A TORMENTED SOUL IN A LOCKED HUT
— CAN XUE'S SHORT STORIES

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Abstract

This thesis is about Can Xue's short stories. Can Xue, the pen name of Deng Xiaohua, is a contemporary Chinese woman writer. Her work is characterized by innovation and she is considered by some critics one of the most non-traditional and modernistic Chinese writer.

The Introduction of the thesis introduces diverse evaluations of Can Xue's works and gives the purpose of the thesis, that is, to review Can Xue's significant short stories and to make my own aesthetic evaluation of them.

The thesis divides Can Xue's short stories into two basic categories: the allegorical and the symbolic. A number of their themes are identified and different features of both the allegorical and the symbolic stories are illustrated. Following this, the focus of the thesis shifts to the artistic techniques of Can Xue's short stories. The modes of allegory and symbolism, the surrealistic imagination and illogical narrative, and the device of antitypification are examined in detail. Finally, particular attention is paid to making an aesthetic appraisal of Can Xue's short stories.
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A Tormented Soul in a Locked Hut
— Can Xue's Short Stories

Introduction

The year 1985 has been considered a very significant turning point in the field of contemporary Chinese literature. From that time onward, literary writing entered a new stage characterized by plurality. In the realm of fiction a good number of innovative works emerged as a rebellion against both the utilitarianism of Marxist literary theory and the realistic convention of the earlier literature. These works rejected some of the traditional novelistic norms of the time and ignored the value of the official ideology. Diverse experiments were made with language, subject matter, form, style, and artistic approach in fictional writing. By absorbing modernist elements into their fiction many writers, such as Liu Suola, Xu Xing, Ma Yuan, Can Xue, Ge Fei, Yu Hua, Su Tong, and others, introduced readers to new fictional genres. Their influential works displayed their talents and at the same time brought them controversial reputations. Among these writers Can Xue is perhaps the most controversial one.

Can Xue's fictional creation is an anomaly. As Michael S. Duke points out, Can Xue is "currently the most non-traditional and modernistic Chinese woman writer . . . all of whose works of fiction are radically non-representational, even to the extent that some serious critics believe that she is genuinely unreadable or that she is not writing 'Chinese literature' at all."¹ Since Can Xue published her first short story in 1985, her unique non-representational and innovative writing style has aroused some intense reactions. Before long some of her works were translated and introduced to readers abroad. Debates about

her works abound, and critical commentaries on the messages and style of her fiction vary greatly both in China and abroad. In her favor, Can Xue is praised for the uniqueness of both the content and form of her works. Charlotte Innes remarks that Can Xue is "one of the most interesting and original Chinese writers to appear before a Western audience in years." Penelope Mesic asserts that Can Xue's first short story collection, *Dialogues in Paradise*, is "a work of considerable talent which answers the [Western readers'] current interest in China's artists and the spirit of her people." Wu Liang, a literary critic on mainland China, considers Can Xue "one of the outstanding writers" in contemporary China and some of her works "extraordinary artistic products." Wang Meng, a Chinese writer and ex-Minister of Culture, says that Can Xue is "undoubtedly a rare talent. Her talent expresses itself in the way she takes her own individual path in writing. . . . Can Xue has never plagiarized anyone but herself." Jon Solomon, in the preface to Can Xue's *Yellow Mud Street*, comments: "The significance of her works has gone far beyond criticism of a certain regional culture. In other words, Can Xue's works try to find a clear way out of a world full of chaos, darkness, blood, and tears." Ronald Janssen, one of the translators of Can Xue's fiction, even asserts that Can Xue "has offered Chinese fiction . . . a direction for new growth." All these comments praise Can Xue's writing although Ronald Janssen's comment perhaps overestimates the influence of her fiction.

On the other hand, not to anyone's surprise, criticisms of Can Xue's writing also exist. An article in the *Times Literary Supplement* says that the plots of Can Xue's works are "strange" and that "Can Xue does not have any particular story to tell. Nor can her writing

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2Charlotte Innes, "Foreword" to *Old Floating Cloud*, (Evanston, 1991), p. IX
6Su Zhe'an (Jon Solomon), "Cong ji'an zhong zhanfang shengming de lingguang — xu Can Xue de *Huangni jie*," (Issuing an intelligent light of life in the darkness — a preface to Can Xue's *Yellow Mud Street*), in *Huangni jie* (Taipei: Yuanshen chubanshe, 1987), p. III
be reduced to any simple category."\textsuperscript{8} The \textit{New York Times Book Review}, in its comment on \textit{Dialogues in Paradise}, remarks that its stories are "oddly disconcerting" and "ultimately somewhat dissatisfying."\textsuperscript{9} Professor Michael S. Duke says: "I do not recommend \textit{Dialogues in Paradise} as enjoyable reading unless you relish the \textit{mise en abîme} of postmodernist chic; in that case, this is the one and only work of contemporary Chinese fiction for you."\textsuperscript{10} Furthermore, Deng Shanjie charges that Can Xue's stories "exhaust the readers" and "give them nothing" after reading, adding that "some of [Can Xue's] works have the nature of following the fashion, deliberately mystifying, and even fishing for fame and compliments." The article concludes that Can Xue's writing "is obviously a failure."\textsuperscript{11} Finally John Domini names Can Xue's second collection, \textit{Old Floating Cloud}, as "surreal scatology."\textsuperscript{12} These criticisms form a sharp contrast with the preceding appraisals.

According to modern reception-theory, all commentaries, despite diversity, contribute to the reading of an artistic work. Since Can Xue's works are available to the public, readers not only have a right to interpret a variety of describable features objectively contained in these works, but also have a right to comprehend the works on the basis of their own life experiences and their own linguistic and aesthetic expectations. Therefore, the varied interpretations of Can Xue, reconciled under modern reception-theory, may be beneficial to the study of Can Xue. Regardless of whether or not the critics like her style, they have made a number of substantive appraisals of the meaning and artistic nature of Can Xue's writing. Charlotte Innes remarks that "nearly all these tales [in \textit{Dialogues in Paradise}] concern battles with a threatening, irrational authority, which gives them a

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{8}Harriet Evans, "Living at Street Level," \textit{Times Literary Supplement} (Jan. 31, 1992), p. 23.
\item\textsuperscript{10}Michael S. Duke, Book review of \textit{Dialogues in Paradise}, in \textit{World Literature Today} (Summer, 1990), p.525.
\item\textsuperscript{11}Deng Shanjie, "Xianfeng xiaoshuo' buzai lingren xingfen'' (The avant-garde fiction is no more exiting), in \textit{Wenxue ziyou tan} (1990, no. 2), pp. 43-5.
\end{itemize}
political edge."\textsuperscript{13} Another comment in the same newspaper asserts that Can Xue's two novellas, "Yellow Mud Street" and "Old Floating Cloud," "offer nightmare images of life under a punishing regime" and "must be considered a critique of her homeland."\textsuperscript{14} All these comments are convincing, since most of Can Xue's works do adopt a satirical or critical view toward contemporary political life in China. However, comments such as these do not sufficiently elucidate all the implications embedded in her fiction. For example, some of Can Xue's stories convey her attempt to explore more universal issues, such as the weakness of human nature, the meaning of life, love, sex, and the conflicts between man and the civilization of his creation. Professor Michael S. Duke first commented on the feature of the "adamantly hermetic and solipsistic probings of 'myself'" in some of Can Xue's tales.\textsuperscript{15} Later a similar point of view was expanded by Charlotte Innes, who describes Can Xue's fiction as "part political allegory, part poetry, part literary allusion, and part analysis of real human conflict that ranges from somber to playful."\textsuperscript{16} Wang Meng points out that "the profundity and frigidity of some of her descriptions are staggering, making readers exclaim in amazement. To have works like this in the literature of this new period, even if they are considered 'heterodox,' has a stimulating value which cannot be overlooked. She has lanced the hearts of many readers, has enriched the imaginative and expressive power of writing."\textsuperscript{17} From different critical perspectives these commentaries reveal a variety of significant features in Can Xue's fiction and provide valuable insights for better understanding her work.

This diversity of evaluation of Can Xue's works stems not only from the critics' likes and dislikes but also from the works' originality and obscurity. Generally speaking, Can Xue's works are characterized by vague settings, surrealistic and deformed imagery, illogical behavior of the characters, irrational narrative, diversity of the thought and

\textsuperscript{15}Michael S. Duke, \textit{World Literature Today} (Summer, 1990), p. 525.
\textsuperscript{16}Charlotte Innes, "Foreword" to \textit{Old Floating Cloud}, p. XII
\textsuperscript{17}Wang Meng, p. 62.
passion, and therefore thematical obscurity. Reading them is a challenging and sometimes a taxing job. However, her work is a unique phenomenon worthy of research and illumination.

To make my own interpretation of Can Xue's works and, along the line of Wayne Booth's theory of "coduction,"18 to enrich the appraisals of them, this thesis attempts to review her significant short stories. For the purpose of this study her stories will be divided into two categories: allegorical and symbolic. A number of their themes are identified and different features of both allegorical and symbolic stories are illustrated. Following this, the focus of the thesis shifts to the artistic techniques of Can Xue's short stories, that is, the modes of allegory and symbolism, the surrealistic imagination and illogical narrative, and the device of anti-typification are examined in detail. Finally, particular attention is paid to making an aesthetic appraisal of Can Xue's short stories.

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Chapter 1: About Can Xue

Can Xue, the pen name of Deng Xiaohua, was born on May 30, 1953 in Changsha, China. When she was young she experienced the chaotic years of the Cultural Revolution. Can Xue once published an autobiographical article entitled "A Summer Day in the Beautiful South" (hereafter "A Summer Day") to record her hard life during that time. The article provides some important information about her personal background. In order to better understand Can Xue's writing, it would not be out of place to pay attention to some key points of the article.

In the article, Can Xue recounts the miserable experience of her family from 1957 to the end of the Cultural Revolution. Her father used to be a journalist and the head of the New Hunan Daily. In 1957, the Communist Party launched an "Anti-rightist" campaign, the purpose of which was to suppress intellectuals courageous enough to openly criticize the Party's policies. During that political campaign, Can Xue's father was condemned as an "ultra-rightist" and the leader of an "anti-Party clique" in the New Hunan Daily Agency. Following his denunciation the whole family suffered political and economic persecution continuously for the next twenty years.

After being labeled as an "ultra-rightist," Can Xue's father was immediately deprived of his editorial job and forced to undergo "reform through labor" at Hunan Teachers' College. Her mother was also sent back to her home town in Hengshan County for labor reform. Two years later the whole family of nine was moved from the newspaper's residential area to the western suburb of Changsha at the foot of Yuelu Mountain. The family was crowded into two tiny huts of about ten square meters each, assigned to them by the government. At the same time, the salaries of her parents were cut down to the minimum: less than ten yuan per person per month. That was a time of nationwide natural disasters and most of the Chinese people had insufficient food supplies. Since Can Xue's
parents had neither savings nor financial help from relatives or friends, the whole family, in Can Xue's own words, "struggled along on the verge of death."¹

In order to survive, since the family could not afford to buy coal, Can Xue's grandmother led the children to collect firewood in the mountain. Can Xue's father reclaimed small plots of land around the house, growing vegetables to feed the hungry family. Their staple food was blackish cakes made of wild hemp leaves and other kinds of wild vegetables and mushrooms. Thanks to these wild vegetables, the family survived, all except the grandmother. She died of dropsy caused by hunger and fatigue. Can Xue recorded the heartbreaking scene of her grandmother's death. This tragic story is helpful to understand Can Xue's miserable childhood and her negative attitude towards Chinese authority which is implicitly and strongly expressed in some of her works.

One of Can Xue's brothers was labeled a "reactionary" when he was only sixteen years old. He was immediately deported to a remote rural area to be reformed through physical labor. In 1966 the Cultural Revolution began. That year Can Xue was thirteen and had just finished her studies in primary school. Then all the schools were shut down and students across the nation were sent to the countryside to, at Mao Zedong's directive, "receive re-education from the poor and lower-middle peasants."² All the children in the family except for Can Xue went to the countryside. Can Xue was able to stay in Changsha because of her poor health: she had been suffering from tuberculosis since childhood. During the Cultural Revolution her father was jailed, her mother left for a "May Seventh Cadre School," which actually was a labor camp, and Can Xue worked in a small neighborhood factory for ten years to make a living.

¹Can Xue, "Meili nanfang zhi xiari" (A summer day in the beautiful south), in Zhongguo (1986, no. 10), p.75. The translation is from Dialogues in Paradise (hereafter DIP), trs. Ronald R. Janssen and Jian Zhang, (Evanston, 1989), p. 1. In my use of the translations from this book, I have modified them where I felt appropriate. Hereafter if the English translations come from this book, the page numbers are also given in the footnotes for reference.
The Cultural Revolution came to an end in 1976. Can Xue's father was politically rehabilitated in 1979 and started working as an adviser in the Political Consultative Committee of Hunan in 1980. Can Xue quit her job and started operating her own sewing shop. She at last had a reprieve from the tough life of the past years. She had more time to think about her past experience. It was then that Can Xue felt prompted to write. She recalled that time as follows:

All of a sudden, I am thirty. Ten years of youth have slipped by in struggle. I believe that I have something to say about these ten years, and about my future. What I have to say is something that ordinary people did not realize and speak about. I want to say it in the form of literature and imagination. Something abstract and purely emotional gradually forming itself in me, I start writing. I write a little bit every day, without any consciousness as to why to put it this way or that way other than to stick to my own favorite style, to ponder repeatedly, and to enjoy myself. This resulted in "The Old Floating Cloud" and many other published and unpublished works.3


Can Xue is now a member of the Writers' Association of Hunan. However, she is still, by occupation, the owner of a private business. Her reputation as a tailor is rising with her reputation in literary circles. It is said that many Hunan writers are currently her loyal customers. They think it is fashionable to attend a party of writers and artists in clothes made by Can Xue. In 1989 Liu Xinwu, a writer from Beijing, went to Changsha and paid a compliment to Hunan writers on their attractive clothes. Of course that should be partly

3Can Xue, "Meili nanfang zhi xiari" (A summer day in the beautiful south), p. 78 and DIP, p. 11.
attributed to Can Xue, who fulfilled her promise to Hunan writers, "I must upgrade the style of your clothing."\textsuperscript{4}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{4}He Liwei, "About Can Xue," in Chinese Literature, Fiction, Poetry, Art (Beijing, Summer, 1989), p. 146.}
Chapter 2: Can Xue's Allegorical Stories

Can Xue's short stories are not unitary. According to their different narrative modes and artistic styles, they can be classified into at least two categories: allegorical stories and symbolic stories. The reason that I name them allegorical stories and symbolic stories is that (1) the allegorical stories possess distinct features similar to sustained allegory to reflect social life in China, and (2) the symbolic stories employ the mode of symbolism to express the author's private feelings and emotions.


Notable symbolic stories include "The Bull," "In the Wilderness," "Skylight," "The Date," "The Instant When the Cuckoo Sings," and "Dialogues in Paradise I-V."

In order to better understand the features of these two categories of stories, detailed analysis will be made on "Hut on the Hill" and "Dialogues in Paradise I-V." These stories are chosen for the analysis because of their typical styles of allegory and symbol. By comparison with other short stories, the thesis will examine the integral features of both the allegorical stories and symbolic stories.

The "Hut on the Hill" (hereafter "Hut") is one of Can Xue's most remarkable works. After its publication in mainland China in 1985, it was reprinted in Taiwan as well as translated into at least three English versions.¹ Quite different interpretations were made

concerning the author's intentions and the story's theme. Through the study of contextuality and intertextuality, this thesis mainly focuses on the allegorical meaning of the story and gives a new interpretation.

The "Hut" is a story about grotesque happenings in a family. There seems to be a hut on the hill behind the family's house. In the hut, a person is imprisoned, moaning, and banging furiously against the wooden door all night. Nobody in the family is able to see the hut except for the narrator. Every time the narrator returns to her room, sitting in the armchair with her hands resting on her knees, she sees the hut, with its fir-bark roof, and the person imprisoned inside. There are odd conflicts among the family members, caused by the narrator's compulsive tidying of her desk drawer every night. Her mother dislikes her tidying job because the noise and light coming from the narrator's room drive her crazy. She therefore threatens to break her daughter's arms. Several times when the narrator is out, her parents make a great mess of her drawer and steal away her favorite things: a set of weiqi (go, a kind of Chinese chess) is buried near a well, and some dead moths and dragonflies are scattered around the floor. However, each time the weiqi set is buried, the narrator digs it up again at midnight. She manages to continue her tidying job by oiling the sides of the drawer, so that she won't make any noise. Since her father had dropped a pair of scissors into the well twenty years before, he feels mentally anguished and turns into a mournful howling wolf at night. One day he attempts to fish out the scissors lying rusting at the bottom of the well, but he fails, and at this moment, the hair on his left temple turns completely white. Several times the narrator goes out and climbs up the hill to explore what is really happening there. When she reaches the top, she sees no hut and no imprisoned person — only a deserted hill. The sun shines dizzily. White lights are swaying back and forth everywhere, even every rock glows with white flames.

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2The narrator's sex cannot be distinguished in the context. For convenience in writing, I assume the narrator to be a female; I do the same to all Can Xue's works in which the narrator's sex is unclear.
In this story, strange things happen to bizarre people in a shifting, shadowy world in which there seems to be no logical coherence or order to events. The characters act and discourse irrationally and incomprehensibly. The traditional elements and representative modes of fictional writing almost vanish into a void. Readers can easily perceive its unconventional and absurd style, but find it difficult to grasp its message.

A variety of assumptions have been made in interpreting the theme of the story since its publication. The Taiwanese writer Ye Hongsheng's interpretation is one of them:

Can Xue's "Hut on the Hill," creates a magical world to describe the sense of nihilism and absurdity about "the human, the beast, and the ghost" in communist society. It stirs the readers' souls and horrifies them. The story also employs the method of symbolism to imply that the persons and events are from the "Anti-rightist" campaign of 1957 to the Cultural Revolution. The parents in the story are the embodiment of the party. All members in the family possess the nature of wolves and keep watch on each other like phantoms. The desk drawer, which can never be tided well, is a metaphor for the political files, which nobody can cast off from birth to death in communist society. The "white" symbolizes reactionaries or capitalist issues in contrast to the communism which is symbolized by the red color and the smell of blood. The "left" intimates radical revolutionaries. The scissors, which have lain at the bottom of a well for twenty years, represent the productive power. The time is precisely identical to the dark period of the "Anti-rightist" campaign of 1957 to the end of the Cultural Revolution. As for the hut on the hill and the person imprisoned inside, they are nothing but mental pictures. However, because of the nonexistent "imaginary enemy," everybody goes crazy. This is really a great tragedy for mankind.3

The above comments sounds like an impressive analysis that expresses the critic's direct response to the story. The criteria which Ye Hongsheng applies to his analysis of the "Hut" is basically grounded in the field of ideology. He draws a direct connection between the story and the sociopolitical context of the Chinese society in which the characters live and act. His interpretation is, in a sense, understandable. However, he does

3Ye Hongsheng, "Shinian shengsi liang mangmang — zongping shisi pian dalu xiaoshuo" (Both the living and the dead at a loss during the ten years — general comment on fourteen mainland short stories), in Lianhe wenxue (Unitas, a literary monthly, 1987, no. 4), p. 200. In the text, all quotations from Chinese books are my own translations.
not treat the story as an entity in itself, and does not identify its unified theme. In addition, the symbolic interpretations he makes of, for example, the drawer and scissors, seem to be arbitrary and lack solid ground. Bai Xianyong, another Taiwanese writer, comments: "Might the story (the "Hut") be an allegory — mutual persecution and slaughter among people on their own side during the mad time of the Cultural Revolution? However the time of the setting is uncertain, and therefore readers cannot but interpret its theme by their own assumptions." The story indeed resists a single interpretation. However we have to explore its main significance.

Mainland Chinese critics, on the other hand, take a different approach toward the "Hut." Their interpretations tend to be abstract and indirect. Wang Fei's comment is a good example. He asserts that the "Hut" is "the expression of the author's feelings and emotions' with a "very strong social content," and that readers should grasp "the hidden message in the language." He explains:

The wooden hut on the deserted hill is an illusion created by [the narrator's] subjective imagination, . . . and a hint at [the Chinese people's] living environment. . . . The person, constantly moaning in the hut, is a symbol of the abstract human being, who is in the throes of the birth of a dream. The person is also endowed with feelings of self-perception, self-pity, and self-love of the narrator. . . . The drawer, which can never be tidied well, is granted an eternal and abstract moral significance. . . . For several decades, the father determines in his dream to fish out the scissors dropped in the well . . . which is a designation of the sense of loss about the human being's existence in the context of a whole lifetime. . . . The episode when the narrator climbs up the hill to seek the imaginary and untraceable hut denotes the entrapped feeling of fatalism because of the total loss of human existence.

