JOURNEY WITHIN:
THE INWARD TURN OF THE CONTEMPORARY CHINESE NOVEL

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the inward turn of the contemporary Chinese novel: a tendency in fictional narrative to move from representing social reality and political events from an “objective” point of view to exploring personal experience, especially the interior world of human beings, from a subjective point of view. I take three novels published in the early 1990s as examples: Yu Hua’s *Crying in the Fine Rain* (1991), Ge Fei’s *On the Margins* (1992), and Wang Anyi’s *Fact and Fiction: One Way to Create a World* (1993). I demonstrate a new narrative mode emerging, with thematic innovations and formal changes, against the background of the collapse of Communist collectivist ideology and the “master narrative” of socialist realism.

In these three works, first-person autobiographical narrators are employed to explore personal experience and private life, a space once repressed and forbidden in modern Chinese literature. Reflections on growing-up, personal memory of the past and the imaginative search for identity can thus be read allegorically as a Chinese Bildungsroman of the awakening consciousness of Self.

This new narrative not only emphasizes the importance of inner territory, but also ushers in a subjective writing which has greatly altered the appearance and conception of the Chinese novel. Chronological line is broken up into a psychological temporal order; plot and event become obscured within mental scenes; and omniscient didactic voices are replaced by self-conscious, reflective minds. Such individualistic, modernist narratives challenge the former collective, socially-oriented “realist epics” produced since 1930s, providing an alternative form and function for the modern Chinese novel.
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Introduction

In 1985, the Chinese critic Liu Zaifu 刘再复 published an influential article entitled “On the Subjectivity of Literature” (Lun wenxue de zhutixing 论文学的主体性). In spite of the debate surrounding this paper that was soon curtailed in China for political reasons, Liu published another article overseas five years later to explain and further develop his original notion of the “subjectivity of literature.”

In these two articles and other relevant articles published during that period, Liu examines the loss of subjectivity in Chinese literature over the last several decades. He points out that under the influence of the theory of mechanical reflection (jijie fanyinglun 机械反映论), literature is considered simply “a reflection of social life,” and in Liu’s view, this “fails to accommodate the essential freedom and transcendence of literary practice, and disregards the writer’s subjectivity as much as that of the reader” (Liu and Tang, 66). As a result, not only are human characters in literary works deprived of their own individuality, inner spiritual conflict and autonomy, and turned into passive products

of the social environment and embodiments of class collectivity, but also writers are
deprived of their creative subjectivity and “are primarily considered instruments engaged
in this kind of reflection” (Liu and Tang, 66).

Based on his liberal humanist idea of literature, Liu fiercely argues that literature
should be a study of human beings (wenxue shi renxue 文学是人学), and should
present human beings as spiritual Subjects whose “ontological existence is fundamentally a
valuative existence. It is the source of value and also the basic measure of value” (Liu and
Tang, 63).² He thus advocates an independent, transcendent literature which not only
represents, imitates and reflects the objective world, but also introduces a subjective spirit,
or recognizes the spiritual world of human subjectivity.

Liu’s call for the rediscovery of human beings as subjects (zhuti 主体), and the
revival of an autonomous literature is not just a rhetorical gesture. As the first systematic
theoretical challenge to the Chinese Communist Party’s policy regarding art and literature,
which was epitomized by Mao Zedong’s “Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature
and Art” (Zai Yan’an wenyi zuotanhui shang de jianghua 在延安文艺座谈会上的讲话), it is first a reflective examination of the institutionalized inhumanity and
politicization of Chinese literature in Mao’s regime. Second, Liu’s ideas are a direct
response to recent developments in contemporary Chinese literature of the 1980s,
especially the deepening exploration of human experience which lies behind social reality.
With the relative loosening of political control in the Post-Mao era and under the influence
of Western modernist literature, Chinese writers since the early 1980s have gradually

² The subjective agency in Liu’s mind is not merely a function of human consciousness,
but “the entire essence of the subject’s existence...Its intensity refers to inner
determination or the features that structure the human subject’s existence as such. Its
extension covers the subjectivity manifest in the relationship between subject and object
within the Subject, i.e., objectifiability” (Liu and Tang, 57). Thus Liu redefines the
essence of literature “as a mode of valuation deriving from the realization of the subject’s
needs, rather than as a product of mimesis or merely the product of consciousness’ active
reflection of the world”(Liu and Tang, 63).
distanced themselves from the “reflectionism” and historical materialism of the socialist realist school, and have revived the tradition of humanitarian and critical realism established in the literature of the May-Fourth period. Since the mid-1980s, with a new generation of Chinese writers maturing, an increasing number of literary works have provided evidence of the profound transformation of Chinese literature from collective writing (jiti xiezuo 集体写作), where the dominant ideology guides the uniform reflection of “objective reality,” to individual writing (geti xiezuo 个体写作) where individual experience and the subjective perception of life are emphasized. Chinese fiction has managed to break from the norms of social realism and present instead a new modernist sensibility and imagination.

In the field of fiction, this transformation can be detected particularly in the works of the so-called New Wave (xinchao 新潮) writers. Around the mid-1980s, in several different styles and formal experiments, Chinese critics have become enthusiastic labelers, and their movements or schools (“isms”) have changed every two or three years. Examples include modernism (xiandai zhuyi 现代主义), postmodernism (hou xiandai zhuyi 后现代主义), new wave (xinchao新潮), post new wave (hou xinchao 后新潮), avant-garde (xianfeng pai 先锋派), formalism (xingshi zhuyi 形式主义), experimental fiction (shiyan xiaoshuo 实验小说), neo-realism (xin xieshi 新写实), new experience (xin tiyan 新体验) etc. While this reflects the vitality of the recent development of Chinese literature, it also brings with it much theoretical confusion. Here I try to avoid such complex definitions, simply choosing new wave fiction to refer to newly emerging innovative literary writing since the second half of the 1980s. This is an influential trend which has greatly changed prevailing conceptions of reality and literature. In my opinion, this “wave” has not stopped even in the 1990s, as my later chapters will argue.

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4 Here I use “New Wave Fiction” as a term including different schools and writers, from the so-called root-seeking writers like Ah Cheng and Han Shaogong through the so called Avant Garde writers such as Ge Fei and Sun Ganlu, to writers who are difficult to classify like Ma Yuan and Can Xue. I basically follow Li Jie 李杰’s definition of the novelty of these writings: in their aesthetic spirit, they abandon the narrow utilitarian approach to literature, and treat literature as an opportunity for formal experiment. See his “Lun zhongguo dangdai xinchao xiaoshuo 论中国当代新潮小说” (On Contemporary Chinese New Wave Fiction), Zhongshan, 1988/5.
major Chinese literary magazines such as *Harvest* (Shouhuo 收获), *Zhongshan* 钟山, *People's Literature* (Renmin wenxue 人民文学) and *Shanghai Literature* (Shanghai wenxue 上海文学), there was a sudden explosion of fictional works which displayed the distinctive personal styles of their authors to an unprecedented extent, by the standards of the last few decades, and dealt uncompromisingly with various aspects of concrete human experience. From Han Shaogong 韩少功’s symbolic allegories of Chinese culture and Chinese existence to Xu Xing 徐星’s down-to-earth colloquial monologues of urban wanderers; from Ah Cheng 阿城’s refined stories of Chinese wisdom in ordinary peoples’ lives to Can Xue 残雪’s highly private, nightmarish words of a paranoid soul; from Mo Yan 莫言’s vigorous and sensory imagination of a glorious homeland of heroes and villains to Ma Yuan 马原’s narratives of multiple perspectives describing exotic adventures in Tibet, these works mark a major revival of artistic sensibility and the individual perception of human life in Chinese fiction.

Within two years, the writers of New-Wave Fiction were joined by a group of even younger writers, including Yu Hua 余华, Su Tong 苏童, Ge Fei 格非, Sun Ganlu 孙甘露, Hong Feng 洪峰 and Ye Zhaoyan 叶兆言. As a group of young people who are themselves going through the process of maturing, their writings are particularly concerned with the personal experience of discovering the world and their search for an identity. Personal experience is often presented in their works as a guide to their understanding of life and the human existential situation in general. For example, Yu Hua’s exploration of cruelty and violence in everyday life is often presented as a teenager’s shocking experience of initiation; Su Tong’s imagination of the past tends to be colored with a sense of the loss of innocence; Hong Feng’s accounts of the coming of age are accompanied by a deeper comprehension of the difficulties and complexities of existence. Their writing has edged the artistic concern with subjective experience and self-conscious experiments with narrative language, begun by previous writers, even further in the direction of individualization. In the space of hardly a decade, Chinese fiction has
emerged from the shadow of politicized literature, and has started to ponder the nature of fictional narrative and the enormous variety of possibilities for presenting humanity and human experience. For the first time, modern Chinese fiction has been widely recognized in the West for its contribution to world literature, and praised for its distinctive Chinese voice.\(^5\)

What is the cause of this "avalanche"\(^6\) of subjectivity in literature?

In describing the changing cultural forces that constitute the background of new wave fiction, I would like to adopt the term "residue of revolutionary experience" to define the kind of reality and experience that recent Chinese literature has captured. Using

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For general criticism of recent developments in Chinese fiction, see the inspiring foreword and afterword to Zhao and Wang's anthologies respectively: the former concentrates on the nature of Avant-Garde writers' formal experiments, the latter on recent fiction breaking away from traditional approaches to life and literary representation. Cf. also Michael S. Duke "Walking Toward the World: A Turning Point in Contemporary Chinese Fiction," *World Literature Today*, Vol. 63, no. 3.


6 This word is used by the Chinese critic Li Tuo, who is also the mentor of many of these young Chinese writers, to describe the sudden emergence of a new literary generation and its effect on modern Chinese literature — he feels that a totally new type of writing has resulted, breaking away from former literature. See his "Xuebeng hechu" 雪崩何处. (Where Is the Avalanche?), preface to Yu Hua, *Shibasui chumen yuaxing* 十八岁出门远行 (Leaving Home and Travelling Afar at Eighteen). Taipe: Yuanliu, 1990.
the word “residue” is an attempt to place emphasis less on the “revolutionary experience” than on the struggle to overcome that revolutionary experience — a process that has preoccupied Chinese people in the “post-revolutionary” transitional period.\(^7\)

Although Deng Xiaoping’s regime assured Chinese people that they would “march” into a new period (xin shiqi 新时期) of post-revolutionary progress, fuelled by economic reform and relative loosening of social-ideological control, the construction of a post-revolutionary culture and identity has actually been anything but automatic. On the one hand, years of revolution in modern China, especially the last few decades of Communist revolution, have had an enormous effect on Chinese peoples’ lives and their mentality. They are not just victims of revolution but also carry within them the ruins of revolution, since they themselves constitute a part of the reality in which they live. Moreover, the existing political reality of repression still overshadows peoples’ lives in society — the obvious example being the June Fourth Tian’anmen Massacre of 1989 — painful evidence of the continuing influence of “revolutionary” ideology.

