he asks this and is told that he is not dead, he asks to be taken to the hospital.<sup>26</sup> After being shot in the head at point blank range in the fourth and final attempt and really dying, he makes a ghostly visit to his wife:

...Shan’gang’s wife saw a man walk in, this man had only half a head. The day was just dawning.

She remembered herself having locked up, but when he came in, she felt like the door was wide open. Despite his only having half a head, it only took a single glance for her to recognize Shan’gang.

“I’ve been released,” said Shan’gang.

His voice had a kind of a drone to it, and she asked him, “Have you got a cold?”

“I probably do,” ...<sup>27</sup>

The incongruity of this question and the bizarre understatement of the reply (after all, half his head has been blasted away) show just how weird things are becoming. Finally, in the last scene, the story becomes entirely farcical. For example,

The urologist hadn’t managed to squeeze in so he was left pacing about on the sidelines. “URINE” was printed in big letters on his surgical mask. The urologist watched them working away on the ping

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<sup>25</sup> Yu Hua, “One Kind of Reality,” pp. 236, 237.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 238.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., pp. 238, 239.

pong table and couldn't help starting to feel worried. He kept warning the doctor who was working on Shan'gang's abdomen, "Don't you go wrecking my testicles now."<sup>28</sup>

This farcical scene works both to show the worthlessness of the individual in the senseless world of the story and to play with preconceptions and taboos by means of black humour. However, it is quite different from much of what has come before. The tone is more lighthearted, and the humour is more silly than bizarre; the nightmare has turned into a strange dream. On first reading, I found this scene to be annoying and unnecessary and felt that it only lessened the impact of the story. However, its very silliness and incongruity does work to pull the carpet out from under us one more time, and, in this regard, it is successful.

#### Postmodernist themes – a summing up

In the course of the preceding examination of four of Yu Hua's stories, a number of themes, many of which are characteristically postmodernist, have been identified, and a very dark perspective has emerged. The prominent themes in "Leaving Home and Travelling Afar at Eighteen" are that the individual is alone in this world, people are cruel and vicious, and the world is random and bewildering. In "The April Third Incident" the world is also shown to be bewildering. This story illustrates how ambiguous a thing reality is and shows that there are many different modes of perception. In "1986" these themes reappear, as do themes specific to the Chinese context that are closely linked to more universal ones: the Cultural Revolution was horrible and destroyed many people; the world is a cruel and vicious place; this horrible past is being forgotten and denied; it should not be. In "One Kind of Reality," the world is once again shown to be bizarre and

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 246.

bewildering. Society and the people that make it up are shown to be cruel and vicious. Humans are beasts and there is little meaning to this crazy world.

These simple thematic statements do not fully cover what is undertaken in these stories. Certain stylistic devices and techniques, such as the use of extreme black humour or the use of naive description, serve an important postmodernist purpose in themselves, particularly as part of an attempt to do what, in his definition of postmodernist literature, M. H. Abrams calls subverting “our accepted modes of thought and experience.”<sup>29</sup> It is worth examining Yu Hua’s use of such techniques in greater detail.

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<sup>29</sup> Abrams, p. 110.

## Chapter Two

### Style and technique – postmodernist ramifications

Confusion. Disorientation. These are the primary means by which Yu Hua attempts to replicate the complexity and ambiguity of the world and break through the “unrealistic” conventions of realism. In an essay first published in 1989, Yu Hua explained his attitudes regarding this:

After I discovered that the old attitude towards writing of “considering things as they are” could only lead to superficial truths, I had to go and search out new modes of expression ... I started to use a kind of “false” form. This kind of form left behind the order and logic supplied to me by the immediate world. However, it allowed me to freely approach the truth.<sup>1</sup>

A particularly potent technique for doing this, for breaking past the the surface and going beyond conventional ways of viewing reality, is the technique of magic realism. M. H. Abrams writes of magic realist authors as follows:

...they interweave in an ever-shifting pattern, a sharply etched realism with fantastic and dreamlike elements... These [fabulist or magic realist novels] violate, in a variety of ways, standard novelistic expectations by drastic... fusions of the everyday, the fantastic, the mythical, and the nightmarish in renderings that blur traditional

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<sup>1</sup> Yu Hua, “Xuwei de zuopin” (“False” works) in Yu Hua, *Shishi ru yan* (The affairs of the world are like smoke) (Taipei: Yuanliu chuban gongsi, 1991), p. 7. All page numbers given in the text in this chapter are from this book.

distinctions between what is serious or trivial, horrible or ludicrous, tragic or comic.<sup>2</sup>

Magic realism, thus, in essence, involves the juxtaposition of the fantastic and possible in a story in which both are described as if they were real and, in doing so, undermines accepted distinctions.

In the context of postmodernist literature, magic realism has two sets of important functions. First, it goes against the conventions of realism and works to subvert the realist tradition (a tradition which is very much alive in China and was particularly so during the mid-eighties, when Yu Hua began writing). In China, writers of straightforward fantasy (in which, unlike in magic realism, specific conventions do separate the fantastic world of the story from the “real” world of the present) and science fiction have received very little serious attention. In fact, anecdotal evidence suggests that educated Chinese readers tend to prefer that which they see as being “realistic” over all else. In discussions with Chinese students in both China and Canada, I have indeed found a strong tendency to criticize and praise stories on this basis. More often than not, however, what is meant by “realistic” is in fact “realist.” This is not surprising because realism, in various forms, has been the predominant literary style in China for the last seventy years.

Returning to Abrams, he describes realism as, “...fiction which will give the *illusion* that it reflects life and the social world as it seems to the common reader [emphasis mine].”<sup>3</sup> Realism is a stylistic mode and realist fiction is, after all, fiction. Furthermore, it is neither essential nor universal for realist fiction to actually have any basis in fact. For example, for a realist author to successfully describe life as a peasant in eighteenth century France, it is totally unnecessary for the author to do so accurately, so long as the stylistic devices are so used as to render the portrayal convincing to the reader. Magic realism

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<sup>2</sup> M. H. Abrams (1988), p. 122.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

subverts the conventions of realism by paradoxically using the style of realism, in particular the objective narratorial tone and the use of extreme detail, to present, with little distinction, that which would be considered highly implausible if not entirely impossible.

The second, and perhaps more interesting, effect of the use of magic realism is the blurring of the conventional boundaries between dreams, fantasy, and reality, boundaries that are very much a part of the modern, rational world view. Yu Hua sees life as, "...the true and the false jumbled together with the false masquerading as the true." [p. 11] Magic realism can be used to depict this kind of world, to bring into question the notion of a single immutable reality, and to generally undermine metaphysical and epistemological foundations. It is this aspect that will be focused on in the following examination.

#### "The Affairs of the World Are Like Smoke" – blurring the lines

Magic realism and other disorientating techniques are used to particularly good effect in Yu Hua's novella "The Affairs of the World Are Like Smoke" [Shishi ru yan] both to effect the previously mentioned undermining of foundations and to heighten the horrifying, nightmarelike atmosphere of this story. The plot, albeit quite complicated and perhaps intentionally difficult to follow, remains and can even be summarized.

"The Affairs of the World Are Like Smoke" is set in some unspecified small town in China (it is China — note references to Guanyin and to the playing of a *suona* during a wedding procession, for example [pp. 56, 102]) in some vaguely modern period (there are automobiles). It deals, for the most part, with the lives and fates of the inhabitants of a courtyard, a fortune-teller whom they visit, and a blind man who sits on a rock along the path to the fortune-teller's house. They are un-named and are only identified by numbers, names of professions (e.g. Driver, Midwife, etc.), attributes (e.g. the Blind Man, the Woman in Grey, etc.) or in relation to those already identified in this manner.

The first part of the first chapter introduces the characters and foreshadows much of what is to come. One by one almost all of the inhabitants of the courtyard visit Master

Fortune-teller and eventually either die or lose their children to either death or to Master Fortune-teller. He is a vampiric character who drains the life-energy of his own offspring and who rapes young girls on the fifteenth of every month so as to cultivate his *yang* energy and thus extend his life.

The first inhabitants of the courtyard to visit Master Fortune-teller are Driver and his mother, Midwife. Driver has had a vivid dream about running over a woman wearing a grey jacket and wants to have it interpreted by Master Fortune-teller. At the fortune-teller's he sees the woman from his dream leaving, and the worlds of dreaming and waking are linked for the first time. He later fails to follow Master Fortune-teller's advice that in order to avoid death he should quickly stop his truck should he ever see a woman wearing a grey jacket. He stops his truck only after having passed by the Woman-in-Grey, the woman from his dream and the same person whom he had run into at Master Fortune-teller's earlier. He buys her jacket and runs it over with his truck. Not long afterwards, the Woman-in-Grey mysteriously dies in her sleep. We learn that she has also recently visited Master Fortune-teller to ask for advice. Following tradition, her son moves up the date of his marriage to coincide with that of his mother's funeral, "...so as to use happiness to dispel sadness..." [p. 63] Driver is invited to the wedding as a friend of the bride. Perhaps, he had loved her in the past. The wedding scene is filled with a masterful manipulation of contrasting images of light and dark, paralleling the contrasting moods of happiness and sadness. In a sense, it is a microcosm of the world and a reflection of the interplay between the dark or spirit world [*you*] and the light or natural world [*ming*] that is part of the play of opposites embodied in the principle of *yin-yang* as well as, according to Karl S. Y. Kao, an important part of certain types of traditional Chinese stories of the

supernatural.<sup>4</sup> During this scene, Driver is viciously teased by 2 and finally flees to the kitchen where he commits suicide (or so it seems).

Meanwhile, we have been introduced to 6, a widower who has been selling off his daughters one by one and now has only one daughter left. She is fast approaching an age at which her father could find willing customers to sell her to, and she is terrified by this prospect. Every morning 6 wakes up very early and goes to the riverside to fish while it is still dark. One morning he notices two strange figures by the riverside. They turn out to be legless ghosts who magically catch fish and gobble them up in a never-ending cycle. From this day onwards, the ghosts are to be found at the river every morning and 6 is no longer able to catch any fish. Finally, terrified, he gives up fishing altogether. He visits Master Fortune-teller to tell him about these ghosts and Master Fortune-teller is terrified.

6 later makes a deal with a buyer of women (a man who is wearing a sheepskin coat and is thus literally in sheep's clothing, no less) to sell his last daughter. However, 6 demands more than the usual price and the buyer has to go to another town to get the additional money. Before the buyer can return, 6's daughter dies mysteriously. In a bizarre scene filled with black humour, her corpse is purchased by 2, who later symbolically marries her ashes to the ashes of Driver, so as to fulfill a promise that he had made to Driver's spirit and to stop Driver's ghost from visiting him in his dreams and demanding that he find a wife for him. Prior to this, Driver's mother, Midwife, has made a visit to the spirit world, where she helped deliver the baby of one of the legless fish-eating ghosts, and has since died mysteriously.

Another resident of the same courtyard as Midwife, 3, has visited Master Fortune-teller to find out what she should do with her grandson's child whom she is pregnant with. Master Fortune-teller arranges to adopt her child to replace his recently deceased son and

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<sup>4</sup> Karl S. Y. Kao, *Classical Chinese Tales of the Supernatural and the Fantastic* (Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 8.



thus continue to extend his life. Similarly, 3's neighbour, the chronically ill 7, has been convinced by Master Fortune-teller that the cause of his illness is the presence of his son and has given up his son to Master Fortune-teller.

4's father has taken his beautiful young daughter, 4, to Master Fortune-teller to find out why it is that she always talks in her sleep. 4's father is then tricked by Master Fortune-teller into allowing him to rape 4, supposedly as a means of expelling the demons that make her talk in her sleep. 4 is so affected by this horrible experience that she finally goes crazy and after stripping completely naked, walks into the river and drowns. She is followed in death by the Blind Man, who has always been obsessed with the sound of her voice and who, after waiting by the river for days, finally wades in after her, and the story comes to an end.

In addition to any ideas about the victory of ugliness over beauty, the destruction of youth, the horribleness of the world, the viciousness, stupidity, greed, and gullibility of human beings, and the horrors of both Chinese culture and recent Chinese history, this story is also very concerned with questions of perception and with causing a re-examination of the way in which we view reality.

What probably strikes the reader of this story first is that none of the characters have names. Some are referred to by profession or distinguishing characteristic but most are assigned numbers instead of names. At first glance, this may seem to just be a modernist affectation — simply an attempt to be strange. However, it does serve several functions. In a sense, it is an allusion to the meaninglessness of the person as an individual. In this sense, the characters are but screws in the machinery of fate set to play out assigned roles. It also calls attention to the artifice of the story. After all, no one in the real world goes by number names. It could also be seen as a reaction to traditional Chinese short story forms in which, in imitation of historical works, characters are often introduced in great detail with multiple names and a host of other biographical details given. The story is filled with allusions to fate and is heavy on the use of foreshadowing and omens and

perhaps the use of numbers could be a reference to Chinese numerology (however, I have yet to find any concrete connections between the symbolic significance of the character's numbers and their fates). Chinese names all have meaning (however obscure) and by naming his characters in this way, Yu Hua has escaped having to assign names that may make the role of his characters too obvious. For the reader, the use of numbers is often confusing, and this is probably intentional. For both readers and characters, the world of "The Affairs of the World Are Like Smoke" is indeed often a confusing, blurry, hazy place.