This interpretation wavers between philosophy and psychological analysis. It interprets the story's theme in an abstract and summarizing manner, and it makes some

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4Bai Xianyong, "Xiangai zhuyi de ciji — ping 'Yige ren sile,' 'Shanshang de xiaowu'" (The stimulation of modernism — comment on 'A person is dead,' 'Hut on the hill'), in Lianhe wenxue (1987, no. 4), p. 212.
5Wang Fei, "Zai meng de renshen zhong jingluan — Can Xue xiaoshuo qiwu" (In the throes of the birth of a dream — a revelation from Can Xue's fiction), in Wenzue pinglun (Review of literature, 1987, no. 5), pp.96-100
good points. However Wang Fei's commentary also seems to be insufficient in illustrating what "the author's feelings and emotions" and the story's "very strong social content" really are. The co-comment of Cheng Depei and Wu Liang, two other mainland Chinese critics, is even more generalizing: the "Hut," they claim, is "a kind of condemnation of evil."6

These sorts of comments are perhaps derived mainly from the critics' impressionistic and emotional responses to the story, but not from analytic reasoning. Can Xue once tells us that "each [of my] stories is a tiny stream of private emotion."7 Although the "Hut" might reflect the common feelings of humankind, it is not meant to be a philosophical statement as such. Therefore I try to give my interpretation on the grounds that the "Hut" is a work which must be understood in relation to the individual experiences and feelings of the author.

The diversity of interpretations of the "Hut" is caused not only by the different criteria that the critics apply, but also by the story's obscurity. The "Hut" rejects the vocabulary closely associated with rational thinking, as well as the mode of logical narrative. It is, significantly, characterized by an accumulation of many images. Most of the images, however, are not the random ones they seem to be, but are used as allegorical emblems to represent, or "allegorize," concrete social practices and social issues. For example, the hut, its prisoner, the scissors, the well, the howling of the wolves, and the mother and father, to name a few, all have their respective allegorical meanings, which I will point out in the following paragraphs. So the key point in identifying the theme of the "Hut" lies in the recognition of its allegorical meaning.

Through a close reading and a careful analysis, I put forth here a new interpretation that the "Hut" can be considered Can Xue's figurative manifesto of her writing motive. In

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the story, the author criticizes the Chinese government's repressive policy towards literature and art in the past twenty years, expresses her own determination to engage in literary creation, and illustrates a few aspects of her own aesthetic orientation.

In 1957, Can Xue's father was condemned as an "ultra-rightist." For the next twenty years the whole family suffered continuously from political and economic persecution. After the Cultural Revolution, Can Xue began writing fiction. As for why she wants to write, Can Xue declares that "My writing this type of fiction is entirely a result of the irreconcilability of human nature. I've never forgotten about vengeance, a kind of vengeance in the emotional realm, especially when I first began writing."8 The reason why I think that the "Hut" can be considered Can Xue's literary manifesto is that the story significantly embodies Can Xue's thought and emotion at the beginning of her writing, that is, "writing fiction for vengeance."

When reading Can Xue's allegorical stories, particular attention should be paid to their titles, which usually contain allegorical emblems, and to the repetitive passages in which the author's suggestions are usually embedded. For instance, the "hut" itself is a very important emblem. It appears in different forms in many of Can Xue's stories, such as "the dark room" ("Dialogues in Paradise II," hereafter "Dialogues II"), "the imaginary empty room" ("Dialogues III"), "the iron cage" ("Dialogues IX"), "big and empty rooms without light" ("In the Wilderness"), and "the damp storage room" used as bedroom ("The Fog"). As has been pointed out by some critics, the "hut" implies the oppressive sociopolitical atmosphere of contemporary China. The emblem is not a novelty, and perhaps is derived from Lu Xun's "iron house."9 Because the hut implies a kind of spiritual shackle, it possesses an illusive feature — it can be perceived only by the narrator in specific moments, but not by other members of the family:

8Shi Shuqing, p. 142.
Whenever I return home and sit in my armchair with my hands resting flat on my knees, I see very clearly the fir-bark roof of the hut. The figure is not far away. . . . There really is a person squatting inside, whose eye sockets are covered with two purple clouds, caused by lack of sleep.10

The scene of the narrator sitting in the armchair and seeing the hut is repeated four times in the story. I believe it suggests that the narrator is sitting by the desk and beginning to write. Only when she enters the writing state, does she envision the hut, or more accurately, feel the oppressive atmosphere of social circumstances. Furthermore, the person who is imprisoned in the hut, banging violently against the wooden door all night and moaning constantly, actually could be viewed as a portrayal of the narrator. In other words, the imprisoned person represents the irreconcilable soul of the narrator. This interpretation finds support in the following paragraph:

One day I decide to go up the hill to see what on earth is happening. I start climbing as soon as the wind ceases. I climb for a long time. The sunshine makes me dizzy. White flames gleam on every rock. I wander about, coughing all the time. Beads of salty sweat from my brows drip into my eyes, and I can neither see nor hear anything. When I return home, I stand outside the door for a while and see that the person reflected in the mirror has mud on her shoes and two big purple clouds around her eye sockets.11

From this paragraph we can see that both the narrator and the captive person share the same features: although they are exhausted and tormented, they are still indomitable and still trying to see what is really happening in the world or to break through the locked hut. In particular, both have dark eye sockets caused by lack of sleep. There are few descriptions of the physical appearance of the characters in Can Xue's stories. The description of the dark eye sockets of both the narrator and the imprisoned person is one of a few examples in the "Hut," which are all imbued with symbolic meanings. For example, the mother's cold and water-dripping hands imply the cruelty of the regime. That the hair on the father's left temple turns white implies the agony suffered by the

older generation of the Chinese people. (My detailed analyses will be given in later paragraphs.) The same is true of the description of the dark eye sockets, which imply that the narrator and the imprisoned person stay up and write late into the night. Because of their similar features, both are supposed to be self-portrayals of the author. The narrator represents Can Xue's physical figure as an irreconcilable writer, and the imprisoned person represents Can Xue's soul or psychological desire for vengeance through writing.

That both the narrator and the imprisoned person are self-portrayals of the author can be supported by another Can Xue story, "Dialogues II," in which these two images are combined into one: "In the darkened room I wait anxiously for a landslide. I cut a hole in the roof with a pair of scissors, frenziedly stretching my head through the opening."12 The same scene is repeated twice in the same story in order to emphasize its significance: "I cannot help cutting a hole in my roof to let in a beam of light. Now my floor practically became a strainer."13 In this episode, the narrator herself is an imprisoned person.

That the "Hut" can be considered Can Xue's literary manifesto can also find support in the story's development. The narrator usually sorts her drawer at night. The episode of tidying up the drawer, which is similar to the episode of her sitting in the armchair, also hints at the narrator's writing practice. The weiqi set, dead moths, and dragonflies are all metaphors for her own literary works. Her mother's disturbance alludes to ideological control in China. Digging up the weiqi set and carrying on the tidying job express the narrator's, or the author's, determination never to give up her practice of literary creation.

More detailed evidence is provided to support this interpretation. In ancient China, playing musical instruments and chess and practicing calligraphy and painting (qin-qi-shu-hua) are the four basic skills of men of letters. Can Xue uses the weiqi set as metaphor for her own writing by way of analogy. Additionally, the use of the ugly images of the dead moths and dragonflies as metaphors to signify her own work is not a

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13 Ibid, p. 6 and DIP, p. 139.
coincidence, and is related to the astonishing prevalence of ugliness and evil in her work. She once said: "I want to set myself against reality. . . . Describing these creatures (scorpion, earthworm, and centipede) is to present a kind of feeling."¹⁴ Her early stories usually teem with ugly images. Before the publication of the "Hut," her manuscript of the novella, "Yellow Mud Street," was circulated among Hunan writers. Some of them are even said to have been truly disturbed by it.¹⁵ Later, Can Xue's work was labeled "the true voice of horror,"¹⁶ a "rubbish heap,"¹⁷ and "surrealistic scatology."¹⁸ Can Xue herself once used an even uglier term, "dog dung," to imply her own work through the mouth of the narrator in one of her novellas.¹⁹ From this evidence, it could be inferred that both "dead moths and dragonflies," and "dog dung" are an ironic response to the criticism of her works. Actually they are not viewed by the author as derogatory, for in the "Hut," Can Xue says through the voice of the narrator: "These (dead moths and dragonflies) are treasures to me."²⁰ In a sense, Can Xue's stories are artistically successful partly due to

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¹⁶"The true voice of horror" is originally the remark of Lu Xun, who was dissatisfied with the inactive literary circles in the middle of the 1920s and hoped for a powerful voice to awaken the society. He wrote: "Where is the true voice of horror of the monster owl, only one cry of which is able to shock almost all people?!" See Lu Xun, "Yinyue?" (Music?) in Lu Xun quanjji (The complete works of Lu Xun), (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1957, vol. 7), p. 53. Tang Si, a critic and Can Xue's elder brother, first used "the true voice of horror" to define Can Xue's fiction. This statement has been accepted or cited by some writers and critics such as Han Shaogong, Jon Solomon, Wang Meng, and Wang Binbin. See Shi Shuqing, "Wei le baochou xie xiaoshuo — yu Can Xue tan xiezu" (Writing fiction for vengeance — discussing writing with Can Xue), in Bafang (1988, vol. 9), p. 142; Su Zhe'an (Jon Solomon), "Cong ji'an zhong zhanfang shengming de lingguang — xu Can Xue de Huangni jie," (Issuing an intelligent light of life in the darkness — a preface to Can Xue's Yellow Mud Street), in Huangni jie (Taipei: Yuanshen chubanshe, 1987), p. XIII; Wang Meng, "On 'Dialogues in Heaven',' in Chinese Literature, Fiction, Poetry, Art, (Winter, 1989), p. 63; and Wang Binbin, "Can Xue, Yu Hua: 'zhen de esheng?' — Can Xue, Yu Hua yu Lu Xun de yizhong bijiao" (Can Xue, Yu Hua: "The true voice of horror?" — a comparison of Can Xue, Yu Hua and Lu Xun), Dangdai zuojia pinglun (1992, no. 1), p. 43.

¹⁷Wang Binbin, "Can Xue, Yu Hua: 'zhen de esheng?' — Can Xue, Yu Hua yu Lu Xun de yizhong bijiao" (Can Xue, Yu Hua: "The true voice of horror?" — a comparison of Can Xue, Yu Hua and Lu Xun), Dangdai zuojia pinglun (1992, no. 1), p. 34.


¹⁹Can Xue, "Yige ren he ta de linju ji lingwai liangsan ge ren (A man and his neighbors as well as two or three other people)," in Zuojia (1992, no. 5), p. 11.

²⁰Can Xue, "Shanshang de xiaowu" (Hut on the hill), p. 544 and DIP, p. 48.
her thematic use of powerfully ugly and evocative imagery. Describing the ugly things has been a component of her aesthetic orientation. Therefore it is a natural thing for the author to use ugly images as metaphors to refer to her own works.

Another key point in the identification of the theme of the "Hut" concerns how to understand the allegorical meanings of the "scissors" and the "well." As Can Xue's allegorical emblems, I think that the "scissors" represent the right of the older generation to write, the "well" represents the government's policy on literature and art, and both scenes of burying the weiqi set near the well and dropping the scissors into the well represent the faults of the policy. This identification is deduced from the following evidence: Can Xue's father used to be the head of the New Hunan Daily and chief editor of the newspaper.21 Before the advent of the computer, a pair of scissors, as well as a pen, was an essential tool of a newspaper editor. So the image of the scissors is used also by way of analogy to imply a related issue — the right to write. There is adequate evidence, which will be illustrated gradually in the following paragraphs, to support the idea that Can Xue's biological father is the model image of the father in the "Hut." That the father dropped his scissors into a well many years ago actually signifies that he was deprived of his right to write and edit during the "Anti-rightist" campaign. The father deeply regrets this. He says:

I made a secret decision in my dream to fish them (the scissors) out . . . I cannot give up the idea, remembering them time and again. I always suddenly feel sorry when I lie down, for not retrieving the scissors as they are rusting at the bottom of the well. I have been troubled by this for dozens of years, and wrinkles have been etched on my face like knife cuts.22

Finally he attempts to fish out the scissors but fails, and precisely at this moment, the hair on his left temple turns completely white. The cited passage is almost realistic. It

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22 Can Xue, "Shanshang de xiaowu" (Hut on the hill), p. 545 and DIP, p. 50.
displays the inner grief of a senior journalist. When Can Xue's real father was finally rehabilitated after the Cultural Revolution, he was an old man. That the father's hair on his left temple turns completely white not only expresses the sense of loss of the older generation of Chinese intellectuals, but also contains the author's dissatisfaction over the leftist policy on literature and art.

This interpretation of the allegorical meaning of the scissors could be also supported by Can Xue's other stories. In "Dialogues II," the narrator uses a pair of scissors to cut a hole in the roof of a dark room so as to stretch her head out for fresh air and light. This scene expresses the author's idea that the most effective way to break through an oppressive sociopolitical situation is to use the forms of literature and art. This thought, as well as the image of the hut, also comes from Lu Xun, who once said that literature and art are the best way to awaken the Chinese masses. It is also interesting to note that the Chinese word "well" is pronounced the same as the word "trap" (jing), which invites the reader to associate the leftist literature and art policy with the entrapment of numerous innocent Chinese writers. In addition, seemingly irrelevant actions such as burying the weiqi set near the well and dropping the scissors into the well are joined by the image of the well. It offers a hint again that both the weiqi set and the scissors are allegorical emblems of writing practice and the well is an emblem of the faulty policy on literature and art. The difference between the weiqi set and the scissors is that they belong to two different generations. The older generation lost its right to write forever, while the younger generation is making every effort to retrieve it.

Another episode in the "Hut" should be particularly noted because it not only further confirms the allegorical meanings of "the scissors" and "the well," but also coherently develops the story and deepens its theme. The episode reads:

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24 Lu Xun, "Nahan zixu" (A self-preface to Cry out), in Lu Xun quanjí (The complete works of Lu Xun), (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1956, vol. 1), p. 5.
Someone is doing something furtively by the well. I hear him lowering the bucket down the well repeatedly. The suspended bucket strikes against the wall of the well, issuing a sound: boom, boom. At daybreak, he drops the bucket with a loud crash and runs away. I open the door of the next room and see my father in deep sleep. With his vein-ridged hands painfully clutching the bedsides, *he is moaning miserably in his dream.* . . . [The narrator says:] "In the hut on the hill, *there is also a person moaning.*"  

From the passage, there are indications that the man, who repeatedly tries to fish out the scissors at night, seems to be the incarnation of the father's tormented soul. When the father is in deep sleep, he feels misery. (Sometimes Can Xue's characters think more clearly in their dreams.) His soul flees the body and runs to the well, trying to retrieve the lost scissors. The soul repeats its effort but also fails, as has the father himself. As is implicitly indicated in the passage, the only thing that the father's soul can do after this failure is to run away from the well at daybreak, returning to the body. And at this moment the father moans miserably over his soul's failure.

A further point could be made by recognizing the relation between the father's moaning and the imprisoned person's moaning, that is, the imprisoned and moaning person is not only the incarnation of the narrator's soul, but also the incarnation of the father's soul. In other words, the imprisoned person represents the irreconcilable souls of two generations of Chinese writers. This gives the story a sharper critical edge. In such paragraphs, one can see that Can Xue is practicing her manifesto: "writing fiction for vengeance." In the story, she cries out against the injustice suffered by her father and the oppressed older generation of the Chinese writers.

I have pointed out that both the narrator's cleaning of her drawer and the father's dropping the scissors into the well represent writing practice. The essential relationship of these two events is further revealed in two notable paragraphs. They implicitly involve the historical roots of the leftist policy on literature and art:

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25Can Xue, "Shanshang de xiaowu" (Hut on the hill), p. 547 and *DIP*, pp. 52-3.
My little sister sneaks in and tells me that Mother has been thinking of breaking my arms because the sound made by my opening and shutting the drawer is driving her crazy. She is so tortured by the sound that every time she hears it, she soaks her head in cold water and gets a bad cold.

"Things like this are not at all accidental," [says my little sister.] ... "Take our father for example, I have heard him talking about that pair of scissors for perhaps twenty years. Every thing has its historical roots." 

Through the mouth of the little sister, the author once more brings together the writing practices of two generations to illustrate that the aim of these two generations is the same: struggling for the right to write, or more generally, for freedom of speech. Furthermore, the author also asserts that both the mother's opposing the narrator's tidying job and the father's dropping his scissors into the well "are not at all accidental... Every thing has its historical roots." Here Can Xue seems to lead the readers to contemplate the "historical roots" of the ideological oppression suffered by the two generations. If a reader is familiar with the history of modern Chinese literature, it is easy for him or her to associate the "historical roots" with Mao Zedong's *A Talk at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art*, which has been the dominant doctrine on literature and art in modern China for more than half a century and considered the origin of the leftist policy on literature and art.

Michael S. Duke further considers the reference to the "historical roots" to be a notable "allusion to Lu Xun's 'Diary of a Madman.'" In the "Diary of a Madman," Lu Xun intensely attacked the so-called feudalistic dictatorship that had existed in the cultural realm over several thousand years in ancient China. Michael S. Duke's comment illustrates the significance of cultural criticism expressed in the "Hut."

It is also necessary to note the story's descriptions of scenery. They play an important role in indicating the social background in which the author lives and writes. Can Xue began her writing in 1983. From then onward, a series of political campaigns, such as

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"Anti-spiritual Pollution" and "Anti-bourgeois Liberalization," were launched by the Chinese Communist Party to counteract Western democratic ideas and to maintain the orthodox status of Marxism and Maoism. A number of writers such as Bai Hua, Dai Houying, Sha Yexin, and others were openly criticized by the government because their literary works were considered to have violated the official ideology.28 In "Hut," the political atmosphere of that time is fully and allegorically reflected in the scenic descriptions, such as: the north wind blows the fir-bark roof of the hut with violent rage; the howl of wolves echoes in the valley; the sun shines dizzily; white flames gleam on every rock; hundreds of rats scurry about in the wind; and the sand and rocks on the hill rumble down towards the wall behind the family's house.

This is a unique circumstance, in which two different natural elements are mixed, conflicting with one another. The north wind, the sunshine, and the landslide are strong natural powers. They represent a certain authority, under whose influence a disturbing atmosphere arises. And the howl of the wolves, the scurry of the rats and the white flames are responses to those strong natural powers, representing an response to authority. Descriptions of mutual conflicts contained within the scenery characterize most of Can Xue's stories that have the post-Cultural Revolution period as a background.

In this situation, Can Xue makes a figurative illustration of her writing strategy in the story. The following passage should be noted:

I always want to clean my drawer well, but my mother secretly sets herself against me. She always walks to and fro in the next room, tapping loudly to distract me.29

In order to deceive her mother and to continue the cleaning, the narrator has to use her own strategy:

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29 Can Xue, "Shanshang de xiaowu" (Hut on the hill), p. 546 and DIP, p. 51.
I oil the sides of the drawer. By opening and closing it carefully, I manage to make no noise at all. I repeat this experiment for many days and the footsteps in the next room cease. She has been fooled. This proves that you can get away with many things under false pretenses as long as you take a little precaution. I am very excited over my success and work energetically all night.30

The passage could be viewed as the author's self-professed writing strategy, that is, using insinuating modes such as allegory and symbolism, or in Can Xue's own words, "using the form of imagination" for the sake of "vengeance in the emotional realm" and at the same time avoiding direct conflict with government censorship.

During the period from 1983 to 1985, many of Can Xue's stories were not accepted by literary magazines for publication. Meanwhile they were circulated among university students in manuscript form.31 Can Xue once said: "During the 'Anti-bourgeois Liberation' campaign, they (authorities) said that I was wasting paper."32 From this remark, it can be seen that Can Xue was thought of as an unwelcome writer by the government. So Can Xue can only criticize the actual society and express her own thoughts and feelings in an indirect and obscure way. In this sense, the episode of oiling the sides of the drawer and deceiving the mother could be considered an allegorical illustration of her own deliberately oblique mode of expression. It is another aspect of her aesthetic orientation.

The scenic descriptions mentioned above denote a rigid political climate. They help readers understand the reason why the mother opposes the narrator's tidying her drawer. Literally the reason is that the sound and light from the narrator's room make her crazy. Actually the sound and light represent democratic ideas expressed in some literary works

31Wu Ruozeng, "Can Xue de chousi — wo du 'Ah Mei zai yige tian li de chousi'" (The gloomy mood of Can Xue — my reading of "The gloomy mood of Ah Mei on a sunny day"), Tianjin wenxue (1986, no. 8), p. 96.
and the mother's fear is an important intimation of the fact that the authorities are frightened by democratic ideas.