On the other hand, within Chinese society there is a deep suspicion of this ideology and its related cultural institutions, including the Marxist-Leninist theory of class struggle, historical materialism and collectivism. Dissatisfied with the hypocrisy of the present regime, Chinese people are starting to look for an alternative foundation for existence to

\(^7\) Different terms, such as “post-Mao,” “post-revolutionary,” and “post-socialist” are used by scholars to distinguish contemporary Chinese society from the preceding three decades. Although China now is still officially governed by a “revolutionary” regime, since the theory and practice of revolution advocated by Mao Zedong and the CCP are no longer considered valid by the majority of Chinese people, and the society itself has undergone such immense changes in the last decade or so, it seems hardly justifiable to refer to the present Chinese society using the same terms as the 1950s and ‘60s. I here use the term “post-revolutionary “ as a corollary to Liu Zaifu and Li Zehou 李泽厚’s reflections on 20th century Chinese ideology and the culture of revolution. Revolution in Liu’s words, means “The radical action of subverting the present system and authority by means of massive violence.” See Liu Zaifu and Li Zehou, *Gaobie geming: Huiwang ershi shiji Zhongguo* 告别革命: 回望二十世纪中国 (Farewell Revolution: Looking Back at Twentieth Century China), Hong Kong: Tiandi tushu, 1995. 4.
fill the blank space left by the collapsing revolutionary ideology. Beginning from the late 1970s and lasting throughout the 1980s, a trend or cult of introducing foreign ideas and culture developed that can be compared with the May-Fourth period, in both enthusiasm and the strong influence that it has exerted on society. Modern Western philosophy and literature, especially that of the so-called Modernist movement, have become an important source in the recent search for an alternative mode of interpreting life and imagination. In particular, existentialism has greatly influenced Chinese intellectuals and writers of the 1980s including those of the new wave fiction movement.8

The literary imagination displayed in new wave fiction is thus a clear manifestation of the post-Mao residue of revolutionary experience, and provides a valuable historical record of Chinese people constructing a new identity and articulating their personal experiences.

In the past decades of revolution, human experience has been highly “publicized” in various discourses, both social and literary, in the sense of undermining individual expression, deprecating individual worth, and suppressing personal identity. In order to overcome such a traumatic experience of collectivism and politicization, more recent cultural forms have inevitably reacted with an overflow of personal expression. As one

8 This introduction of Western philosophy, art and literature has been both extensive and very intense. Of course, translation provides Chinese readers with their main access to Western ideas, and numerous collections and series translating Western writers and thinkers have been published. For example, in the mid-1980s, counting only magazines that introduced and translated foreign literature, there were more than ten, the leading ones being *Waiguo wenyi* 外国文艺, *Shijie wenxue* 世界文学, *Waiguo wenxue* 外国文学, *Waiguo wenxue yanjiu* 外国文学研究, *Dangdai waiguo wenxue* 当代外国文学, etc. Although these publications cover Western thought and literature from all periods, when compared with those of previous periods, e.g. the May-Fourth period, they have concentrated much more on 20th century writings, especially those of the so-called Modernists. With regard to book-length monographs, since the four-volume series *Waiguo xiandaipai wenxue zuopin xuan* 外国现代派文学作品选, edited by Yuan Kejia 奥可嘉 and published through the early and mid-1980s, started to appear in 1980, outlining the development of Modernist literature this century, numerous other translations of Western Modernist writers have been published.
critic puts it, the “age-old deprivation of authentic experience”\(^9\) has resulted in a flood of self-expression and self-discovery.\(^{10}\) As Chinese people attempt to reconstruct their identity as individual subjects, fiction in the post-revolutionary era has become a kind of “carnival” space of personal freedom and imagination, as well as a means of releasing pent-up emotional pressure.

More concretely, the personal stories, records of love, desire, and nightmares, the abundance of confessional first-person narrators, and the crowding of works with personal symbolism and imagery that mark new wave fiction can be sharply distinguished from the fiction of even the May-Fourth generation, let alone Communist period Chinese writers, who are generally obsessed with “China” and “Chinese people,” and tend to promote a socio-political, utilitarian approach to literature. By contrast, the post-revolutionary generation often tries to avoid direct social or collective concern in fiction: writing has become an individual enterprise through which writers can project their imagination and daydreams: “What is it that a writer presents in fiction? I think maybe it is I who create such a life, and maybe this life doesn’t exist in reality at all. As a writer, a creator, I am constantly questioning how I write, where my interest lies, and the way my imagination, my daydreams or my secret feelings and thoughts can be revealed and put into words.”\(^{11}\)


\(^{10}\) A popular song entitled “yi wusuoyou” — 无所有(I Have Nothing) by the Chinese rock singer Cui Jian 崔健 best exemplifies the spiritual and physical poverty Chinese people feel in a post-revolutionary age. Cui Jian’s song, which managed to capture the Chinese experience of doubt, anger and confusion so well, was most popular around the time of the June Fourth Incident of 1989. One study of popular culture in recent Chinese society gives many other vivid examples: see Zha Jianying, *China Pop: How Soap Operas, Tabloids and Bestsellers Are Transforming a Culture*. New York: New Press, 1995.

\(^{11}\) Su Tong, “Xiaoshuo de xianzhuang” 小说的现状 (The present state of fiction), in *Wenxue ziyou tan* 文学自由谈, 1991/3, 100.
Another tendency in recent Chinese fiction can also be explained as a kind of residue of revolutionary experience. After the blind enthusiasm and passion for revolution of the Communist period, after the collapse of revolutionary icons and ideology, Chinese people in the post-revolutionary period have all experienced in different degrees the breakdown of a consistent collective experience, resulting in despair, confusion and loss of values, and a skeptical rejection of the prevailing ideological vision of outward reality. This collapse of the outer established order is doubtless responsible on the one hand for the sense of decadence or decline apparent in the literary presentation of history and contemporary life. On the other hand, it has led to an inward turn to search for a sense of integrity that is not so dependent on outside circumstances. Thus, the interior world has become a site for resisting disintegration and a source of authentic experience.

This inward turn helps to explain the obsessive exploration of psychological reality and subjective experience in much post-revolutionary literature, a characteristic of both the nightmarish world of Can Xue’s madwomen and of Ge Fei’s description of life exclusively through the lens of his characters’ memories: objective reality is replaced in recent literary works by the perceptions and inner logic of human subjects.

The situation of “all that is solid melting into air,” which Chinese people face in the post-revolutionary era, also explains the affinity contemporary Chinese writers feel for

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12 There was a panel entitled “Decadence and Revolution: A Neglected Dialectic of Twentieth Century Chinese Literature” in the 1995 AAS annual conference, in which the discussion of the sense of decadence in both early Republican and contemporary fiction gave interesting insights into one aspect of the literary imagination in the late 1980s. There is one writer, Su Tong, who exemplifies this sense of decadence in his stories, which are frequently set in the early Republican period, for example, “Yiji sansi nian de taowang — 九三四年的逃亡,” and “Yingsu zhi jia” for English translations of some of these works, see note 5 above.

13 I find a surprising similarity between 20th century Chinese society and its mentality, facing constant transformation from a traditional to a modern perspective, and enduring a series of catastrophes and revolutions, and the modernist experience that has transformed Western society, as described in Marshall Berman’s book All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity, Penguin Books, 1988, especially the following quotation from Marx: “All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men at last are
modern Western literature, especially modernist writers such as Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, William Faulkner, Marcel Proust and Gabriel García Márquez. Not surprisingly, the Modernists' concern with alienation from society, their turn inward to search for a more solid sense of integrity, and their belief in the importance of subjective existence have resonated with Chinese writers within their own similar yet distinctive Chinese experience.

Only against the background of this residue of revolutionary experience can we understand why Liu Zaifu's enlightenment-inspired discourse promoting the "aesthetic reconstruction of human subjectivity" has had such an influence in Chinese literary circles, and appreciate the way in which his theory is deeply rooted in present Chinese literature.

Central to the reconstruction of subjectivity is the reconstruction of the self as an individual and spiritual subject aiming for a sense of moral integrity and personal forced to face with sober senses the real conditions of their lives and their relations with their fellow men" (89). This comment expresses perfectly what many Chinese people feel after three decades of revolutionary chaos, especially during the Cultural Revolution. Yet what should be kept in mind is the fact that the melting vision of the outside world in China seems to lead to a reaffirmation of individual, self and inner world, not a radical doubting of humanity itself. A vivid example of this experience can be found in the Chinese film director Chen Kaige 陈凯歌’s description of his personal pilgrimage from former red-guard to individualist who believes in self and individual worth: Shaonian Kaige 少年凯歌 (Kaige as a Young Man), Taipei: Yuanliu. 1991. This book sheds some light on the disillusionment with revolution and collectivism and the formation of the individualistic outlook among intellectuals in the post-Mao era. Chen argues that this individualist tendency occurred because the Cultural Revolution forced Chinese people to search for another truth; he himself provides a fine example of the idea that truth and maturity can only be obtained through reflection on personal experience.

14 The following description of the dimensions of selfhood might give some idea of what I am going to discuss later:

Selfhood involves being self-aware or reflective; being or having a body; somehow taking into account the boundaries of selfhood at birth and death and feeling a continuity of identity in between; placing oneself in a generational sequence and network of other connected selves as forebears and descendants and relatives; being in partial communion and
identity. As several critics have noted, the narrative of self has been one of the most important concerns of post-Mao Chinese literature, especially since the late 1980s, and this tendency is perhaps most clearly manifested in the revival and development of first-person narration. Though certainly aided by an explosion of individualism and the changing relation between state and individual during the 1980s, the narrative of self, I suggest, is an attempt to heal one of the deepest wounds of revolution: that of self-alienation and self-annihilation. As one Kafkaesque story of the late 1970s, “Who Am I?” (Wo shi shui 我是誰) shows, the huge gap between public identity and personal memory that opened up during the Cultural Revolution caused such terrible inner conflict.

communication with other contemporary selves, while experiencing an irreducible separateness of experience and identity: engaging in joint and individual enterprises in the world with some degree of forethought and afterthought: guiding what one does and appraising what one has done at least partly through reflection on one's performance; feeling responsible, at least sometimes, for one's actions and holding others responsible for theirs.


16 There is a special issue on “The Individual and the State in China” in The China Quarterly, No.127 (Sept., 1991). The articles collected in this issue concede that although there is still a long way to go to build a civil society from a former totalitarian state, there is certainly a tendency in present Chinese society towards weakening political institutions and collective action, with a corresponding rise of individualism. A similar argument and examples are also given in a book about Chinese society in late 1980s: Perry Link, Evening Chats in Beijing: Probing China’s Predicament. New York, Norton, 1992. Both indicate a growing sense of self and reclamation of individualism, especially among Chinese intellectuals.
that it could only result in schizophrenia and finally self-destruction. However, the desperate cries of the heroine, far from revealing a unique, abnormal mental disorder within one individual, demonstrate rather the real sense of alienation felt by Chinese people throughout society, when the enforcement of an oppressive public identity crushed their sense of self: “She looked around confused, feeling that her self was melting and breaking down into dust, into air, little by little becoming thinner and thinner. She felt a

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17 This short story which was published in the late 1970s immediately after Mao’s death, is worth mentioning as I would like to predicate my understanding of the narrative of self in the three novels I examine against the dark experience expressed by this work: Zong Pu 宗璞’s “Wo shi shui” 我是谁 (Who Am I?) is one of the hundreds of stories of “the literature of the wounded” that attacked the Cultural Revolution from the vantage point of the late 1970s, though with a rather didactic tendency and prosaic style. The striking quality of this story is that it presents the sense of self-alienation the heroine suffers and stresses the evocation of her remaining personal memories. The heroine, a college teacher who has devoted her life to research and teaching, suddenly finds herself treated as a bearer of poison by her students and an enemy of the people in the Cultural Revolution. After suffering insults and public criticism for a long time, her nerves finally break when one evening she comes home and finds that her husband, who is also a scientist, has hung himself in the kitchen. After wandering helplessly on the campus she drowns herself in a lake. In describing the insanity of the heroine, this story reveals the horrific and confused images and illusions that appear in the heroine’s mind. She first sees herself as an ox demon and snake spirit (Niugui sheshen 牛鬼蛇神), an image provoked by the recent accusations and by passersby treating her with nothing but disgust. However her suffering consciousness also brings back her childhood memories of being the precious flower of her parents, and of her own past as a hard-working and patriotic intellectual. With these conflicting images of self, she is torn between public accusation and personal memory, and terribly confused by the question “who am I anyway?”