This is intensified by the use of magic realism. In the scene where Midwife makes a visit to the home of a ghost, this is particularly evident. This scene begins with a description of a strange dream that Midwife is having. Soon, however, the sound of someone calling at her door pulls her out of the world of dreams and into what one expects will be the normal world of the awake. This person asks her to come with him to assist his neighbour in giving birth. Midwife feels that there is something unusual about him; his features are strangely indistinct and his voice sounds as if it were coming from far away. Nonetheless, she still follows him. As she follows him she notices even more strange things about him, yet her reactions remain subdued and she seems to have no real trouble with what she sees. For example, "Her eyes strayed down towards his feet, but she didn't see anything. It was as if he hadn't any legs and his body was just floating along in mid-air.," [p. 75] her only reaction is to simply dismiss what she has just seen because, "something was probably wrong with her eyes." [p. 75] Throughout, the tone of the narration remains incredibly controlled and subdued. Yes, we have entered the shadow world, but that is nothing to be alarmed about.

In fact, much of the effect of this scene depends on the contrast between the feelings of the reader and the controlled narration and relatively detached attitude of Midwife. The mood is very eerie, and the reader is given numerous indications that Midwife is making a trip to a world of ghosts. When she comes to the part of town where

her patient is awaiting her, she sees many low buildings in the midst of pines and cypresses, trees that were traditionally planted amongst the tombs in Chinese graveyards and have come to be symbolically linked with tombs.<sup>5</sup> A further hint that she is entering the world of the dead is that when she enters the area where her patient lives, she feels as if she has fallen down, almost as if she had entered a tomb.

When she enters the house of the woman who is about to give birth, “she saw a woman lying on a *colourless* bed [emphasis mine].” [p. 75] This incongruous detail is passed over without comment from either the narrator or Midwife. In the ethereal world of spirits I suppose there are such things as colourless beds. In the detailed description that follows this, Yu Hua allows free reign to his imagination and uses some truly bizarre imagery:

After walking in, she [Midwife] discovered that this woman was entirely naked; the woman’s skin was like the skin of a fish that had had its scales scraped off. She felt that this woman and the man standing by her side were strikingly similar. Her face was also very indistinct and, what’s more, it was also difficult to see her legs. However, when Midwife stretched out her hand, she seemed to be able to feel legs there. Midwife started to work...

This was the most difficult birth of her life, yet, unexpectedly, that woman made not a single sound. She just lay there calmly. When Midwife’s hands came into contact with that woman’s skin, it didn’t feel at all normal, but, rather, was like touching water. To Midwife’s hands, that woman felt like a pool of water. Midwife felt sweat coming out from her every pore, and she was as cold as could be. Not until much later was the baby born. The strange thing was that

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<sup>5</sup> *Ci Yuan* (The font of words) (Hong Kong: Commercial Press, 1979), vol. 2 , p. 1540.

throughout the whole process Midwife hadn't even seen so much as a single drop of blood... [pp. 75, 76]

Once again, Midwife's reactions are strangely muted. Nonetheless, she does indeed notice the strange as being strange and, in so doing, adds a certain verisimilitude to the scene. When dreaming, one tends not to notice the incongruous as such while actually in the world of dreams. Additionally, in most fantastic literature there is a tendency towards polar reactions on the part of characters, in the sense that characters in the fantasy world either belong and are not surprised by the fantastic (e.g., most science fiction) or are outsiders and react with extreme amazement (e.g., in C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*). There is a tendency to be pulled along with Midwife in this scene and to temporarily accept these happenings as being unusual yet real. At the same time, however, the observant reader will have the suspicion, unvoiced by Midwife, that these people are ghosts and, thus, will see the scene somewhat differently (for example, the "low houses" are not houses but, rather, tombstones). One final confusing possibility is that, in the context of the story, this scene is in fact yet another dream, and she has simply dreamt her awakening.

Another aspect of this story that further confuses the distinctions between the normal world, the spirit world, and the dream world is what could be called "tying-in of effects." What is meant by this is that happenings in one sphere have implications in another. For example, in the scene that has just been discussed, after the birth, Midwife is given some soup by the ghost (this mundane detail further serves to bring the scene into the realm of normalcy) and later, in another more everyday reality, Midwife vomits up her soup and discovers that what she had thought was a bowl of noodles topped with two eggs was, in fact, a mess of tangled hemp topped with two balls of hemp. [p. 81] Additionally, she discovers that the part of town that she had visited that night was, in fact, a graveyard and that in the spot where the house she had visited was located there was a grave of a woman who had died while still pregnant. [p. 79, 80] Furthermore, similar legless ghosts

appear for 6, and we also learn that Master Fortune-teller harbours an extreme fear of legless ghosts. [pp. 54, 84] Thus, the ghosts are “real ” ghosts and not dream ghosts, at least in the sense that they are not specific to Midwife’s reality. Finally, this visit to the world of the dead has some connection with her very real death that occurs later. On the day after her visit to the spirit world and on the same day that she has vomitted up the soup, Midwife starts to feel strangely ethereal (like a ghost) and to have visions of a river, a part of nature which, in this story, has come to symbolize both the course of fate and “the stream of life.” [p. 95] Later, her rotting body is described in gustatory detail. [pp. 100, 101]

This method of “tying-in effects” is also used to link dreams with the everyday world. In this story dreams do have a very real effect on reality. For example, after Driver dies, he starts appearing in the dreams of his mother, Midwife, and 2 and asking them to find him a wife. This was something that Driver had been worried about before his death and that 2 had promised Driver’s ghost he would arrange. The result of all this is that Driver is eventually married to a dead girl and, thus, appeased. Similarly, after seeing the Woman in Grey in his dreams, Driver sees her in the real world.

Yu Hua’s use of magic realism is by no means limited to “The Affairs of the World Are Like Smoke.” Even in his recent novel-length *bildungsroman* “Cries and Fine Rain” [Huhan yu xiyu], which is far less experimental in technique than most of his earlier works, episodes of magic realism do exist. When defining magic realism, M. H. Abrams refers to the blurring of, “...traditional distinctions between what is serious or trivial, horrible or ludicrous, tragic or comic.”<sup>6</sup> The following scene from “Cries and Fine Rain” certainly fits this description:

At his wit’s end, on the morning of the first day of the new year, Sun  
Youyuan braved the freezing winter wind and ran into town carrying

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<sup>6</sup> M. H. Abrams (1988), p. 122.

his father's corpse...When it [the body] was placed on the counter of the town's pawnshop, it was already as hard as a popsicle...

The pawnbroker was a sixty year old man and in all his life he'd yet to hear of a dead person being pawned. He plugged his nose and waved his hands repeatedly, "Can't accept it, can't accept it..."

...a few other shop assistants carrying poles started striking out at Sun Youyuan. Sun Youyuan could only lift up his father's corpse to block them and strike back...Having gained the powerful support of his father's corpse, brave Sun Youyuan beat those shop assistants until they were so terrified that they didn't know what to do...<sup>7</sup>

Grotesque farce is not necessarily magic realism. The fact that "Cries and Fine Rain" moves in and out of this kind of description, at times serious, at times ridiculous, is what makes this kind of passage an example of magic realism.

The black humour in this passage is strongly reminiscent of a previously discussed story, "One Kind of Reality." Indeed, that story does contain magic realist elements (for example, the scene discussed in Chapter 1 in which, after his execution, Shan'gang makes a ghostly visit to his wife), and black humour and magic realism are closely connected. However, it should be stressed that not all black humour is magic realism. Black humour can successfully rely upon the use of an irreverent tone to describe things which are not improbable or even exaggerated.

#### Seeing anew – novel modes of perception in "The Affairs of the World Are Like Smoke"

Using magic realism is certainly one way to portray the world in a new manner, and it also undoubtedly allows for the use of imaginative and novel means of expression and description. It is, however, not the only technique that can do this.

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<sup>7</sup> Yu Hua, "Huhan yu xiyu" (Cries and fine rain), *Shouhuo* (1991, no. 6), pp. 50, 51.

As both part of his questioning of the nature of perception and of the boundaries between illusion and reality, and as a way to extend the boundaries of description (and, hence, of language) Yu Hua often uses radically different perspectives and modes of description in his writing. For example, in “The Affairs of the World Are Like Smoke,” he plays with the way we perceive in many ways. The third-person narrator of this story describes people using their shadows (e.g., Master Fortune-teller’s son), [pp. 46, 56] rapidly switches perspectives, and often turns to sound alone to underscore and even to describe entire scenes.

Much of this is channelled through the character of the Blind Man. Early in the story we are introduced to the Blind Man and we learn that nearly every day he sits on a rock along the path to Master Fortune-teller’s house, just near the high school that 6’s daughter and 4 go to. Apparently, “He knows about many things that have happened and are happening so his silence is unusually full.” [p. 44] He remains a constant figure throughout the horrible events of the story and is a choric character whose different perceptions both provide insight and underscore the horror of the story. For example, during the funeral of the Woman-in-Grey, the crying of the professional mourner, 3, evokes countless horrors for the Blind Man:

The sound of 3’s crying seemed to contain all the hair-raising, bone-chilling sounds that there are. There was the terrified cry of a child falling from a building, the sound of many window panes breaking at the same time, the great boom of a door being suddenly blown open by a wild wind in the middle of the night... [p. 65]

The method of transferring perception to the Blind Man is used to greatest advantage during the scene in which 4 is raped by Master Fortune-teller. We are first given a detailed description of 4 being stripped naked, and then the scene suddenly shifts to the Blind Man:

This time 4's cries no longer had discernible intervals between them and had joined into one. When the sound reached the Blind Man, it seemed as if countless particles of dust were falling into his ears one after another...

The Blind Man stood up. Facing towards this frightening sound, he groped his way over. He seemed to feel that the sounds coming towards him were like raindrops in a rainstorm beating down upon his face causing him to feel a dull sense of pain. As he walked forward, the sound became louder and louder and then he slowly began to feel that this sound was not just that of raindrops in a rainstorm. He felt that it was seemingly very sharp, piercing into his body. Then he also felt that a house was starting to collapse. Countless tiles were smashing towards him. In the midst of this he heard a short gasp. This gasping sound mixed in with all this seemed incomparably gentle and soft, seemingly caressing the Blind Man's ears. Tears came to his eyes. [p. 90]

The horror is underscored by the fact that the Blind Man is not as aware of what is happening to his beloved 4 as the reader is. By moving from dust to rain to the collapse of a building and climaxing with tears we feel the Blind Man's horror and 4's pain. The novelty of this scene stems from the fact that we are forced to perceive sounds through a blind man who perceives them physically, viscerally. They pierce into his body, caress his ears, and beat down upon his face.

#### Modes of description and perception

Yu Hua's technique of limiting the perception and/or description of scenes to sound alone forces us to "view" things in a manner different from that which we usually employ.



However, there is nothing inherently novel about describing sounds. In many cases, to describe sounds, Yu Hua simply resorts to the use of simile – one sound is compared to another. For example, in “The Affairs of the World Are Like Smoke,” the Blind Man hears, “...the cry of a child falling from a building...the great boom of a door being suddenly blown open by a wild wind in the middle of the night...” [p. 65] in 3’s crying. Sounds are compared to other sounds. However, as is often the case with simile, it is not simply a question of comparison, but also of evocation. 3’s crying may not actually have sounded at all like the sound of a door being blown open in the middle of the night, but the horror felt by a listener or expressed by 3 may have evoked that frightening sound in the mind of a listener. The connection is thus not descriptive in the literal, superficial sense, but, rather, in the sense of emotional connection.

More often than not, however, Yu Hua describes sounds not through other sounds that they evoke, but through visual means. This method has more potential for novelty. However, in some case the images that he uses are universal, in the sense that the link between them and the evoking sound is self-evident and not primarily a link between other episodes in the story or the memories of a character. For example, in Yu Hua’s short story “Summer Typhoons” [Xiaji taifeng]: “In the deep of night, the sound of Zhong Qimin’s flute [*xiao*] drifted in the rain. The sound of the flute was like a sailboat plying the sea, floating far away in the darkness.”<sup>8</sup> It is easy to see how music could evoke such imagery, and it is not necessary to relate this to other images in the story or to see it as a character’s memory in order to understand it. In the same story, the effect of the sound of voices on music is described as follows: “The music had already made its getaway. Their noisy voices were the Japs that had crossed Marco Polo Bridge back that year. The music had

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<sup>8</sup> Yu Hua, “Xiaji taifeng” (Summer typhoons), *Zhongshan* (1991, no. 4), p. 20.

fled for its life at full speed.”<sup>9</sup> This is similarly universal. The music is personified and compared to people fleeing the Japanese during the Second World War.

In other circumstances, sounds evoke responses, emotions, and images that are more personal. For example, in “Summer Typhoons”: “When Bai Shu knocked on the door, he heard the faint sound of a song coming from inside. Then, the indistinct image of that pond on the west side of town rippling at dawn appeared before his eyes; there were a few blades of grass floating on its surface.”<sup>10</sup> Certainly we have all had the experience of memories being triggered by more or less unrelated sounds. In this case, the triggered images are a part of a character’s memory and are revealed as part of the process of characterization. That is not to say, however, that this image is inexplicable and does not have any innate evocative power for the average reader, who does not share Bai Shu’s memories

In other scene from the same story, sounds are also described in visual terms: “The sound of their laughter was like countless pieces of paper fluttering in the wind. After their laughter was gone, the pieces of paper were still dancing about on the lawn. Without the sun shining on it, the lawn was exceptionally green and so the paper dancing about on it was as beautiful as could be.”<sup>11</sup> Although “universal” in a sense and not especially shown as evoked memory, the visual terms of this simile are a reflection of nearby reality and a reiteration of a motif. Thus, it can be seen that such a mode of evocation can also be used as part of the unifying imagery of a story.