There is sufficient evidence to state that the mother represents the current authority. In China's social life, mother is a popular symbol of the Party or the regime. Can Xue transplants the symbol to some of her works, but makes the mother a negative image. In her story, "Soap Bubbles on the Dirty Water," the vicious mother loses her figure and becomes "a heap of shining soap bubbles, spreading the smell of rotten wood." In the novella, "Old Floating Cloud," Old Kuang's mother is engaged in a special job: purging people's souls. Obviously the job satirizes the government's ideological control, because the governmental propaganda glorifies political workers as "engineers of the human soul." In the "Hut," the father says to the narrator: "When I wake up, I always find that I am mistaken. I have never dropped any scissors into the well, and your mother is quite sure of that I am wrong." The father's remark reveals his inner belief: he should not have been condemned as a "rightist" and deprived of his right to write for twenty years. The reason for all this is merely that the mother is quite sure that he is wrong. At the same time, the father's remark also reveals that the mother is an incarnation of an absolute authority. She has the power to decide others' fate simply according to her own likes or dislikes.

The relationship between the mother and the father can be further expounded by the mother's remark to the narrator:

"Stung by the light from your room, my blood vessels throb hard as though drums were beating. Look here," she points to her temple, where the blood vessel pulsates like a plump earthworm, "I'd rather get scurvy. There is a

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33 An example of this is the lyrics of a well-known political song written by the paragon Lei Feng: "Singing a folk song to the Party, I compare the Party to my mother."
34 Can Xue, "Wushui shang de feizao pao" (Soap bubbles on the dirty water), in Xin chuangzuo (New writing), 1985, no. 1 and DIP, p. 35.
35 Can Xue, "Canglaofuyun" (Old floating cloud), in Zhongguo (China), 1986, no. 5.
36 Can Xue, "Shanshang de xiaowu" (Hut on the hill), p. 545 and DIP, p. 50.
throbbing in my body day and night. You have never tasted my suffering. 
Because of this disease, your father once thought of committing suicide."37

First of all, the mother's remark shows that her disease was not contracted recently but
is a chronic one, or in other words, the disease also has its own "historical roots."
Secondly, the remark also indicates that the mother's disease is the cause of the father's
tragic fate. Seemingly there is no causal relationship between the mother's disease and the
father's contemplation of suicide. Actually it is a tricky narrative, in which two steps of
logical deduction are omitted. By filling in the omitted steps, it could be understood in
this way: because of the mother's disease (the fear of democratic ideas), she decided to
stop the scary sound and light in the father's era (the "Blooming and Contending"
campaign — criticism toward the Party in 1957) by launching the "Anti-rightist"
campaign. The father became one of the victims in the campaign, suffering so much that
he once thought of committing suicide.

Examining all Can Xue's stories, a basic relationship between the mother and the
father can be exposed, namely, the mother is usually the incarnation of authority, while
the father represents the victim of authority. In the "Hut," the father turns into one of the
mournful howling wolves at night. This illustrates the idea that the father is only one of
the numerous victims who were persecuted in various political campaigns and are
continually crying out against injustice toward them. In this environment, even the mother
is so scared that cold sweat drips from her back and the soles of her feet in her dreams. So
this scene also shows the inner weakness of the authority. In "The Fog," the father goes
out and lives in a temple. The real meaning of this event is that the father was sent to a
labor camp during the Cultural Revolution.38 In the same story there is also a description
of the father's feet turning into two wooden sticks, which implies the loss of his freedom
of action.39 All these descriptions function as strong evidence to confirm the idea that the

38Can Xue, "Wu" (The Fog), in Wenshu yuebao (1986, no. 2), p. 66 and DIP, p. 43.
father is a tragic image and acts as a counterpart to the image of the vicious mother. This interpretation is not the same as Ye Hongsheng's assertion that both the mother and the father are incarnations of the Party. In fact, the image of the father is closer to the image of the narrator than to the image of the mother. For example, in "Dialogues IV," the narrator says: "every night I hide in the forest, howling at the sky like a wolf."40 In "The Things That Happened to Me in That World," the narrator herself is also captured and imprisoned in a temple.41 This is evidence that both the father and the narrator are rebellious images. That the father knows from his own grievous experience the danger of becoming a writer under current social conditions in China may explain why he joins his wife in stealing his daughter's weiqi set. He may be opposing her career choice for her own sake. In addition, the relationship between the mother and the father is also expressed ambiguously, thus making the image of the father multifaceted. Sometimes the father and the mother look like political counterparts. Sometimes they seem to be a real couple. At the moment of daybreak, a huge swarm of beetles fly in through the window, the mother beats them awkwardly with a broom. This scene can be seen as the hard situation that the Chinese government cannot effectively counteract the inflow of Western ideas. When a beetle bites mother's toe, her leg swells into a great lead pillar. The father, in his sound sleep, is dreaming of being bitten himself.42 This typical example seems to express an ambivalent view: although the father has been a victim of the mother (an allegorical emblem of authority), as a high-ranking ex-official, he still has an unavoidable emotional link with authority. (The argument is based on the assumption that Can Xue's real father is the model image of the father in the story.) The ambivalence of the father's image reflects the political and emotional dilemma that many loyal elderly Chinese intellectuals feel in their attitude toward the Party.

40Can Xue, "Tiantang de duihua IV" (Dialogues of paradise IV), in Xiaoshuo jie (1988, no. 5), p. 38 and DIP, p. 149.
41Can Xue, "Wo zai nage shijie li de shiqing" (The things that happened to me in that world), in Renmin wenxue (1986, no. 11), p. 94 and DIP, p. 92.
42Can Xue, "Shanshang de xiaowu" (Hut on the hill), p. 547 and DIP, pp. 52-3.
The preceding analyses, paraphrases, and comments focus especially on obscure, ambiguous, and figurative passages of the overall story. In this interpretation of the "Hut," a study of contextuality and intertextuality is employed to reveal the author's allegorical emblems and implicit metaphors. By examining the story's subject matter, characters, events, and setting as a coherent entity, the interpretation attempts not merely to communicate its literal meanings, but also to identify the allegorical and emotional significance suggested by the story. In doing so, a few aspects of the author's aesthetic orientation and the sociohistorical background of the story's composition are also examined. A suggestion that the story is Can Xue's figurative literary manifesto — "writing fiction for vengeance" — is made. The story provides a criticism of the Chinese authorities' policy on literature and art. Apart from this theme, the "Hut" also reflects a sense of horror in a society where people cherish hostility toward one another. In such a society, people have no rationality and no dignity. They are weak and incompetent, including the seemingly powerful and aggressive mother. Even though some ambitious people, represented by the narrator and the father, are striving against the repressive circumstances in which they live, they cannot control their own fates. They seem to be trapped in a fruitless, even hopeless predicament. In this sense, the story also expresses the author's feeling of fatalism and nihilism.

"The Fog," "The Embroidered Shoes and Fourth Mother Yuan's Anxiety," "Raindrops in the Crevice Between the Tiles," and "The Gloomy Mood of Ah Mei on a Sunny Day" are all set during the Cultural Revolution, and all depict the miseries of common people during this catastrophic period. "The Fog" narrates the radical change of a harmonious family at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. As usual, Can Xue does not specify a temporal framework for the story. However she uses "fog" as an allegorical emblem to represent the social circumstances of the Cultural Revolution. The first paragraph of the story indicates the social background of that time:
Since the fog came, everything surrounding grew out long, fine hairs and trembled constantly. All day I stretched my eyes wide trying to see clearly, which made my eyes extremely painful. This damned fog was everywhere. Even the bedroom was full of it. From morning to night it surged in like thick smoke.43

Because of the beginning of the Cultural Revolution the family's normal life is disrupted:

There were five people in my household. We ate together and watched TV together in family harmony. But that morning when I opened the door, I saw the sun turn light blue. It seemed to be wrapped in long, fine hairs. It turned out that the fog had been unusually thick the night before. All my family became shapeless shadows. What's more, everyone became hotheaded, eccentric, even frivolous. Take my mother for example, on the second day of the fog, she declared that she was leaving away from the family. The reason, she claimed, was unbearable physical pain. After she left, father's legs withered into wooden sticks, tapping on the cement from morning to night. He even whistled popular tunes. My two elder brothers were completely mad. They rummaged through chests and cupboards. Everyone knew that they raised rats under the bed, but they still put on an air of secrecy, fearing that others might uncover their tricks. . . [They] screamed and howled outside, smashing glass. I had great pity for them. They suffered from a severe bone disease and couldn't walk normally, even though they were over twenty.44

The description reads somewhat farcically. In actuality, it is an allegory of a family's tragic experience during a period of social chaos. To read the story from this perspective, the farcical description becomes reasonable and understandable. The story can be viewed as a microcosm of many Chinese families under attack during the Cultural Revolution: the mother's leaving the family represents the common phenomena of forced separation; the father's legs turned into two wooden sticks, and his living in a broken down temple allegorize innocent people having lost freedom (i.e., their arrests and imprisonments in labor camps); the crazy behavior of the narrator's two brothers represents Red Guard's (hong wei bing) atrocities so common to the period.

44Can Xue, "Wu" (The fog), p. 65 and DIP, pp. 39-40
The ambiguous narrative used to depict the mother's fate is perhaps the most remarkable feature of "The Fog." Since the mother left the family, the narrator (daughter) has kept looking for her. It seems that the mother has not really left, but is hiding somewhere nearby. At night the daughter "hear[s] some one dash into the house and make a clean sweep of the leftovers."45 The daughter runs toward the figure,

"Mama?" I grab a soaking wet sleeve.... Mother's body is soft in her clothes, as though nothing were there. Who knows, maybe it is utter emptiness inside her garments.... No, it couldn't have been Mother in the clothes. She should be a heavy woman.46

The significance of the passage cited above cannot be determined by reading it in isolation. We have to note its ambiguous feature. In the story the mother's fate is expressed as a mystery. At one point the narrator sees her mother fall down under a tree. She runs over to support her. She finds that mother's eyes are glazing "like porcelain," her body becomes "thin and light," and "her face turns blue." The mother stretches out her "thin, empty claw" to the narrator. "Instantly, one of her ribs breaks in a crack. She disappears on the other side of the tree."47

Each depiction of mother's empty and lifeless body seems to suggest that the mother has died. This impression is also supported by both father's and mother's remarks. The father tells the narrator: "Your mother . . . is digging earthworms at the other side of the mountain."48 The mother says: "I smell a kind of odor here. It is from the earth."49 Both remarks imply that the mother has gone to another world or rested forever under the ground. The author does not use the word "death," instead, she describes the mother's destiny through her own words, thus indicating that the death occurs in an allegorical mode: "I was looking for an egg. I once raised two white hens. They were laying eggs every-where. It came to me all of a sudden that I had lost my direction in the forest.

45 Can Xue, "Wu" (The fog), p. 65 and DIP, p. 40.
46 Can Xue, "Wu" (The fog), pp.65-6 and DIP, p. 41.
47 Can Xue, "Wu" (The fog), p. 66 and DIP, pp. 42-3.
48 Can Xue, "Wu" (The fog), p. 66 and DIP, p. 41.
49 Can Xue, "Wu" (The fog), p. 66 and DIP, p. 44.
There was a steep cliff over there. Mountain torrents would rush down in an instant."\(^{50}\)

We might as well think that the mother died in a secluded spot just at the beginning of a disaster. Furthermore, it is not just the mother who died in the disaster. The mother says to her daughter: "Beyond the forest, there are a number of human figures. Can't you feel that?"\(^{51}\) At the end of the story the narrator attempts to tell something to her mother, she explains with great difficulty:

My mind is blank. I simply cannot make myself clear, not the least bit. My words condense into pasty spots sticking to the front of my jacket. I keep on using question marks and exclamation marks, trying to exaggerate. But all are totally in vain. *Mother has fallen asleep.* I shake her violently and ask her frustratedly: "Do you understand?" *Her blue face is crawling with insects.* A grayish white semicircle is drifting near the door, popping in and peeping about. That is a cloud of yet denser fog.\(^{52}\)(Emphases added.)

Thus the story ends with this final suggestion that the mother has died; the narrator is unable to communicate with her any more, and her body is decomposing. However, the mother's death remains a mystery like that cloud of elusive fog. It is really a sorrowful story. Perhaps the author does not want to make the mother's death determinate due to emotional reasons. In this story the image of the mother is entirely tragic. Her job used to be raising hens, but that ended twenty years before. The number twenty is significant here both because it signifies the darkest years from 1957 to 1976, as well as the mother's chronic suffering. Like the father in "The Hut," who searched for the scissors dropped down the well, the mother in "The Fog" has been looking for "the eggs" for the last twenty years. We cannot ascertain the exact allegorical meaning of the eggs, but we can identify the range of their reference. The eggs can be viewed as an emblem of the mother's goal or ideal, which she relentlessly pursues for twenty years. She gets lost in the forest because she keeps looking for the eggs. Thus, the mother's search for eggs can be read as an allegorical representation of her pursuit of an ideal at the expense of her

\(^{50}\)Can Xue, "Wu" (The fog), pp.65-6 and *DIP*, p. 41.
^{51}\)Can Xue, "Wu" (The fog), p. 66 and *DIP*, p. 42.
^{52}\)Can Xue, "Wu" (The fog), p. 67 and *DIP*, p. 44.
tragedy might be a tragedy of an idealist of the Communist movement, who fails in searching for an unreachable ideal. More profound still is the fact that even in death the mother continues her search:

In the morning I am wakened by the noise of the crows. I notice that mother is looking for something along the foot of the wall. She is bending over the ground, her wax-yellow face almost touching the mud. She seems to be taking pains to identify something. Her dry eyeballs rub in their sockets with a soft grinding sound.53

In this passage we see a tormented soul, unyielding and yet at a total loss. It is, in fact, an accurate representation of many innocent people, including idealistic Party members, who were falsely accused and driven to their deaths during the Cultural Revolution without ever realizing their ideals or understanding the reason for their persecution. Out of the sympathy for the untold victims of the Cultural Revolution Can Xue does not actually depict the mother's death, but leaves it instead to the reader's imagination.

There is, perhaps, another reason why Can Xue does not make the mother's death explicit, and that is because she herself did not know the fate of this character. Most likely Can Xue adapted an event that occurred to a neighbor's family as the source for her story "The Fog." The husband of the family was a colleague of Can Xue's father's at the New Hunan Daily, who was also condemned as a "rightist" and member of the "anti-Party clique." The man's wife left home at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution and never returned. Whether or not she survived remains a mystery.54 Can Xue may draw on this event for inspiration. She deliberately arranges the narrative so that the mother's destiny is ambiguous. This ambiguity allows the story to transcend the particular to make a more universal critical statement about the Cultural Revolution.

53Can Xue, "Wu" (The fog), p. 66 and DIP, p. 43.
54The son of this family used to be my classmate in secondary school and in college. His mother's disappearance is one of the unsettled cases in Hunan province after the Cultural Revolution. I once read his unpublished article written in memory of his mother. His name is Su Hainan.
"The Embroidered Shoes and Fourth Mother Yuan's Anxiety" (hereafter "The Embroidered Shoes") tells the story of Fourth Mother Yuan's losing and regaining her embroidered shoes. Fourth Mother Yuan and Old Lady Li are friends who make their living by searching through garbage heaps for odds and ends. Fourth Mother Yuan has a pair of embroidered shoes. They are her treasure. One day Old Lady Li borrows the shoes and experiences a meteoric rise in social status. At the same time, Fourth Mother Yuan undergoes a great deal of suffering because of the loss of her shoes. She recounts these unusual events to the narrator, her neighbor:

Everything turned out to be changed unexpectedly in the dream! The evil beat the good; the devil got the throne. From that day on, the woman swindler (Old Lady Li) won! From that day on I fell into an abyss ten thousand zhang deep. . . . The woman swindler became a respectable person! Who can recognize the gigantic fraud?55

Fourth Mother Yuan makes every effort to seize back the embroidered shoes. She adopts the "tactic of direct attack" by dashing into Old Lady Li's room at night to search for her lost shoes. However, she is unable to find the shoes and is bitten by a fierce dog instead. As her efforts continue to fail she becomes increasingly depressed. She smashes glasses without reason and even shoots at pedestrians with an air gun. She also dashes into the narrator's room to search for her shoes, creating a great mess and forcing the narrator to flee the disturbance. Everything that she tries is ineffective, and finally she changes her strategy and adopts "outflanking tactics."56 She stops going out to collect waste materials. Pretending illness she lies in her house waiting for an opportunity to try out her new strategy. Finally she gets back her embroidered shoes. She is so exited that she dashes into the narrator's room, embracing her and hitting her. Then she gets on the bed and sits on her chest, telling her: "now the embroidered shoes are returned to their

55Can Xue, "Xiuhua xie he Yuansi Laoniaang de fannao" (The embroidered shoes and Fourth Mother Yuan's Anxiety", in Hai'ou (1986, no. 11), p. 11.
original master. All things will come to light. Justice won! The bright sun will shine on my head."\(^67\)

The story is a typical allegory. Can Xue uses the "embroidered shoes" as an allegorical emblem to signify something important to the Chinese people. Perhaps it can be interpreted as political power. Viewed in this context the theme of the story becomes more comprehensible. If people's rights and power are grabbed by a dictator they will suffer from the loss. In terms of allegory, this story is interesting for two reasons: both the name, Old Lady Li (Li da pozi), and the fact that she is transformed from a mere nobody into a character with political power and influence clearly allude to Mao Zedong's wife, Jiang Qing. When Jiang Qing was a teenager, she was abducted and sold to a theatrical troupe. During that time, her stage name was Old Girl Li (Li da guniang).\(^58\)

In addition to the above mentioned theme there are two other significant points that should be pointed out. The first one is the double-edged nature of political power. Some people who aspire to political power will do absolutely anything, no matter how vicious, to achieve their ends. Often, after attaining their goals, such people are likely to become political tyrants. The second one is that the author seems to disagree with the idea of using violence to fight violence. In this story she seems to advocate a spirit of tolerance commonly associated with Christianity, an idea that is more fully developed in Can Xue's later works.

The artistic value of "The Embroidered Shoes" is difficult to summarize. It is the first story in which Can Xue incorporates elements of black humor. In this story, Fourth Mother Yuan's narrative discourse (both in dialogue and monologue) is rife with elegant proverbs used in an overrational manner. Wu Liang criticizes the language of Fourth Mother Yuan, arguing that it is completely inconsistent with her social status, which is correct. However, I disagree with Wu Liang's overall criticism of the story, and I suggest

\(^{57}\)Can Xue, "The Embroidered Shoes," p. 10.
\(^{58}\)Zhong Huamin, Jiang Qing zhengzhuan (The formal biography of Jiang Qing), (Hong Kong, 1967), p.6.
instead that Can Xue deliberately uses this type of language to create an exaggerated and satiric style that affects the story's black humor. In addition, Can Xue satirizes both Fourth Mother Yuan and Old Lady Li by making them appear ridiculous, which in turn evokes in the reader attitudes of amusement, contempt, and indignation. Taken together the various elements in this story articulates the author's view that the era of the Cultural Revolution was marked by widespread social chaos, cruelty, and insanity. Later Can Xue wrote other works in which she attempts to develop the element of black humor, such as in the short story, "Artists and the Old County Magistrate, Who Has Already Read Romanticism," and the novella, "A Man and His Neighbors and Two Or Three Other People." In both works the lengthy and awkward-sounding titles are a feature of Can Xue's black humor. Unfortunately, neither story is very successful.

"Raindrops in the Crevice between the Tiles" involves an injustice, which is a common theme in post-Maoist literature. The story's heroine is an educated person who is constantly revising a letter appealing for redress of an injustice she suffered during the Cultural Revolution. At some point prior to her obsessive letter writing the woman has become an owl. However, in the context of the story, she still thinks and acts like a person. "She ponders a long time after that but still can't figure out how she was turned into an owl!" The mother of her daughter's friend has also turned into an owl. The woman's daughter tells her: "Since my friend's mother has become an owl she has been thinking about flying out of the attic." Later she does fly out from the window with disastrous results: "The owl breaks its wings in the sky. It falls down to the street, dead."