For Chinese readers, the huge gap between public identity and personal memory presented here is far from simple mental derangement; it is a true depiction of the extreme situation of political dehumanization in a revolutionary society under a Communist regime. The alienation of a human being from herself is embodied in the enforcement of the public identity that crushes her sense of self and personal memory. The public identity has deprived people of their self-conception, and their personal identity is replaced by a vision that others have created. The end of the story, with the heroine’s final realization that she is a human being only coming as a prelude to drowning herself in the lake, implies the impossibility of existence as a subjective self in such an inhuman time. See “Wo shi shui?” in Zong Pu xiaoshuo sanwen xuan 宗璞 小说散文选 (Selection of Fiction and Prose by Zong Pu), Beijing chubanshe, 1981.
nameless horror, and screamed: ‘I, this disappearing I, who am I anyway !?’ “ (Zong, op.cit. 138)

Moreover, the subordination of self was not only a social political reality but also operated in cultural institutions, including those controlling literature, previous to the 1980s. Revolutionary Literature (geming wenxue 革命文学) as “a literary system centred around (or dominated by) a revolutionary ideology”\(^{18}\) is based almost entirely on the assumption that literature is a tool for reforming society and awakening the political consciousness of the masses, and hence should guide them to strengthen their political and collective identity. Such literature necessarily restricts moral and intellectual reflection and flights of aesthetic transcendence in order to propagate one particular dogma. It replaces the writer’s personal observation of life with a uniform illustration of Marxist and Maoist class struggle theory. For example, the socialist-realist novels produced in modern China, from Ding Ling 丁玲’s The Sun Shines on the Sanggan River (Taiyang zhao zai sanggan he shang 太阳照在 桑干河上) in the late 1940s, to Hao Ran 浩然’s Golden Road (Jinguang dadao 金光大道) of the 1970s, no matter what particular ideology they may promulgate, all tend to portray human life from a social and political approach. The reality presented is always an “objective reality” devoid of mature examination of individual experience: a progressive process guided solely by historical materialism and class struggle. Both the world and the people within it are depicted quite impersonally from the perspective of an omniscient narrator, a pseudonym for history. As a result, the novel becomes simply the “realist epic of a nation.”

\(^{18}\) Here I use this word not in the defensive sense in which communist writers use it, but in the critical sense of Liu Zaifu when he examines the harmful effects that radical ideology has on literary writing. Refer to Liu Zaifu and Lin Gang 林岗, “Ershi shiji zhongguo guangyi geming wenxue de zhongjie 二十世纪中国广义革命文学的终结,” Zhishifenzhi, vol. 7, no. 3.
Hence modern Chinese literature became for some time a mirror of “socialist” reality, exclusively emphasizing peoples’ socio-political relations and representing characters merely as embodiments of social forces. This view of historical process and socialist reality not only simplifies and distorts concrete human experience and various other aspects of reality, but also reduces human individuals to the position of instruments of such and such a political project or objective. There is no longer any need to deal with the subtleties of individual personality: characters are simply encoded as representatives of a certain class or type, whether cadres, peasants, capitalists, or people in between (zhongjian renwu 中间人物), etc.

Such a vision of human beings as mere political creatures obviously must neglect the humanist values of individual worth and dignity, and ignore the moral strengths and psychological complexities of each individual. Corresponding to this political approach to literature, there even emerged a Maoist-style literary language (Mao wenti 毛文体). A study of the various aspects of revolutionary literary style, from vocabulary and syntax to rhetoric, shows its didactic and abstract nature and its lack of sensory qualities that would normally arise from an interest in individual experience.

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19 This phrase was coined by the Chinese critic Li Tuo 李陀, who uses it to define the literary language that originates from and is best represented by Mao Zedong’s political essays. Li Tuo argues that the language in Maoist literature is abstract and didactic, conveying judgment but lacking sensory qualities, and bearing constant political undertones. See his “The New Vitality of Modern Chinese Fiction,” in Larson, Wendy & Anne Wedell-Wedellsborg, eds., Inside Out: Modernism and Postmodernism in Chinese Literary Culture. Aarhus University Press, 1993. In a detailed study on the language and style of modern Chinese prose works, Edward Gunn also makes a similar argument about Maoist writing. See Edward Gunn, Rewriting Chinese: Style and Innovation in Twentieth Century Chinese Prose. Stanford University Press, 1991. Chapter 6.

Reading a few pages of Communist writer Hao Ran’s Jinguang dadao 金光大道 (Golden Road) will give an idea of what this language is like. Mao-style language was first challenged in the early 1980s by Wang Meng’s “stream of consciousness” and parodies of revolutionary language in his fiction. However, it was only after 1985 with the emergence of new wave fiction that highly lyrical language, with personal style and sensory particularity, became widespread in contemporary Chinese literature.
By contrast with the revolutionary period, literature in the post-revolutionary era is obsessed with the expression of personal and previously suppressed experience, the exploration of the inner world and psychological reality. It is therefore no surprise to find that this literary reconstruction of subjectivity has found its clearest voice in a new generation of Chinese writers with a quite different life experience and literary education from their Communist predecessors. There are at least two characteristics shared by recent writers: first, they belong to the generation born in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and while they were still in their adolescent years, the Cultural Revolution had collapsed and most of the original revolutionary patriarchs had died. Society was soon transformed from a superficially classless mass into a multi-layered complex with a prevailing atmosphere of skepticism and nihilism among its younger members. Unlike the generation of their grandparents or parents, these writers’ experiences involve not the construction of the myth of revolution but the cataclysmic collapse of that myth. Compared with previous generations of Chinese writers, those belonging to this new group lack any sense of connection with history or enthusiasm for socio-political endeavours.

Second, these writers were educated, or “reeducated,” during the late 1970s and early 1980s, and they had a relatively broad and positive contact with Western literature and classical Chinese literature as the xenophobic and anti-traditional atmosphere of the 1960s relaxed. At the same time, they developed new beliefs centred around individualism, which grew out of their reflections on the collapse of collective identity and were reinforced by existentialism and other Western modernist ideas from Nietzsche to Sartre, steadily introduced into China since the late 1970s. This combination of influences has produced an extreme attraction to individualism, with its strong consciousness of self and identity, wedded to an existentialist fascination with the individual facing an alienated world.20

20 One recent article entitled “Wu wang wo—geren zhuyi de suxingyu fansi” 不忘我—个人主义的苏醒与反思 (Don’t Forget the Self—The Awakening of
Perhaps the most distinctive feature of these writers is that they all started their writing careers in their adolescent or early adult years, and on the whole, it is the adolescent experience that they first describe with their personal voices and formal experiments. In an interesting article entitled "The Complementary Youth Consciousness" (Hubu de qingnian yishi 互补的青年意识) two Chinese critics first detected this new artistic sensibility developing among younger Chinese writers during the late 1980s, including Liu Suola 刘索拉, Xu Xing, Ma Yuan, Hong Feng, Yu Hua, Su Tong and Ge Fei, which they called "Youth Consciousness" (Qingnian yishi 青年意识). This sensibility, they argue, although at first sight an understandable consequence of these writers' age, or the bio-psychological stage of life they have reached—all of them being still in their twenties or early thirties at that time—has more recently developed into a special perspective from which they perceive and understand the world.

Their subject matter involves personal experiences closely related to their developing consciousness, such as sexual initiation, school years, or fascination with the past and with their roots. Stylistically, their writing reveals an autobiographical quality most clearly represented by the close identification between the protagonist, the narrator and the implied author in many of their works. These writers have consciously established their artistic personae as young people searching for selfhood and the truth of life, and

Individualism and Reflection upon It) in Dushu 读书 (Reading), 1995/12, is a distinctive manifesto of the individualism that has developed since the early 1980s. It challenges the whole idea of "selflessness" and collectivism, which the author feels leads to self-annihilation and anti-humanism. Interesting is the fact that the author Liu Juning 刘军宁 claims that "the theory of No-self is a value in a society with a planned economy, and it is not compatible with a market economy."

21 The three most promising young writers Yu Hua, Ge Fei and Su Tong all published some excellent works in their twenties, and in one way or another, they all seem fascinated with the narrative of their adolescent experience, and tend to make use of an adolescent or young narrator. See for example, Su Tong's series of stories about boyhood life; and Yu Hua's "Shibasui chumen yuanxing," and the novel I discuss below.

22 Wang Zhen 汪政 and Xiao Hua 晓华, "Hubu de qingnian yi shi" 互补的青年意识 (The Complementary Youth Consciousness), in Dushu, 1989, 7-8.
have adopted a lyrical narrative emphasizing the expression of sentiment rather than event. In sum, inner experience and feelings, and the dreams or nightmares of restless souls have become the source of their imaginative creations. 23

Although I don’t agree with these critics’ attempt to divide the group of young writers into earlier and later stages, and relate them to modernism and postmodernism respectively, I feel that they are absolutely correct when they claim that the main interest of the writing of this generation is its intensely personal focus. It is such a characteristic, which connects these writers with the reconstruction of the individual self on a national scale, that I have delineated above: their rebellious impulse, self-assertion, and expression of the distinctive emotions of youth are inextricably entwined with the general social tendency of disillusionment with collectivism and rediscovery of self in the post-Mao era.

Apart from its exploration of the self, one of the most visible changes brought about by new wave fiction is a revolution in the use of literary language. In this aspect, and especially in its conscious experimentation with narrative techniques, new wave fiction is comparable to the literary revolution of the May-Fourth period. The highly individual experience that these young writers try to present obviously cannot be contained and shaped by the impersonal and abstract Maoist language of the socialist realist mode that I mentioned above. Thus Western literature has not only affected the content of contemporary Chinese fiction, but has also played a major role in aiding Chinese writers in their search for an alternative narrative language. These writers consciously “borrow”

23 Here my definition of Youth is as follows: Youth as a bio-psychological stage refers to the transitional period from childhood to adulthood, and this progression from dependence to independence involves one central experience: the discovery of self. Thus this transition has an enormous effect on the formation of one’s world-view and value system. It is also, as many artistic and aesthetic theories argue, a crucial stage in terms of developing artistic sensibility and later creative concerns. A book on childhood life as presented in literature with an existential approach has greatly inspired me in interpreting the personal growth theme in the young generation of Chinese writers, and its relation with the reconstruction of self in a broader sense. See John Hodgson, *The Search for Self: Childhood in Autobiography and Fiction since 1940*, Sheffield Academic Press, 1993.
many of the expressive techniques of Western fiction, again concentrating especially on the modernist literature of this century. 24

As a result, new wave fiction is distinguished by its numerous technical innovations, from the use of arcane and private symbolism and sensuous imagery to stream-of-consciousness, inner monologues, the adoption of multiple perspectives and the blurring of reality and fantasy. 25 At the same time, each writer has developed his or her own unique style: Can Xue makes extensive use of private symbols and imagery; Mo Yan of sensory language; Ah Cheng adopts a refined, precise vernacular; Han Shaogong's works display a kind of allegorical realism; Ma Yuan's metafiction explores the nature of reality and fiction; Yu Hua's use of magic realism questions the boundary between illusion and reality; 26 Ge Fei's riddle-like narration reflects the logic of dreams and memory; and Su Tong expresses his nostalgia for the past in an unmistakably lyrical tone.