In his essay “‘False’ Works” [Xuwei de zuopin], Yu Hua refers approvingly to Marcel Proust’s notion of the kind of evocation that has been discussed above:

In *The Remembrance of Things Past* Proust writes, “Only through the sound of a bell does Cambrai at noon come into my mind, and

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 16

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

only through the noises of the radiator do I come to think of Tangiers  
in the morning.<sup>12</sup>

The usually spontaneous evocation of memories by sights, sounds, and smells, appears in a very different form in this passage from Yu Hua's "This Story is Dedicated to the Young Woman Yang Liu" [Ci wen xiangei shaonü Liu Yang] in which images are *actively* used as a way of remembering:

The words on the paper hinted at some faded thing of the past, and I  
lapsed into deep yet empty thought. My eyes focussed on the sunlight  
outside the window. I took the sunlight of this instant and all the  
sunlight left in my memory and joined them together. The result was  
that my attention turned to the sunlight beside a brilliantly coloured bed  
of flowers. In the sunlight of that time a nurse walked up to me...<sup>13</sup>

The narrator takes the sunlight and joins it together with his memories of sunlight in order to force an evocation.

Yu Hua's notions of the importance and reality of memories and of our individual spiritual world are clearly spelled out in a statement on reality appropriately titled "My Reality" [Wode zhenshi]:

All that exists is true, and there only exists truth. Inside my mind,  
things that others out in the real world would not think of as being real  
I think of as real. For example, a person is dead, yet still lives on in  
my mind because I still remember him. As soon as I remember him  
that means he is still alive. Moreover, that I have already forgotten

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<sup>12</sup> Yu Hua, "Xuwei de zuopin" ("False" works), p. 8 [I chose to translate from the Chinese translation because that is what Yu Hua refers to].

<sup>13</sup> Yu Hua, Ci wen xiangei shaonü Yang Liu (This story is dedicated to the young woman Yang Liu), *Zhongshan* (1989, no. 4), p. 151.

about many people who are still living proves they have already died.<sup>14</sup>

As a result, Yu Hua often engages in lengthy descriptions of evoked memories and is not always clear in separating them from the immediacies of the story.

The importance of memory, not so much the memories of emotions and places far away, but, rather, the memories that we draw upon to classify what we see, is alluded to in this whimsical scene from “Summer Typhoons” in which a child has been given a pair of paper glasses that block his vision:

The paper blocked the child’s eyes.

“I can’t see anything.”

“How can that be?” asked Zhong Qimin. “Take your glasses off; careful now. Look to the left. What do you see?”

“A cupboard.”

“And?”

“A table.”

“Look to the right, what’s there?”

“A bed.”

“And in front of you?”

“You.”

“If I leave, then what?”

“A chair.”

“Great, now put the glasses on again.”

The child put the paper glasses on.

“Look to the left. What’s there?”

“A cupboard and a table.”

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<sup>14</sup> Yu Hua, “Wode zhenshi” (My reality), *Renmin wenxue* (1989, no. 3), p. 107.

"To the left?"

"A bed."

"What's in front of you?"

"You and a chair."

Zhong Qimin asked, "Now can you see?"

The child replied, "I can see."<sup>15</sup>

Another, more novel way in which sounds are described by Yu Hua is through their embodiment. They are described as, or compared to, things with visible form. To the Blind Man, 4's cries feel like, "...countless particles of dust were falling into his ears one after another." [p. 90] In Yu Hua's fiction, sounds take on all manner of forms. For example, in "The Affairs of the World Are Like Smoke" crying is described as follows, "... the shrill sound of 3's crying curled about this little town like smoke." [p. 63, 64] The sound of crying is also embodied in "Summer Typhoons": "...sound of crying filled the sky like fluttering banners."<sup>16</sup> In the story "Inescapable Calamities" [Nantao jieshu] it is the sound of laughter that takes on form: "...Lu Zhu seemed to hear her father's cough-like laughter. The sound of his laughter materialized just like dust falling down from the roof."<sup>17</sup>

In the following passage, sound is first described almost as if it had a form, and then the standard "rules" of evocation and simile are played with:

Lu Zhu could dimly see that Dong Shan's lips were just like a motor in motion. Twisted, deformed sounds were coming out from there, ... She heard the sound of some sparrows smashing up against the windowpane. This sound completely smashed the flow of words

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<sup>15</sup> Yu Hua, "Xiaji tafeng" (Summer typhoons), p. 17.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>17</sup> Yu Hua, "Nantao jieshu" (Inescapable calamities), *Shouhuo* (1988, no. 6), p. 70.

pouring forth from Dong Shan. She knew that was her father's voice;  
 Father was chuckling away to himself.<sup>18</sup>

What possible link could there be between sparrows smashing into a window and the sound of laughter? Perhaps the two sounds are similarly startling, but the comparison is undoubtedly an unusual metaphor. It thus serves to underscore the unusual nature of the situation and of the world of the story.

This kind of toying with metaphor and purposely playing with language to create jarring effects is an important part of Yu Hua's undermining of expectations and describing the world as he sees it (or wants his readers to see it).<sup>19</sup> An even stranger example, in which sounds are described as being pickled [*yan*], can be found in "This Story is Dedicated to the Young Woman Yang Liu": "...two women started chatting away, both using a kind of pickled voice. The laughter interspersed throughout their conversation was like two slabs of dried fish smacking together."<sup>20</sup>

In addition to his use of different methods of description, such as those described above, and such techniques as limiting description to one sense alone, Yu Hua uses different modes of perception. In other words, his narrators and his characters often are made to perceive things in a manner other than we would expect. They may, in fact, not be physically limited in their perception or be resorting to any unusual metaphors to describe what they see, but may simply see differently. The most clear example of this is what was referred to earlier as "naive perception." In this mode, commonplace things are seen as unusual, new, or even shocking because they are not immediately recognized and classified and are, thus, not dealt with in the way that we usually deal with familiar patterns. Using this mode of perception, in "The April Third Incident" a key is first described as a "... cold,

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>19</sup> There are antecedents of this in classical Chinese poetry. See Han Yu or Huang Tingjian, for example.

<sup>20</sup> Yu Hua, "Ci wen xiangei shaonü Yang Liu" (This story is dedicated to the young woman Yang Liu), p. 129.

metallic feeling.”<sup>21</sup> Generally speaking, in such passages in order to achieve an effect, things are first described and then, a while afterwards, identified. For example, in “The April Third Incident”: “He could only feel that there was a hot yellowness outside the window. ‘That’s sunlight,’ he thought to himself.”<sup>22</sup> and in “This Story is Dedicated to the Young Woman Yang Liu”: “Behind me someone emitted a sound made up of three syllables. This sound obviously represented someone’s name.”<sup>23</sup>

Other related modes of perception are also used in many of Yu Hua’s stories. Perhaps the most common such mode is “negative space description,” where things are described by their shadows or by the space that they do not take up. It has already been mentioned how in “The Affairs of the World Are Like Smoke” characters are described in relation to their shadows. This occurs in other stories too. The following scene in “Inescapable Calamities” is a good example of this: “...He had seemingly forgotten all about Lu Zhu’s existence. He was only vaguely aware that beside him there was a shadow on the wall.”<sup>24</sup>

Another mode of perception, which is also a form of naive description, is what could be called “disconnection.” In this mode of perception, causal links are not immediately made. For example, in “The Affairs of the World Are Like Smoke,” “...Driver saw that an old piece of clothing had covered the purple liquid. The clothing started to move. On top of the piece of clothing there was one of 2’s hands.”[p. 66] This description temporarily abandons normal logic by not making the obvious link between the hand and the moving piece of clothing immediately explicit. A more extreme example occurs in “Summer Typhoons” :

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<sup>21</sup> Yu Hua, “Siyue sanri shijian” (The April Third incident), in Yu Hua, *Shiba sui chu men yuan xing* (Leaving home and travelling afar at eighteen) (Beijing, Zuoja chubanshe, 1989), p. 141.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 141.

<sup>23</sup> Yu Hua, “Ci wen xiangfei shaonü Yang Liu” (This story is dedicated to the young woman Yang Liu), p. 129.

<sup>24</sup> Yu Hua, “Nantao jieshu” (Inescapable calamities), p. 70.

“She heard a kind of really crisp, really clear sound and she figured he’d boxed her ear. She guessed that she was smashing into the door with her head.”<sup>25</sup>

This kind of perceptual mode although unusual in both fiction and real life, does, in fact, partially mirror the way in which we sometimes see things when very tired, drunk or involved in a horrible accident. Personal experience leads me to believe that the cliché of having the feeling that time is standing still and that one is watching the scene from the outside during an accident is more than just a cliché. In this sense, it is part of Yu Hua’s self-proclaimed goal of approaching reality and it also serves the purpose of forcing a seeing anew, however brief, by breaking conventions.

Practically every strange mode of description has its parallel in some real-life mode of perception and, as a result, is potentially realist. Postmodernist literature does not entirely abandon realist techniques. In the case of magic realism, for example, the author undermines the conventions of traditional realism while, at the same time, making use of the effects of realist description. Yu Hua’s use of different modes of description and perception is similar.

#### Language and metaphor – breaking past the commonplace

Novel imagery and inventive metaphors are very much a part of Yu Hua’s use of different modes of perception. By describing things as he does in the preceding scenes, Yu Hua expands both the use of language and the imagination. In “‘False’ Works,” he firmly stresses the value of the free play of imagination and criticizes the over-reliance on commonsense views of the world, writing that: “As a result, [of being limited to ‘seeking truth from facts’ *shishi qiu shi* ] our literature has only been able to pass its time in unimaginative old shacks.” [p. 6] This affirmation of the value of imagination for its own

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<sup>25</sup> Yu Hua, “Xiaji taifeng” (Summer typhoons), p. 19.



sake is a very radical thing in a Chinese context. Certainly much Chinese literature has been highly imaginative. However, there has been a tendency to see serious literature as being far more concerned with social and moral questions than with imagination. This has been particularly true during the last 70 years, and, as I have already discussed, there is an additional partiality for the “realistic” among Chinese readers. When writing about his fictional technique, Yu Hua does not, in fact, fully reject this discourse. He works within this framework and justifies his unconventional approach as necessary as a means of better approaching reality. For example, he writes that rejecting “the order and logic supplied by the immediate world” allows him to “freely approach the truth.” [p. 7]

Similarly, with regard to language, he writes that:

For the sake of true expression, language must break through common sense and seek a mode of expression that is able to simultaneously express many possibilities and layers and that, moreover, with respect to grammar, is able to dismiss, twist, topple, and otherwise not be restrained by the order set out by grammar. [p. 16]

This passage indicates the degree to which Yu Hua desires to reject conventional modes of expression.

In an article on Yu Hua, the Chinese literary critic Li Tuo calls this kind of process “language liberation” [*yuyan de jiefang*] and sees it as being part of the new generation’s attempt to overthrow “Maospeak” [*Mao wenti*] the orthodox, limited, doctrinaire language of both Chinese socialist realism and Chinese political writings and create a new way of expressing themselves.<sup>26</sup> Writing about Yu Hua, Ye Zhaoyan, Ge Fei, Sun Ganlu, and others, he even goes so far as to state that:

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<sup>26</sup> Li Tuo, “Xuebeng hezai?” (Where is the avalanche?), preface to Yu Hua, *Shiba sui chu men yuan xing* (Leaving home and travelling afar at eighteen), Taipei: Yuanliu chubangongsi, 1990, pp. 12-14.

What is most important about their literary movement is not their attitude towards reality, but, rather, their attitude towards language. Writing in this way cannot help but deeply influence the modern Chinese language.<sup>27</sup>

However, these writers are not popular outside of limited circles, and it seems likely that pop-culture figures such as Wang Shuo will have far more real impact on the modern Chinese language.

Obviously, any kind of description, be it novel or commonplace, relies on language. One could even go further and say that description relies upon metaphor, in the sense that perception and the description of it rely on contrast and comparison. Something is perceived by comparison either with its surroundings or with memories of past perceptions. As part of his "language liberation," Yu Hua often resorts to highly jarring or incongruous metaphors. In doing so, he smashes linguistic and stylistic expectations and also creates more memorable, more interesting imagery. In some cases the metaphors are downright disgusting: "...the colour of her [a bride at a wedding] face was red tending to black, as if plastered with pig's blood..."<sup>28</sup> The woman who is described in this quote is ugly, both physically and spiritually, and this ugly image reinforces our awareness of this. This metaphor seems out of place in the context of a wedding, but the comparison between a flushed face and a blood-covered face is not inherently incongruous.

Many of Yu Hua's more shocking metaphors, however, derive much of their shock value not only from being out of place but also from their internal incongruity. In metaphors with internal incongruities the comparison itself is bizarre and causes one to stop

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This expansive topic would be well worth exploring in further detail, quoting from literature and political documents from the Maoist years and then showing the long-term effects of this kind of language on writers in the post-Mao era, especially through comparisons with pre-revolutionary vernacular and the vernacular of modern Taiwan.

<sup>27</sup> Li Tuo, "Xuebeng hezai?" (Where is the avalanche?), p. 13.