59 Can Xue, "Yishujiamen he du guo langmanzhuyi de xianzhang laotou" (Artists and the old county magistrate, who has already read romanticism), in Shanghai wenxue (Shanghai literature), 1988, no. 10.
60 Can Xue, "Yi ge ren he ta de linju ji lingwai liang san ge ren" (A man and his neighbors and other two or three people), in Zuojiia (Writers), 1992, no. 5.
61 Can Xue, "Wafeng zhong de yudi" (Raindrops in the crevice between the tiles), in Zhishi fenzi (Intellectuals, Autumn, 1986), p. 17 and DIP, p. 25.
The fact of people being turned into owls is a key element in the story's allegorical narrative. In Chinese culture the owl is an inauspicious image symbolizing misfortune. The transformation of human beings into animals allegorizes the fact that during the Cultural Revolution many innocent people, especially the educated, were condemned, without reason, as reactionaries or some other negative epithets used by the Party to attack its helpless victims. It is for this reason that the protagonist is changed into an owl without her understanding why or how it has occurred. In terms of gaining redress for the political persecution she experienced, the only avenue open to her is to write a letter of appeal. She revises it time and again, however, each time she "simply can't find a suitable way to express herself." This inability to clearly express her grievance is a theme repeated five times in the story, and it is used by Can Xue to emphasize the severity of the political persecution and the helplessness of its victims.

In despair, the protagonist pays close attention to the style of clothing worn by her section chief; both she and her colleague "believe that the way he dresses mysteriously affects everybody's personal interests." Three times in the story the narrator describes what the chief is wearing, and each time the protagonist is disappointed to learn that he has not changed his style of dress. This particular detail is of interest because it reveals the state of mind of the persecuted; they watch for any sign indicating a change in the harsh political climate, hoping that soon they will be rehabilitated. In "Raindrops," as in many of her other stories, Can Xue expresses a strong sense of fatalism. People have no capacity to resist their misfortune because resistance inevitably brings disaster. This point is expressed allegorically through the fate of the owl that attempts to fly from the attic window only to break its wings in the sky and fall dead into the street.

"The Gloomy Mood of Ah Mei on a Sunny Day" depicts the spiritual death of the Chinese people through the description of one family's abnormal life. Old Li wants to

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64 Can Xue, "Raindrops," p. 17 and DIP, p. 25.
marry Ah Mei because her mother owns a house. Prior to the wedding, every time that Old Li visits he "sneak[s]" into the kitchen to "discuss something furtively" with Ah Mei's mother. After the wedding the mother tells the neighbors that it is her daughter's great fortune to marry such a good man: "I thought nobody would like to marry her. I'm the only one aware of the fact that it is not her but my family that he'staken a fancy to." It seems that Ah Mei marries Old Li because of her mother's approval, but the relationship between the newly-married couple is so unharmonious that on the second day of their marriage Old Li builds a loft in the corner of the bridal room where he sleeps alone. He says to Ah Mei: "When I sleep with you, I always get scared and can't fall asleep. It is easier for me to sleep here."

Following the wedding the relationship between the mother and Old Li cools. She stops talking to him in the kitchen, and comes to consider him a "loafer." Three months later Old Li leaves. He does not visit the family again until Ah Mei gives birth to their son, Dagou. Old Li resumes his practice of sneaking into the kitchen to talk with Ah Mei's mother, and their former closeness is restored. As Dagou grows up he becomes more and more like his father: he is small statured with "a huge bottom," and like his father he never calls Ah Mei "mother" but "hey" instead. When Dagou is five years old Old Li stops his visits. "Maybe it is because of this that Mother hates me all the more. She's cleared a storeroom next to the kitchen and lives there. I believe she did this in order to avoid me." Three years pass and Ah Mei hears nothing about Old Li. One of her neighbors stands in the yard digging with a coal rake at a hole high in the wall, which he has enlarged every night since it first appeared. The mother has been coughing for over two months. She feels that she is not long for this world, so she locks herself in the store

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65 Can Xue, "Ah Mei zai yi ge taiyangtian li de chousi" (The gloomy mood of Ah Mei on a sunny day), in Zhishi Fenzi (Intellectuals, Autumn, 1986), p. 19 and DIP, p. 17.
room. The neighbor is still digging at the hole in the wall. Ah Mei is anxious that if the wind blows at night, the wall will fall down and cause her house to collapse.

"Ah Mei" is Can Xue's only short story that exhibits what might be considered a coherent plot structure. In this sense it somewhat resembles to a traditional story. At the same time it also reads like an allegory because of the abnormality and absurdity of the family's life. In the story the mother is shabby and mean, Old Li is ugly and his behavior is sordid, Ah Mei is insensitive and meek. All of the relationships: between husband and wife, mother-in-law and son-in-law, mother and daughter, mother and son, and between neighbors, are so aberrant that the reader tends not to see the story as a realistic portrayal of family life, but as an allegorical representation of particularly vicious aspects of human nature. It is for this reason that I classify "Ah Mei" as an allegory.

After the publication of "Ah Mei," it received some critical attention in literary circles. In his article introducing "Ah Mei" Wu Ruozeng, a writer and critic, says: "I think that it is indeed a 'very bizarre' story. By saying that it is 'very bizarre' I mean that it almost completely abandons the conventional modes of writing. . . . It uses incoherent details and happenings to link some fragmentary images and mirages produced by hallucination to structure story, and thus to express some particular perceptions and emotions of the author."68 He concludes by saying that "this story of Can Xue's, as a unique phenomenon, is worthy of our appropriate attention."69

"Ah Mei," along with other stories by writers such as Mo Yan, Ma Yuan, and Han Shaogong, exhibits a new trend in contemporary Chinese fiction: the narrative focus shifts from the evil of society to the weakness of human nature. In "Ah Mei" the importance of external forces that traditionally (during the Maoist era) caused characters to think and act is significantly diminished. The characters are no longer the direct

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68Wu Ruozeng, "Can Xue de chousi — wo du 'Ah Mei zai yi ge taiyangtian li de chousi'" (The gloomy mood of Can Xue — my reading of "The gloomy mood of Ah Mei on a sunny day"), Tianjin wenxue (1986, no. 8), p.96.
69Ibid, p. 53.
victims of society. Although we can perceive the aberrant social atmosphere surrounding these characters, they themselves seem to be ugly and vicious by birth. All of the characters in "Ah Mei" lack individual moral will. They are selfish, callous, and mean spirited. They attempt nothing and accomplish nothing. Can Xue’s bold depiction of the darker aspects of human nature truly shocked Chinese readers. Wu Ruozeng comments that: "In contemporary Chinese literary circles, there is no other work that depicts ugliness and evil so fiercely and completely." This literary trend of exploring the evil side of human nature became somewhat of a vogue, and can be seen in many works of fiction by such writers as Yu Hua, Su Tong, Hong Feng, and Xu Xiaohe.

"The Things That Happened to Me in That World" expresses the author’s animosity toward the "Anti-bourgeois Liberalization" campaign, and was published in November, 1986, precisely at the height of the campaign. The government openly criticized certain writers for spreading bourgeois ideas, and once again a hostile political climate caused a panic in art and literary circles. "The Things" is Can Xue’s only story which has a subtitle: "To my friend." Who exactly this "friend" refers to is unknown, although a careful reading of the text reveals that the story is probably Can Xue’s response to a sympathetic letter. Perhaps the friend was concerned about the situation that Can Xue was facing during the campaign, and sent a letter to give her moral support.

In contemporary China every political campaign disturbs people’s normal lives and causes an atmosphere of panic. People constantly exchange information about the current political climate, show great concern for one another, and hope that they themselves may be able to escape becoming a target of the campaign. The "Anti-bourgeois Liberalization" campaign is used as source material not only in the story "The Things," but in Can Xue’s earlier novella "Old Floating Cloud" as well. In that work the protagonist, Geng Shanwu, puts a dead sparrow into an envelope and throws it through a window into the room of Xu Ruhua, his neighbor and mistress. Once again Can Xue uses

\footnote{Ibid, p. 96.}
allegory to tell the story of people warning one another to take precautions against the campaign.

In "The Things" Can Xue depicts seemingly incomprehensible events which occur during the campaign. It is midnight and raining hard. In someone's yard a noisy mob surges back and forth. They are digging up a camphor tree and planning to replace it with a tong tree. The mob yells madly. A strong man carefully makes a noose and throws it at the narrator's neck, trying to catch her. The leader of the mob is an old woman. "She is a hawk."71 After killing a baby with a hoe, the old woman jabs the narrator's waist with a knife. She finds that "it turns out to be stainless steel inside [the narrator's clothes]."72 The mob rounds on the narrator, who, in panic, turns into a column of ice. In the end, however, she is unable to avoid being captured and is imprisoned in an old temple. The angry mob seems to give up its plan to plant the tong tree and becomes a line of mourners circling a bare hill. They sing a monotonous song: "string, string, oh, string." A bamboo flute plays a tuneless, mournful melody. The old woman is changed into a fossil. Inexplicably the flute is knocked to the ground.73

All these grotesque occurrences happen to the narrator in "that world." In contrast to this series of grotesque and depressing events the descriptions of the physical setting of "that world" are quite colorful and exiting:

It's midnight now, my friend. Outside the sky is pitch-dark. A heavy rain is falling. . . . The wide wasteland is deserted. Then the snow stops. From the bluish white sky hang long, dazzling spears of ice. . . . There are frozen cactuses and transparent reptiles in the wilderness. Delicate ice columns hang from the sky to the ground.74

Ever since that windy day there has been a crack in the sky.75

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71 Can Xue, "Wo zai na ge shijie li de shiqing" (The things that happened to me in that world), in Renmin wenxue (People's literature, 1986, no. 11), p. 92 and DIP, p. 88.
In the pool on the limestone there is an eternal thing: When frost comes down from the sky, the dead water jingles. . . . I was thinking of that ice mountain. If the sea thaws, the ice mountain will start floating. A column reaching toward the sky breaks with a shiny, dreamy blue and then disappear in a wink. The rays of the icicle are eternal and dazzling.  

I hear the feet of wolves. . . . The ice peak gives off purple smoke, rolling deeply.

At night, ghosts and goblins cavort, and underground something is jumping and running madly about.

Like the "Hut," this story can also be read as a political allegory. With an allegorical interpretation, we can identify the story's theme as ridiculing the "Anti-bourgeois Liberalization" campaign, and by extension the Chinese government's system of official ideology. The mob undoubtedly refers to the political hard-liners, so its leader is depicted as a "hawk." That the mob wants to dig up the camphor tree to replace it with a tong tree is an allegorical representation of the campaign's aim: to eliminate the influence of Western ideas and re-establish the absolute authority of Marxism/Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought. The "tong" is a native Chinese tree, which is used as an allegorical emblem to refer to the native Chinese ideology. The "hawk" and the "fossil," as allegorical emblems, represent the crudity and rigidity of the hard-liners' thought. "The line of mourners" foreshadows that their aim will inevitably fail. The one-word song about "string" is reminiscent of the Party's key line (gang): in the Maoist era, it was the "class struggle;" in the post-Mao era, it is the "four basic principles." The loss of the flute implies that the monotonous song will be hard to continue.

The description of the scenery in a whole represents the changing political and social situation in China. In the story, a number of important allegorical emblems need to be deciphered. The time setting of a dark and raining "midnight" indicates the political darkness of that time. Its symbolic significance is similar to that of Mao Dun's novel.

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76 Can Xue, "The Things," p. 93 and DIP, p. 89.
Midnight (Ziye) and Lu Xun's prose poem "The Autumn Night" (Qiuye). Both are used to predict that the darkness of their time will pass and the dawn will not be far away. The "dead water" (sishui) comes from Wen Yiduo's poem "Dead Water," which symbolizes the lifeless Chinese society of the 1920s. That "underground something is jumping and running madly about" perhaps derives from Lu Xun's "underground fire" in the "Foreword" to Wild Grass, which reads: "Underground fire moves under the ground, rushing and dashing. Once the lava erupts out, it will burn up all wild grasses and arbors."79 Something that is jumping and running madly underground foreshadows a social element of certain unrest. The image which combines ice and flame together also can find its source in Lu Xun's prose poem "The Dead Fire." In this poem, a flame burns in the icy valley. It would rather burn itself up than be frozen to die out.80 The fire represents the opposite social power.

By understanding the meanings of all these allegorical emblems, we find that the story's theme becomes very clear: the suppression of democratic ideas by the hard-liners will fail. Although it is the darkest time ("midnight"), the ideological control of the government is not as effective as before ("There has been a crack in the sky"); people start to know how to protect themselves (The narrator wears underclothes made of stainless steel); the rebellious emotion grows ("At the other side of the swamp, a pack of hungry wolves is running." "At night, ghosts and goblins cavort, and underground something is jumping and running madly about."); the social circumstances will change ("When frost comes down from the sky, the dead water jingles." "If the sea thaws, the ice mountain will start floating." "The ice peak gives off purple smoke, rolling deeply.").

In such a circumstance, the narrator, who almost always exhibits depression in her works, cannot help becoming exited and crying out in the last paragraph:

79 Lu Xun, "Tici" (Foreword) to Yecao (Wild grass), (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1979), p. 1.
80 Lu Xun, "Si Huo" (The dead fire), in Yecao (Wild grass), p. 35.
My friend, it is the time. Listen, the flaming hailstones are falling in a storm. The transparent tree is shaking its white canopy. The sea is waving with carnal desire. Hand in hand we rise from the surface of the sea. We narrow our eyes, bathing in the radiance of the ice, and sing from our chests, "Mom's shoes..." 81

"The Things" is Can Xue's only optimistic story. In the story, she expresses a kind of enthusiasm to fight against the Chinese government's ideological suppression. She appeals people to make by their own judgments and she expresses her determination to withstand ideological suppression:

Have you ever had this experience, my friend? When your heart is open and your head becomes a reflective mirror, the stars are overshadowed. The sun pales into insignificance, flashing dimly in the darkness. . . . I will stand still in this world, my friend. I am growing upward, growing into one of those sky-pointing ice columns." 82

This story indeed conveys the author's confidence of a bright future and her courageous stand against the current darkness. This positive attitude is seldom seen in Can Xue's other stories.

From the preceding analyses, we can draw some conclusions about Can Xue's allegorical stories. First, in these stories the agents, actions, and settings are contrived to make sense on the language level of signification, and at the same time to signify a second, correlated order of agents, concepts, and events. In addition the allegorical narrative is sustained throughout the works. In this sense, I name this category of Can Xue's stories allegorical stories.

Secondly, except for "Ah Mei," these allegorical stories all have strong social content. In this sense, they can be considered political allegories. The term "political allegory," which is first employed by Charlotte Innes to summarize certain features of Can Xue's fiction, 83 perhaps is an appropriate term for Can Xue's allegorical stories. In these stories, the characters and actions represent historical personages and events. For instance, the

83 Charlotte Innes, "Foreword" to Old Floating Cloud, (Evanston, 1991), p. XII
father in "Hut" represents the older generation of Chinese writers. Old Lady Li in "The Embroidered Shoes" most likely represents Jiang Qing. The crazy behavior of the mob in "The Things" allegorizes the "Anti-bourgeois Liberalization" campaign. Many allegorical emblems are employed in these stories. For example, the "hut" indicates the stifling cultural atmosphere in contemporary China; the "fog" indicates the Cultural Revolution; and the "embroidered shoes" indicates political power. All these emblems suggest political issues. The use of these emblems also demonstrates that the author has a political purpose in writing this category of short stories. This point has already been substantiated by Can Xue herself. She once admitted, although reluctantly, that her early works "had some sort of symbolic meaning and they were about the Cultural Revolution and its legacy."84

Thirdly, because allegorical stories need characters and actions to represent historical personages and events, a diversity of characters and their actions becomes indispensable. Most of the characters in these stories can be classified into types. For instance, the narrators in "The Things" and "Hut" represent the rebellious younger generation, while the father in "The Fog" and the protagonist in the "Raindrops" are clearly victims. The characters' actions form plots. Although the plots in these stories are not quite complete and clear, they are still traceable. "Ah Mei" spans a period of eight years and depicts the process of Ah Mei's betrothal, wedding, and separation. "The Embroidered Shoes" covers the beginning and ending of the Cultural Revolution and describes the allegorical event of Fourth Mother Yuan's losing and regaining her embroidered shoes.

Fourthly, some of Can Xue's allegorical stories such as "the Fog" and "Raindrops" bear some features of scar fiction (shanghen xiaoshuo). They focus on the catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution and the suffering of the Chinese people. However, they cannot be classified as scar fiction for two major reasons. The first reason is that Can Xue's

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allegorical stories no longer contain any unfounded optimism and hope. Much scar fiction is composed with optimistic endings to show the authors' hope in the post-Mao era, which features significantly in the scar fiction. Can Xue's allegorical stories, however, assume an uncompromising attitude toward current political policy. "Hut" and "The Things" can serve as examples, since both continually attack the Chinese government's ideological suppression in the post-Mao era. The second reason is more important, that is, Can Xue's characters are no longer described as Promethean victims or committed heroes with a sober consciousness in the Cultural Revolution or post-Mao era. They are common people with their own weaknesses. In "The Fog," every family member becomes hotheaded, eccentric, even frivolous during the Cultural Revolution, even though some of them were victims. In "The Things," after being imprisoned in an old temple, the narrator has no choice but to disguise herself by putting on a monkey mask and uttering words against her own will. Fourth Mother Yuan might become a new tyrant once she holds some power. This feature endows Can Xue's allegorical stories with a more profound meaning. It forces readers to become aware that every one is responsible for China's historical travails. In this sense, Can Xue's allegorical stories figuratively illustrate that it is more important for the Chinese people to reflect about what kind of role they played in past catastrophes and are still playing in current social life than simply to blame others and pretend that they themselves are totally innocent victims. It is this point that particularly impressed me when I first read some of Can Xue's stories.
Chapter 3: Can Xue's Symbolic Stories

Can Xue's symbolic stories mainly employ symbols to express her individual feelings and emotions. Her notable symbolic stories include "The Bull," "In the Wilderness," "Skylight," "The Date," "The Instant When the Cuckoo Sings," and "Dialogues in Paradise I-V." In the following paragraphs I will analyze these ten stories with a concentration on "Dialogues in Paradise I-V."

These stories are composed in a symbolic mode and are replete with many of Can Xue's private symbols. Reading them is really "as difficult as deciphering some secret code," as Can Xue herself admits.\(^1\) However her remark reveals another aspect of these stories: since they are written in a so-called "secret code," there certainly exists a method to decipher the "secret code," otherwise the stories will be totally meaningless. I think that the "secret code" is precisely her private symbols. Ultimately, Can Xue's private symbols cannot be entirely independent from the background of Chinese traditional culture and the regular usage of Chinese language. Therefore Can Xue's private symbols are not absolutely "private" and, to some degree, can become understandable through an appropriate interpretation. Furthermore, Can Xue's private symbols do not exist in isolation in a single story. Rather the same or similar symbols not only repeat in the same story but also appear frequently in many other stories. Thus, contextuality and intertextuality can also be employed as an effective method in the interpretation of Can Xue's symbolic stories.

In the interest of clarity I will simply list the most significant symbols in these ten stories and point out their meaning before I begin my analysis.

The "bull," "black cat as big as a leopard" ("black leopard cat," "leopard," ) "bee" ("wasp"), and an unnamed "little boy" and "he" are symbols of ideal lovers or some

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female's desire. In Chinese life and thought, there is a popular belief in the strength of the ox, and the "bull" is a symbol of male strength.² In classic fiction men who are fond of women are called "gluttonous cats" (chan zui mao). One example can be found in Dream of the Red Chamber, in which Mother Jia calls Jia Lian a "gluttonous cat" when she learns of his adultery with the wife of the servant Bao Er.³ In Can Xue's story the "black cat," together with the "black leopard cat" and the "leopard," is always used to symbolize an extramarital lover or some female desire. "Like the butterfly, the bee also represents a young man in love, and the peony on which it sits, or around which it flies, represents the girl he loves. The expression 'to call the bee and bring the butterfly' (zhao feng redie) refers to an extramarital affair."⁴ The unnamed "little boy" in "The Instance When the Cuckoo Sings" and "he" in all Can Xue's symbolic stories except for "Skylight" are always ideal lovers for whom the female narrator longs continuously. "Mulberry tree," "willow tree," "tuberose," and "water" ("the source of water," "well," "river," "lake," "spring," "flood") are symbols related to love and sex. In many of Can Xue's symbolic stories the narrator's husband or lover usually lives in a house under a mulberry tree. Can Xue calls it a "lascivious plant."⁵ "Willow tree is a symbol of spring and love, as spring is the season of erotic awakenings. In Chinese language, the phrase 'willow feelings and flower wishes' (liuqing huayuan) means sexual desire; 'looking for flowers and visiting willows' (xunhuawenliu) means visiting a prostitute."⁶ In Can Xue's stories "tuberose" symbolizes the sexual pleasure of the female. In traditional Chinese culture, "Water also symbolizes yin, the primeval female principle . . . and any expressions denoting sexual intercourse have to do with water."⁷ "In erotic literature, the well stands for the vagina."⁸

³See Honglou Meng (Dream of the red chamber), (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1982), p. 609.
⁴Eberhard, Dictionary, p. 37.
⁵Can Xue, "Tiantang de duihua IV" (Dialogues of paradise IV), in Xiaoshuo jie (1988, no. 5), p.39 and DIP, p. 151.
⁷Eberhard, Dictionary, p. 309.
⁸Eberhard, Dictionary, p. 311.
Similarly "water" is a generic symbol for the ideal of the female in Can Xue's symbolic stories. The female narrator frequently turns into a fish and swims in the water. The unnamed character "he" often digs a "well," searching for spring. The "spring" is a symbol for the source of love because it is semantically connected with the concept of "origin" and actually it is a kind of "source of water." The "flood" in "Dialogues V" gives off an "odor of reproduction." It symbolizes the extreme of love: sex. "In Chinese, a distinction is made between two kinds of blood: fresh, red blood, the kind that flows from wounds, is a symbol of life." In ancient rites, red blood was smeared on objects to make them sacred. "While the dark blood . . . is unclean; contact with it brings illness or unhappiness." There is an analogous distinction of bloods in Can Xue's symbolic stories. "Fresh blood" symbolizes energy and desire, while "black blood" symbolizes sorrow, incapacity, and marital inharmony.