These formal experiments on the whole display not merely a game of words but rather an awakening literary subject, full of philosophical curiosity and epistemological sophistication. A self-conscious view of fictional language as an intrinsic entity, and consequent emphasis on the difference between literary language and common communicative language, has gradually developed. Treating literary language as an

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24 An extensive reading of the articles published by these young Chinese writers about their writing and education certainly leaves me with the strong impression that most of their favorite writers — and thus those who have affected their own writing to the greatest extent — are those Western Modernist writers whom I referred to above. With the exception of Lu Xun, Shen Congwen and a few others, modern Chinese writers are virtually ignored. I will give more detailed evidence for this point in my chapters on Ge Fei and Yu Hua.


26 Here I am thinking of Yu Hua's early works before 1990. His later novels like *Huozhe* 活着 (To Live) are in some ways realist works in a more traditional style. For further discussion, however, see my chapter on Yu Hua.
“indeterminate narrative language” (bu queding de xushu yuyan 不确定的叙述语言), as the young novelist Yu Hua calls it, not only aims for a true and reliable expression of personal perceptions, but also expresses the belief that fiction has its own aesthetic and ontological existence, which is an end in itself. Language is not just reflective but self-sufficient and creative. This “formalist” approach to language and literature is especially manifested in the works of Ma Yuan, Ge Fei and Sun Ganlu, who among new wave writers have shown the greatest awareness of the self-reflexive nature of narrative. And in this reflexive aspect, the revolution in literary language of the 1980s has certainly exceeded that of the May-Fourth generation.

The present study has germinated from my reading of recent Chinese fiction, mainly the so-called new wave fiction by the younger generation of writers mentioned above. As a student of modern Chinese fiction, I have been struck by the new angle and fresh experience of human life expressed in their works, and impressed by their enthusiastic experimentation with fictional forms. This impression gained substance and clarity when I read three novels published successively in the early 1990s, in one of the most important literary magazines, Harvest.

In 1991, Yu Hua, one of the most promising young writers in Chinese literary circles, published his first novel Crying in the Fine Rain (Zai xiyu zhong huhan 在细雨中呼喊). This is a story of an abandoned boy growing up in a cruel and violent

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28 My reading has been mainly in several of the most important literary magazines — since in China, literary works usually first appear in the hundreds of literary magazines spread over the country. These include Shouhuo 收获, Zhongshan 钟山, Huacheng 花城, Wenxue Siji 文学四季, Renmin wenxue 人民文学, Shanghai wenxue, and Beijing wenxue 上海文学. The short stories and novellas of other contemporary writers also show a similar consistent attempt to establish a new literary tradition.
29 Huhan yu xiyu 呼喊与 细 雨 (Shouting and the Drizzle) first appeared in Shouhuo, 1991/6; when it was collected in Yuhua zuopinji 余华作品集 (Collected Works of Yu
environment. Taking the form of a mature adult’s recollection of his boyhood life and family relationships at that time, this novel is not only uncompromising in exposing the harshness of human bonds, especially family relations — one of Yu Hua’s trademarks — but also manages to display a profound concern with personal growth, including both the boy’s and the reflective narrator’s deep feelings of fear, pain and loneliness. Here Yu Hua also continues and explores further the theme of his early works: that of a young man’s initiation into a cruel and chaotic world.

Though as I have noted, fiction writers have been dealing with similar themes since the mid-1980s, Crying in the Fine Rain is one of the first novel-length works from the Chinese Mainland to explore childhood and adolescent life from the perspective of personal growth, and hence marks a new stage in the development of the Chinese novel.

The voice of Yu Hua’s reflective narrator preoccupied with his memories was soon echoed by another novel published in 1992, Ge Fei’s On the Margins (Bianyuan 边缘). In this work, the narrator-protagonist is a centenarian who has experienced almost all the important events of this turbulent century in his life of frustration and depression, from the founding of the Republic to Deng Xiaoping’s reforms. However, presenting itself as the old man’s remembrance of his past, the novel concentrates on personal events and private feelings. The narrator-protagonist’s meditations on love, hate, death, friendship and memory thus provide a lyrical account of a human being trying to overcome outer chaos, hatred and darkness by affirming his inner existence.

In 1993, Wang Anyi 王安忆’s autobiographical novel Fact and Fiction: One Way to Create a World (Jishi he xugou: chuangzao shijie de yizhongfangfa 纪实和虚构), Beijing: Zhongguo shehuikexue chubanshe, 1995), the title was changed to “Zai xiyu zhong huhan”，which I have followed here. In this thesis, my analysis and the page numbers given below are based on the book forms of the three novels. The translations are mine.

30 Bianyuan 边缘 was first published in Shouhuo, 1992/6, later published in book form by Zhejiang wenyi chubanshe, 1993;
introduced yet another first-person narrator. Written in the style of a “Kunstlerroman” (artist-novel), the novel develops along two separate lines. One is the autobiographical account of the narrator-protagonist growing up in Shanghai, developing from a worried, lonely child into a confident, imaginative writer. This part covers the first forty years of her life, and her various adventures. The other line is an imaginary family history created by this writer, descending from a remote minority tribe in the North in the 5th or 6th century to her mother’s generation in 20th century Shanghai. The novel thus involves a meta-narrative in which the process of constructing an imaginative world is framed into another process of an anxious urban artist endeavoring to solve her identity crisis by means of writing. “Fact and fiction” therefore refers to two simultaneous ways of creating the world on paper.

Despite their different styles and thematic concerns, all of these writers have chosen a first-person narrator to introduce personal stories and inner experience, and this overwhelming presence of the first person singular in the contemporary Chinese novel is an important formal and thematic breakthrough, as my later examination of the formal conventions of the modern Chinese novel will demonstrate. Moreover, my reading indicates that this first-person narrator is a narrative strategy to reappropriate and empower the individual, and once more place the self in a subject position. By making a narrating “I” tell his or her own story retrospectively, mostly in the form of memories and reflections, these works present a quite different view of human life and humanity from previous novels — whether those espousing social realism or socialist realism. And the

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31 An abridged edition of *Jishi he xugou: chuangzao shijie de yizhong fangfa* (纪实和虚构: 创造世界的一种方法) was first published in *Shouhuo*, 1993/2. The complete edition was published in book form by Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1993. In the following chapters, I will just use *Fact and Fiction* to refer to it.

32 *Fact and Fiction* is part of Wang Anyi’s autobiographical fiction project. This novel is root-searching on her mother’s side. A novella called *Shangxin taipingyang* (The Sorrow of The Pacific Ocean) is root-searching on her father’s side. For *Shangxin taipingyang*, see *Shouhuo*, 1993/3.
fact that the "I" in these three novels is both the narrator and the character described, both an experiencing subject and a narrating subject, adds to the intensity of their expression of selfhood. Universal themes of growing up, family life, inner anxiety and private feelings are the shared subject matter of these novels, and the search for identity and personal integrity become their central preoccupations.

Those familiar with the development of the Chinese novel and its tradition of social realism, cannot fail to note that examples of the genre since the 1930s have mostly adopted impersonal omniscient narrators, establishing an objective approach to human life as the dominant narrative mode of the novel. The representation of reality in the fictional world is mostly "sociological" — in other words, reality in Chinese novels means social reality, with political and social events as central, and characters as social types with little psychological complexity. I will deal with this aspect in more detail in the following chapter. Here I just note the dramatic change of perspective that the use of vulnerable first-person narrators in new wave novels reveals when placed against the background of the last few decades.

For the foregoing reasons, these most recent novels have convinced me that in the late 1980s and early 1990s, linked with the general transformation of Chinese literature that I delineated above, an inward turn has also occurred in the development of the Chinese novel. By inward turn, I refer to a tendency in fictional narrative to move from representing social reality and political events from an objective point of view to exploring personal experience, especially the interior world of human beings, from a subjective point of view. This inward turn, placed in the generic context of the development of the modern

33 The word "Inward Turn" has previously been used by Erich Kahler to describe the internalization of reality in Western narrative. He argues that "the direction of the interacting development of consciousness and reality is to be a progressive internalization of events, an increasing displacement of outer space by inner space, a stretching of consciousness." See The Inward Turn of Narrative, trans. by Richard and Clara Winston, Princeton University Press, 1973. I have been greatly inspired by this book in my attempt to describe contemporary Chinese writing.
Chinese novel since the 1920s, is an important stage that deserves scrutiny and evaluation. I have thus decided to examine this tendency in detail in this thesis by using the three novels mentioned above, by Yu Hua, Ge Fei and Wang Anyi, as my case studies.

My approach to the present study will be as follows.

First, rather than a separate study of individual texts, I place my discussion in the generic context of the development of the modern Chinese novel, and treat my textual analysis of these three novels as a demonstration of the appearance of a new narrative mode. From subject matter and characterization to narrative point of view and temporal order, I examine how these works embody a discontinuity with former conventions. The reason I choose the novel as an example of the recent transformation of Chinese literature is that, compared with short stories, the novel is more systematic in dealing with whole stretches of human life and reality, and a successful novel usually gives the reader a relatively complete vision of human life and reality. As one scholar claims, it “can give a set of attitudes as regards society, history, and the general culture of which the novel is a part.”

I hope that by investigating the forms and meanings in these three novels, I can delineate more thoroughly and comprehensively the changes in recent fictional representations of human life and experience. Moreover, the Chinese novel of the past decades has been the most politicized genre in the field of literature. It has established a whole socialist realist mode of interpreting human character and reality. So by placing my examination within its generic context, I can provide a clearer and more precise evaluation of the thematic and formal changes in the Chinese novels of the 1990s, and make a more solid historical evaluation of those developments.

Secondly, the similarity of these three novels in their use of first-person narration has led me to examine the development of this technique in the modern Chinese novel.

First-person narration was introduced into Chinese fictional narrative early in the May-Fourth period, and was one of the greatest literary achievements of the individualism and subjectivism that characterized the May-Fourth spirit; yet the experiments in first-person narration of that period remain rather limited. The narrating self is virtually always identified as the immediately experiencing self; and the interest of this straightforward narrator still largely lingers on external events, most of which continue to affirm the centrality of social and political life. Such narratives present the human mind as simply a “mirror” directly reflecting the outside world. The true potential of first-person narration is still left unexplored, including the attempt to treat the problem of personal experience and its tension with historical truth, or the inner mechanism of human feelings and consciousness.

Moreover, first-person narration in the May Fourth period is confined to experiments in short stories and novellas, and except in very few cases, it is not incorporated into the novel. And even these primitive experiments with first-person narration were cut short by outside socio-political interference, and the voice of the first-person singular was silenced for decades, along with the individualism and subjectivism characteristic of May-Fourth literature, until the late 1970s.  

In the early 1980s, first-person narration was reintroduced into experimental fiction. The inner monologues or stream-of-consciousness in some of Wang Meng 王蒙’s short stories, Zhang Xinxin 张辛欣 and Bei Dao 北岛’s novellas, and Dai Houying 戴

35 For the achievements of first-person fiction in May Fourth literature, see Lydia H. Liu, “The Politics of First-person Narrative in Modern Chinese Fiction,” Ph. D dissertation, Harvard Univ., 1990. Liu argues that the appearance of first-person narration in Chinese literature is “a formal correlative of individualism and pluralism” which “responded to a historical need, the reconfiguration of modern Chinese men and women as self-conscious subjects.” I find a similar situation in my reading of first-person narration in the 1980s. Another interesting point that Liu makes is that first-person narration in the May-Fourth period dramatizes the confrontation between the educated subject and the other (the underprivileged), something that I have not detected in fiction of the 1980s.
M-'s novels, are, as scholars have noticed, technical innovations aiming at presenting the innermost feelings and thoughts of Chinese people. And it is no coincidence that these urgent, confessional, sometimes rather too garrulous narrators are intellectuals or dissidents who have been suppressed into silence for years. However, first-person narration during the first half of the 1980s still doesn’t venture much beyond the level of May-Fourth period experimentation.