<sup>28</sup> Yu Hua, "Nantao jieshu" (Inescapable calamities), *Shouhuo* (1988, no. 6), p. 67.

in one's reading and think : "What would that look like!?" For example, a waterlogged corpse is described as follows: "...it was like the features on his face had been built up by children playing with building blocks."<sup>29</sup> Perhaps this will become more clear when we first examine a normal simile used to describe a smile and then examine a more incongruous one. For example, "...His [Master Fortune-teller's] smile made 4's father feel like it had been cut in with a knife." [p. 88] is somewhat unusual, but one easily visualizes a thin, terse smile. However, what is one to make of: "The smile on his face was like a rotten apple..."<sup>30</sup>

Lest one get the impression that Yu Hua is humourless and only concerned with shock value or describing the disgusting, it should be noted that incongruous metaphors can be used to humorous effect. As has already been noted in the discussion on black humour, the unexpected and out of place can be quite funny. For example: "...Lu Zhu adopted the posture of a mail box and sat in the window..."<sup>31</sup> or "All the friends had come, and they were just like a pile of garbage on top of Dong Shan's wedding."<sup>32</sup> When in the middle of this same wedding, the couple being married is so overcome with lust that they run off to an adjoining bedroom and start having sex, and the sound of them on the bed is described as "...much like the sound of brushing one's teeth."<sup>33</sup> In an inventive scene in "Summer Typhoons" Yu Hua uses language metaphors and plays with euphemism:

Her body lay down, and those two hands started to speak to her clothes. That body rose up and lay on top of her body. One body was using stale clichés to call out to the other body. ...Something entered into her body. She ought to be able to remember. The words

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<sup>29</sup> Yu Hua, "Xiaji taifeng" (Summer typhoons), p. 22.

<sup>30</sup> Yu Hua, "Nantao jieshu" (Inescapable calamities), p. 68.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

were familiar, a sentence that never tired of being used again and again entered her body...<sup>34</sup>

### Narrative contradiction in "This Story is Dedicated to the Young Woman Yang Liu"

Yu Hua also uses narrative contradictions, unreliable narrators, and other tools to play with the conventions of literary and narrative reality and to undermine the concept of one truth/one reality by creating many simultaneous realities. This is particularly evident in "This Story is Dedicated to the Young Woman Yang Liu."

In this story Yu Hua experiments with time, memory, and narrative truth. This is the story of the first-person narrator, a man who greatly fears interaction with the common rabble and who lives in a house by the river in a town called the Little Town of Smoke [*Xiao cheng yan*], a clear reference to the ephemeral nature of reality in this story.

The plot is quite complex and contradictory, but among the stories presented is that of Yang Liu. An unusual companion enters the first-person narrator's life one night. Perhaps she is a figment of his imagination, a reification of a memory, or some ghostlike apparition. It is not entirely clear. She sits by the window and watches the river. After having an argument with her about her ceaseless pacing at night, the narrator meets her gaze and begins to make out her previously invisible features and then begins to cry. He continues crying for an extremely long time and starts to go blind. As his blindness increases, her form becomes temporarily clearer. Finally, after his tears have stopped, he decides that he is happy with her and that he must go and buy some curtains so that they can cover the windows and begin their new life together. His vision is so impaired, however, that on the way to buy curtains, he gets into an accident and finds himself in the hospital. When he recovers from his injuries, he is moved to a hospital in Shanghai where

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<sup>34</sup> Yu Hua, "Xiaji taifeng" (Summer typhoons), p. 27.

he receives a cornea transplant which, according to a nurse, was from a young woman called Yang Liu who had died of leukemia not long ago in the same hospital. His vision is restored and he returns to the Little Town of Smoke. Years later, he comes across a piece of paper on which he had written down the address of Yang Liu's family. He goes to her old home in the residential district of his town and meets her father, who informs him that Yang Liu had never been to Shanghai and had died at home in her sleep some time after a strange ethereal man began visiting her. Her father notes that the narrator's gaze is similar to his daughter's. The narrator sees her photograph and recognizes her as his spirit companion. She had drawn a picture of the ethereal man who had been visiting her, and at the very end of the story, the narrator notices that his alter ego, the Man from out of Town, looks just like this picture.

Earlier, the story of Yang Liu and this man also had been presented. He had also been visited by an invisible female companion, become obsessed with trying to recreate her image on paper, and gradually lost his sight. He, too, had ended up in a hospital in Shanghai and had received Yang Liu's corneas. This time, however, she had supposedly died in a car crash. This story is both recounted to the first-person narrator by the Man from out of Town and narrated in part by an unknown narrator in a separate and even earlier passage.

The most important thing to note when examining this story further is the degree to which contradiction and coincidence are present and to which the normal logic of time is erased. Much of this leads one to think that this whole story is all a case of confused memories colliding, but it is not easy to make sense of it all.

In contrast to the imprecision in representing reality in this story, precise dates (which link the story to the outside world shared by us all) are used throughout. The date of the first person narrator's operation remain constant throughout and match the dates given for the Man from out of Town's operation. What remains quite unclear is the real date of the narratorial present at any given time. For example, near the beginning reference

is made to “May 8, 1988, that day” as if it were in the past.<sup>35</sup> Slightly later, however, when the Man from out of Town argues with the narrator about when ten years ago was, he says that it was 1988, but the narrator claims that 1988 is the present. [p. 114] It is important to note that the narrator visits Yang Liu’s father ten years after his accident and that the Man from out of Town recounts the story of his cornea transplant before the narrator has received his.

Closely connected to this is the fact that, in a sense, the Man from out of Town is the first person narrator’s alter ego (perhaps the narrator in a different time or different reality). For example:

At this time we both stepped up onto the sidewalk. He [the Man from out of Town] started to calmly walk forward. His calmness made me most satisfied with the way I was walking. He walked ahead using a most ordinary way of carrying himself. That was exactly the way I’d acted every time I’d gone out in the past. He walked this way so that he’d blend in with the crowd. His method of concealing himself was exactly the same as mine...

He stopped his walking in front of a house by the side of the river. He took a golden yellow key out of his right pocket. In my right pocket I also had a golden yellow key. He opened that door and went in. When he closed the door, he seemed most careful, and the sound was the sound I’d made in the past whenever I’d left my house. But I didn’t go into this house by the side of the river... [p. 130]

However, strangely enough, in a separate scene (when he is returning from the hospital) the narrator is described as sitting in the same row on the bus as someone whose

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<sup>35</sup> Yu Hua, “Ci wen xiangci shaonü Yang Liu” (This story is dedicated to the young woman Yang Liu), p. 111. Until the end of this chapter, all page numbers given in the text will refer to this source.

actions match those described earlier by the Man from out of Town as his own. [pp. 118, 119, 134] Coincidentally, in this scene the narrator notices that the seat number of the young man whom we recognize as the Man from out of Town is 26, the same as the street number in Yang Liu's address. [p. 148] In other scenes, the Man from out of Town also talks to the narrator as if he were an entirely separate person. [For example, p. 134]

Extremely paradoxical descriptions are given in the scenes where the first-person narrator is with the female apparition that he later discovers looks like Yang Liu:

...right now she was in the kitchen making breakfast for me. I completely ignored the fact that I had no kitchen. Even though I understood this, I really couldn't say that I had no kitchen because she was in the kitchen. [p. 125]

Shortly after gaining this virtual kitchen, he loses his curtains: "When I pulled open the curtains, I realized that I hadn't any curtains." [p. 125] Even stranger, he notices that she has a disembodied gaze: "Although I still couldn't really see her eyes, her gaze was already as clear as could be..." [p. 126]

What really happened? Well, it is possible that these are all the confused and repressed memories of a deceased lover embodied by Yang Liu and jumbled up in the narrator's head... but it is not clear. In fact, there is no "really happened." This kind of ambiguity, on the one hand, represents the confusion of life and of memory (a place where different times exist simultaneously and incompletely) and undermines the convention of having a single ascertainable narrative truth.

## Chapter 3

### Yu Hua and the use of tradition

If we define tradition, as the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* does, as being, “artistic or literary principle(s) based on accumulated experience or continuous usage,” then showing that Yu Hua uses elements of tradition is rather trivial indeed. By writing in a language not of his own making, Chinese, Yu Hua of necessity refers to a linguistic tradition. Obviously, no writer that hopes to be at all intelligible can do otherwise.

I shall not bother to further prove that which is self-evident, but instead will focus on which aspects of pre-modern Chinese literary forms and thought are referred to in Yu Hua’s fiction and on how they are used. Additionally, it will be shown that a number of the postmodernist themes and techniques discussed previously, while not necessarily originating in Chinese tradition, do have parallels there. For the sake of discussion, “pre-modern” will be defined as before the end of the Qing Dynasty (i.e., before 1911). Before beginning this exploration, it is worth briefly examining the role of anti-traditionalism and the use of tradition in Chinese literature of this century and reiterating the connection between the use of tradition and postmodernist literature.

### Twentieth Century Chinese literature and antitraditionalism

Breaking up Chinese literature into the artificially monolithic categories of “traditional” and “modern” may seem to be a highly arbitrary thing to do. However, this dichotomy stems from a reality of Chinese literary history: most writers of “serious” fiction in China after 1919 saw themselves as being intrinsically different from and even opposed to the writers that had come before. In the early years of this century, a conscious movement to reform literature in China began. In 1917 Hu Shi published his “Some Tentative Suggestions for the Reform of Chinese Literature” [Wenxue gailiang chuyi] in



which, among other things, he suggested a variety of ways to rejuvenate Chinese literature and get beyond what he saw as stale, clichéd forms.<sup>1</sup> This was followed by a number of related articles by himself and others. The so-called “literary revolution” had begun. This aspect of the iconoclastic movement generally known as the May Fourth Movement initiated enormous changes in the Chinese literary scene.

In the years that followed, the modern vernacular replaced the classical language as the language of serious literature, traditional literary forms and genres were largely supplanted by new Western forms (particularly the realist short story), and the ideological and stylistic gulf between the writers of the day and what had come before widened. This is not to suggest, however, that no writers during this period made explicit use of Chinese literary tradition (see, for example, Zhang Ailing’s “The Golden Cangue” [Jinsuo ji] and its use of the Qing novel *The Dream of the Red Chamber* [Honglou meng]) but rather that the trend in serious literature was away from that direction.

It is also not clear how fully removed from the tradition this whole process of antitraditionalism was. Some have also pointed to the paradox inherent in the iconoclasm of the May Fourth Movement and claimed that “totalistic iconoclasm” and the belief in the primacy of cultural change had their origins in Chinese traditional thought.<sup>2</sup>

In the years immediately following the communist revolution of 1949, the gulf between the literature of the day and the literature of even a hundred years ago became greater still. A foreign brand of literature, socialist realism, held sway, and during the Cultural Revolution [1966-1976] there were numerous attempts to wipe out the last vestiges of Chinese tradition. Anything old was “feudal” [*fengjian*] and, hence, bad. The notion that one could incorporate aspects of classical fiction in one’s writing as a means of

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<sup>1</sup> Hu Shi, “Wenxue gailiang chuyi” (Some tentative suggestions for the reform of Chinese literature), *Xin qingnian* (1917, no. 1).

<sup>2</sup> Lin Yü-sheng, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness – Radical Antitraditionalism in the May Fourth Era* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1979).

enrichment was simply not entertained. After 1976 this anti-traditionalist bias slowly lessened, but immediate post-Mao literature was very much concerned with the realist depiction of events in the post-revolutionary past and, for the most part, did not look further back. However, around the middle of the eighties, some writers, such as Han Shaogong and Ah Cheng, loosely described as nativist [*xiangtu*] or as part of the “search for roots school” [*xungenpai*] began to look to Chinese tradition, peasants, and ethnic minorities for the origins of both the good and the bad in Chinese society. Somewhat more recently, other younger writers such as Yu Hua, Su Tong, and Ye Zhaoyan have started to make greater use of words and phrasing from early vernacular and classical Chinese and have looked to a variety of pre-modern Chinese literary forms for inspiration.<sup>3</sup>

#### Tradition in postmodernist literature

Earlier, reference was made to the importance of the parodic reincorporation of elements of tradition in postmodernist literature. The following passage by Linda Hutcheon was also cited: “... most of these postmodern contradictory texts are also specifically parodic in their intertextual relation to the traditions and conventions of the genres involved. When Eliot recalled Dante or Virgil in *The Wasteland*, one sensed a kind of wishful call to continuity beneath the fragmented echoing. It is precisely this that is contested in postmodern parody where it is often ironic discontinuity that is revealed at the heart of continuity, difference at the heart of similarity.”<sup>4</sup>

In the context of Yu Hua’s fiction, if not in all postmodernist literature, it is perhaps better to see this discontinuity not as a gap but, rather, as a sharp change in alignment. In mathematics, it is possible for a function to produce a *connected* line that

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Su Tong, “Qiqie cheng qun” (Wives and concubines), *Shouhuo* (1989, no. 6).

<sup>4</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth Century Art Forms* (Methuen, 1985) cited in Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism – History, Theory, Fiction* (Routledge, 1988), p. 11.

owing to sharp changes in direction would be considered discontinuous by the mathematical definition of continuity. Furthermore, it is not always clear whether this discontinuity is being revealed or created. Yu Hua uses many forms of Chinese tradition, ranging from images, symbols, literary genres and norms, and religious and philosophical concepts. Sometimes, he does indeed engage in the clear negation of norms, but in many other cases he simply uses these elements in new and redirected ways that do not necessarily imply complete negation or conceptual gaps. “The Affairs of the World Are Like Smoke” provides the most extended and clear example of the use of and reference to elements of tradition in often radically redirected ways.