The "snake" ("python," "serpent") is the most frequently used symbol. It appears in nine stories out of Can Xue's ten symbolic stories (except for "The Date"). It symbolizes sex and a sense of sin about sex. The snake is one of the five noxious creatures, and is regarded as sensual but wicked and treacherous in Chinese culture. Chinese people also use the snake as a symbol to identify the penis. According to classic legend, Nüwa and Fuxi had human heads and snake bodies. They were sister and brother. However they got married. When intercourse took place, their bodies wound around each other like two snakes. Because of the mystery of reproduction primitive people introduced the sense of original sin to sex. This legend is an expression of this sense, and is somewhat similar to the western legend. In the Bible it is a snake that tells Adam and Eve to eat the fruits

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10Can Xue, "Tiantang de duihua V" (Dialogues of paradise V), in *Xiaoshuo jie* (1988, no. 5), p.41 and DIP, p. 159.
14Eberhard, *Dictionary*, p. 269.
of the tree of knowledge. After that mankind had a sense of shame.\textsuperscript{16} Reflecting the influence of both Eastern and Western culture, the snake in Can Xue's stories is usually related to sex and the sense of sin. "Wilderness" ("wasteland," "deserted island," "deserted hill," "dry place," "gray highland") appears in seven stories out of the ten. Can Xue expresses her disillusion with the existence of an ideal social life and personal emotional harmony in this bereft world after the catastrophe. The symbolic meaning of the wilderness, I believe, is the same as that in T. S. Eliot's \textit{The Waste Land}. Both can be thought of as symbols of social reality without order and, especially, the authors' psychological reality without belief.

"Dialogues in Paradise I-V" are a series of five mutually integrated yet relatively isolated stories, recording the whole process of a young woman's marriage and her emotional changes. "Dialogues I" expresses the original feelings and emotions of the young woman, the narrator, who is newly married to an unnamed character "you." The story happens in a season in which the south wind blows. The narrator calls the wind "goddamned south wind."\textsuperscript{17} She says: "I hate the south wind. It disturbs everything when it comes and only its howling remains behind."\textsuperscript{18} However, just in this season, she starts her marital life.

In the opening paragraph of the story the author refers directly to the narrator's sexual experience:

\begin{quote}
Last night I smelled the fragrance of the tuberose for the fifth time since you told me about it . . .

Just before its attack (the fragrance of the tuberose), I felt a strong, restless form growing inside me. I touched my legs and found them lithe and smooth like a snake . . . . My legs became red and swollen, and I could no longer see anything. I shook, about to fall into the lake, when you held me up by my waist. "Tuberose," you said, "Tu-be-ros-e!" . . . It was that time
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{17}Can Xue, "Tiantang li de duihua I" (Dialogues in paradise I), in \textit{Huangnijie} (Yellow mud street), (Taipei: Yuanshen chubanshe, 1987), p. 161 and \textit{DIP}, p. 134.
\textsuperscript{18}Can Xue, "Tiantang li de duihua I" (Dialogues in paradise I), p. 163 and \textit{DIP}, p. 133.
that you told me the secret of the tuberose. You told me to wait for it every midnight . . ."19

Although the above passage is written in a symbolic mode, we can still see that this is a description of sexual experience from a female perspective. In Chinese tradition the south wind is a symbol of "male custom" (nanfeng) because these two words are homonymous.20 When the narrator says "it disturbs everything when it comes and only its howling remains behind," she actually refers to the fact that her male partner stirs her and brings her a sexual secret. So she admits: "Your voice is full of seduction."21 This is a kind of intimation of their sexual love. The fragrance of the tuberose intimates the narrator's sexual pleasure. After that, the narrator desires the pleasure so much that she even goes to the deserted hillside to wait for it during the daytime. Her actions are ridiculed by others. She comes back depressed. However, at midnight, she experiences the pleasure once again.

At midnight I tossed about and kicked away the quilt. I realized that I was surrounded by the quivering live ether. The vibration was so queer that all my joints came loose and my limbs drifted on the air. "A fish," I murmured bashfully, narrowing my eyes as if drunk. With some faint disturbance, the fragrance spread outward from the corner of the room. Even at that first experience, the fragrance seemed familiar. It has remained in my memory of that foggy morning long, long ago. Four times afterward, the fragrance became stronger and more real. Last night it felt suffocating, and I fainted.22

From the preceding quotation we know that the "fragrance of the tuberose" is a kind of experience of human life, not the real smell of a flower. The "tuberose" (ye lai xiang) literally means "fragrance that comes at night," further indicating that it symbolizes sexual experience. A young woman's first experience of love is very strong and mystical. Therefore the narrator felt "drunk." She "murmured bashfully" and finally "fainted."

19Can Xue, "Tiantang li de duihua I" (Dialogues in paradise I), pp. 161-2 and DIP, p. 131.
20Wolfram Eberhard, A dictionary of Chinese Symbols, p. 208
21Can Xue, "Tiantang li de duihua I" (Dialogues in paradise I), p. 162 and DIP, p. 132
22Can Xue, "Tiantang li de duihua I" (Dialogues in paradise I), p. 163 and DIP, p. 132
The narrator names the exciting moment "a fish." In Can Xue's symbolic stories both "fish" and "water" are related to the female's ideal or pleasure. On a number of occasions the narrator turns into a "fish" or a "whale," swimming in a lake or even in the air. In order to further understand the description of sex in "Dialogues I," I would like to compare it with an analogous description, quoted from a Western novel by Erica Jong:

I allow him to take off my knit dress, to run his hands down my lavender lace teddy, to kiss the skin that peeks between my lavender silk stocking tops and my long, lavender satin garters . . . and Grigory's kisses on my neck, my breasts, my thighs, begin to stir me.

He slips off the top of my teddy and uncovers my breasts. "They are like wild berries of the woods, my Jessichka," he says, "such sweet cloud berries, rosy raspberries, California strawberries . . ." He sucks on my nipples and I begin to warm toward him in spite of myself. My thighs spread, my clitoris begins to throb, my mouth finds his . . . I am aroused . . . and so, apparently, is he. He seems mad to lick me, bite me, hug me, rip my clothes off . . .

Erica Jong is also a woman writer and her description also concerns the sexual experience of a female character narrated in the first person. The subject matter and even the emotions of both Can Xue's and Erica Jong's descriptions are the same. In Can Xue's description the attack of the tuberose's fragrance, the narrator's strong and restless feeling, and her legs which become red and swollen are equivalent to Erica Jong's "I am aroused." All the details of the male partner's actions and language in Jong's description are reduced to one action and one word in Can Xue's story: "You held me up by my waist. 'Tuberose,' you said." In contrast to Can Xue's verbose and deliberately mysterious and exaggerated expression of the narrator's sexual pleasure, Jong writes in a much more candid and straightforward way: "My thighs spread, my clitoris begins to throb."

I have no intention of commenting on which description is better. This comparison only aims at proving that "Dialogues I" really involves sex. Can Xue differs from Erica

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Jong in her use of the symbolic mode, and in her offer of more room for readers' imagination.

In contemporary China works of fiction with direct description of sex are very few, especially those by women writers. The reason for this, according to Li Tuo, is that government censorship sternly suppresses literary works with a theme of "sexual revolution." However, sex is a significant aspect of human life. Contemporary writers have begun to deal with this theme by introducing descriptions of sex. In this sense, "Dialogues I" is a rarity, especially since it is from a female perspective.

At the beginning of the story Can Xue writes two verses as an epigram: "Poetry accompanies you forever, seducing you to create miracles." Her purpose seems to be to tell people, especially women, that natural human desire is something as lyrical as poetry. If you conform to your own nature, you can create your own life miracles.

What should be noted is that "Dialogues I" does not stay at the level of mere description of female enjoyment of marital life. The protagonists' emotional crisis is embedded almost at the very beginning of the marriage. They became a couple during an extremely difficult era, and their marriage is unavoidably influenced by this.

I met you in the darkness. You were a lonely sleepwalker, sitting motionless on a stone. It happened I had set out to look for bees that night, and I recognized you immediately. I couldn't wait to tell you that I had a huge hole in my chest with wet pebbles rustling inside. I also told you how I had feared cold since I was young. Rattling on, I put my icy fingers into your warm hands. . . . I meant to ask how you survived. The place was so arid. The ground was covered with poisonous snakes. . . . How could you wait so long in the same place without your feet being bitten by the ice and snow?25

Through the narrator's recall we know that the character "you" underwent a lot of tribulations in a tough place and just survived a certain disaster. We might think he was an "educated youth" (zhishi qingnian) who was newly returned from the countryside to the

24 See "Haiwai zhongguo zuojia taolunhui jiyao" (Summary of the symposium of overseas Chinese writers), in Jintian (1990, no. 2), p. 95.
city, like the male protagonist in "The Date." The narrator's meeting with him seemed to happen just because she went out to look for a spouse ("to look for bees"). She was a sickly girl. However, she frankly told the truth to her would-be husband. She perhaps married him merely for the sake of obtaining a sense of security. The next day of their meeting, "I no longer felt fearful because you were holding my hands. Your steps were so steady. Later on you grew into a strong man."²⁶

The image of the narrator might bear the stamp of Can Xue's own experience. Can Xue herself was a sickly girl since childhood. The "huge hole" in the heroine's chest is perhaps a reference to her own tuberculosis. Although the narrator feels morally indebted to her husband, who first brought her psychological security and physical pleasure, she frankly tells him that emotionally there exists an unnamed yet inextricable "he," who seems to be between them all the time:

> I should tell you something else important. When I would wait for the tuberose at night, a dark shadow stood at the door. When I shut my eyes, he moved toward me, I shivered and dared not sleep. One day when I couldn't help dozing off, his long arms stretched out and snatched my hair. . . . I didn't understand how he had come in. I checked all the windows and doors in fear every night before going to bed . . .

> Maybe I really will become a fish. Then you won't be able to see me. At the lakeside early in the morning, you will see only a fine, tiny fish jump from the water and move its lips to you and disappear. Then your heart will be torn to pieces and your head will spin like a windmill. I am not hardhearted enough to change into a fish. I will search for the tuberose with you in the darkness, you outside, I inside.²⁷

This is the first time that the unnamed character "he" appears in the story, and he appears only once. However, his appearance foreshadows the story's development. By examining the quotation above, we know that "he" is certainly not a superman-like figure who is able to break through "window and door" and "snatch" the narrator. "He" exists in

²⁶Can Xue, "Tiantang li de duihua I" (Dialogues in paradise I), p. 165 and DIP, p. 135.
²⁷Can Xue, "Tiantang li de duihua I" (Dialogues in paradise I), pp. 166-7 and DIP, pp. 135-6.
her emotional realm, or in other words, the narrator is emotionally his captive. Therefore every time the narrator shuts her eyes, he appears and even snatches her.

Just because of the existence of "he," the narrator's marriage will take an unexpected turn. This point has been foreshadowed by the narrator's remark. She may leave her husband to seek her ideal life ("become a fish" and "disappear"). Then her husband's "heart will be torn to pieces." However, at the same time, the narrator is also very contradictory. She feels hesitant to forsake her spouse in adversity. For this reason, she has to maintain their relationship and perform a wife's obligations in an embarrassed manner. ("I will search for the tuberose with you in the darkness, you outside, I inside.") At this moment, the husband is no longer able to enter his wife's emotional realm. The expression of "you outside, I inside" perhaps derives from the Chinese phrase "[A couple is] having different dreams in the same bed" (tongchuang yimeng). Can Xue uses this expression to denote her characters' marital disharmony.

In "Dialogues II" the couple's emotional gap becomes wider and wider. Can Xue uses imaginary scenery to symbolize the narrator's emotional shift at this moment:

This place is indeed severely drought-stricken. There is no source of water, only a deep well, which will be dried-up soon. The water in the well is all muddy. The green is disappearing from the earth, leaving sun-dappled lizards crawling everywhere. The roads are cracking. Dreams are long and sere, full of the smell of dust. Every night I come out to look for bees.28

It is noteworthy that the description involves a kind of change concerning the couple's emotion. Because their love has no "source" they are facing an emotional crisis. (The well is drying up and the original green is disappearing.) The wife's enjoyment of marital life is fading. Her dreams are no longer sweet. Once again she attempts to have a new lover. ("Every night I come out to look for bees.") Toward his wife's change, the husband feels sad. "How lonely and dull the nights are," he says to his wife," listen, the

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28Can Xue, "Tiantang li de duihua II" (Dialogues in paradise II), in Qinghai hu (1987, no. 2), p. 5 and DIP, p. 137.
glacier is also breaking up. . . . I used to live in the house under the mulberry tree. . . .
[now] my heart shrinks into a lump of dried lemon."29

Their relationship is near the breaking point as the heroine says to her husband: "Wind
is howling between you and me. The moon is only a lightless shadow."30 In Chinese
"wind and the moon" (fengyue) is a most common symbol "suggest[ing] prolonged love-
play during nights together."31 Can Xue uses the symbol by separating it into "wind" and
"the moon" to imply the couple's emotional break up. Furthermore, the wind is a "howling
wind" and the moon is a "lightless moon." Both further imply the gravity of their
emotional crisis. Then, Can Xue shifts her description from scenery to her female
protagonist:

The well is drying up gradually. . . . It is a long, long story, I felt cold.
Later I started to pay attention to my appearance. I hung strings of grapes
around my neck. . . . There might be someone on the highway.32

This passage is reminiscent of a Chinese idiom, "woman dresses herself up for the
man who pleases her" (nü wei yuejizhe rong). At this moment the heroine already has an
extramarital lover in mind, who is "the man on the road:"

Once my mouth is open, I speak about the man on the road again. I can
hear your eyelashes flicker. My face turns red with shame.33

On my way back, I always met that man on the muddy path. . . . We passed
each other in a hurry, I always felt I had lost something.34

The unnamed character "he" appears eight times in "Dialogues II." The last time
when he appears, "I gaze at him, seized by hatred and fear."35 Toward this extramarital
love the narrator feels shame and guilt: "My face turns red with shame. . . . I pretend to go

29Can Xue, "Tiantang li de duihua II" (Dialogues in paradise II), p. 5 and DIP, p. 137.
30Can Xue, "Tiantang li de duihua II" (Dialogues in paradise II), p. 5 and DIP, p. 137.
31Eberhard, Dictionary, p. 315
32Can Xue, "Tiantang li de duihua II" (Dialogues in paradise II), pp. 5-6 and DIP, p. 138.
33Can Xue, "Tiantang li de duihua II" (Dialogues in paradise II), p. 6 and DIP, p. 138.
34Can Xue, "Tiantang li de duihua II" (Dialogues in paradise II), P. 7 and DIP, p. 141.
35Can Xue, "Tiantang li de duihua II" (Dialogues in paradise II), p. 6 and DIP p. 142.
out to find bees, but I know it is ridiculous."36 She falls into so deep a contradiction that twice in the story she shouts to her husband: "Hold me tight. Hold me tight. Look at that huge python. . . . Its teeth are about to bite your ankle."37 This is like a version of a scene in *Genesis*, in which the serpent violates God's will and deceives Adam and Eve into eating the fruits of the tree of knowledge. Then they know good and bad. In order to punish the serpent, God says to it: "I shall put enmity between you and the woman and between your seed and her seed. He will bruise you in the head and you will bruise him in the heel."38 Implicitly using the story of *Genesis* as an allusion, Can Xue expresses the conflict between ideal and reality, love and sin. People are not free enough to pursue love completely at their own will. They cannot extricate themselves from various restrictions such as family obligation, morality, and even personal opportunity. Overstepping of these restrictions will engender a sense of sin. This scene also further supports the symbolic meaning of snake in Can Xue's fiction.

Although the wife feels guilty about her extramarital love, she is still adamantly pursuing that indistinct character "he." She opens the windows of her house wide all year round so as not to "miss the shadows on the road." Wherever the shadow of a tree or butterfly sways before her eyes, she paces and sighs anxiously, even "knock[s] on the wall until it makes a hollow sound."39 She does not love her husband any more and says to him: "Your house was under a mulberry tree. Standing under the tree, you could see the sunset glowing like fire. You walked out long, long ago. The jackdaw built two nests on the dead branch."40 In the narrator's mind her husband left the house under the mulberry tree long ago. The beautiful scenery there becomes an affair of the past. And now the mulberry tree has already died. All these things symbolize the ending of their love. In comparison with the heroine's anxiety, restlessness and fluctuation, the husband expresses

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36 Can Xue, "Tiantang li de duihua II" (Dialogues in paradise II), p. 6 and *DIP* p. 140.
37 Can Xue, "Tiantang li de duihua II" (Dialogues in paradise II), p. 6 and *DIP* p. 140.
39 Can Xue, "Tiantang li de duihua II" (Dialogues in paradise II), p. 7 and *DIP* p. 142.
40 Can Xue, "Tiantang li de duihua II" (Dialogues in paradise II), p. 6 and *DIP* p. 140.
great tolerance, constancy and even sympathy. Sometimes he pats his wife's cheek calmly as if he is "coaxing a child:"

"It is too cold. That man does not exist. As long as you shut your eyes quietly, and we will appear under the gingko tree. . . . Don't be impatient, gently, gently, one day maybe we will have a try."\(^{41}\)

Sometimes he puts a "shivering, pale, slim palm" on his wife's chest and tries to persuade her with a suggestive question: "Is the burning sun so severe during the day?"\(^{42}\) This question perhaps can be translated like this: "Is his seduction so strong in your mind?" Three times in the story, the husband advises her to be "more patient" and "have a try" to re-establish their harmonious relationship. He says to his wife: "If we go straight ahead holding hands with our eyes shut, we might reach the house under the mulberry tree."\(^{43}\) What the husband hopes for is a return to their previous marital harmony.

The beginning of "Dialogue III" is written as follows:

I went out again last night. You had warned me not to wander around at night so as to avoid unexpected harm. I remembered your warning, but I went out anyway as if sent by a ghost or a god.\(^{44}\)

The narrator does not take her husband's advice and still acts as she wants. In the story she goes out by flying. "I have been good at flying ever since I was young. This is my personal secret."\(^{45}\) She seems to look for "a huge color, stereoscopic picture." That is a fantastic picture. Sometimes her husband is in it. "Sometimes it is that person" who is in the picture (original emphasis).\(^{46}\)

All these descriptions do not mean that the wife really goes out to seek "that person" at night, but indicate that she feels an emotional dissatisfaction. In Chinese, "flying

\(^{41}\)Can Xue, "Tiantang li de duihua II" (Dialogues in paradise II), p. 6 and DIP p. 139.
\(^{42}\)Can Xue, "Tiantang li de duihua II" (Dialogues in paradise II), p. 6 and DIP p. 140.
\(^{43}\)Can Xue, "Tiantang li de duihua II" (Dialogues in paradise II), p. 7 and DIP p. 142.
\(^{44}\)Can Xue, "Tiantang li de duihua III" (Dialogues in paradise III), Tianjin wenxue (1988, no. 6), p. 35 and DIP, p. 141.
\(^{45}\)Can Xue, "Tiantang li de duihua III" (Dialogues in paradise III), p. 35 and DIP, p. 141.
\(^{46}\)Can Xue, "Tiantang li de duihua III" (Dialogues in paradise III), p. 36 and DIP, p. 144. The English version loses this sentence.
together' is a metaphor for married bliss."47 However, what the wife can do now is fly by herself. She lives with her husband in a deep dilemma. Can Xue describes the dilemma with a concrete scene:

Each time you kissed my lips involuntarily, I would say, "My darling." And then I promptly turned pale and icy cold, looking right and left to avoid imaginary wasps.48

This is one of the most frequently quoted passages, on which Wang Meng comments:

This reads like poetry. And this experience of the pallor and coldness of love can be sensed but not put into words. Not many writers have conveyed it. The majority write about the radiance and ardor of love. Actually, wherever there is a radiance and ardor there must also be pallor and cold. They may come together or after the radiance and ardor. Something that has burned too fiercely may turn to ashes, and love that is too obsessive may turn into illness.49

Wang Meng's comment focuses on the relativism of love. This is one level. Wang Binbin deals with this passage at a deeper level:

What is expressed here is a profound self-suspicion toward love. Because the narrator herself suspects the truthfulness of her own love. She feels this sort of love disgusting and ridiculous.50

Wang Binbin's comment is closer to the message that is conveyed through the story. This point can be seen in Can Xue's description that follows the preceding passage.