The later development of first-person narrative since 1985, and especially after 1987 with the emergence of a younger generation of Chinese writers, has led in diverse directions and plumbed greater depths than ever before, for instance, in Can Xue’s exploitation of subjective perception to present a distorted and tormented soul; or Ge Fei’s experiments with first-person narrators to examine the complicated relation between past and present, memory and reality.

As I have indicated, this fascination with first-person narration has also extended into novel-writing. More and more novels have adopted first-person narrators, and writers have increasingly displayed an interest in exploring the formal possibilities of first-person narration in the novel. By examining these three novels, I wish to ascertain the

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37 This turning from a conventional outer perspective to a “direct” presentation of the inner world is best illuminated by the structure of Zhang Xinxin’s novella “Wo zai nar cuoguole ni?” 我在哪儿错过了你 (Where Did I Miss You?), Shouhuo, 1980/5. The beginning and the conclusion give an objective depiction of the heroine working as a bus conductor, but the main part of the story is an inner monologue of this woman as she works. This shift in narrative conveniently indicates the similar change in much contemporary Chinese fiction.

38 Except for the three novelists I am discussing here, Tie Ning 铁凝, Meiguimen 玫瑰门 (Rosy Gate), Wenxue siji 文学四季, 1988; Zhang Xianliang 张贤亮, Xiguan siwang 习惯死亡 (Getting Used to Death), Wenxue siji, 1990; Yu Hua, Huozhe 活着 (To Live), Shouhuo, 1992/6; Liu Heng, Canghe batrimeng 苍河白日梦 (Daydream of the
extent to which the potential of first-person narration has been realized in the
contemporary Chinese novel, especially with regard to presenting human beings as
autonomous individuals or spiritual beings, and bringing a poetic insight, along with
psychological intensity and depth, into the dialectical relation between our existential
situation in the world and our inner lives.

Third, and related to the second point, the common interest of these three novels in
the self — both as narrating subject as well as experiencing subject — provides a concrete
basis on which to examine a controversial question in recent discussions of new wave
fiction, namely, what kind of subject is presented in the works of the new generation?
Two recent studies of new wave fiction, Lu Tonglin’s *Misogyny, Cultural Nihilism &
Oppositional Politics: Contemporary Chinese Experimental Fiction*, and *Endless
Challenge: The Postmodernity of Chinese Avant-Garde Literature* (无边的挑战: 中国先锋文学的后现代性) by the Chinese critic Chen Xiaoming 陈晓明 have both
touched on this question from different angles, yet provide rather disappointing answers.

Lu’s book also reads the most recent works of fiction as articulating the search for
a new identity for the subject in post-revolutionary society. However, from a feminist
perspective she finds, not surprisingly, that male writers of experimental fiction display an
attachment to the hierarchical power structure that they are superficially attempting to
subvert, thus it becomes a flawed subversion. Chen’s book purports to be a
comprehensive examination of avant-garde writing in the late 1980s, concentrating on the
narrative revolution. Chen argues that a post-modernist attitude towards the human
subject and literature characterizes new wave fiction, particularly with regard to its
ahistorical, decentralized approach, its conscious lack of depth in presenting human life,
and its devaluation and deconstruction of the Self in opposition to the affirmation of Self
and individualism in Romanticism and Modernism. Chen’s book is representative of

Old River), *Shouhhuo*, 1993/1; and Zhang Wei 张炜, *Baihu* 柏慧, *Shouhhuo*, 1995/2,
among others also experiment with first-person narration in their novels.
younger critics in China, who have become the main commentators on new wave writing since the older generation of Chinese critics, trained in theories of literature as reflection, has retreated. 39

Both books, in spite of their unique approaches, appear inadequate to me, and fail to address some basic questions in interpreting the nature of the subject re-established in recent Chinese literary works. The main problem with Lu’s argument is that in her haste to discover misogynistic trends, she drastically over-simplifies the relation between male writers and female writers, and between male writers and their fictional female characters. 40 Chen and other avant-garde critics, on the other hand, seem intent on pursuing the world-wide fashion of postmodernism and trying to prove that Chinese writing has not been left behind. Although it is true that some individual sentences and themes in these works could be interpreted as postmodern, when placed in their context and read as part of a whole, they suggest quite different conclusions. The fatal weakness of both arguments, in my opinion, is that they neglect one of the most important experiences that is engraved in the hearts of every Chinese woman or man and reappears throughout recent Chinese revolutionary history, cultural institutions, and especially literary discourse, namely, the terrible effect of the subordination of self, leading to the

39 A similar argument is made by other young critics like Zhang Yiwu 张颐武, Wang Ning 王宁 and so on. For example, Chen Maiping, cited in note 15 above, argues that “‘postmodernity’ is associated with an inclination against individualism, and the absence of self in Chinese literary texts is also an expression of ‘postmodernism’ in Chinese literature.” Inside Out, op.cit. 90. For further discussion of these younger critics’ ideas, see my later chapters, especially on Yu Hua and Wang Anyi.
40 Lu’s study is a flawed literary study, whose defects should be noted in spite of the author’s claim to be engaging in cultural, rather than purely literary studies. Lu ignores some basic principles of reading a complex literary work, and reduces many of these writings to mere repetitive proofs of misogyny. For example, she overlooks the basic difference between the subject matter and the attitude of the author, and in analyzing Yu Hua’s fiction of violence, especially the violence executed against women which is only a part of Yu Hua’s concern, she hastily concludes that it is justified and supported by the author. Literary works can certainly be used to provide evidence for studies in sociology, history or culture, but these must be based on respect for literary works as literature, and not on a simplistic or distorted use of them.
deprivation of the authentic experience of personal life, and the loss of identity of Chinese people. Thus, it seems to me that both Lu and Chen's discussions of the post-Mao subject are biassed and misguided. By contrast, my major concern is to locate the three novels with which I am dealing as important milestones in the process of reestablishing human subjectivity in Chinese literature of the post-Mao period.

In the following chapter, I will give a brief survey of the development of the tradition of social realism in the modern Chinese novel, from its origins at the turn of this century until the socialist realism of the Maoist era. Here it is not my intention to give a comprehensive picture of the modern Chinese novel, but only to provide a generic background for the three novels of the 1990s, to be analysed in subsequent chapters. On the whole, the modern Chinese novel has adopted a socio-political orientation in presenting human life. Historical milieux, omniscient narrators, chronological plots and social-type characters have become generic characteristics of the Chinese novel during the last several decades. The socialist realist novels of the 1950s and '60s finally terminated the potential of the genre for presenting human life and exploring human experience, until the post-Mao reform period.

The following three chapters separately deal with the three individual novels that I introduced above. In each chapter I first give a general introduction to the writer's works, which will create a proper context for my interpretation of each novel. I then concentrate on textual analysis of the three novels. My analysis, though intended as inclusive, encompassing the themes, characters and structure of each work, will focus especially on the forms of rendering consciousness and their implications.

Frequently, I place the situation of self presented in these three novels against the backdrop of modern social reality, especially as regards the idea of self in China. Since the obsession with self manifested in the three novels presents a kind of collective experience in the post-revolutionary era, involving the anxiety of personal identity and the authentication of personal memory and experience, these three novels might therefore be
read allegorically as a collective bildungsroman of the awakening consciousness of self in China.
Chapter 1 The Modern Chinese Novel: Individual and Society

The novel, an “extended narrative of fiction written in prose,”1 is a relative newcomer to the narrative family, developed over the last three hundred years. As a genre, it distinguishes itself from other kinds of fiction not only through its formal appearance — “a large diffused picture of life”2 containing “greater variety of characters, greater complication of plot, ampler development of milieu and more sustained exploration of character and motives”(Abrams,130) than other narrative forms — but also through its particular poetics based on modern epistemology and philosophy.

In the West, the novel as a product of bourgeois culture is closely related to individualism and philosophical realism. In his study on the early English novel of the 18th century, Ian Watt points out that “the modern novel is closely allied on the one hand to the realist epistemology of the modern period, and on the other to the individualism of its social structure . . . the modern field of vision is mainly occupied by the discrete particular, the directly apprehended sensum, and the autonomous individual.”3 Based on the belief that the pursuit of truth is a wholly individual matter, the investigation of the external world in the novel is often presented through personal experience and subjective perception. Thus in the novel, the sense of reality is achieved through the confrontation of

2 This is Tobias Smollett’s definition, see Philip Stevick ed., The Theory of the Novel, The Free Press, 1967, 11.
the human individual with the world outside the self, and the exploration of the nature of reality is through a process of "disillusionment" of the critical consciousness of individuals.

This idea is clearly illustrated by the typical norms of the novel. Novels usually describe the everyday world and have an individual being (sometimes several individual beings) as their protagonists throughout; the exploration or development of these individuals constitutes the main plot of each novel.4

Other important aspects of the novel like point of view and tempo are also related to this idea of particular and individual experience. Thus, as Maurich Z. Schroder says, "The Bildungsroman is not merely a special category: the theme of the novel is essentially that of formation, of education,"5 "an education into the realities of the material world and of human life in society." He believes that the central action of the novel is "the quest," and that the protagonist of a novel is always an individual who progresses from a state of innocence to a state of experience through time and space. Thus, others have concluded that the novel is a form where "most representational meaning in narrative lies in the area contested by the individual and society."6

From the 18th century English novels, represented by Fielding, Defoe, and Richardson, to the 19th century French realists Stendal, Balzac and Flaubert, until the modernists of this century, such as Proust, James Joyce and William Faulkner, the novel has undergone great changes in both formal appearance and vision of reality and human nature. Yet there is a certain consistency in their efforts, in that the novel has continued to

4 This emphasis on a central character and his/her consciousness is especially obvious in the case of Henry James, who asserted that "the consciousness of a central character gave the novelist not only his materials but his form." Richard M. Eastman, A Guide to the Novel, Chandler Publishing Company, 1965, 127. Henry James's theory and practice of the novel are together regarded as one of the most important stages in the development of the novel form.
discover new understandings of reality and human nature, not only in the social, public
area, but also in private, individual life; not only in social manners and outward behavior,
but also regarding the inner world and human consciousness. And these discoveries are
often presented as the individual’s interaction with a society outside the self. It is the
dynamic relation between the individual and society that still allows the aesthetic
possibilities of the novel to flourish.

In China, the extended fictional narrative, “vernacular chapter-divided fiction”
(baihua zhanghui xiaoshuo 白话章回小说), in the pre-modern period represents a
quite different tradition from the Western novel form. Both in origins and form, the
Baihua zhanghui xiaoshuo  has a much closer relation with historical narrative. As
Andrew Plaks has shown in his ambitious project of examining Chinese narrative from a
comparative perspective, due to the overwhelming importance of historiography in
Chinese narrative and the lack of an epic genre in the narrative tradition, Chinese literary
narratives assume more the function of “transmission of actual or hypothetical fact” than
their Western counterparts. They pay more attention to historical events and truths, and
social didacticism, rather than individual experience.

This conception of viewing human experience from a historical perspective is
manifested in many aspects of traditional Chinese narrative. First, most Baihua zhanghui
xiaoshuo  are centred around historical events, or at least assume the guise of history, for
instance the famous works Romance of the Three Kingdoms 三国演义 and Water
Margin 水浒传, both of which are traditionally seen as additions to historiography.