“The Affairs of the World Are Like Smoke” – reincorporation beyond the framework

The river as the symbol of “the stream of life” and of the course of fate is introduced very early in the story. The first part of the first chapter introduces this symbol and, in traditional Chinese storytelling fashion, foreshadows much of what is to come. This is particularly evident in the following passage: “A young girl died. Her corpse lay in the mud. A young girl went insane. Her body turned ethereal. From start to finish Master Fortune-teller sat in that dark room, seemingly foreseeing all — the *shwa shwa* sound of a narrow river flowing in the mist, a peach tree blossoming forth in brilliant pink on the riverbank.”<sup>5</sup> Much later in the story, 6’s daughter is found lying dead on the riverbank by a peach tree. 4 drowns herself in the river and the story ends with 4 and the Blind Man’s bodies resurfacing and with a description of, “... a peach tree blossoming forth in brilliant pink on the riverbank.”<sup>6</sup>

The river is an apt metaphor for fate and for life because it can be both the source of life and death (e.g., floods) and it, like the passage of time and the passing away of life

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<sup>5</sup> Yu Hua, “The Affairs of the World Are Like Smoke,” pp. 44, 45.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

energies (the prevention of which is the prime obsession of Master Fortune-teller) flows on inexorably, guided by its banks. This is reiterated in a vision that Midwife has after her visit to the spirit world and shortly before her death: "Afterwards, she saw a river. As if solidified, the waters of the river were neither churning nor tossing. Some people and vehicles were floating on the river. She also saw a road, but the road was flowing and on it a few boats were sailing. The sails raised by these boats looked just like ragged feathers stuck in there."<sup>7</sup> In this vision, the symbol of the river is combined with a bizarre reversal of reality to show the topsy-turvy nature of Midwife's world. The road flows like a river and the river is like a road. Nothing is as it ought to be (or perhaps there is even no "ought to be") yet, on the other hand, this state of affairs is linked with a symbol of fate, the river. Perhaps the implication is that the world is fated to be filled with suffering.

The final scene, in which 4 drowns herself in the river, completes what has been predestined. First, leaning against a *wutong* tree (a Chinese parasol tree) she strips herself naked in a scene which is described in a manner highly reminiscent of the scene in which she is stripped naked by Master Fortune-teller. The *wutong* tree, "is regarded as the tree par excellence, favoured by the phoenix when it wishes to alight."<sup>8</sup> The phoenix is often metaphorically associated with those possessed of divine virtue.<sup>9</sup> She then enters the water, which for her is comfortable, "... making her feel as if she were putting on a new piece of clothing,"<sup>10</sup> and so this phoenix, this girl drowns. Significantly, her body later floats to the surface near a peach tree in full bloom. The peach is the symbol of longevity and immortality. Master Fortune-teller has earlier drained life energy from her so as to extend his own life. In another sense, peach blossoms also evoke memories of Tao

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>8</sup> Wolfram Eberhard, *A Dictionary of Chinese Symbols* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), p. 316.

<sup>9</sup> *Ci Hai* (Ocean of words) (Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 1989), vol.1, p. 899.

<sup>10</sup> Yu Hua, "The Affairs of the World Are Like Smoke," p. 105.

Yuanming's tale of utopia, "Peach Blossom Spring" [Taohua yuan], perhaps pointing to 4's escape from the cares of this cruel world.

The fact that the outcome is predicted in the very beginning and that the story merely serves to display the unfolding of what was fated both emphasizes the futility of existence and structurally replicates many traditional Chinese stories. In much of traditional fiction, a chapter or story would begin with a poem which would outline or, at least, allude to certain aspects of what was to come. Moreover, the similarities by no means end there. In "The Affairs of the World Are Like Smoke," Yu Hua draws heavily upon the Chinese tradition of stories of the supernatural and fantastic. The stories of the *zhiguai* genre that flourished during the Six Dynasties period (A. D. 222-589) provided many of the basic elements of Chinese fantastic fiction and exerted unquestionable influence over later writers. Many of the important phenomena described in the *zhiguai* and later genres are to be found in "The Affairs of the World Are Like Smoke."

In the introduction to his work *Classical Chinese Tales of the Supernatural and the Fantastic*, Karl S. Y. Kao provides a typology of the phenomena found in *zhiguai* fiction:

1. Portents and augury...
2. Necromantic communion: manifestations of ghosts and spirits and pneumatological communication.
3. Animistic phenomena: manifestations of animal transformations and transformations of the inanimate objects of nature...
4. Communion with transcendent beings...
5. Thaumaturgic phenomena: manifestations of magic feats and transformations associated with *fangshi* and Taoist magicians.
6. Retributive phenomena... <sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Karl S. Y. Kao, ed., *Classical Chinese Tales of the Supernatural and the Fantastic* (Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 5.

Practically all of these classes of phenomena are represented in "The Affairs of the World Are Like Smoke." The first category includes premonitory dreams, and such are found in this story. Driver's dream about the Woman-in-Grey is a clear example of this. The fish-eating ghosts obviously fall into category two. Hemp is temporarily transformed into noodles by these ghosts and fed to Midwife. This falls into the third category. The fifth category is represented by Master Fortune-teller and his life-extending methods and pursuit of immortality. This human obsession probably sees its fullest pre-modern expression in Chinese religious Daoism and alchemy, and Yu Hua's negative representation of it is a clear reference to tradition.

Kao also points out that, "... a marriage between a human and the spirit of a dead person (involving an after-life sexual union) and the transmission of a message from the world beyond to the human world through dreams are the most frequently encountered situations in *zhiguai* tales."<sup>12</sup> The visits from the afterworld by Driver's spirit in the dreams of his mother and, later, 2 are clear examples of the second situation, and the outcome of these visits, the marriage of the ashes of 6's daughter to the ashes of Driver, is but a modification of the first.

Yu Hua, however, does far more than simply incorporate and vivify these elements of traditional fiction in a story of a similar type. He is not just writing another story in the same vein but is, rather, subverting the tradition as he uses it. Most of the traditional Chinese tales of the supernatural and fantastic are mundanely reassuring in their reaffirmation of the order of things. It may be an order of things based on Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism or some syncretic combination but it is, nonetheless, an order of things. Furthermore, in keeping with their origins in Chinese historiography the traditional tales are often quite moralistic in tone. At the very least, they proffer some small kernel of supposed wisdom. In "The Affairs of the World Are Like Smoke" any order that there

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

may be is consistently obscured by the purposeful blurring of the lines between illusion and reality. This confusing world is described as being incredibly cruel and basically meaningless. There is, in a sense, an order of things in the structure of predestination contained in the story but it is a strangely arbitrary order. There are no reasons given or even hinted at for the existence of suffering in this life other than the inherent cruelty of this world. It just is that way.

One could see "The Affairs of the World are like Smoke" as being, in a sense, a cautionary tale about the dangers of believing in soothsayers and their ilk (allegorically representing Mao Zedong or the Chinese Communist Party, perhaps). However, there is a profound lack of clarity in this regard. Is Master Fortune-teller purely a charlatan? His advice to Driver turns out to be basically correct. Driver is warned that he has one foot in the grave and that in order to avert death he should always stop his truck immediately should he see a woman wearing grey. He fails to do so, and he does die. 7 is told by Master Fortune-teller that in order to cure his chronic illness he should give up his son. The reader knows that this is just a trick on the part of Master Fortune-teller so that he can get another son to extend his own life. Yet after 7's son leaves, 7's illness does indeed improve (only to be replaced by deep depression, however).

In addition to this profound lack of clarity, there is a strangely skewed sense of retribution. For example, Kao writes that, "... the working of retribution often takes the form of a good turn done to a supernatural being by a human who is later rewarded unexpectedly for what he did."<sup>13</sup> Midwife's only reward for helping the ghost mother give birth is sickness and death. In contrast, retribution is not forthcoming for evildoers such as Master Fortune-teller. It is not even hinted at as a possibility, and all information in the story points to Master Fortune-teller continuing to extend his life and ruin the lives of others. All of this is consonant with the postmodernist undermining of the belief in

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

underlying meaning in life and is a radical departure from modern Chinese literature of social concerns as well as classical Chinese fiction.

However, the negation of traditional concepts is by no means complete. The description of the destruction of beauty in this story is disturbing and sad. Hence, there is an underlying assumption that there is indeed beauty and that it is of value. Similarly, if the story truly succeeds in destroying the belief in the value of justice, order, and life itself, then it destroys its effect. If the reader does not believe that there should be some meaning in life, then this story is neither disturbing nor even particularly interesting.

Yu Hua's use of traditional literary forms, imagery, and symbolism in this story acts both as a reference to the roots of Chinese culture (and, hence, despite the often radical change of perspective, to a certain connection to the past) and as a form of enrichment. However, unlike "Fresh Blood Plum Blossoms" [Xianxue meihua], this story does not focus on a single aspect of traditional thought nor on a single genre.

#### "Fresh Blood Plum Blossoms" – turning a genre on its head

Knight-errant fiction (*wuxia xiaoshuo*) has a very long history in China. This genre in narrative fiction dates from the Tang dynasty, when many of the prototypical knight-errant stories first appeared in the form of short stories written in the classical language. Stories of this and related genres have continued to be written until the present day (particularly in Hong Kong and Taiwan) and are an important part of Chinese popular culture. In an article on the depiction of the knight errant, Y. W. Ma writes:

The Chinese knight-errant catches our fancy as a man of atypical prowess (regardless of his outward build), fascinatingly skilled in the use of arms and equally adept in hand to hand combat, one who would enlist, rarely with second thoughts, his physical strength, and sometimes financial resources as well, to right wrongs for the poor or



oppressed with whom he may not have any previous connections at all.<sup>14</sup>

For the sake of this discussion, the following, more inclusive definition will suffice: knight-errant stories are those stories concerned with the deeds of men and sometimes women with exceptional martial prowess (sometimes accentuated or even replaced with magical abilities) who often, but not always, fight on behalf of the powerless and downtrodden.

Yu Hua's short story "Fresh Blood Plum Blossoms" is essentially an anti-knight errant story. In this story, he sets up a variety of false expectations both through initially adopting many of the conventions of the *wuxia* genre and through false foreshadowing and then proceeds to disappoint them all.

"Fresh Blood Plum Blossoms" is the story of a young man, Ruan Haikuo, and his quest to avenge his father's death. Fifteen years ago, when Ruan Haikuo was still a child, his father, a renowned knight errant, was mysteriously killed in the night. His body was later discovered with daggers stuck in his eyes. When Ruan Haikuo comes of age, his mother gives him his father's magic sword, Plum Blossom, a sword that is described in a narrative aside as follows:

If the Plum Blossom Sword should become covered in blood, one need only lightly shake it and blood will whirl away from the blade like snowflakes. All that will be left is a single drop that will remain on the sword forever and will take the form of a miniature plum blossom.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Y. W. Ma, "The Chinese Knight-Errant in *Hua-Pen* Stories," *T'oung Pao* (vol. LXI, 4-5), p. 269.

<sup>15</sup> Yu Hua, "Xianxue meihua" (Fresh blood plum blossoms), *Renmin wenxue* (1989, no. 3), p. 62. Magic weapons are indeed quite common in *wuxia* stories. See, for example, "Governor Zheng Accomplishes a Great Service with a Mighty Bow" [Zheng jieshi ligong shen bigong] from Feng Menglong's anthology *Xingshi hengyan* (Lasting

She then tells him that in order to discover who killed his father, he should ask either the Daoist Master of the Azure Clouds [Qingyun Daozhang] or the warrior Bai Yuxiao, and that he must avenge his father. She sets fire to herself and her home, and her son sets out on his quest. The revenge quest is very much a part of the tradition, and many knight-errant stories deal with exacting revenge.<sup>16</sup>

In his search, he wanders far and wide and meets Madame Rouge [Yanzhi nü], a heavily made-up woman whose body is covered in a powder so poisonous that merely standing near her will cause one to drop dead, and Black Needle [Heizhen Daxia], an expert at creating darkness through magical means. Madame Rouge wants the protagonist to ask the Master of the Azure Clouds about the whereabouts of Liu Tian, and Black Needle wants him to ask about the location of Li Dong. Ruan Haikuo wanders aimlessly for a long time and finally comes across Bai Yuxiao. However, Ruan Haikuo fails to recognize him, and when Bai Yuxiao asks him who he is looking for, he can only think of the Master of the Azure Clouds and, thus, misses this opportunity. Later, he meets up with the Master of the Azure Clouds and asks about the whereabouts of Liu Tian and Li Dong, but then, before he has a chance to ask about who killed his father, the Master of the Azure Clouds says that he will answer only *two* questions and then leaves. Ruan Haikuo wanders and wanders and eventually meets up with Black Needle and Madame Rouge and relays the answers to their questions. Finally, he meets Bai Yuxiao again and asks who killed his father. Bai Yuxiao tells him that Liu Tian and Li Dong killed his father, but that he need not worry about them because they have already been taken care of by Madame Rouge and Black Needle. The protagonist has failed to personally exact revenge or even to

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words to awaken the world), first published in 1627. This story is discussed in Y. W. Ma, pp. 279, 280.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, "Woman Warrior" [Xia nü] from Pu Songling's *Liaozhai zhiyi* (Tales of the unusual from the leisure studio) (Taibei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 1956), pp. 58-61. In this short story a woman avenges her father by killing a man who had falsely accused her father and thus caused him to be executed.

actively cause it to come about and thus, following the code of honour of the genre, he has failed.