So I became cautious and stopped saying "my darling." I held the expression in my throat, and combed your hair with my fingers in silence. But this didn't make much difference because you could perceive all, and you knew where I kept the expression. You remained pale and quivering, your expression frozen like a mask.

47Eberhard, Dictionary, p. 112.
48Can Xue, "Tiantang li de duihua III" (Dialogues in paradise III), p. 36 and DIP, p. 145.
50Wang Binbin, "Can Xue, Yu Hua: 'zhen de esheng?' — Can Xue, Yu Hua yu Lu Xun de yizhong bijiao" (Can Xue, Yu Hua: "The true voice of horror?" — a comparison of Can Xue, Yu Hua and Lu Xun), Dangdai zuojia pinglun (1992, no. 1), p. 35.
Without making a sound, you said, "my left leg is suffering atrophy. You've mistaken me for the man who was throwing pebbles by the riverside at dusk."[51]

This is the continuity of the figurative description of the dilemma. Both wife and husband feel very painful. The wife does not want to speak against her own will any more and becomes reticent. This cannot conceal her emotion from her husband, who is sensitive enough to know that the wife has offered the expression of "my darling" to someone else. ("You knew where I kept the expression.") He is not handsome and muscular. ("My left leg is suffering atrophy.") However he has his own dignity as a man. He has realized that he is no longer the real husband of the heroine but a replacement for the lover in her mind. ("You've mistaken me for the man.") This is perhaps the most painful thing for the husband.

Can Xue does not give out concrete information about "that person" or "he" until the end of "Dialogue III." Through the narrator, she writes:

When I was fifteen I broke my leg. Lying in bed I folded thousands of paper cranes. . . . Finally the day came when a young man similar to you walked into my room and saw the cranes scattered on the floor. He was silent for a long time, then he stooped down as if about to pick up the little things. Quickly I stepped on the one he intended to pick up. Our eyes collided in an explosion of little stars. I noticed a scar on his temple. He was the man. I knew this scarred face. . . . We have met many times before. I used to be the crane-folding girl, who cannot be realized, of course.[52]

We know from this that "he" turns out to be the narrator's previous boy friend. From "Dialogues IV" on, Can Xue changes the title into "Dialogues of Paradise" (Tiantang de duihua). I cannot decide if the change is an intentional one. Another change is that the character "you" in "Dialogues IV" no longer refers to the husband, but the narrator's previous boy friend. The narrator recalls the process of their love as follows:

You enticed me to play the game the second time you met me: "You will gain an unbelievable happiness." The glittering cold spark from your eyes when you were saying this. . . . Instinctively, I retreated to the corner, my

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back to the wall, digging at the wall with my fingers behind my back. . . . The flame extinguished, your eyes became two pieces of flat yellow glass, turbid and dusky. "I can't be wrong." You stamped your foot impatiently and stubbornly, and then you dashed out. The empty room resounded with your steps. The floor cracked. My finger peeled down a big lump of lime.\textsuperscript{53}

Because the narrator refused her boy friend's enticement she lost him forever. She regrets this at once. She feels intense emotional pain:

Every night I hide in the woods, howling to the sky like a wolf. I've lost you and I have to pass through many more cities. With a false hope, I walk and walk.\textsuperscript{54}

The whole story is that of the narrator's regret. She reflects on her previous mistake and in her imagination even plays the game with her previous boy friend. The game is to jump off a cliff. The narrator imagines that she sits on the cliff with him shoulder to shoulder. He says: "We only need to leap off and we will gain a new soul." However, for the female narrator, "the game simply can't start, even in fantasy."\textsuperscript{55} Because of her hesitation she misses the opportunity to "taste the happiness of smashing the body and breaking bones."\textsuperscript{56}

Playing the game is a symbol for a virgin's first sexual experience. The symbol might stem from a slang expression "throw the body off" (\textit{diu shenzi}), which refers to consummating a sexual action.\textsuperscript{57} During the Cultural Revolution the Chinese people's human nature was greatly repressed. The young had a sense of fear or even a sense of sin in regard to sex. Their state of mind was contradictory. The narrator in "Dialogues IV" represents a typical state of mind of the younger generation in the Cultural Revolution. In her imagination, sex is dangerous and sexual happiness is a kind of "happiness of

\textsuperscript{53}Can Xue, "Tiantang de duihua IV" (Dialogues of paradise IV), \textit{Xiaoshuo jie} (1988, no. 5), p. 38 and \textit{DIP}, p. 149.
\textsuperscript{54}Can Xue, "Tiantang de duihua IV" (Dialogues of paradise IV), p. 38 and \textit{DIP}, p. 149.
\textsuperscript{55}Can Xue, "Tiantang de duihua IV" (Dialogues of paradise IV), p. 38 and \textit{DIP}, p. 150.
\textsuperscript{56}Can Xue, "Tiantang de duihua IV" (Dialogues of paradise IV), p. 39 and \textit{DIP}, p. 151.
smashing the body and breaking the bones." Because of this typical state of mind, the narrator is unable to experience love. She regrets this loss forever:

Now I realize that it is I who did not take the opportunity. I will flee in panic forever. Even if one day I rid myself of doubt, I'll still be in fatal contradiction.\textsuperscript{58}

The narrator reflects on her past and considers that her loss can never be compensated for. Thus she advises others: "Treasure . . .\textsuperscript{59} She does not say what the people should treasure. However, we can perceive that she advises the new generation to treasure youth and to openly accept the urgings of human nature. She also says: "Maybe the spark from our eyes can light our partners, though our own souls are always in chaos."\textsuperscript{60} Through the narrator's reflection Can Xue seems to maintain that the significance of love lies not only in accepting love from others but also in giving love to others.

In "Dialogues V," the narrator finally tries to leave her husband and to seek her ideal:

When I left you that day, I forgot to tell you what had happened during the nights. Turning my head while running away, I saw you kick the huge rock off the cliff. The empty valley reverberated with its rumble.\textsuperscript{61}

The reason the wife leaves her husband is "What had happened during the nights." Every midnight, "a shadow" comes into the room. It stirs the wife. She "imagines it a black cat as big as a leopard, blind in both eyes, ferocious and wild."\textsuperscript{62} It is something secret and desirable to the narrator. She says: "I don't detest the cat. On the contrary, I am expecting it every night."\textsuperscript{63} The imaginary cat "leaves as soon as a rooster crows."

Then the narrator becomes very depressed and angry:

Immediately, I feel the heaviness of the pillow. I sit up and beat it forcefully, making a series of explosions.\textsuperscript{64}

\textsuperscript{58}Can Xue, "Tiantang de duihua IV" (Dialogues of paradise IV), p. 39 and \textit{DIP}, p. 154.
\textsuperscript{59}Can Xue, "Tiantang de duihua IV" (Dialogues of paradise IV), p. 39 and \textit{DIP}, p. 153.
\textsuperscript{60}Can Xue, "Tiantang de duihua IV" (Dialogues of paradise IV), p. 38 and \textit{DIP}, p. 150.
\textsuperscript{61}Can Xue, "Tiantang de duihua V" (Dialogues of paradise V), \textit{Xiaoshuo jie} (1988, no. 5), p. 40 and \textit{DIP}, p. 155.
\textsuperscript{62}Can Xue, "Tiantang de duihua V" (Dialogues of paradise V), p. 40 and \textit{DIP}, p. 155.
\textsuperscript{63}Can Xue, "Tiantang de duihua V" (Dialogues of paradise V), p. 40 and \textit{DIP}, p. 156.
\textsuperscript{64}Can Xue, "Tiantang de duihua V" (Dialogues of paradise V), p. 40 and \textit{DIP}, p. 155.
She feels "forsaken on a certain gray highland," where it is frigid and frightful. This situation occurs more and more often, and the wife "is drying up in spring and fall." She cannot tolerate this and finally leaves her husband.

The imaginary cat might refer to the wife's real lover or something else that she expects but is unable to get. Therefore we can consider that she leaves her husband because she feels dissatisfied emotionally and physically with her current marriage.

Her flight happens in "the flooding season" of spring. "The sunlight in spring and fall has a touch of decadence. The turbulent river is rife with the odor of reproduction." After fleeing, the narrator goes to the bank of the river and lies under the willow trees near the river sunbathing. "In the flooding season, I keep looking across the river into the distance, expecting something."

All these descriptions suggest that the wife's flight is due to the break-up of her marriage, as I have pointed out that "spring," "flood," "willow tree," and "river" are all Can Xue's private symbols for love and sex. Furthermore, Can Xuedraws the readers' attention by using abstract words such as "decadence" and "reproduction" to reveal the meaning of her private symbols.

Several times the wife tries to cross the river by flying. However, she fails each time and breaks her leg. At the end of "Dialogues V," she comes back to her husband and he consoles her.

It's not necessary to run away. Just stay where you are, and your body will become translucent and shining. I have undergone all of this. Just keep calm.

The husband forgives his wife's flight and accepts her return with equanimity. He attempts to make his wife believe in their destiny, which, in his opinion, can never be changed by personal effort:

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65 Can Xue, "Tiantang de duihuá V" (Dialogues of paradise V), p. 41 and DIP, p. 157.
66 Can Xue, "Tiantang de duihuá V" (Dialogues of paradise V), p. 41 and DIP, p. 159.
67 Can Xue, "Tiantang de duihuá V" (Dialogues of paradise V), p. 41 and DIP, p. 158.
68 Can Xue, "Tiantang de duihuá V" (Dialogues of paradise V), p. 42 and DIP, p. 159.
Our meeting was predestined. Neither of us has sought the other. And these raindrops accompanying us are recounting some kind of eternity.\(^{69}\)

Although the husband was very angry about his wife's flight at the beginning ("I saw you kick the huge rock off the cliff. The empty valley reverberated with its rumble"), he finally relaxes at his wife's return. He says to his wife: "It's great. I've driven away the leopards. They tried to ambush you on your way here, a big one and two small ones."\(^{70}\)

The leopards used here are also symbols, like the black cat, for persons or things that entice the narrator to flee. Her pursuit ends in total failure. In the last paragraph, through the narrator, Can Xue writes:

Tonight I'll go to the deserted land with you. I've made two kites. We are going to shout and scream as we did in our childhood. . . . We will wear ourselves out the whole night, forgetting our miserable sleeplessness, forgetting the dark city.\(^{71}\)

Having no other choice and being unable to shake off the emotional predicament, the wife has to return to the previous disharmony ("deserted land") and to endure emotional suffering ("miserable sleeplessness") again. Here the author expresses a sense of fatalism, which is exhibited in a number of Can Xue's stories including "Hut" and "Ah Mei," and becomes one of the most significant themes of Can Xue's stories.

"Dialogues I-V" are the only five short stories written in a combination of the first person and second person. They read like lyric poetry. Although they describe the sorrows of love and the contradiction between ideal and reality, no ugly and evil images are used in these stories. In this feature, they differ from her allegorical stories.

The "you" in "Dialogues I-III" and "Dialogues V" is an impressive character. He loves his wife. He is simple and tolerant. However, he is incapable of satisfying his wife, both psychologically and physically. His impotence is the main reason for their marital frustration. The character of the narrator is also a successful one. Her complicated state of

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\(^{69}\) Can Xue, "Tiantang de duihua V" (Dialogues of paradise V), p. 42 and DIP, p. 160.
\(^{70}\) Can Xue, "Tiantang de duihua V" (Dialogues of paradise V), p. 42 and DIP, p. 160.
\(^{71}\) Can Xue, "Tiantang de duihua V" (Dialogues of paradise V), p. 42 and DIP, p. 160.
mind is expressed in a lively and sophisticated manner. The significance of this image is that it to some degree is typical of the younger generation in the Cultural Revolution. Because of the catastrophe, a great number of young people lost forever their opportunity to experience love. Their marital and emotional sorrow bears the stamp of that time.

I believe that "Dialogues I-V" also contain certain personal experiences of Can Xue herself. Sensitive critics have noted this point. Shi Shuqing once discussed with Can Xue her private life. She mentioned Can Xue's husband, who used to be a carpenter and currently is running their own sewing shop together with Can Xue, and asked Can Xue: "Do you want him to understand you?" "No," Can Xue answers, "I am relatively realistic. I emphasize emotion in a general sense."\(^2\) From Can Xue's remark we know that some difficulties of emotional communication certainly exist between a writer wife with some reputation and an ex-carpenter husband without much education.

That I say "Dialogues I-V" contain the author's personal experience does not imply a lack of universal significance in these stories. "Dialogues" are not only the dialogues between a couple, but also the self-dialogues of a contemporary Chinese woman with her own soul. In these self-dialogues readers are meant to feel the limitation of their own lives, love, and ideals. Therefore, in this sense, a universal significance can been seen in these stories, i.e., that people should pursue and value their natural urges and ideal life.

"The Bull" was published in 1985, almost the same time as "Hut on the Hill." From the very beginning of Can Xue's writing, she has exhibited two different narrative styles. "The Bull" is Can Xue's first symbolic story.

In "The Bull," the female narrator sees in the big mirror on the wall a bull passing slowly by outside the window. Its rump flashes a purple light. After that the narrator feels at a loss and continually expects the reappearance of the bull. She tells her husband about this, but he sees and understands nothing about what his wife says. Instead he keeps

\(^2\)Shi Shuqing, "Wei le baochou xie xiaoshuo—yu Can Xue tan xiezuo" (Writing fiction for vengeance — discussing writing with Can Xue), in Bafang (1986, no. 9), p. 142.
repeating: "We are really well matched" and other irrelevant or inappropriate phrases. One day,

Someone knocks at the door with three very light, hesitant taps. Perhaps it is only my imagination? I push the door open, only seeing the round, smooth rump of the bull. The beast has passed by and is moving away, encircled in a broad aura of dark purple.\(^\text{73}\)

The Bull turns out to be a person who has a special relationship with the narrator and sometimes visits her furtively. The narrator loves him very much. When she is about to fall asleep the bull's horn pokes into the room through the wooden wall. The narrator holds out a nude arm, trying to caress it. But what she touches is the back of her husband's head, cold and hard.

Although this is the narrator's imagination, we can know from this surrealistic description that the person, who is symbolized by the bull, is a love adversary of the narrator's husband. Furthermore the husband is obviously in the losing position. The husband is mediocre and foolish, however, he notes his wife's unusual change: "You are looking in the mirror all the time and care so much about your appearance, which indeed surprises me."\(^\text{74}\)

Finally the wife tells her husband about the bull:

Those are some things which happened long, long ago, and connected to the mulberries that fell into the crevices between the tiles. There is a rattlesnake hanging from a branch. . . . Whenever I see purple, my blood boils. I've just bitten a blister on my tongue and now I taste nothing but — ugh — blood.\(^\text{75}\)

Several of Can Xue's most commonly used private symbols appear in this paragraph. Can Xue's purpose in using these symbols of "mulberries," "rattlesnake," and "blood" together seems to imply the affair is connected to her personal emotions. The story ends

\(^{73}\)Can Xue, "Gongniu" (The bull), in *Huangni jie* (Yellow mud street), (Taipei: Yuanshen chubanshe, 1987), p. 139 and *DIP*, p. 73.

\(^{74}\)Can Xue, "Gongniu" (The bull), p. 141 and *DIP*, p. 74.

\(^{75}\)Can Xue, "Gongniu" (The bull), p. 141 and *DIP*, p. 75.
with a tragic scene when the husband learns of his wife's affair. With a big hammer he
smashes the mirror from which the bull appears. Panic-stricken, the heroine sees far, far
away in the broken mirror, a huge beast falling down and writhing in the throes of death
with dark red blood spurting from its mouth. This scene can be viewed in terms of an
erotic event giving rise to violence.

Because the story is composed in a symbolic mode many suggestions have been made
to identify the symbolic meaning of the "bull" and the theme of the story. Tang Si says
that the bull is a symbol of "life" (shengming). Jon Solomon says that "it is a self-
symbol of the author." Sha Shui considers that the story "surprisingly contains a vast
social life and a profoundly bleak sense of history." All these comments are perhaps too
broad and abstract to illustrate appropriately the symbolic meaning of the bull and the
story's theme.

Among the various comments Zhou Shi's opinion is notable. He declares that the
"bull' may be a symbol of the narrator's previous lover or her dead mother, or something
else precious. However it is not important to define what the bull symbolizes. The
general meaning of "The Bull" is the lack of mutual understanding among the people and
the sense of loss aroused by the estrangement of personal relations. I agree with Zhou
Shi's opinion. In a narrow sense, "The Bull" expresses the inharmonious relationship of a
couple; in a broader sense, it also reflects estrangement among the Chinese people. Can

76Tang Si, "Can Xue pingzhuan" (Critical biography of Can Xue), in Zhongguo dangdai nü zuojia pingzhuan (Critical biographies of contemporary Chinese woman writers), (Beijing: Zhongguo funü chubanshe, 1990), p. 559.
77Su Zhe'an (Jon Solomon), "Cong ji'an zhong zhanfang shengming de lingguang — xu Can Xue de Huangni jie" (Issuing intelligent light of life from silence and darkness — a preface to Can Xue's Yellow mud street," in Huangni jie (Yellow mud street), (Taipei: Yuanshen chubanshe, 1987), p. XIV
78Sha Shui, "'Gongniu' yu shidai qianyishi" ("The Bull" and the subconsciousness of the time), in Zuopin yu zhengming (1985, no. 9), p. 66.
79Both Tang Si and Sha Shui are pen names of Can Xue's two brothers. Unavoidably, their comments may sometimes be overstated.
80Zhou Shi, "Zhongyao de tashi yitou gongniu" (The important thing is that it is a bull), in Zuopin yu zhengming (1986, no. 8), p. 72.
Xue repeats this theme in her later stories such as "In the Wilderness," "The Date," and especially, "Dialogues I-V."

"The Instant When the Cuckoo Sings" involves the reminiscences of a girl's first love. In the story the heroine, "I," has been seeking an unnamed boy for many years. The boy used to be her classmate. "I close my eyes and try hard to go back to the place .... The boy had a clear white face which always had an irresistible enchantment for me .... His childish glances were soft and shy. Ever since that time my blood surged when I met his glance." 

In order to find the boy the narrator knocks open one closed door after another in midnight on every street and every lane. Finally she sees him once during the daytime and finds that he is "an out-and-out dwarf. His pale shanks are hairless. Like me he is getting on in years. Without recognizing me, he sneaks away like a thief." In reality, the idealistic color of the boy has faded. With this symbolic story, Can Xue once again expresses the conflict between ideal and reality, which is one of the common themes of her symbolic stories.

"The Date" is one of Can Xue's most exquisite stories. It uses the miserable experience of educated youth (zhishi qingnian) to expose the emotional problems faced by them upon their return to cities, and to convey the idea that many educated youth lost ideal love and harmonious marriage forever. The most intriguing literary device which Can Xue employs in "The Date" is symmetry and parallelism. Through the use of symmetry and parallelism the story is constituted by two parallel processes, which are mutually distinct but dependent on each other. Both processes develop symmetrically and finally reach two different results. Although these two results are different in detail, both are tragic. The device of symmetry and parallelism may be an effective one to describe the most profound contradiction. It provides the story with double tragedies and thus a more universal meaning. In other words, the tragedies expressed in "The Date" are not

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81 Can Xue, "Bugu niao jiao de nayi shunjian" (The instant when the cuckoo sings), in Qingnian wenxue (1986, no. 4), p. 52 and DIP, p. 123.
82 Can Xue, "Bugu niao jiao de nayi shunjian" (The instant when the cuckoo sings), p. 52 and DIP, p. 124.
only individualistic, but also universal for the younger generation as a whole during the Cultural Revolution.