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7 Although some scholars, like Plaks, argue that there is a striking correspondence
between the essential qualities of Baihua zhanghui xiaoshuo and the Western novel, and in
fact in Western studies of Chinese literature it is a common practice to refer to these
extended prose works produced between 16th and 19th centuries as “classic Chinese
novels,” I still feel there is a clear distinction between the two generic traditions which is
not overcome until the 20th century. If I use the term “classic Chinese novel” below, it is
only for convenience, since it is not as unwieldy as “vernacular chapter-divided fiction.”
8 See Andrew Plaks, “Full-length Hsiao-shuo and the Western Novel: A Generic
Although within its own tradition, the Chinese novel has also gradually undergone a
change “from historicity to fictionality,” finally developing an autobiographical sensibility
in the late Qing dynasty,9 the most representative examples of premodern vernacular
fiction emphasize world affairs rather than human consciousness (zhong shishi er fei
renxin 重 世 事 而 非 人 心). It is this attempt to define the human world and experience
from a historical perspective that has resulted in the value of Chinese fiction often being
judged by its relation to history or its ability to survey historical events. At its worst, the
novel is merely defective history (baiguan yeshi 稗 官 野 史); at its best, it provides an
important “supplement to history” (bu shi zhi que 补 史 之 饬).10

Second, this perspective also affects the structure of Chinese novels: rather than
being tightly unified around the single process of becoming of one character or a group of
characters, as in most Western novels, Chinese novels are normally episodic in structure,
and adopt multiple focuses based on events that are often only loosely related. Even if, as
some scholars argue, there are inner unitary patterns such as “complementary bipolarity”
and “multiple periodicity” beneath the surface events,11 these organizing patterns are still

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9 Recent research on Chinese narrative theory and vernacular fiction has claimed that by
the time of Qing dynasties, Chinese narrative moved away from the central fixation with
historicity, and actually gained a strong autobiographical sensibility in which the individual
is the central concern. See Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, From Historicity to Fictionality: The
Chinese Poetics of Narrative, Stanford Univ. Press, 1994; and Martin W. Huang, Literati
and Self Re-presentation: Autobiographical Sensibility in the Eighteenth-Century

10 Although some recent scholars argue that there is irony in the use of the conventional
storyteller, and actually great Chinese novels as a whole are based on ironic principles, the
emphasis on the similarity of these works to historical writing as a means of justifying
spending time on fiction is very obvious in traditional criticism and comments on the
novel. These two sayings about the nature of fiction are quite typical of traditional fiction
criticism. For some English translations of such criticism, see David Rolston, ed., How to

11 For instance, Plaks, in his research on Dream of the Red Chamber (Honglou meng 红
楼 梦) and the four masterworks of the Ming dynasty. Refer to his Archetype and
Allegory in the ‘Dream of the Red Chamber,’ Princeton Univ. Press, 1976; and The Four
Hsia find Plaks’ argument unconvincing, claiming that he overstates the case: see Hsia,
based more on general philosophical ideas about human life and the cosmos than on an individual viewpoint.

Third, not only are traditional Chinese novels based on social, historical and religious norms rather than those of the individual, but the narrative point of view is confined to an outside, omniscient one. One of the most distinctive characteristics of *Baishua zhangu ziaoshuo* is a simulated context of public storytelling, with a narrator who adopts the storyteller persona, comments on the characters or events and gives a general didactic framework. In this aspect, the storyteller, just like the narrator of official historiography, is not an individual but "functions as a technician-demonstrator" to confirm the norms. The moral visions in Chinese novels are usually conformist and their tone is didactic.

Fourth, in characterization, while the heroes of Western novels are often esteemed for their unique personal character, the characterization of human figures in traditional Chinese novels emphasises social or religious types rather than individuals, and little attention is paid to the development of the latter. Individual existence "falls into specific functional roles defined by the society" and is defined through "the interplay and overlapping of types" (Plaks, *Chinese Narrative*, 344).

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13 Nevertheless, there is controversy about the extent of stereotyping in Chinese fiction. Some claim that "the psychological makeup of individual characters in their literature is often as predictable as the operation of Karma in many short stories from the seventeenth century San-yen and Erh-p'o collections" (Joseph S. M. Lau); but others declare: "The heroes of Chinese fiction, it is generally agreed, are much less individualized, much more 'types'; the author tries to characterize them by one or two essential traits, displaying also little attention to individual psychology, but rather showing their nature through actions and conversations . . . But just as Western fiction managed to create many completely uninteresting individuals, Chinese fiction created many convincing types" (W. L. Idema). See J. S. M. Lau, "Duty, Reputation, and Selfhood in Traditional Chinese Narratives," in
Scholars have tried to define the Chinese novel as based on its own aesthetic characteristics and philosophical implications, arguing that the *Baihua zhanghui xiaoshuo* is comparable with the Western novel, both in its intellectual origins and its adoption of basic generic principles like irony. Yet I am more convinced by the arguments of other scholars, that despite the formal realism shown in some *Baihua zhanghui xiaoshuo*, the genre more resembles Western forms like romance, allegory or satire than the novel with its focus on individualism and realism.

The first confrontation of these two literary traditions and a subsequent growth in the popularity of the genre of fiction took place at the turn of this century, in the late Qing and early Republican period. It was in this period that, aided by the flourishing of literature in big cities and strong advocacy of “revolution in the field of fiction” (*xiaoshuo jie geming* 小说界革命) by social and political reformers like Liang Qichao 梁启超, fiction for the first time replaced classical Chinese poetry to become the most important genre of literature, both as a serious enterprise playing a significant role in social reform, and as the most popular genre read by urban dwellers.


As part of a general tendency of learning from the West, there was a large-scale introduction of Western novels into China from 1898. However, at first those novels that were translated were mainly popular works with less literary value — detective and political novels, and romances — and the translations, which varied greatly in quality, showed more interest in the content of the works than in their literary form. However, with more works being introduced all the time, and more emphasis on the artistic quality of literature being translated, Chinese writers began to notice and incorporate Western literary ideas and techniques. The so-called New Fiction (新小说 Xin xiaoshuo) of this period loosened the grip of the traditional story-teller approach, and its experiments in plot structure and point of view had a great effect on subsequent modern fiction.16

However, by the first decade of this century New Fiction had still not accomplished the transition from the pre-modern 白话长篇小说 Baihua zhanghui xiaoshuo to the modern Chinese novel. The narrative form still largely inherited the conventions of its predecessors, and the imitation of Western techniques was superficial and inconsistent. The real obstacle to a fully-fledged Western style novel was the lack of a concept of the human being as an individual subject with an independent standpoint from which to observe reality. In fact, the modern Chinese novel didn’t truly emerge until the advent of the so-called May-Fourth cultural enlightenment.

Like certain other genres in modern Chinese literature, the modern Chinese novel of the May-Fourth period was created under the impact of the Western novel, and took a

16 Recent scholarship on the origins of modern Chinese fiction has broadened its research horizon to include the late Qing period, and considers that the transformation of Chinese narrative — challenging traditional norms and aesthetics — involves a process lasting from 1898 to 1927. Chen Pingyuan 陈平原, points out the importance of New Fiction as a transitional period from the classic novel to the modern novel, and he thinks this process can be divided into two periods: one is that of New Fiction (1898-1916), the other of May-Fourth fiction (1917-1927). Refer to Chen Pingyuan, Zhongguo xiaoshuo xushi moshi de zhuangbian 中国小说叙事模式的转变 (The Transformation of Chinese Narrative Modes), Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1988; and Melina Dolezelova-Velingerova, ed., The Chinese Novel at the Turn of the Century, Univ of Toronto Press, 1980.
path quite different from the classic Chinese novel. In subject matter, it emphasized individual experience and current social affairs, rather than history; in characterization, it usually dealt with a single central protagonist throughout; in narration, it aimed for a single focus and coherent unity of narrative. Even the language, which writers called modern vernacular, can be distinguished from the pre-modern vernacular of previous novels and the classical Chinese of other prose genres: it is a new language combining colloquial speech, western syntax and vocabulary, some classical expressions, and later, regional dialects. Yet the most distinctive feature of the modern novel is its conception of individual experience and the consequent standpoint from which it defines reality. The development of this conception is related to a general cultural tendency towards individualism and humanism which I will briefly analyse here.

The May-Fourth cultural enlightenment was a Western-oriented and anti-traditional cultural movement. The most important modern ideas advocated by its proponents, apart from the slogans Science and Democracy perhaps, were the Western

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17 Here I use modern Chinese novel to refer to extended fictional narratives from the 1920s onwards. Classic Chinese novel refers to Baihua zhanghui xiaoshuo (vernacular chapter-divided fiction) written between the 16th and 19th centuries. The distinction between modern and classic novels is certainly not just a temporal one. As I will argue below, the modern Chinese novel broke away from traditional norms and aesthetics and established its own approach to reality. A brief comparison of a typical classic novel, Rulin waishi 儒林外史 (The Scholars) by Wu Jingzi 吴敬梓 and the modern novel Wei cheng 围城 (Fortress Besieged) by Qian Zhongshu 钱钟书, both of which deal with Chinese intellectuals, clearly reveals the differences in both thematic concerns and narrative manner. Although some critics have tried to claim vernacular chapter-divided fiction as its basic model, in practice the modern novel borrows very little from the earlier Chinese tradition. Here, I would like to point out that I confine my study to what might be termed elite literature, and don’t attempt to include traditional-style popular fiction, which was actually read more widely than May-Fourth literature in urban centres and seriously competed with the latter in the first two decades of this century. Popular fiction displayed quite a different relation to both Western culture and traditional fiction. For this aspect, see Perry E. Link, “Traditional-Style Popular Fiction in the Teens and Twenties,” in Modern Chinese Literature in the May Fourth Era, ed. Merle Goldman, Harvard Univ. Press, 1977.
concepts of humanism and individualism. These were embraced by Chinese intellectuals as part of a positive liberating discourse, and guided them in constructing a new culture and literature that for the first time attempted to treat human beings explicitly as individuals. The idea of romantic individualism, with an autonomous individual as the moral centre of a universe acting as a spiritual subject in opposition to society, not only worked to emancipate individuals from family and state, but also inspired the literary ideal of reconstructing a humanist literature. Lu Xun 鲁迅, the most celebrated writer and thinker of the May Fourth period, following Yan Fu 袁世凯, believed that the advance of Western culture was not based on material factors, but rather that the spirit of the individual and individualism were the true guiding forces of modern Western civilization, and Chinese culture should adopt and assimilate such a way of thought. Using “modern” Western romantics like Byron, and modernist thinkers such as Nietzsche as his examples, he called for a new literature with a powerful individual voice that could defend truth, cause new life to stir, but not conform to or please the crowd.18

In an essay entitled “Humane Literature” (Ren de wenxue 人的文学), which clarifies the idea of humanism advocated in May-Fourth literature, Zhou Zuoren 周作人, another important critic and writer of the May-Fourth period, claims that the discovery of “humanity” has been the major achievement of Western culture since the enlightenment. Based on his radical iconoclastic position, Zhou drew a one-sided conclusion that, in China, “the problem of man has never been solved, not to mention the problems of women and children”;19 and “in the literature of China, in fact, there has been extremely little humane literature” (Denton, 156). Hence to advocate humanitarianism, one should start with literature. Humanitarianism he defines as “an individualistic ideology of basing

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19 Zhou Zuoren, “Humane Literature”, in Denton, Modern Chinese Literary Thought, 152
everything on man” (Denton, 154); “the humanitarianism that I have in mind therefore
starts with man, the individual” (Denton, 155); and “writing that applies this
humanitarianism in recording and studying all questions concerning human life is what we
would call humane literature.” (Denton, 155)

Such a “Mara Spirit” and individualism are clearly manifested in the practice of
modern fiction, particularly the stories of Lu Xun. His intellectual critique and moral
contemplation of the inhumane practices common in Chinese society and the “sick nature”
of the Chinese character are also matched by his technical advances, for example, the
symbolic dimension, the use of irony and experiments with different kinds of narrators.20
Following Lu, May-Fourth fiction, for the first time in Chinese literature, became crowded
with urgent individual voices and subjective perspectives in conceiving reality.
Confessional, autobiographical fiction focusing on the experiences and sentiments of
individuals predominates, and even though most of these works are still concerned with
broader social problems, they examine reality from a personal, independent standpoint. At
the same time, first person narration, the epistolary diary, and other new narrative
frameworks allow writers to open up an interior world of human sentiments and feelings.