The two things about this story that first strike the reader are that there is practically no action (or, more precisely, all the action is described peripherally) and that almost everything that does happen seems to happen entirely because of coincidence. Fortunately, this story is quite short (only seven double column pages) or else it would be unbearably dull. Most of the story is taken up with repetitive descriptions of the protagonist's random wandering.

In most knight-errant stories much emphasis is given to the description of action, particularly fight scenes, and to their gory aftermath. In "Fresh Blood Plum Blossoms" events typical to the genre do indeed occur: old enemies return for a battle with a great swordsman (Ruan Haikuo's father) and warriors with supernatural powers vanquish their foes. However, these incidents are related indirectly, the protagonist is never part of them, and the description remains highly removed. For example, all that we know of the protagonist's father's death is related through these disjointed images and vague rememberings:

...[his father's death] was the vague happening of some fifteen years ago. In the memories of Ruan Jinwu's son, Ruan Haikuo, from when he was five, the sky was filled with bloodied leaves fluttering about...

...she [his mother] had already had a vague premonition about an image of her husband lying in the sunlight. Fifteen years ago, on that quiet morning, that scene came true to life. Ruan Jinwu was lying on his back in that bunch of yellowed grass with his limbs spread out signifying a kind of helplessness. From his eyes a pair of black-handled daggers jutted out. A few leaves that had fallen from a desolate tree by his side fluttered about his head; the leaves were

covered with fresh blood. Afterwards, she saw her son, Ruan Haikuo, pick up those leaves.<sup>17</sup>

However, this description does serve to create a sense of mystery and aids in establishing a typical quest. It is in the description of the deaths of his father's killers that the conventions of the genre are most fully negated:

After Bai Yuxiao heard this, he once again smiled ever so slightly and told him [the protagonist], "There were two people responsible for your father's death, one called Liu Tian and one called Li Dong. Three years ago on the way to Mount Hua they died at the hands of Madame Rouge and Black Needle, respectively." [p. 69]

This is the totality of the description of their death. There is no action and no gore. Following this, we are shown the disappointing truth about the Plum Blossom sword. Those red specks are not magically appearing plum blossoms, just specks of rust. [p. 69] This absurdly anticlimactic ending is the culmination of our false expectations, expectations born of both generic conventions and what could be called false foreshadowing.

The story begins by establishing the motivation for an archetypal quest. Ruan Haikuo's father's sword takes on an important symbolic value when his mother tells him that, "There are already ninety-nine fresh blood plum blossoms on the sword, and she hoped that the blood of the enemy who killed her husband would make up a fresh plum blossom on the blade of this sword." [p. 63] At this point in the story the protagonist is described as weak and incapable. The expectation that the story will follow the rite of passage archetype and that he will face many dangers but finally overcome them, avenge his father's death, and become a man comes both from the genre and from various aspects of foreshadowing. The majestic imagery which links the sun, his mother's self-immolating

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<sup>17</sup> Yu Hua, "Fresh Blood Plum Blossoms," pp. 62, 63. Until the next reference, all page numbers given in the text will refer to this work.

fire, and the image of Ruan Haikuo as he sets out presages something of the order of a mythic quest:

When he was walking down the road, he couldn't help but look back.  
He saw that the hut that he had just left had become the colour of the red sun. Red flames danced gracefully about the hut in the morning breeze. In the sky behind the hut, dawn was also fiercely flaming...In the days that stretched out from this point there would no longer be a place to call home... [p. 63]

However, nothing happens. He neither overcomes dangers nor succumbs to them.

At the point when he sets out on his quest, the story has not greatly deviated from the generic tradition.<sup>18</sup> As the story progresses, however, it becomes increasingly obvious that Yu Hua is playing with the genre and, at times, even satirizing it. For example, the inclusion of warriors with bizarre magical powers, which are often outlined in narrative asides is very common in the genre and also appears in "Fresh Blood Plum Blossoms." However, in this story their powers are vaguely ridiculous. Madame Rouge is described as follows:

Madame Rouge was the second worldly master of poison. Her entire body was plastered with exceedingly poisonous pollen. Should this pollen permeate outward, anyone within three metres would be poisoned and would die. [p. 65]

She wears heavy make-up and since this pollen [*huafen*] could also be a reference to women's toiletries in general, the impression one gets is that of a woman who wears far too much perfume. Black Needle, at first, seems more sinister:

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<sup>18</sup> In fact, even the language is classically flavoured. This linguistic flavouring continues throughout, and the diction is quite different from other works by Yu Hua.

Amongst men of the sword, Black Needle's fame hovers near that of Madame Rouge, and he has been a powerful member of the fraternity of arms for almost ten years now. He is a first rate expert at creating darkness, especially at night, when he is right on the mark every time. His instrument for creating darkness is none other than his head of black hair. As soon as any hair leaves his head, it becomes as straight and rigid as a black needle. When it shoots out into the night, not the slightest bit of light is left. As a result of years as a wandering adventurer, the hair on his head has started to present a rather desolate sight. [p. 65]

Is there not something vaguely ridiculous about his ability to make dark nights dark? And what about the image of his balding head?

The use of bizarre coincidences as the sole means of propelling the story forward is both a satirical statement and a means of illustrating the theme of the meaninglessness and arbitrariness of life. In knight-errant stories coincidence is often used to propel the plot forward. However, this story takes it to new and ridiculous extremes. For example, it is only through a string of random occurrences that the protagonist stumbles upon Black Needle. First, "Before dawn, Ruan Haikuo woke up as if he were a window that had been blown open by the wind." Then, the sound of horses outside makes him think of the road, so he leaves the inn where he was sleeping and sets out by moonlight. Following this, he is inexplicably attracted to a little path along the river and, half-unaware of what he is doing, follows this path and comes to a village. At the entrance to the village there is a well, and Black Needle is sitting under a tree near this well. [pp. 65, 66] Had any one of these events not happened, he would almost certainly not have met Black Needle. Nothing the protagonist accomplishes is accomplished because of his ability or effort. There also seems to be no motivation for events. He is described as, "...like the wind blowing along the ground, moving along as it pleases," [p. 64] and this is an apt description.

This kind of an experimental anti-story is difficult to analyse for meaning beyond that inherent in undertaking the reversal of norms. It is clearly pointing to the ridiculous aspects in the genre and to the meaninglessness of certain Chinese ideas such as the responsibility of revenge. More generally it points to a highly random notion of life – things happen because they happen. It succeeds as a readable experiment because there is some interesting imagery, some of the satiric elements do show imagination, and because it is short. Unlike in “The Affairs of the World Are Like Smoke,” Yu Hua does not take the ideas of the genre and use them in something that goes beyond the genre. An anti-genre is always highly bound by the original conventions of the genre itself by the very fact that it is its opposite.

One should not neglect to mention that there is great precedent in traditional Chinese literature for overturning the conventions of the knight-errant genre. For example, Y. W. Ma points to a story in the *huaben* tradition called “Yang Wen, the Road-Blocking Tiger” [Yang Wen lanluhu zhuan] and illustrates how the protagonist of this story, Yang Wen, fails to live up to the expectations attendant on being a knight-errant. Y. W. Ma writes:

Yang is the scion of the arch-patriotic hero Yang Ye whose descendants provide the Song Dynasty with generation after generation of mighty male and female generals. His father is a great general in his own right. Even his father-in-law is a high military officer. It is only natural for Yang Wen to be exceedingly qualified in martial arts. The storyteller elaborates this point as the story begins, to make sure that this message is not missed. But then incident happens after incident to discredit Yang’s credentials while the story continues to honour his status as a knight-errant at the same time.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Y. W. Ma, “The Chinese Knight-Errant in *Hua-Pen* Stories,” p. 290.

“Classical Love” – a modern *chuanqi*

Yu Hua’s story “Classical Love” [Gudian aiqing] is neither a clear negation nor a simple satire of the norms inherent in the classical Chinese stories that form its basis. It is similar to “Fresh Blood Plum Blossoms” in that, unlike “The Affairs of the World Are Like Smoke,” it does not use an eclectic selection of elements from traditional Chinese literature, but, rather, adopts a traditional form (and, to a certain extent, pre-modern language) and stays well within this form for the bulk of the story.

This story combines a number of themes that are part of both Tang *chuanqi*, earlier *zhiguai*, stories by later writers such as Pu Songling, and poetry: it follows the life of a failed scholar, and it deals with lovers who through circumstances are kept from happy union,<sup>20</sup> the strength of love in the face of separation and adversity, the ghostly lover, and the reuniting of lovers after one of them has died.<sup>21</sup>

The story begins when Liu Sheng, the son of an impoverished scholar, sets out for the capital to write the civil service examinations and bring glory to the family name. He hopes to succeed where his deceased father failed. En route to the capital, he comes upon a bustling and prosperous city. Chance brings him into the beautiful garden of a great family where a series of fortuitous events allows him to meet and fall in love with an exceptionally beautiful young lady. He spends the night and promises to return after writing the exams. She gives him some silver and a lock of her hair. He later fails the exams and returns to find that, only months later, all that is left of the estate where his beloved lived are ruins overgrown with weeds. This kind of discovery is typical in depictions of encounters with fox-fairies (magical fox-like creatures who sometimes take human form, usually that of a

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<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Lin Daiyu and Jia Baoyu in Cao Xueqin’s *The Dream of the Red Chamber* [Honglou meng].

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Li Jingliang, “Li Zhangwu” in *Taiping Guangji* (340.3) for afterlife union, translated in Kao, pp. 197-204. The whole ghostly lover topic receives a section in Y. W. Ma and Joseph S. M. Lau, eds., *Traditional Chinese Stories – Themes and Variations* (Cheng and Tsui, 1986).



beautiful and bewitching woman). In such stories, often a character becomes lost and comes across a great mansion or exquisite garden where he meets a beautiful woman only to return later and find a graveyard or ruins.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, Karl S. Y. Kao notes that, "...many of the Tang *zhiguai* feature a hero who becomes the experiencer of the strange events often right after he has failed the civil service exam...",<sup>23</sup> and this is similar to the case of Liu Sheng.

Three years later, Liu Sheng sets out for the capital again. Horrible scenes of drought and starvation follow and Yu Hua engages in some typically bizarre black humour. For example, Liu Sheng notices that: "The trees along the road were covered in scars; they had all been gnawed on by humans. There were a few trees that still had some teeth stuck in them. Probably some people had used too much force and their teeth had been left in the trees."<sup>24</sup> Shortly afterwards, he sees, "... ten or more people crawling about on the grass, their rear-ends jutting up as they urgently munched away at the grass..." [p. 246]

When Liu Sheng reaches the formerly bustling city that he had come across last time, he finds it in serious decline. Men sell their wives and daughters to butchers who chop up these women while they are still living for sale as food. He flees this truly horrible scene and comes upon an inn in the countryside. A merchant comes in and orders fresh meat. In the back room the leg of a still living woman is chopped off and the meat is prepared as food. Liu Sheng soon discovers that this woman is none other than his beloved.

She asks him to buy back her leg and then to kill her so as to take her out of her misery. Using the last remnants of the silver she had given him, he does so and then

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<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Huangfu Mei, "Zhang Zhifang," in *Taiping Guangji* (455.1), translated in Kao, pp. 371-379.

<sup>23</sup> Karl S. Y. Kao, p. 43.

<sup>24</sup> Yu Hua, "Classical Love," in *Shishi ru yan* (The affairs of the world are like smoke), (Taipei: Yuanliu chuban gongsi, 1991), p. 246. All page numbers given in this subsection refer to this work.

buries her body by the river. Following this, he tends graves for a wealthy family in order to survive but eventually tires of tending the graves of strangers. He later returns to the city of old and finds that it is prosperous again. He comes upon a strikingly familiar estate, and, much like in the past, he enters its garden and hears the voice of a young lady. However, this time he is driven away by a maid. Finally, he decides to live in a hut by his beloved's grave and sell tea in order to survive. His beloved comes to him at night but disappears before daybreak. He uncovers her grave and finds her whole and un-rotten body. The next night she come to him again, but she tells him that since he had uncovered her grave, her attempt to come alive has been thwarted and this will be the last time he will ever see her.<sup>25</sup>

Superficially, aside from the occasional episodes of black humour and the regular use of modern Chinese, this story follows classical models quite closely. Its central theme of impermanence, suffering, and illusion in life, although not part of all pre-modern fiction, does have its origins in Buddhist thought and does find expression in numerous classical stories. However, Yu Hua subverts or, at the very least, mutates the original form in a few ways. He juxtaposes classical stock phrases and clichéd imagery with his own very different method of description. This is particularly evident in the sensual scene in which Liu Sheng comes to meet the beautiful young mistress of the great, yet ethereal, house. The mansion, its garden, and the young mistress are described using four character set phrases and other classical formulaic methods. For example, the garden is described as “exquisite and refined [*linglong jingzhi*]” [p. 232] and the young mistress is “fair, slim and graceful [*tingting yuli*]” and has “golden clothing, jade body [*jinyi yushen*]” and a “little cherry mouth [*yingtao xiaokou*].” [pp. 236, 236, 232, respectively] However, more inventive passages, usually in more modern-sounding Chinese, are interspersed amongst

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<sup>25</sup> An exact reversal of a similar scene in the Ming Dynasty play *The Peony Pavilion* [Mudan ting] by Tang Xianzu.