In the story, the male protagonist "he," who dates the female narrator, is an ambiguous character. Sometimes he is a single person, the same type as the narrator "I." Sometimes he is "all kinds of people . . . all of whom are people that I have created in my imagination." In the story, the narrator's actions are also ambiguous: "Most often, I didn't go on the date in person. Instead, I had the rendezvous in my mind. But occasionally I went for the appointment." These paradoxical passages create an effect implying that the "date" is a universal event. Furthermore, the most penetrating aspect of the story is that the date itself poses a dilemma:

He invited me to go to a deserted island at three. Then he added that I could refuse because it was not at all necessary. In fact, it might be too bad if I went.

I considered, and decided to go because it was not at all necessary not to go. It might be worse if I didn't.

All these mutually contradictory narratives are in the form of symmetry and parallelism, expressing an inextricable predicament. They reveal that no matter what kind of process the date will take, it is doomed to fail or be fruitless.

With its lyrical language the story brings the protagonists back to the reminiscences of the life in the countryside. As the following quotation illustrates, even in hardship the protagonists' love is pure and romantic:

[The male protagonist says:] "We once strolled in the open country." . . . I guess he smiles. "You were so light, but still you walked on tiptoe. You told me you were afraid of stepping on something and crushing it. I held your arm. There was nothing in my arms — you were as light as a wisp of smoke. Before dawn there was the strong smell of dried hay over the field. It was dark. Your white robe gleamed. You mumbled that it would be too

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83 Can Xue, "Yuehui" (The date), in Qinghai hu (1987, no. 2), p. 3 and DIP, p. 95.
84 Can Xue, "Yuehui" (The date), p. 3 and DIP, p. 95.
bad to step on a frog. Mumbling, you walked so fast that I could hardly follow.”

However, the advent of misery is unavoidable in that time of great disorder. "Later, I (the male protagonist) abandoned you and retreated to the shadow of the city. I found real rest there." This is the beginning of the tragedy of love. Some educated youth were allowed to return to city, while others were not. Many youth in love were forced to separate. Then the story symmetrically exhibits two painful processes. In the first, the male protagonist finally meets his former lover again on a date after more than twenty years of separation, and the scene is represented like this:

"Everything will disappear at sunrise. You won't even have time to regret. I'll no longer appear in your room. You shouldn't have come. Now everything is ruined." His shoulder is turning cold on my cheek.

"I shall keep meeting you in my mind." Gloomily, I stop shivering in silence.

In the first process the male protagonist doesn't love his previous girl friend any more. He even condemns her for coming for the date. The narrator has to accept the misery without any choice. She is so grieved that she even loses her anger. ("I stop shivering in silence.")

The second process describes the male protagonist's fruitless search:

[He says:] "My teeth are falling out. Listen: one, two, three, ... I am looking at you, and you have become a frozen shadow." ... Some night bird calls. His heart is frozen. Blood is coagulating into big dark red blocks in his blood vessels. ... His figure has condensed into mottled blocks. I cannot recognize him any longer. Drawing back his shoulders, he sits in silence. Then he groans heavily rubbing his frostbitten heart.

This is the result of the second process, in which the male protagonist finally meets the narrator on the date. But at this moment he looks so old and pallid that his previous girl friend cannot even recognize him any longer. The second process is a tragedy also.

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85Can Xue, "Yuehui" (The date), p. 4 and DIP, p. 97.
86Can Xue, "Yuehui" (The date), p. 4 and DIP, p. 97.
87Can Xue, "Yuehui" (The date), p. 4 and DIP, p. 99.
88Can Xue, "Yuehui" (The date), p. 4 and DIP, pp. 99-100.
Both results symbolize the unavoidable tragic destiny of the whole generation. In the story, Can Xue emphasizes the tragic destiny twice, as follows:

"Why have you come?" He still had the voice of an April morning, touched with the rasp of a cold.
"I want to see the sunrise." My dry lips swelled into fullness.
"You will disappear at sunrise. Do you still want to?" he said again.89

What the narrator is facing is forever a dilemma, which lets her sink into a more miserable plight. If she wants to pursue her ideal she will pay her all. This paradoxical and perplexing aesthetic feature makes the story reminiscent of Lu Xun's prose poem "The Shadow's Leave-talking:"

I am only a shadow. I shall leave you and sink into darkness. Yet darkness will swallow me up, and light also will cause me to vanish. . . . Alas! If it is dusk, black night will surely engulf me, or I shall be made to vanish in the daylight if it is dawn.90

Like Lu Xun's "The Shadow's Leaving-talking," Can Xue's "The Date" conveys a sense of profound contradiction toward reality. People cannot really control their own destiny. Their life is paradoxical, contradictory, and above all, depressing. In order to express this profound contradiction effectively, "The Date" employs the form of dialogues. This form later develops in "Dialogues I-V," in which the first-person female narrator "I" enters into dialogues with the second-person male partner "you" or with herself.

The theme of the story "In the Wilderness" is almost the same as that of "The Bull" and "Dialogues I-V." A couple live in huge house with many dark and empty rooms. At nights they wander "in darkness" in the house "like two spirits." "They are horrified by each other." 91 There are snakes in the room. The husband is attempting to catch "a wild

89Can Xue, "Yuehui" (The date), p. 4 and DIP, p. 99.
91Can Xue, "Kuangye li" (In the Wilderness), in Tansuo xiaoshuo ji (Collection of exploratory fiction), p. 79 and p. 319
"cat" in the house. He hears a stranger's footsteps and asks his wife: "Who is walking there?" The wife denies there is anybody else in their house.

At the very beginning, the husband planted Chinese boxwood on the windowsills. He did not water the plants, so they died. "It is worse than not to have planted anything," the wife complains. Her waxen face looks discouraged. "No plant can grow in such a place," the husband answers back with hatred, "a savage land." From that time on, he stops planting anything. Actually here they are mutually complaining about their partner's sexual incapacity. The "wild cat" probably refers to an extramarital lover of the wife. The "wilderness," as the title of the story, is a symbol of the couple's psychological reality. This story repeats a common theme: a marriage without love is similar to a wilderness.

"Skylight" is the only story out of the ten that does not involve love and sex but explores the meaning of secular life. Jon Solomon considers "Skylight" Can Xue's most obscure work.92

One day the narrator "I" receives a "strange letter" with a human skull printed on the envelope. The letter is sent from an old man, whose work is to burn corpses in a crematorium. He invites the narrator to visit a magic place.

At midnight the old cremator appears in the mirror of the cupboard. He is a skein of vague stuff like a puff of air. He stretches his hand toward me from inside the mirror. It is full of the black smoke of burnt flesh.93

The narrator climbs up the skylight with the cremator and sees a unique scene:

I see the dew dripping shyly from the petals of lilacs. In the shining blue sky, a gigantic red moon appears like a furry monster. On the bare hill, thousands upon thousands of apes and monkeys shriek to the monster in the sky. A peculiar, sweet fragrance fills the air.94

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92 Su Zhe'an (Jon Solomon), "Cong ji'anzhong zhanfang shengming de lingguang — xu Can Xue de Huangni jie" (Issuing intelligent light of life from silence and darkness — a preface to Can Xue's Yellow mud street," in Huangni jie (Yellow mud street), (Taipei: Yuanshen chubanshe, 1987), p. VI
93 Can Xue, "Tianchuang" (Skylight), in Huangdan pai xiaoshuo (The fiction of absurd school), (Changchun, 1988), p. 307 and DIP, p. 104.
94 Can Xue, "Tianchuang" (Skylight), pp. 308-9 and DIP, p. 106.
There are also dancing red squirrels, night birds that eat human flesh, and an old woman with "astonishing sexual desire!" This is a scene of an after-death world in the author's imagination. The after-death world is primitive, unique, surprising, and attractive. It contrasts sharply with the human secular world. In the story, the secular world is described as being full of sin and misery. The narrator's father is a syphilis patient and her mother is dying of diabetes. The narrator herself was thrown into a chamber pot as soon as she was born. "Because I was steeped in urine, my eyeballs protrude, my neck is soft and weak, and my head was swollen like a ball when I grew up. I have breathed in poisonous air for half my life. My chest is eaten up by tubercle bacilli."95 Toward the end of the story, the narrator's father rings a bell with hesitation. "I hear the ding-dong behind me. That world is breaking apart." When the narrator is hurrying ahead in the forest, she is stopped by a man in gray, who has no head. "You! Want to put on a disguise?" The man without a head asks. "No. No." the narrator answers, "I only want to change underwear and a pair of shoes. Then I will comb my hair. Very simple matters."96 These descriptions seem to symbolize people approaching death. Then the narrator says to herself:

"Many people float away through the skylight, many, many... I will sit to the last moment in the dark night, smiling coldly, smiling tenderly, smiling bitterly. By that time, the oil lamp will go out and the bell will resound." At long last I am fascinated by my own voice. It is a kind of low voice, both soft and beautiful. It pours out eternally to my ears.97

"The last moment" when "the oil lamp will go out and the bell will resound" symbolizes death. Everybody will experience this moment and die. ("Many people float away through the skylight.") Beyond the skylight is a celestial world of after-death or more exactly, a religious, metaphysical, and transcendental world in Can Xue's mind.

95 Can Xue, "Tianchuang" (Skylight), p. 309 and DIP, p. 107.
96 Can Xue, "Tianchuang" (Skylight), p. 317 and DIP, p. 119.
97 Can Xue, "Tianchuang" (Skylight), p. 318 and DIP, p. 120.
Can Xue once said: "I fear death very much. I want to live one hundred years." She is very sensitive to human misery, as well as social injustice, and attempts to escape from both. This point is significantly expressed through the images of the female narrators in her stories. Almost all of them are, to varying degrees, self-symbols of the author and her state of mind. In "Hut," she imagines herself being imprisoned in a hut. In "Dialogues IV" she compares herself to a wolf which is shut in "an iron cage" and runs day and night, trying to escape from its sorrowful world. In "Dialogues II," she cuts the roof of the dark room with scissors and stretches out her head for fresh air and light. All these descriptions illustrate what Jon Solomon has observed: "Can Xue's work is attempting to find a clear way out of the world full of chaos, darkness, blood, and tear." Finally, Can Xue finds a way out of the miserable world by escaping from the "skylight." In other words, Can Xue wants to escape from social injustice and human misery by trusting religion. At the end of the "Skylight," the narrator is fascinated by her own voice. The "voice" can be viewed as the story's theme, that is, the secular world is miserable and human life is senseless; people may be rescued after their death by religious belief.

Perhaps in this sense, Tong Si entitles Can Xue "a theologian" and considers Can Xue's fiction to have proved the existence of the human's soul. Can Xue's fiction indeed exhibits a process from "vengeance" to tolerance. She disagrees with Fourth Mother Yuan's violent action and foresees that violence will bring about a tragic result. (In "Raindrops" the owl forced its way out of the attic and died.) Can Xue also changes the bloody violence in "The Bull" into a compromise in "Dialogues V." All these

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98 See Shi Shuqing, "Weile baochou xie xiaoshuo — yu Can Xue tan xiezu" (Writing fiction for vengeance — discussing writing with Can Xue), in Bafang (1986, no. 9), p. 139.
99 Su Zhe'an (Jon Solomon), "Cong ji'an zhong zhanfang shengming de lingguang — xu Can Xue de Huangni jie" (Issuing intelligent light of life from silence and darkness — a preface to Can Xue's Yellow mud street), in Huangni jie (Yellow mud street), (Taipei: Yuanshen chubanshe, 1987), p. IV.
100 Tang Si, "Fei qixu de yuehui he duihui — ping Can Xue de liangge duanpian" (Unexpected date and dialogues — comment on Can Xue's two short stories), in Qinghai hu (1987, no. 2), p. 78.
101 Tang Si, "Can Xue pingzhuan" (Critical biography of Can Xue), in Zhongguo dangdai nü zuojia pingzhuan (Critical biographies of contemporary Chinese woman writers), (Beijing: Zhongguo funü chubanshe, 1990), p.556.
examples suggest the spirit of Christian tolerance: "Do not resist him that is wicked." In addition her "vengeance" is, in her words, a kind of "vengeance in the emotional realm." Therefore Can Xue's fiction seldom involves death and violence, which distinguishes it from Yu Hua's fiction.

Although "Skylight" rejects the human world and creates a celestial world, this does not mean that "a clear way out of the miserable world" has been found. At most Can Xue's own death-frightened soul is, to some degree, consoled by her imaginary story.

To sum up the features of Can Xue's symbolic stories, we see first that Can Xue employs a number of selected words or phrases as symbols to signify some thing or concept beyond their semantic meaning. In these stories, the symbol is a significant mode of literary expression. Because many of Can Xue's symbols are private, her symbolic stories possess the most individualistic features and thus are very obscure. Can Xue says: "I am creating my own world. Others cannot enter my world. It is impossible to enter my works completely. [If someone can, he or she] will become my self." Here Can Xue is deliberately showing off her obscurity and mystery. Actually by identifying Can Xue's private symbols, her works are understandable. Therefore, Wu Liang says: "I tend to interpret Can Xue's fiction through the mode of symbolism." Wang Meng even predicts that a computer will be able to create Can Xue-style stories by technically dealing with her vocabulary:

Without reading all Can Xue's work I think I can grasp her road, her model, her narrative process, and her favorite vocabulary. A really efficient computer could probably compile a slim dictionary of Can Xue's literary vocabulary. It is rather limited, and she uses the same expressions again and again. So a little extra effort should enable the operator of the

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103 See Shi Shuqing, "Weile baouchou xie xiaoshuo — yu Can Xue tan xiezuo" (Writing fiction for vengeance — discussing writing with Can Xue), in Bafang (1986, no. 9), p. 143.

104 Wu Liang, "Yige yixiang shijie de dansheng — ping Can Xue de xiaoshuo" (The birth of a fantastic world — critique on Can Xue's fiction), in Bafang (1988, no. 8), p. 133.
computer to grasp the model of her stories, and I fully believe that finally the computer could write what appears to be a genuine Can Xue's story.\textsuperscript{105}

I think that both Wu Liang and Wang Meng are correct. However Wang Meng fails to understand that the repeated expressions are actually Can Xue's symbols. When we identify them, we know what Can Xue really wants to express in her stories.

Secondly, Can Xue's symbolic stories are extra-political. They do not involve political issues any more but concentrate on more universal themes such as the contradiction between ideal and reality, and the meaning of love, sex, and life. Can Xue once said:

My writing this type of fiction is entirely a result of the irreconcilability of human nature. I've never forgotten about vengeance, a kind of vengeance in the emotional realm. Especially when I first began writing, the vengeful feeling was very strong. On the other hand, I am extremely interested in human beings, a kind of interest like struggling in hell.\textsuperscript{106}

Can Xue's symbolic stories are stories which mainly explore the universal human issues. Therefore, the "vengeance" and the "interest" toward human life are respectively the two basic themes of Can Xue's allegorical and symbolic stories.

Thirdly Can Xue's fiction develops from political allegory to records of individual mind, from vengeance to tolerance. This tendency is consistent with the mainstream of contemporary Chinese fiction. In "Dialogues IV," Can Xue writes:

The tiny flowers in the dusk are full of tender thoughts, patches of purple-blue mist floating in the shady forest. Calming our stormy hearts, we run into the woods. The whole mountain resounds with the song of the oriole.\textsuperscript{107}

This is a revelation of a shift in Can Xue's thought. At this time, she wants to replace "stormy hearts" by "tender thoughts." Later, she declares explicitly that "the highest state
Fourthly. Can Xue's symbolic stories, I think, are mainly records of her own individual experience and mind, as she says: "I am always probing myself, using non-rational methods." 109 However, because of the symbolic mode, her symbolic stories possess an ambiguous nature. Everybody can interpret them according to his or her own experience, association and even expectation. Therefore these symbolic stories also possess a universal meaning.

Chapter 4: The Artistic Characteristics of Can Xue's Stories

I. The use of allegory and symbol.

One of the most significant characteristics of Can Xue's stories is the use of allegory and symbol. According to this characteristic, I have classified Can Xue's stories into the allegorical and the symbolic. Some main features of these stories have been discussed in the preceding chapters. Here a further analysis is made to illustrate the features of allegory and symbol in Can Xue's stories from an artistic perspective.

1. Allegory. Sustained allegory is a form of narrative fiction. The most practical reason for using allegory in a society without freedom of speech is its obliquity. Making full use of this feature of the form of allegory, Can Xue wrote a number of allegorical stories to criticize the society, at the same time successfully avoided conflict with government censorship.

Allegory is also a narrative strategy which may be employed in any literary form or genre.1 In Can Xue's non-allegorical stories, sometimes this strategy is also used to introduce a brief allegorical action. For instance, in "Dialogues IV," playing the game of jumping off a cliff is a short passage of allegorical narrative, which allegorizes sexual experience. Another example can be found in "The Instant When the Cuckoo Sings," in which Can Xue allegorically describes another "game." The narrator, hand in hand with her imaginary boy friend, goes into a big room with huge mirrors hanging on all sides of the room. This allegorical action probably represents the narrator's willingness to probe the mystery of love from both self and mutual perspectives.

2. Symbol. Many symbols are employed in Can Xue's stories and most of them are her private symbols. The words or phrases, which appear repeatedly in the context and especially in the titles of the stories, are usually symbols for persons, objects or events beyond the words and phrases.

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The symbols in Can Xue's stories always appear in groups. This feature is similar to Lu Xun's prose poem "Autumn night" (Qiuye) and different from Mao Dun's "Ode to a White Poplar" (Baiyang lizan).

The symbol, as a mode of literary express, is also employed in Can Xue's allegorical stories. I have pointed out that the "hut," the "fog," and the "embroidered shoes" are all allegorical emblems. In essence an allegorical emblem is also a kind of symbol. In this sense, Can Xue's allegorical stories also employ the mode of symbol. Therefore the distinction between Can Xue's allegorical stories and symbolic stories is relative.

II. Surrealistic imagination and illogical narrative.

1. Irrationality controlled by rationality. Can Xue once declares "My works will reject rationality completely." She tries to maintain "absolute irrationality" in fiction writing. Her so-called "absolute irrationality," in my opinion, refers to the illogicality of her plots and her rejection of abstract words with subjective color. For rational plots she substitutes a variety of images in her stories. With this mode, her stories engender an effect of visualization, which mainly affects readers' sensations but not their reason. This is one of the most significant features of Can Xue's stories. About this point, the critic Li Tuo comments: "Can Xue's mode is to make full use of the advantage of Chinese language, which possesses imagery. Her narrative becomes a process, in which the imagery accumulates without limit."

Actually, it is impossible for a writer to write in a mode of "absolute irrationality," because literature itself is a product of human rationality. Can Xue's stories inevitably expose both rational and subjective color from time to time. Fourth Mother Yuan's

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3See Shi Shuqing, "Weile baochou xie xiaoshuo — yu Can Xue tan xiezuo" (Writing fiction for vengeance — discussing writing with Can Xue), in Bafang (1988, no. 9), p. 140.
4See "Haiwai zhongguo zuojia taolunhui jiyao" (The summary of the symposium of Chinese overseas writers), in Jintian (1990, no. 2), p. 98.
overly rational speech is an example. In addition, Can Xue has to resort to rational and subjective words to convey her emotion and to make her private symbols understandable. For instance, in "Skylight," a scarlet wine glass is hanging in the sky and "evil" froth is bubbling and gurgling from it. The word "evil" is certainly a rational concept with a very strong subjective color. It is used to define a negative attitude toward the "scarlet wine glass," which is very likely a parody of the public symbol of the "red sun." During the Cultural Revolution, the red sun was the exclusive symbol for Mao Zedong. In "Dialogues IV," Can Xue tells us that the mulberry tree is a "lascivious" plant. The word "lascivious" is also a rational and subjective concept. It is also used to suggest a direction or a broad significance for her private symbol "mulberry tree." Therefore, the so-called "irrationality" of Can Xue's stories is only a kind of irrationality controlled by rationality. Or in other words, Can Xue's "irrationality" is not irrational at all, just non-judgmental.

2. **Surrealistic exaggeration, deformation, and transformation.** Exaggeration is a kind of figure of speech. It is used to emphasize the degree of a situation. Exaggeration is usually used by combining with simile in conventional usage. For example, in order to emphasize cold, we can say: "I am so cold that my stomach seems to be frozen." However Can Xue breaks through the conventional usage of exaggeration. Her exaggerations often lead to surrealistic effects. For instance, in "Hut," Can Xue writes: "How that north wind pierces! . . . Bits of ice have formed in my stomach. When I sit down in my armchair I can hear them clinking all the time." In the same story, the back of the narrator's head becomes "numb and swollen" whenever her mother glares ferociously at her. These exaggerations are para-normal, therefore I name them surrealistic exaggeration.