During the first period in the development of modern Chinese fiction, the decade
after 1917,21 the short story quickly reached a high level of achievement. Yet perhaps

20 Lu Xun’s practice in fiction, however was mainly confined to short stories, and except
for a novella “Ah Q zhengzhuan” 阿Q正传 (The True Story of Ah Q), he didn’t write
any works that might be termed novels.
21 Here I adopt Lee Ou-fan Lee’s division into three periods of development of modern
Chinese fiction — the beginning phase: 1917-1927; fiction of the thirties, 1928-1937; and
literature of war and revolution — in his “Modern Chinese Fiction: An Interpretive
Overview,” conference paper. This categorisation is also accepted by other scholars of
Chinese fiction. See Wu Fuhui 吴福辉, “Shenhua zhong de bianyi: Sanshi niandai
Zhongguo xiaoshuo lilun ji xiaoshuo” 深化中的变异: 三十年代中国小说理论及小说
(Variations in Intensification: Chinese Theories of Fictions and Novels from the
1930s), Shanghai wenlun 上海文论, 1991/5; and Qian Liqun 钱理群, “An Overview
of Chinese Theories of Fiction from the 1940s,” trans Steven P. Day, in Modern Chinese
Literature, vol. 9 no. 1 (Spring 1995).
because of its sheer length and grand structure, making the novel more difficult to master, the first group of modern Chinese novels didn’t appear until the early 1920s. And in the early stages of the modern Chinese novel (1921-1927), most published works are relatively short in length, narrow in scope, and exhibit great inconsistency and immaturity in their use of narrative form.

The first two novels in modern Chinese literary history were Zhang Ziping 张资平’s *Alluvial Period Fossil* (*Chongjiqi huashi*, 冲积期化石) (1922), and Wang Tongzhao 王统照’s *A Leaf in the Wind* (*Yiye*, 一叶) (1922). Both works are semi-autobiographical, and concern themselves with the personal experiences of young intellectuals during a turbulent time at the turn of this century. The protagonist of *Alluvial Period Fossil*, Wei Heming 韦鹤鸣, and its narrator “Mr. Xie,” are students in Japan, and the protagonist of *A Leaf in the Wind*, Li Tiangen 李天根, is a provincial student in Beijing. Both heroes find themselves deeply depressed and frustrated by their corrupt and impoverished society and begin to suffer from hypochondria. The novels describe their sense of hopelessness and sadness trapped in a society over which they have little control, focusing on their mental afflictions by describing both their observations of those around them and their own thoughts. Both novels also try to explain the present situations of their protagonists as influenced by their past, and tend to insert flashbacks to their childhood and early youth at home, and their earlier adventures in society.

Their depression comes from their perception of China as a chaotic and unfair society, a fact that they continually encounter in their parents’ miserable fate, their own growing up and the lives of people around them. These young adults inevitably remind the reader of Lu Xun’s metaphor about Chinese society and the few who are aware of its problems, like people awakening imprisoned in an iron-walled house, helplessly suffering from the disjunction between ideals and reality. Both novels also try to depict their main characters as lonely but sensitive individuals who feel crushed by social forces, Chinese
tradition, wicked missionaries, the political revolution — in fact, almost everything that exists outside — and develop a deep personal distrust towards and fear of society.

I should point out that as the first experimental works in a new genre, these two novels are quite immature and inconsistent in their point of view and narrative focus. But this first stage of the modern Chinese novel has nevertheless already broken away from traditional norms and aesthetics, and established a new narrative preoccupied with personal experience and adopting an individualistic approach to life. For the first time, the individual psyche is exposed in a direct and unapologetic way, and the modern novel can begin to allow the investigation of reality from an individual perspective.

This subjective and experimental tendency is also apparent in other novels produced during this first period of modern Chinese fiction. Most of the novels before the late 1920s are slightly-veiled autobiographical fiction, and the authors model their protagonists directly on their own life experiences. Mainly describing young intellectuals who leave home on difficult journeys into society, on the one hand they reveal how corrupt and unfair the world around them has become, and on the other hand fiercely display their sentiments and their awareness of being helpless. Formally, first-person narration, epistolary novels and novels in the guise of diaries are most popular, since they most readily convey a subjective approach to life. Guo Moruo 郭沫若's *Trilogy of Wandering* (Piaoliu sanbu qu 流浪三部曲) (1924) and *Falling Leaf* (Luoye 落叶) (1925); Zhang Wentian 张闻天's *Sympathy* (Tongqing 同情) (1924); and Jiang Guangci 蒋光慈's *The Young Wanderer* (Shaonian piaobo zhe 少年漂泊者) (1926) are representative examples of these tendencies.

Even the language of May Fourth fiction also established the foundation for modern Chinese literature. Whatever the explicit claims of the early experimental writers, in practice they did not use a vernacular language resembling the style of premodern fiction, but wrote in a mixture of European-style translation, classical prose and poetry.
Generally, they managed to adopt a highly individual lyricism that captures and reproduces the sentimental experience expressed in their novels.

Thus, viewing the period from the early 1920s till 1927, the Chinese novel is basically still in its experimental stage, and there are few works that display formal maturity. However, the genre of the novel has already helped to introduce a new epistemology and language into Chinese society and literature, and a greater concentration on contemporary life, which distinguishes it from traditional vernacular fiction.

Incidentally, although in the novels of the 1920s there is a recurrent theme and image of the self as a lonely traveler, the Chinese novel hasn’t yet developed a true bildungsroman form with a sense of the development of the individual. As I will suggest below, subsequent outside pressures probably prevented such an evolution until much later.

Moving to the second period of modern Chinese fiction (1928-1937), more and more Chinese writers started to compose novels — in the three years from 1921 to 1923, fewer than ten novels and novellas had been published, but 1928 and 1929 alone saw the publication of more than one hundred novels and novellas. A survey of these works reveals that the modern Chinese novel has become more accomplished in its narrative techniques and has gradually developed an important characteristic, that is, consciously relating personal life to socio-political life.

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23 The source of these figures is the appendix, entitled “Zhongguo xiandai zhong-changpian xiaoshuo shumu 中国现代中长篇小说书目 (List of Modern Chinese Novels and Novellas) to Liu Zhongshu 刘中树, et al. ed., Zhongguo xiandai baibu zhong-changpian xiaoshuo lunxi 中国现代中长篇小说论析 (On Hundred Modern Chinese Novels and Novellas), Jilin daxue chubanshe, 1986.
Two works published at the end of the 1920s represent the gradual maturity of the Chinese novel as well as this new consciousness of the individual in society. One is Ye Shengtao’s *Ni Huanzhi* (倪焕之, 1928), the other is Mao Dun’s *Rainbow* (虹, 1929). In many aspects, these two novels take a similar approach to the relation between society and individual.

*Ni Huanzhi*, largely based on the author’s personal experience in the area of education, depicts an intellectual’s struggle to search for a meaningful life for himself and at the same time find a path to salvation for Chinese society. The protagonist, Ni Huanzhi, an ambitious reformer who hopes to save the country through education, finds himself trapped in a minor provincial post. Both disillusioned with the failure of his dreams to educate society, and frustrated by the mundane decline of his romantic relationship, he escapes to Shanghai and throws himself into the mass revolutionary movement. At the end of the book, he suddenly dies after the revolution is dealt a terrible blow in 1927.

In many ways, Ni’s life represents the typical pilgrimage of May-Fourth period Western-oriented intellectuals: from education to revolution; from ambition to disillusionment with the present order. Through Ni’s failure, awakening and death, the author seems to ponder the complicated relation of individual reformers to a society that seems beyond the reach of their enthusiastic efforts at reform, and to mourn the inability of bourgeois intellectual individuals to change the world around them. The whole novel, though narrated in the third person and using a mix of different kinds of omniscient narration, including editorial, neutral and selective omniscient narration, focuses on

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24 Sometimes it is rather frustrating to analyse narrative in the Chinese novel according to narrative theory, for example, and concentrating as I do on point of view. Chinese novels seem disappointingly mixed and lacking in awareness of narrative technique, with little of the subtle control of point of view that writers like Henry James would require for a good work. This is largely due to modern Chinese writers’ relative neglect of aspects of form, especially in the early stages of the modern novel. This shortcoming, however, is largely overcome by recent Chinese writers. The latest generation, including especially Ge Fei, Yu Hua, Su Tong and Liu Heng, has a very strong sense of form, and consciously
Ni's struggle to find a suitable role, and the reality around him and other characters is largely perceived from his point of view.

Mei Xingsu 梅行素 in *Rainbow* is a “new woman,” another group that embodies very well the individualism of the May-Fourth period. Freeing herself from her husband and other entrapments, she pursues her new life in Shanghai, finally also throwing herself into the revolution. However, unlike the gloomy picture in *Ni Huanzhi, Rainbow* ends with an optimistic scene of revolutionary masses in the 1925 “May 30th Movement.” In spite of its revolutionary tendencies, this novel, like Mao Dun’s other early fiction about new women and young intellectuals, adopts the protagonist’s perspective and presents the “psychological reality”\(^\text{25}\) of an individual in a revolutionary era.

Compared with the novels of the early 1920s, these two novels succeed in adopting a more consistent perspective and deeper characterization. Both novels involve a certain degree of character development, that is, in the narrative the main characters clearly go through physical and mental changes over time. If in the previous period, the characters had been more static, representing a fixed state or situation regarding the relation between individuals and society — for instance, the protagonists’ constant alienation from society and helplessness — both Mao Dun and Ye Shengtao’s novels clearly show interest in depicting the change and development of individuals through their encounter with society. Though certainly placed within a broader social environment, the hero/heroine’s development provides the clue and focus that joins together the aspects of reality that are depicted. Social reality, and individual life with its reaction to that reality, are thus carefully integrated, and the protagonist’s angle of perception of the people and society around her/him is also the angle adopted by the narrative.

Another new development in the modern Chinese novel of this period as represented by these two works is that, while still concentrating on the personal experience and psychological development of bourgeois intellectuals, their personal quest for meaning and freedom is deliberately set within the context of social change from the May Fourth Movement to the upheavals of 1927. There is a gradual strengthening of the sense of outside society impinging on the individual, which is best summarized in the review of *Ni Huanzhi* by Mao Dun, who is also an important critic of Chinese fiction in this period.

In this article, Mao Dun first criticizes the early novels, which explore the psychology of the wandering youth of the May-Fourth period, yet remain “narrow and partial,” and “have not captured the broader and more profound background of this wandering.”\(^{26}\) Comparing *Ni Huanzhi* in this respect, he finds much to approve: “This is certainly the first full-length novel whose setting is the historical development of the past ten years. Moreover, it must be said that this is also the first work that consciously attempts to trace the development of one character — an intellectual from the petit-bourgeois class, full of revolutionary zeal — showing how he is influenced by the historical tide of the past ten years, how he moves from the countryside to the city, from single-minded devotion to education to mass movement, from liberalism to collectivism” (Denton, 297). This consciousness of historicizing the individual causes Mao Dun to regard *Ni Huanzhi* as a significant work, especially praiseworthy for two reasons: it “retraces the influence of this era (the May-Fourth period) on the minds of people,” and “consciously attempts to depict contemporary phenomena or social life”(Denton, 297).