these formulaic descriptions. For example, these water metaphors parallel the rainstorm going on during this scene: "Although the young mistress' voice was as lissom as trickling water, Liu Sheng was still able to immerse himself in it. A smile came to his face, and the smile undulated like a wave..." [p. 234] and, later, "Liu Sheng saw that a volume of poetry was lying open on the desk. He continued reading from where the young mistress had been reading from just a while ago. Every word jumped about just like the rain outside the window." [p. 237]

These kinds of metaphors are not at all shocking or bizarre. However, they do work to create a certain dichotomy in the scene, a dichotomy between traditional (and, in this case, clichéd) and modern (or at least more typical of Yu Hua in his other stories) modes of description. This dichotomy is paralleled in this scene by the dichotomies of real/false, dream/reality, and *ying/yang*. Reality and unreality intermingle, foreshadowing the ephemeral nature of the garden and the beautiful woman in it: "The young mistress had left, but her scent remained. Amidst the fragrant smell of the ink used for seals, Liu Sheng could distinguish another kind of refined, subtle scent. That scent faded in and out, as if real, as if false." [p. 237]

After she leaves the room that he is in, Liu Sheng projects his fantasies about her onto inanimate objects, and slowly the distinctions between fantasy and reality fade: "Liu Sheng walked up in front of the plum blossom canopy. He could smell the fragrant scent of ink. That jadeite green quilt seemed to be lying there on its back like a person... Liu Sheng stood in front of the bed for a while and then let down the plum blossom canopy. The canopy in his hands seemed as smooth as the young mistress' skin." [p. 237] Enraptured by the thought of her, he is lulled to sleep by the sound of the rain. When he is woken by her, he is at first unable to distinguish her from his dreams and fantasies and is unsure as to whether or not she is real: "The young mistress' hair was somewhat tousled and some leftover make-up was visible on her face. Despite looking like this, she was even more tantalizing than just before. For a while, Liu Sheng thought this was just an

image in a dream. Only when he heard the young mistress speaking did he know that this scene was real.” [p. 238]

From Liu Sheng’s perspective, there is a feeling of unreality about this garden and about the young mistress. It almost seems as if he is real, while she belongs to the world of fantasy. Certainly, one can read the story as if she is an embodiment of his desires and does not even “really” exist. However, what are, depending on how one interprets this story, either his fantasies or elements of the spirit world do have effects on the mundane world. After he leaves her presence, he still has the lock of her hair and the silver. Furthermore, this silver is real enough for him to use it to survive on. [p. 245]

This contrast between these two realities is paralleled by other dualities, for example the *yin-yang* pair. Karl S. Y. Kao points out that the interrelationship between the spirit world and the real world is often seen in such dualist terms (usually, light [*ming*] and dark [*you*]).<sup>26</sup> In “Classical Love,” the young mistress and Liu Sheng’s embrace is described as the coming together of *yin* and *yang*, and for a short time, fantasy becomes real as the spirit world melds with the mundane world, and they cannot distinguish between each other. [p. 239] This kind of dualism is also evident in the Qing dynasty novel *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, in which the ebb and flow between real and false forms a central motif.<sup>27</sup> That novel was set largely in a garden similar to the one described in “Classical Love.”

All of these dichotomies (including the traditional stock imagery/modern-sounding inventive imagery one) are present to a certain extent throughout the story. They and the story are held together by two important threads, the river and the yellow road that Liu Sheng follows. Previously, we have seen the use of the river as a symbol for fate and for the course of life in “The Affairs of the World Are Like Smoke.” In “Classical Love” the

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<sup>26</sup> Karl S. Y. Kao, p. 8.

<sup>27</sup> See Andrew H. Plaks, *Archetype and Allegory in the Dream of the Red Chamber* (Princeton University Press, 1976) for a treatment of this topic.

river also has these values. It is also the constant against which the passing away of time is measured.

The river parallels the flow of Liu Sheng's life. He repeatedly comes to the river, and he ends up living by it. Furthermore, the young mistress is mirrored in the river by a white minnow that Liu Sheng sees on numerous occasions. The parallel between this fish and his desires becomes evident very early in the story when he first sees it: "A white minnow was swimming to and fro all alone. That swaying body was most lovely and graceful. Watching the minnow moving, perhaps because the minnow was all alone or because it was so lovely, Liu Sheng felt somewhat melancholy." [p. 229] Later, long after he has met the young mistress, the parallel between her and the minnow becomes more explicit: "Seeing the beauty of the minnow's movements, how could he not think of the young mistress walking gracefully in her quarters?" [p. 264]

The yellow road (*huangse dadao*) that Liu Sheng travels on throughout the story has its parallel in the path of the sun which is also referred to in traditional Chinese cosmology as the yellow road (*huangdao*). As the sun inexorably passes over its path, so the days pass away. This yellow road is a unifying symbol that ties together the numerous references to the impermanence of life. A reincarnation of the Buddhist theme of the impermanence of worldly things is central to "Classical Love" and is reflected both in the story as a whole and in numerous statements on impermanence and ephemerality. Liu Sheng sees the drastic turns of fortune of the city that he passes through periodically. He visits a mansion and finds love only to return and find ruins. Furthermore, statements such as, "the affairs of the world are like smoke," [p. 248] and, "everything in the past was like smoke that had cleared, clouds that had dispersed..." [p. 243] dot the story, and Liu Sheng expresses such sentiments as, "if worldly affairs are so changeable, what are accomplishments and fame worth?" [p. 264] The rejection of the value of worldly

accomplishments is part of both Daoist and Buddhist thought. There are also numerous examples of traditional Chinese stories presenting just this sentiment.<sup>28</sup>

#### Further enrichment and parallels

Of Yu Hua's stories to date, "Classical Love," "Fresh Blood Plum Blossoms," and "The Affairs of the World Are Like Smoke" make the most extensive and obvious use of traditional Chinese models. However, Yu Hua's use and adaptation of traditional elements is by no means limited to these stories. He makes far more use of premodern or, at the very least, pre-revolutionary language and symbolism than most other contemporary Chinese authors. Similarly, visits from ghosts and ethereal, ghostlike lovers are very much a part of his fiction.<sup>29</sup> There are numerous other parallels, particularly with respect to imagery.

The extreme nature of the grotesque and macabre imagery in Yu Hua's fiction may seem to be a new thing for Chinese literature. However, there is much precedent for such imagery in classical Chinese literature. For example, the madman's bizarre fantasies in "1986" may derive from descriptions of Buddhist hells. In "1986" the madman engages in extended and gruesome fantasies that include such descriptions as:

In a great big pot oil was bubbling away. Those people whose bodies were still whole were tossed into the pot like falling rain and a tremendous rending sound burst forth. Frying bodies were thrown up like fish jumping out of the water and then tumbled back in. He saw that those heads in mid-air [from previously decapitated bodies] had

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<sup>28</sup> See, for example, "The World Inside a Pillow" [Zhenzhong ji] from *Wenyuan yinghua* (Fine blossoms from the garden of literature) translated in Ma and Lau, eds., pp. 435-37.

<sup>29</sup> For example, Shan'gang's visit to his wife after his death in "One Kind of Reality" and the ethereal companion in "This Story is Dedicated to the Young Women Yang Liu."

all fallen down to earth and now covered the ground in a thick layer...the bodies in the pot were still frying away.<sup>30</sup>

Compare this to the following description from the Six Dynasties era *zhiguai* story “Zhao Tai and His Experiences in Hell”:

In yet another hell, sinners were cooked in huge cauldrons over hot stoves. Their bodies and heads would come apart and sink, and they would churn about with the boiling water. Demons with pitchforks stood by the side. There were three or four hundred people standing on one side waiting to enter the cauldron; they were seen to embrace each other and cry bitterly. In another, there were countless tall, broadsword trees, the roots, trunks, branches, and leaves all made from swords. A crowd of people were cursing each other, and they would climb up the trees of their own accord, as if delighted to do so.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, the black humour that is so much a part of stories such as “1986,” “One Kind of Reality,” and “Classical Love” has its parallel in the traditional *biji* (jottings) genre in which unusual and interesting happenings and imaginings were briefly recorded. The following passage from a Qing dynasty *biji* written by Pu Songling is a good example of this:

The scholar Mr. Sun Jingxia says that in his city a certain Mr. Jia ran into some roving bandits and was killed. His head fell down in front of his chest. When the bandits retreated, his family took his corpse. As they were carrying it off to be buried, they heard him breathing and

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<sup>30</sup> Yu Hua, “1986”, in *Shiba sui chu men yuan xing* (Leaving home and traveling afar at eighteen) (Taipei: Yuanliu chuban gongsi, 1990), pp. 83, 84.

<sup>31</sup> “Zhao Tai and His Experiences in Hell” from *Taiping Guangji* (377.1), translation by George Lytle in Kao, p. 168.

took a closer look at him. The one whose breath had not stopped stretched out his fingers, took hold of his head and lifted it up and put it back in place. Following this separation, it was not until night came that he started to moan. They fed him a little with a spoon and chopsticks. Half a year later his wound had healed. Over ten years later he got together with a few people for a chat. Someone made a joke and the whole room erupted in laughter. Mr. Jia also clapped. When he lent his head back [in laughter], his scar burst open and blood poured out. Everyone could see that he had died...<sup>32</sup>

This is even reasonably self-referential; the gruesome humour stems from a man who dies laughing.

#### Postmodernist ideas about reality and perception and their Buddhist parallels

The parallels between Yu Hua's fiction and Chinese tradition are by no means limited to literary forms and language. Many of the postmodernist themes in Yu Hua's works that were examined in chapters one and two have their parallels in Buddhist thought. This is particularly the case in the realm of perception and notions of reality. This is not to say, however, that Yu Hua is a Buddhist writer or that postmodernism derives from Buddhism. Idealism also has a long tradition in the West separate from Buddhism. Furthermore, the context in which the postmodernist undermining of metaphysical and epistemological foundations occurs is radically different from the context in which many of these Buddhist views were expounded. Having said this, there are, however, some striking similarities between some postmodernist views and the ideas of certain strains of Buddhism, particularly Chan Buddhism. From the evidence provided in the stories

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<sup>32</sup> Pu Songling, "A Certain Mr. Jia from Town" [Zhucheng moujia] in *Liaozhai zhiyi* (Strange Stories from the Leisure Studio) (Taipei: Yiwu yinshuguan, 1956), p. 110.



discussed above (in particular “Classical Love”) it is clear that Yu Hua has been exposed to these ideas, if only second-hand through literature influenced by Buddhism. Yu Hua explains his way of approaching the truth as follows:

After I discovered that the old attitude towards writing of “considering things as they are” could only lead to superficial truths, I had to go and search out new modes of expression ... I started to use a kind of “false” form. This kind of form left behind the order and logic supplied to me by the immediate world. However, it allowed me to freely approach the truth.<sup>33</sup>

The truth that Yu Hua is trying to approach sounds remarkably like the “ultimate reality” of *Mādhyamika* Buddhism. According to Chang Chung-yuan, “When the *Mādhyamika* (*Sanlun*) Buddhist says that all things are empty, he is not expressing a nihilistic view, but speaking of Ultimate Reality, which cannot be placed in any modern logical system.”<sup>34</sup>

As has been demonstrated earlier, many of Yu Hua’s descriptive methods depend on incongruity and on the rejection of commonsense divisions and connections. These techniques have their parallels in Chan Buddhism, a school of Buddhism that developed partly out of the *Mādhyamika* tradition. According to Kenneth Chen, “The *Linji* branch [of Chan Buddhism] ... follows what may be called the shock therapy, the purpose of which is to jolt the student out of his analytical and conceptual way of thinking and lead him back to his natural and spontaneous faculty.”<sup>35</sup> Strange riddles known as *gong’an* were part of this “shock therapy.” Kenneth Chen describes their purpose as follows: “The *gong’an* is meant to stimulate the student to a realization that logic, reason, and conceptualization are

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<sup>33</sup> Yu Hua, “Xuwei de zuopin” (“False” works) in Yu Hua, *Shishi ru yan* (The affairs of the world are like smoke) (Taipei: Yuanliu chuban gongsi, 1991), p. 7.

<sup>34</sup> Chang Chung-yuan, *Original Teachings of Ch’an Buddhism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969), p. 5.

<sup>35</sup> Kenneth K. S. Chen, *Buddhism in China – A Historical Survey* (Princeton University Press, 1964), p. 359.

stumbling blocks to his awakening and to induce him to resort to resources other than logic and reason..."<sup>36</sup> Such tools as magic realism, black humour, descriptions of extreme violence, incongruous metaphors, and naive perception serve a similar purpose.

However, there is a unity, a foundation that is part of the Chan Buddhist belief system but is not part of postmodernism. Kenneth Chen writes, "When the Chan follower apprehends the Buddha-nature within himself, he experiences an awakening or enlightenment...an awareness of the undifferentiated unity of all existence."<sup>37</sup> That everyone has this Buddha-nature within forms an uncontested foundation.

The constant undermining of foundations and expectations and the blending together of reality, dream, and fantasy that is a part much of Yu Hua's fiction also has its parallel in one of the Chinese philosophical systems that influenced Chan Buddhism, Daoism. This is particularly evident in the works of the Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi. Consider the following passage of his from roughly the third century B.C.:

In the northern darkness there is a fish and his name is Kun. The Kun is so huge I don't know how many thousand *li* he measures. He changes and becomes a bird whose name is Peng. The back of the Peng measures I don't know how many thousand *li* across and, when he rises up and flies off, his wings are like clouds all over the sky. When the sea begin to move, this bird sets off for the southern darkness, which is the Lake of Heaven.