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5 Can Xue, "Tianchuang" (Skylight), in Huangdai pai xiaoshuo (Fiction of absurd school), (Changchun, 1988), p. 313 and DIP, p. 112.
6 Can Xue, "Shanshang de xiaowu" (Hut on the hill), in Tansuo xiaoshuo ji (A collection of exploratory stories), (Shanghai & Hong Kong, 1986), pp. 545-6 and DIP, pp. 50-1.
7 Ibid, p. 544 and DIP, p. 48.
Deformation and transformation are commonly used strategies in Can Xue's stories. In "The Fog," the father's legs become two wooden sticks, and the mother's body becomes thin and light, seemingly empty inside her garments. These are deformations, which are employed to present the deterioration of these characters' destiny. More examples of transformation can be found in Can Xue's stories. Frequently characters turn into a wolf, owl or stone, and sometimes an eagle turns into a person. All these exaggerations, deformations, and transformations are surrealistic and illogical modes, which combine to create a great fantastical effect.

3. Externalization of characters' emotions and materialization of their miseries.
Because of Can Xue's mode of "nonrationality," she cannot frequently employ subjective and abstract concepts to express her characters' emotions and miseries. She also cannot use psychological analysis to explore their minds rationally. So she expresses characters' emotions by describing their actions. For example, in several stories, the female narrator digs the lime on the wall with her fingernails. This is to express her bashfulness. In "Dialogues V," the description of the husband "you" kicking the rock off the cliff actually expresses his anger. I name this strategy the externalization of characters' emotions.

Another strategy which is called "materialization" is extensively used to display her characters' miseries. That the father's legs turn into wooden sticks is an example of materialization. In "Dialogues I" there is a big hole in the heroine's chest with damp pebbles clicking in it. In "Dialogues II" the husband's heart withers into a dry lemon. All these examples express the characters' miseries. This is a unique expressive strategy in Can Xue's stories, which is seldom seen in modern Chinese fiction. This strategy was first pointed out by Wang Fei, who called it "surrealistic materialization" in 1987. Wang Fei's definition has been accepted by some other critics.9

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8Wang Fei, "Zai meng de renshen zhong jinluan — Can Xue xiaoshuo qiwu" (In the throes of the birth of a dream — a revelation from Can Xue's fiction), in Wenxue pinglun (1987, no. 5), p. 97.
9One example is Wu Liang. See his "Yige yixiang shijie de dansheng — ping Can Xue de xiaoshuo" (The birth of an imaginary world — critique of Can Xue's fiction), in Bafang (1988, no. 9), pp. 134-5.
4. No explicit and logical law of causation in the characters' behavior and the development of events. There no longer exists an explicit and logical law of causation in Can Xue's stories. Characters seem to act without consciousness and events happen without reason. For instance, in "Ah Mei" the author does not illuminate why the husband leaves home. In "The things" we also do not know why the mob wants to dig up the camphor tree and replace it by a tong tree, and why and how the mob later becomes a line of mourners. All these represent illogical narrative. Usually Can Xue only describes phenomena or the results, leaving the reader to ponder the ambiguous causation.

In some cases, the reasons are narrated in an illogical mode, that is, the reasons are not logical enough to result in the characters' behavior and events' happening. For example, in "Hut" the mother hates her daughter merely because the light and sound from her daughter's room make her crazy. The narrator in "The Fog" leaves home only due to a physical pain. These examples illustrate some of the reasons why Can Xue's stories are nonrational and allegorical.

The stories without an explicit and logical law of causation project the irrationality, helplessness, and absurdity of the real society and human life. Li Tuo considers that this feature of Can Xue's stories, as well as some stories by Ma Yuan, Zhang Chengzhi, and Zhaxi Dawa, "make[s] official critics extremely irritated" because for a long time the law of causation has been a "sacred principle" of historical materialism according to China's official ideology.¹⁰

5. Ambiguity and open-endedness. Can Xue employs an uncertain narrative to reach an effect of ambiguity and open-endedness. This is another aspect of her surrealist imagination. Readers cannot judge from the "Hut" whether or not there really is a hut on the hill. In "The Fog" we do not know if the mother is dead. The mode of ambiguity and open endedness endows some of Can Xue's stories with a more universal meaning.

All the five points summarized above are different aspects of surrealistic imagination and illogical narrative displayed in Can Xue's stories. They are related to each other and serve Can Xue's general aesthetic principle: surrealism.

III. Anti-typification.

According to Maoist literary theory, typification is one of the most important writing principles. Its basic meaning is the creation of so-called typical characters in a typical environment with a typical plot. Actually the principle of typification was a shackle to force writers to serve politics by describing "ideal" (actually false) environments and characters in the Maoist era. Since the end of the Maoist era Chinese writers have been attempting to reject the principle of typification. Among these writers Can Xue is one of most active anti-typifiers.

Anti-typification in Can Xue's stories exhibits itself in three aspects. First, the characters in Can Xue's stories tend to be unidimensional. All of them have been abstracted into anti-types from a Maoist perspective. Most are unnamed. None is portrayed distinctly in appearance and, in many stories, even the sex of the first-person narrators is unclear. According to the principle of typification Can Xue's characters are never typical, they are actually anti-types. They live in hopeless circumstances. They are ugly, mean, weak, incompetent, and make no effort to improve their condition. Although a few such characters, like the narrator and the father in the "Hut" and the narrator in "Dialogues I - V," have some ambition to achieve or search for some unnamed thing, they fail in a fatalistic manner. In this sense, they are all tormented characters. Charlotte Innes considers these "tormented characters too much the same."11 Her opinion illustrates the anti-typification of Can Xue's characterization.

The general meaning of Can Xue's unidimensional characters lies in their reflection of the unreasonable existence of the contemporary Chinese people. The fact of their

miserable existence explodes a modern myth, i.e., that the Chinese people are masters of their own nation. What is more important is that these tormented characters are like a clear and ruthless mirror that reflects the weakness of the Chinese people. As Solomon comments: "The characters in Can Xue's fictional world and their timid, sordid, aimless, and shadowy lives are nothing but the experience of ourselves." In short, Can Xue's fiction does not aim at characterization of Maoist-style typical images. Her characters reflect her anti-typical vision of Chinese life and serve as carriers of her own emotions.

The plots of Can Xue's stories are fragmentary. Because she does not describe the causes of events and the relationships between issues, there are no linear plots in her stories. ("Ah Mei" is the only exception.) What remains in the stories is a variety of conflicts. Furthermore, if Can Xue really wanted to tell a connected story she would not deliberately cut the plots into pieces and embed them in the narrative and the language of characters, nor present her plots in an allegorical or symbolic mode. In reading Can Xue's stories readers have to unearth the plot as well as identify the allegory or symbol. A typical instance can be found in "Dialogues V." The plot of the heroine's leaving and returning home is expressed as follows:

(1) "The escape was unexpected and sudden." This is a narrative of the narrator, telling us that the wife left home. (2) "I lie under the willow tree near the river sunbathing. In the flood season I always look across the river into the distance, expecting something." This is the wife's monologue, demonstrating that she wants to seek her ideal love. (3) "While you were lying under the willow tree, I saw you trying to fly. You failed each time and broke your leg." This is the husband's dialogue, showing that he saw his wife's attempt and failure. (4) "Tonight I'll go to the deserted land with you.

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12 Jon Solomon (Su Zhe'an), "Cong ji'an zhong zhanfang shengming de lingguang — xu Can Xue de Huangni jie" (Issuing intelligent light of life from silence and darkness — a preface to Can Xue's Yellow mud street), in Huangni jie (Yellow mud street), (Taipei: Yuanshen chubanshe, 1987), p. IV
14 Ibid, p. 41 and DIP, p. 158.
We will wear ourselves out the whole night, forgetting our miserable sleeplessness."16
This is the wife's dialogue, showing that she returned to her husband's side.

This kind of plot tires the reader. Wang Meng frankly admitted his impatience: "I am fascinated by them but, I am sorry to say, I rarely have the patience to finish them."17 As Michael Duke comments: "One can read many of her stories backward paragraph by paragraph, and they make equally good sense."18 These comments illustrate the fragmentation of Can Xue's plots.

Can Xue herself declares: "[My stories] have no plot, which is not important. The most important thing is the coherence of the emotions."19 I agree with Can Xue's comment on her own work. The most impressive elements of her stories are her strong emotion for vengeance and her female instinct for self-protection. By comparison, the characters and plots in her stories are insignificant and even less typical.

There is no concrete description of the environment in Can Xue's stories. Readers do not know the time and location of her stories. The environments in Can Xue's stories have been abstracted into two basic types: living environments and cultural-psychological environments. Both construct the general setting in Can Xue's stories. In John Domini's words, her stories "offer nightmare images of life under a punishing regime."20

In Can Xue's stories people live in leaky houses, storage rooms, and even run-down temples. Rooms are damp and dark. Rats run everywhere. As the narrator in "Skylight" says: "When night comes we sneak in panic, . . . like rats looking for the darkest and remotest place."21 All this implies the bad living environment of the Chinese people. On the other hand, we have to pay attention to another kind of description of environment in

19See Shi Shuqing, "Weile baoshou xie xiaoshuo — yu Can Xue tan xiezuo" (Writing fiction for vengeance — discussing writing with Can Xue), in Bafang (1988, no. 9), p. 144.
21Can Xue, "Tianchuang" (Skylight), in Huangdan pai xiaoshuo (Fiction of absurd school), (Changchun, 1988), p. 310.
Can Xue's stories: dry places, deserted islands or hills, the wilderness, cold highlands with huge black shadows, and so on. These descriptions mainly symbolize China's cultural environment and the Chinese people's psychological environment. As Ronald R. Janssen points out, this kind of environment is the mind itself, where all the external tensions of parent and child, husband and wife, community and individual have been internalized. Sociology becomes pathology, perception drifts into hallucination and nightmare, the whole bringing her narrators, as she says in "Dialogues," to "face the horrifying abyss."22

Both environments mentioned above mesh with each other and constitute the general setting of Can Xue's stories. According to Maoist literary theory, a nightmarish description of the environment is never typical because it does not reflect the "ideal" or "bright" aspect of socialist society. However, in essence, I think Can Xue's description of the environment is quite a genuine reflection of Chinese society and the people's minds at the time when the stories take place.

In summary, the principal artistic features in Can Xue's stories are anti-traditionalism and surrealism. Can Xue deliberately rejects any traditionally accepted mode (in China) of fictional creation. At the beginning of her writing, perhaps merely because of her intention to practice sarcasm, which is clearly exhibited in "Yellow Mud Street," Can Xue found her unique writing mode. She consistently stuck to her own mode and finally shaped her anti-traditional and surrealistic style.

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Chapter 5: Conclusion

The unique features of Can Xue's fiction gave rise to various interpretations. One of the most controversial issues is how to summarize her fiction. Different critics employ different terms to define Can Xue's fiction. The major arguments are as follows:

1. *Avant-garde fiction, experimental fiction, exploratory fiction, new writing, and new fiction.* Li Tuo calls Can Xue an "experimental novelist" and her fiction "experimental fiction" (*shiyan xiaoshuo*).1 He also says: "The phenomenon of experimental fiction is quite complicated. It perhaps can be summarized as avant-garde literature (*xianfeng wenxue*)."2 Wu Liang and Chen Peide call Can Xue's fiction "exploratory fiction" (*tansuo xiaoshuo*).3 Charlotte Innes calls it "new writing."4 Bai Xianyong calls it "new fiction" (*xin xiaoshuo*).5

All these designations emphasize the innovative style of Can Xue's stories, but do not elaborate on their specific artistic features. Some of these designations, such as "experimental fiction," "new writing," and "new fiction" may be too broad in connotation to define Can Xue's fiction.

2. *Absurd fiction, oblique fiction, fiction of imagery, and fiction without depth.* Some critics classify Can Xue's fiction as "absurd fiction" (*huangdan xiaoshuo*).6 Li Shulei designates Can Xue's fiction, together with that of Chen Cun, Liu Suola, and Xu Xin, by

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1See "Haiwai zhongguo zuojia taolun hui jiyao" (Summary of the symposium of overseas Chinese writers), in *Jintian* (1990, no, 2), p. 98.
2Ibid, p. 97.
3See *Tansuo xiaoshuo ji* (A collection of exploratory fiction), Wu Liang and Chen Peide ed., Shanghai & Hong Kong, 1986.
the name of "oblique fiction" (bu touming xiaoshuo). Deng Shanjie calls it "fiction of imagery" (yixiang xiaoshuo). Wang Binbin entitles Can Xue and Yu Hua's fiction, "fiction without depth" (wu shendu de xiaoshuo), saying that it "never involves the characters' soul."

All these definitions focus on the nonrationality of Can Xue's fiction. However, in essence, Can Xue's fiction is not absurd; her stories have determinate themes. It is not correct to consider that she "never involves the characters' soul." She does, but in an indirect and figurative way. In addition, "oblique fiction," "fiction of imagery," and "fiction without depth" are not commonly accepted literary terms.

3. Quasi-expressionism. Wu Ruozeng considers Can Xue's "Ah Mei" a story of quasi-expressionism (lei biaoxian zhyi). This is an interesting and, to some degree, an accurate assessment of "Ah Mei." Unfortunately this term is not applicable to all of Can Xue's stories.

4. Realism. The Hunan writer Cai Cehai says: "Can Xue is a painful realist (tongku de xianshi zhyi)." She forces readers to see a ruthless and icy reality." Zhang Yesong defines her fiction as "the realism of Can Xue's style" (Can Xue shi de xianshi zhyi). Penelope Mesic comments: "They (Can Xue's stories) have a simplicity and directness reminiscent of Russian novelists of the last century. Can Xue captures both the miserable hardships of rural poverty and its fleeting, unpredictable oddity."

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7 Li Shulei, "Bu touming xiaoshuo ji qita" (The oblique fiction and so on), in Tianjin wenxue (1986, no. 4), p. 91.
8 Deng Shanjie, "Xianfeng xiaoshuo buzai lingren xingfen" (The avant-garde stories are no more exiting), in Wenxue ziyou tan (1990, no. 2), p. 44.
9 Wang Binbin, "Can Xue, Yu Hua: 'zhen de esheng?' — Can Xue, Yu Hua yu Lu Xun de yizhong bijiao" (Can Xue, Yu Hua: "The true voice of horror?" — a comparison of Can Xue, Yu Hua and Lu Xun), Dangdai zhoujia pinglun (1992, no. 1), p. 38.
10 Wu Ruozeng, "Can Xue de chousi — wo du 'Ah Mei zai yige taiyangtian li de chousi'" (Can Xue's anxiety — my reading of "Ah Mei's anxiety on a sunny day"), in Tianjin wenxue, (1986, no. 6), p. 95.
11 Cai Cehai, "Ta wei shenme fennu?" (Why she is indignant?), in Wenxue ziyou tan (1990, no. 2), p. 33.
All these comments concentrate on the utilitarianism of Can Xue's fiction. Some of her stories do possess critical significance in relation to actual society. However, the defining artistic feature of Can Xue's fiction is never realistic.

5. Surrealism. Jon Solomon considers that Can Xue's imagination belongs to "surrealism" (chao xianshi zhuyi). In her essay in The New York Times Book Review Charlotte Innes comments: "They (Can Xue's stories) bring to mind . . . most of all, modern American surrealist writing." As early as 1987, Wang Fei defined Can Xue's fiction as "surrealism". In my opinion surrealism should be considered one of the main artistic feature in Can Xue's fiction.

6. Modernism. Can Xue herself describes her fiction as "modernism" (xiandai zhuyi). Similarly, many critics classify Can Xue's fiction as a type of modernism, while Deng Shanjie puts it in a "pseudo-modernist school" (wei xiandai pai). Undoubtedly Can Xue's fiction possesses many features of modernism. However, modernism is a rather broad term and can be used to define any nontraditional literary phenomenon. About this point, Li Tuo comments: "The term modernism . . . seems not to be very accurate either," because obscure poetry (menglong shi) and roots-seeking (nativist) fiction (xungen xiaoshuo) can also be defined as modernism.

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14Su Zhe'an (Jon Solomon), "Cong jian zhong zhanfang shengming de lingguang — xu Can Xue de Huangni jie (Issuing intelligent light of life from silence and darkness — a preface to Can Xue's Yellow mud street), in Huangni jie (Taibei: Yuanshen chubanshe, 1987), p. III
16Wang Fei, "Zai meng de ren shen zhong jingluan — Can Xue xiaoshuo qiwu" (In the throes of the birth of a dream — a revelation from Can Xue's fiction), in Wuxue pingliun (Review of literature), 1987, no. 5, p. 94.
17See Shi Shuqing, "Weile baochou xie xiaoshuo — yu Can Xue tan xiezu" (Writing fiction for vengeance — discussing writing with Can Xue), in Bafang (1986, no. 9), p. 143.
19Deng Shanjie, "Xianfeng xiaoshuo buzai zhangren xingfen" (The avant-garde stories are no more exiting), in Wuxue ziyou tan (1990, no. 2), p. 49.
20See "Haiwai zhongguo zuojia taolun hui jiyao" (Summary of the symposium of overseas Chinese writers), in Jintian (1990, no. 2), p. 97.
7. Post-modernism. Shen Jinyao defines Can Xue's fiction as "post-modernism" (hou xiandai zhuyi). He considers that Can Xue adopts an "attitude of absolute inactivity" (chedi de wuwei taidu) and completely rejects conventional fictional skills and concepts. Thus Can Xue's fiction is a kind of "anti-fiction" (fan xiaoshuo). Michael Duke considers Can Xue's Dialogues in Paradise to be perhaps the one and only work of "postmodernist fiction" in contemporary China.

From the various arguments cited above we know the appraisals of Can Xue's fiction differ greatly from one another. This is not only because of the complexity of Can Xue's fiction, but also because of the difficulty of employing Western literary terms to describe China's literary phenomena. In Li Tuo's words, "This exposes a language predicament in that we cannot find an appropriate term to define contemporary literary phenomenon." In order to make an accurate assessment to Can Xue's fiction we must examine it from two different perspectives. From the perspective of contemporary Chinese literature, Can Xue's fiction can be considered as belonging to avant-garde fiction; a school that has been developing since 1985. Under normal conditions the term avant-garde fiction is used to designate other literary schools such as obscure poetry (menglong shi), reflective fiction (fansi xiaoshuo), and roots-seeking fiction (xungen xiaoshuo). The most significant features of the avant-garde fiction are its anti-traditionalism and innovation. Avant-garde novelists, including Can Xue, make many experiments in fictional writing. Their contribution lies in a complete break with the orthodox literary concepts of Marxism and Maoism, and the establishment of a plurality of contemporary Chinese fiction. Can Xue's fiction is, thus, one of the most significant types of avant-garde fiction.

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21Shen Jinyao, "Shixi jinnian lai xiaoshuo zhong de hou xiandai zhuyi" (Experimental analysis of postmodernism in fiction of the latest years), in Xiaoshuo pinglun (1989, no. 2), p. 10.
23See "Haiwai zhongguo zuojia taolun hui jiyao" (Summary of the symposium of overseas Chinese writers), in Jintian (1990, no. 2), p.97.
From the perspective of its artistic features, the most significant characteristic of Can Xue's fiction, I believe, is its surrealism. Can Xue's fiction has broken with conventional Chinese modes of artistic organization to experiment with free association, nonlogical and nonchronological order, dreamlike and nightmarish sequences, and the juxtaposition of bizarre, shocking, or seemingly unrelated images. Can Xue mixes up reality and fantasy, action and consciousness, constructing a surrealistic and imaginary world. In her fiction Can Xue mainly expresses her subjective feelings and emotions, but does not strive for a realistic depiction of her characters' physical surroundings.

Can Xue's fiction is nonrepresentational and deliberately oblique. This is due partly to the oppressive political atmosphere, and partly to her use of private symbolism, which can been seen in a number of her stories. Because of this Can Xue's fiction is understood and appreciated by only a small percentage of her readers; those who perhaps share with Can Xue similar experiences, or appreciate her literary aesthetic. Can Xue's fiction does not offer a growing direction for contemporary Chinese fiction as Ronald Janssen predicts. It is only one among many diverse styles being experimented with in contemporary Chinese fiction.
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Xu Xiaohhe
Xu Xing

劉素拉
柳情花顯
馬原
朦朧詩
莫言
賈母
南風. 男風
女爲悅己者容
女婿
老況
琴棋書畫
<<秋夜>>
傷痕小說
生命
實驗小說
<<死水>>
蘇童
探索小說
痛苦的現實主義者
僞現代主義
圍棋
無深度小說
現代主義
新小說
虛汝華
徐曉鶴
徐星
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<td>&quot;Ziye&quot;</td>
<td>&lt;&lt;子夜&gt;&gt;</td>
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