*The Universal Harmony* records various wonders, and it says: "When the Peng journeys to the southern darkness, the waters are roiled for three thousand *li*. He beats the whirlwind and rises ninety thousand *li*, setting off on the sixth-month gale." Wavering heat, bits

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<sup>36</sup> Kenneth K. S. Chen, p. 359 .

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

of dust, living things blown about by the wind – the sky looks very blue. Is that its real color, or is it because it is so far away and has no end?<sup>38</sup>

After seeing that Yu Hua's works have many elements in common with Chinese traditional literature, one might be tempted to dismiss the idea that he is a postmodernist writer. No one would actually say that the three stories discussed in detail in this section are the *same* as the traditional models that they follow, but there are a great number of parallels between the themes and literary methods found in practically all of his stories and traditional Chinese literary methods and philosophical beliefs. This might lead one to see him as simply continuing an indigenous tradition.

The existence of parallels between Yu Hua's works and aspects of Chinese tradition does not, however, prove that Chinese tradition provided the source for all his ideas. In the case of Chan Buddhist ideas, there are many sources for similar ideas that are not Chinese (e.g., Dada, surrealism, Sufi mysticism, etc.). Similarly, there are graphic images of hell in the European tradition (e.g., Dante).

Even if Chinese tradition is the source for these ideas, this does not mean that a foreign conception such as postmodernism cannot be validly applied to Yu Hua's fiction. European and South American postmodernist writers look to both pre-modern and foreign belief systems and literary traditions as sources of ideas, images, and literary forms, and they do this as a way of breaking past modern European thought systems, breaking past rationality, rejecting realism, and wallowing in "otherness." Take for example, Jorge Luis Borges and the use of Cabbalism and Sufi mysticism, and Salman Rushdie and the transplanted use of ancient Indian and Arab thought, history, religion, and imagery in a modern British context.

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<sup>38</sup> Zhuangzi, *Chuang Tzu – Basic Writings* (translated by Burton Watson) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), p. 23.

Yu Hua's turning to pre-modern forms and ideas and writing something like "The Affairs of the World Are Like Smoke" is also a way of breaking past prevailing literary attitudes and the limits of imagination. In modern China the modern tradition of cutting off the pre-1911 tradition and the hegemony of modern, realist, socially-concerned, Western-influenced literature means that by delving into traditional genres as removed from this sphere as *zhiguai*, Yu Hua is radically rejecting the orthodox limitations of his milieu. In a sense, the events of the last seventy years (particularly the Cultural Revolution) have made many aspects of pre-modern Chinese culture more foreign to young Chinese today than foreign notions such as realism.

In dealing with this topic, one must distinguish between parallels which could be accidental, and the clear use of tradition. Few of Yu Hua's works, postmodernist or not, use Chinese tradition in as obvious a manner as "The Affairs of the World Are Like Smoke." However, even if all the thematic parallels discussed earlier are accidental and Yu Hua derived all of his ideas on epistemology and modes of description through personal reflection and/or foreign influence, their existence would serve to prove the point that postmodernism is not entirely alien to Chinese culture. The reality is that postmodernist writers in general do not solely derive their inspiration from aspects of the modern highly industrialised world, but rather transplant mutated plants from the past and from other cultures as a means of going beyond the ways of thinking that grew out of the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution. For Yu Hua, one might substitute May Fourth Movement and Communist Revolution for Renaissance and Industrial Revolution.

## Conclusion

Is Yu Hua really a postmodernist writer? As we have seen, his stories are certainly filled with themes that are consonant with postmodernism, themes such as: society is filled with alienation; human beings are horrible, violent, vicious, and cruel; this world is a random, meaningless place full of suffering; reality, fantasy, and dreams are not as easily distinguished as commonsense would have us believe; there are many different modes of perception.

Many of these themes, however, are present in the works of writers such as Lu Xun and Anton Chekhov. Why aren't these writers postmodernist? There is no question that Lu Xun often expresses an extremely pessimistic view of human (or at least Chinese) nature. Similarly, he often describes alienated characters and the inability to really communicate. These are indeed common aspects of postmodernist literature. However, they are not part of an "if and only if" relation. In other words, in themselves, they do not make a work postmodernist. There is very little questioning of reality or perception in Lu Xun's fiction. "Diary of a Madman" is not at all about perceptions of the physical world. It is about perceptions of society and the ethical world. Furthermore, the truly fantastic and bizarre ups and downs of novels like Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* or Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* are simply not there. Lu Xun is not certain about the way the world is, and he does occasionally pull the rug out from under his readers (especially "old style" Chinese intellectuals in the early decades of this century). However, in a novel like *The Satanic Verses*, the rug is continually being pulled out from under us (and even becomes a magic carpet).

Anton Chekhov is similar to Yu Hua in that he also deals with alienation and meaninglessness (in the lives of peasants and nobles alike). However, Chekhov does not openly and radically undermine our conceptions of what is real and what is not. What is shared by Chekhov and Lu Xun is the degree to which there are foundations (tottering

perhaps, but at least visible) to stand on in the worlds presented in their stories. Naturally, one cannot eliminate foundations altogether, but postmodernist writers often try to give the *impression* that they are, much like how realist writers try to produce the *illusion* of reality.

The postmodernist attempt at undermining foundations is most evident in Yu Hua's use of magic realism, black humour, unusual modes of perception and description, and contradictory or ambiguous narration. Many of these methods are, however, present in modernist writing as well. Yu Hua's use and mutation of tradition is perhaps what most clearly distinguishes him from modernist writers. In some cases, this tradition is that of pre-modern Chinese literature and philosophy, while in other cases it is the May Fourth realist tradition (especially in "The April Third Incident" where Lu Xun's use of the enlightened madman as a means of exposing the horror in Chinese culture and society is recreated in a radically ambiguous manner). This kind of parodic reincorporation of tradition is typical of postmodernist literature.

In the final analysis, however, it is not all that important whether or not Yu Hua's fiction actually fits into the admittedly rather artificial category of postmodernist literature. The themes and methods identified in the course of this study and briefly outlined above are interesting in and of themselves. The mutation of tradition, the use of magic realism and imaginative and often bizarre language, the vivid description of fantastically extreme violence, the use of black humour, and the conception of the world as a meaningless, cruel place characterize Yu Hua's writing and set it apart from the mainstream of modern Chinese literature.

## Glossary for Chapter 1

Can Xue	残雪
fei	非
Ge Fei	格非
gong	宫
Guanyin	观音
Haiyan	海盐
Lei Feng	雷锋
Lu Xun	鲁迅
lingchi	凌迟
ming	明
mo	墨
Pipi	皮皮
Shanfeng	山峰
Shan'gang	山岗
Su Tong	苏童

## Glossary for Chapter 1, contd.

suona	唢呐
Wang Anyi	王安忆
Ye Zhaoyan	叶兆言
y i	剿
yin-yang	阴阳
you	幽
Yu Hua	余华
Zhang Fu	张珏
Zhang Xianliang	张贤亮



## Glossary for Chapter 2

baihua	白话
Bai Shu	白树
Ci Yuan	词源
Dong Shan	东山
Ge Fei	格非
Guanyin	观音
Han Yu	韩愈
Huang Tingjian	黄庭坚
Li Tuo	李陀
Lu Xun	鲁迅
Lu Zhu	露珠
ming	明
muguang	目光
shishi qiushi	实事求是
Su Tong	苏童

**Glossary for Chapter 2, contd.**

Sun Ganlu	孙甘露
Sun Youyuan	孙有元
suona	唢呐
Wang Shuo	王朔
xiao	箫
Xiaocheng yan	小城烟
yan	腌
Ye Zhaoyan	叶兆言
yin-yang	阴阳
you	幽
Zhong Qimin	钟其民

## Glossary for Chapter 3

Ah Cheng	阿城
Bai Yuxiao	白雨潇
Chan	禅
chuanqi	传奇
fengjian	封建
gong'an	公案
Han Shaogong	韩少功
Heizhen Daxia	黑针大侠
huangdao	黄道
huangse dadao	黄色大道
huaben	话本
Huangfu Mei	皇甫枚
Jia	甲
Jia Baoyu	贾宝玉
jinyi yushen	金衣玉身
Kun	鲲

## Glossary for Chapter 3, contd.

li	里
Li Dong	李东
Li Jingliang	李景亮
"Li Zhangwu"	李章武
Lin Daiyu	林黛玉
Linji	林济
linglong jingzhi	玲珑精致
Liu Sheng	柳生
Liu Tian	刘天
<i>Mudan ting</i>	牡丹亭
ming	明
Peng	鹏
Qingyun Daozhang	青云道长
Ruan Haikuo	阮海阔
Ruan Jinwu	阮进武
Sanlun	三论

## Glossary for Chapter 3, contd.

Sun Jingxia	孙景夏
Tang Xianzu	汤显祖
<i>Taiping guangji</i>	太平广记
Tao Yuanming	陶渊明
"Taohua yuan"	桃花源
tingting yuli	婷婷玉立
wutong	梧桐
wuxia xiaoshuo	武侠小说
xiangtu	乡土
xungenpai	寻根派
yang	阳
Yanzhi nǚ	胭脂女
yin	阴
yingtao xiaokou	樱桃小口
you	幽
zhiguai	志怪

A Chronological Bibliography of Yu Hua's Fictional Works

"Xingxing" 星星 (Xingxing), *Beijing wenxue* 北京文学 (Beijing literature; 1984, no. 1).

"Zhu nǚ" 竹女 (Bamboo woman), *Beijing wenxue* 北京文学 (Beijing literature; 1984, no. 3).

"Yueliang zhaozhe ni, yueliang zhaozhe wo" 月亮照着你, 月亮照着我 (The moon shines on you, the moon shines on me), *Beijing wenxue* 北京文学 (Beijing literature; 1984, no. 4).

"Nan er you lei bu qingtan" 男儿有泪不轻弹 (A real man's tears don't come lightly), *Donghai* 东海 (Eastern Ocean; 1984, no. 5).

"Meili de zhenzhu" 美丽的珍珠 (Beautiful pearls), *Donghai* 东海 (Eastern Ocean; 1984, no. 7).

"Nan gaoyin de aiqing" 男高音的爱情 (The male soprano's love), *Donghai* 东海 (Eastern Ocean; 1984, no. 12).

"Sange nǚren yige yewan" 三个女人一个夜晚 (Three women, one night), *Mengya* 萌芽 (Sprouts; 1986, no. 1).

"Laoshi" 老师 (Teacher), *Beijing wenxue* 北京文学 (Beijing literature; 1986, no. 3).

"Kan hai qu" 看海去 (Going to see the ocean), *Beijing wenxue* 北京文学 (Beijing literature; 1986, no. 5).

"Shiba sui chu men yuan xing" 十八岁出门远行 (Leaving home and travelling afar at eighteen), *Beijing wenxue* 北京文学 (Beijing literature; 1987, no. 1).

"Xibei feng huxiao de zhongwu" 西北风呼啸的中午 (The northeast wind whistled at midday), *Beijing wenxue* 北京文学 (Beijing literature; 1987, no. 5).

"Siyue sanri shijian" 四月三日事件 (The April Third incident), *Shouhuo* 收获 (Harvest; 1987, no. 5).

"Meihao de zhemo" 美好的折磨 (Wonderful Torment), *Donghai* 东海 (Eastern Ocean; 1987, no. 7).

"1986 nian" 1986 年 (1986), *Shouhuo* 收获 (Harvest; 1987, no. 6).

"Hebian de cuowu" 河边的错误 (Mistake by the side of the river), *Zhongshan* 钟山 (Zhongshan; 1988, no. 1).

"Xianshi yi zhong" 现实一种 (One kind of reality), *Beijing wenxue* 北京文学 (Beijing literature; 1988, no. 1).

"Shishi ru yan" 世事如烟 (The affairs of the world are like smoke), *Shouhuo* 收获 (Harvest; 1988, no. 5).

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"Xian xue meihua" 鲜血梅花 (Fresh blood plum blossoms), *Renmin wenxue* 人民文学 (People's literature; 1989, no. 3).

"Ci wen xiang ei shaonü yangliu" 此文献给少女杨柳 (This story is dedicated to the young woman Yang Liu), *Zhongshan* 钟山 (Zhongshan; 1989, no. 4).

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 "Xibei feng huxiao de zhongwu" 西北风呼啸的中午  
 "Yinghuo chong" 萤火虫  
 "1986 nian" 1986 年  
 "Hebian de cuowu" 河边的错误  
 "Siyue sanri shijian" 四月三日事件  
 "Xianshi yi zhong" 现实一种  
 "Shishi ru yan" 世事如烟

*Shiba sui chu men yuan xing* 十八岁出门远行 (Leaving home and travelling afar at eighteen). Taipei: Yuanliu chub an gong si 远流出版公司, October 1990. includes:

"Shiba sui chu men yuan xing" 十八岁出门远行  
 "Siwang xushu" 死亡叙述  
 "1986 nian" 1986 年  
 "Hebian de cuowu" 河边的错误  
 "Xianshi yi zhong" 现实一种



*Shishi ru yan* 世事如烟 (The affairs of the world are like smoke).

Taipei: Yuanliu chuban gongsi 远流出版公司, February 1991.

includes:

"Aiqing gushi" 爱情故事

"Shishi ru yan" 世事如烟

"Ci wen xiangci shaonü yangliu" 此文献给少女杨柳

"Ouran shijian" 偶然事件

"Gudian aiqing" 古典爱情

"Xiaji taifeng" 夏季台风 (Summer typhoons), *Zhongshan* 钟山  
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