What especially interests Mao Dun in this novel is its “historicity” (*shidaixing* 时代性).\(^{27}\) Apart from depiction of the social milieu, he defines *shidaixing* as consisting


\(^{27}\) Here I use Marston Anderson’s translation of *Shidaixing*, and his explanation of this concept in Chapter 4 of *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary*
of two aspects: how history affects the people; and how collective human effort hurries the realization of historical necessity. Mao Dun also uses *shidaixing* as a criterion in pointing out that, despite its achievements, the inadequacy of *Ni Huanzhi* stems from the fact that none of the characters show this “human effort,” and especially that the protagonist is a bourgeois intellectual who can’t carry out the revolutionary mission. He also expresses dissatisfaction that the subjective perception (*geren de gannian* 个人 的 感念) and personal activity (*geren de huodong* 个人 的 活动) of this novel prevent the author from presenting “historicity” fully. If the parallel between socio-political life and personal life in Ye Shengtao is spontaneous, since in that time any realistically depicted personal experience would almost of necessity include the socio-political arena, then Mao Dun’s critique indicates that by the late 1920s a rational and conscious effort in the direction of historicizing personal life has become an essential commodity for the successful novelist.

The concept of *shidaixing* also indicates another aim of modern Chinese writers, namely realism, which during the 1920s gradually became the dominant literary model in Chinese novel-writing. When the concept of realism was first introduced into China in the May-Fourth period, it implied only a vague idea that the novel should concern itself with the everyday world and human life. Lu Xun was the first writer to establish the May-Fourth tradition of critical realism, in which a polarity is set up between the individual as critical observer and the society as object of analysis.

Later, critics like Mao Dun advocated realism both in theory and in practice, but its definition was never really stabilized. What Mao Dun contributed to Chinese realism was his attempt to view society as a whole, and his fascination with the intricate relationship between particular circumstances. He was greatly influenced by Hippolyte

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*Period*, Univ. of California Press, 1990. 124. It is clear that by this time, Mao Dun was strongly attracted by Marxism, and he uses it in explaining the fictional relation between the society and the development of the individual.
Taine's views of literature and its ties with historical epoch and national milieu, and became especially fascinated with the critical realism of 19th century European writers. He argued that the works of the French realists Balzac and Zola, and the Russian Tolstoy, reflect their times (fanying shidai 反映时代) and display much skill in presenting social life in great detail. Yet interestingly, Mao Dun injected the Marxist theories of historical progress and Communist revolution into the "Balzacian" project of scientifically presenting the totality of life. Mao Dun's approach represents a reconceptualization of realism in the late 1920s, which slants the individual-society polarity firmly towards the social aspect. It is also a sign of the return to the traditional value of "Literature as a vehicle for the Way" (wen yi zai dao 文以载道), only this time, the "way" is Marxism.

What one could call Mao Dun's social utilitarian approach to realism and his demand for a strong consciousness of social reality in fiction were quickly echoed by other writers. In fact, most Chinese writers (weighed down by their "moral burden") assumed some kind of social role in this time of national crisis: if they did not become revolutionaries in real life, they at least worked as activist sociologists or historians attempting to give direction to the nation through their writings, as the case of Mao Dun himself clearly demonstrates.

Such social activism had become particularly widespread after the collapse of the 1927 revolution. By that time, with the introduction and spread of Marxist ideology and the greater involvement of intellectuals in leftist political movements, individualism had begun to lose its earlier positive glow among Chinese intellectuals and became a negative

28 For Mao Dun's conception of realism, and the influence of Taine on his criticism see Anderson, Limits of Realism, op.cit. Chapter 4.
29 For detailed analysis of Mao Dun's linking of Zola, Tolstoy and others' literary theories with Marxism, see David Der-wei Wang, Fictional Realism in Twentieth-Century China: Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen, Columbia Univ. Press, 1992, Chapters 2 and 3.
30 David Der-wei Wang has commented on the intriguing relation between Mao Dun as a writer and as a revolutionary. See Wang, Fictional Realism.
manifestation of bourgeois ideology in opposition to social collectivism. The personal approach to life came to be regarded as inadequate, leading only to a dead end. And the allegorical ambition of depicting a whole epoch through an individual, reflected in the two works of the late 1920s mentioned above, foreshadows an important subsequent turn in the Chinese novel. It indicates the new direction that Chinese novelists would soon take, going beyond a personal and therefore “partial” perspective to reach a “direct objective description” (zhengmian de zhijie de miaoxie 正面 地 直 接 地 描 写) of an epoch. This approach reaches its highest stage of development in the social realist novel of the 1930s.

With the full-length novel becoming the dominant literary genre in the 1930s, the modern Chinese novel also reached its first peak and established a tradition of “social realism,” in which “the focus of representation is the society as a whole, especially the countryside and rural reality.”31 Central to the achievement of the novel in this period is its ability to present social reality with both breadth and a deep humanist concern with social problems: poverty, corruption, moral degeneration and social injustice.

The representative works of this period (1928-1937) include: Ba Jin 巴 金’s Family (Jia 家) (1931), Mao Dun’s Midnight (Ziye 子 夜) (1933), Wang Tongzhao’s Mountain Rain (Shanyu 山 雨) (1932), Xiao Hong 萧 红’s Field of Life and Death (Shengsi chang 生 死 场) (1935), Li Jieren 李 颖 人’s Ripples in Dead Water (Sishui 死 水 微 澜) (1935), and Lao She 老 舍’s Camel Xiangzi (Luotuo Xiangzi 骆 驼 祥 子) (1936). From the countryside of Shandong to the provincial towns of Sichuan and the metropolis of Shanghai, from poor urban rickshaw-pullers, and peasants in the traditional-minded, poverty stricken countryside to the struggles of national capitalists in

31 Leo Ou-fan Lee points out that most modern Chinese fiction belongs to the category of “social realism.” See his paper “Modern Chinese Fiction,” op.cit. note 1.
newly developed centres of industrialization, the Chinese novel presents a panoramic picture of social reality in a changing time.32

Most writers of the thirties inherited to a certain extent the May-Fourth tradition of humanism and critical realism that Lu Xun began, and attempted to diagnose what they considered the disease afflicting Chinese society and the Chinese people. Recording their own personal observations, they exposed the painful struggles within a Chinese society in crisis, and the spiritual and physical poverty of Chinese people. Although most of the novelists in this period were especially concerned with depicting social realities, their respective approaches to reality and style, both in presenting the different aspects of society and in their use of language and structure, nevertheless display distinctive personal idiosyncrasies. The focus on external reality actually resulted in a great variety of impressions of the social picture.

The clearest illustration of this tendency is the flourishing of what later came to be called regional fiction. Working in such a large country as China, writers were able to concentrate on describing their favorite or most familiar corner. The regional novel with its “earthy flavor and local color” (Lee, “Modern Chinese Fiction”) reveals their outstanding achievement in presenting the particular. To give just one example, South-West China is depicted by the Sichuan writer Li Jieren. His trilogy *Great River (Dahe 大河)*, including *Ripples in Dead Water, Before the Storm (Baofengyu qian 暴风雨前)*, and *Great Waves (Dabo 大波)*, covers the historical events of the late Qing period from 1894 to 1911, through the lives of characters belonging to the different classes living in provincial society. The trilogy acts as a social history with its vivid characterization and delineation of local customs.

32 Another period in which the novel was preoccupied with social reality was the Late Qing. However, the novel of the 1930s differs in many respects from the earlier period, both due to its experiments in narrative form and the influence of May-Fourth writers’ modern humanitarian spirit.
Moreover, these regional novels differ from each other not only because the places and characters they treat are different, but also because writers still retain their own individual approaches to, and understanding of, life. For instance, Xiao Hong, Xiao Jun and other North-Eastern writers all describe northern China, especially under the Japanese occupation, but Xiao Hong’s *Field of Life and Death* is unique in showing how natural catastrophe and the invasion of foreign forces have forced the peasants into a way of life no different from that of animals. The animal imagery used throughout exposes the inhuman existence of the characters, and works to transcend the immediate social situation and give universal implications to the story.

Beside its attempt to capture the particularities of Chinese society, social realism was also instrumental in developing methods of characterization in the Chinese novel. With the whole society as the focus for the presentation of reality, the protagonists and characters of Chinese novels are no longer restricted to sentimental bourgeois intellectuals, but include peasants, city poor, local gentry — the whole social spectrum. The novels of the thirties not only present a great variety of characters from all different social classes, but also establish the conception of “typification” (*dianxing hua*). The main factor affecting characterization is the social environment, and often outside circumstances are shown altering the opinions and viewpoints of the protagonists and other characters in these novels. A clear example is Lao She’s *Camel Xiangzi*, which shows how a young

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33 In the early 1930s, Chinese Marxist critics Qu Qiubai and Zhou Yang introduced Engles’ theory of “typical circumstance and typical character” via the interpretations of Soviet critics, and since then the theory of “typification” has become one important aspect of Chinese socialist realism. Friedrich Engles, in a letter to a contemporary writer, claims that a successful novel should present “a typical character in typical circumstances” (*dianxing huanjing ti de dianxing renwu*) and literary characters should be typified to embody social class and class frictions. For the development of the “typification” theory in China, see Wen Rumin 温儒敏, *Xinwenxue xianshizhuyi de liubian* 新文学现实主义的流变 (*The Transformation of Realism in Modern Chinese Literature*), Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1988. 141-144, 160-165.
rickshaw-puller’s unexceptional ideal of living decently through honest work is smashed again and again by the conspiracy of various social evils, driving him to despair. Compared with the intellectual protagonists in novels of the 1920s, the psychological aspect is less developed than its social dimension. Yet the awareness of the sometimes terrible effect of circumstances on one’s very identity contrasts with the rather static picture of human character in earlier novels, and must surely be seen as an advance.

Second, despite their often vivid and idiosyncratic characteristics, one cannot help feeling that the protagonists of these novels are intended as representatives of social groups. For example, the young peasant Xi Dayou 奚大有 in Mountain Rain, is typical of peasants who are forced to flee from their land due to heavy taxation, natural catastrophe, and the threat of warlords and bandits. And Wu Sunfu 吴荪甫 in Midnight is a typical Chinese businessman crushed in a capitalist war between different classes. The emphasis on characters as representative types, though not so noticeable in the thirties, would later begin to predominate and overwhelm the more individualistic approach of social realism.

On the whole, Chinese writers of the thirties, while still retaining their individual, critical approach inherited from the May Fourth tradition, showed more interest than previous writers in directly portraying the present state of Chinese society and the physical and spiritual poverty of Chinese people throughout that society. As the 1930s progressed, an even more socially-oriented approach to reality and human existence began to hold sway in novel-writing. Most of these later works can be called social novels, which “emphasize the influence of the social and economic conditions of an era on characters and events, [and] also embody an implicit or explicit thesis recommending political and social reform.”

This tendency towards socially-oriented realism, as many scholars have demonstrated, can’t be explained or sympathetically understood unless we place it within its historical circumstances. On top of the social imperative that had always been a persistent background feature of modern Chinese literature, by the 1930s the society was facing a crisis situation: the continuing fragmentation of the country under regional warlords; the impending threat from outside invaders, especially the Japanese; natural catastrophes and the encroachment of modern foreign industries that were gradually eroding the fabric of Chinese agricultural society — all these factors demanded urgent solutions. Among Chinese writers, the traditional function of literati as moral guides to society was strengthened by Western ideas of humanism, leading them to assume the role of spokespeople against social oppression. At the same time, some of these writers were beginning to search desperately for a more direct or effective prescription for this sick society than the slogan of science and democracy promulgated during the May-Fourth enlightenment.

The debate among Chinese intellectuals over the political and scientific approaches to reality during the early 1930s, and the gradual domination of Marxist socio-economic theory and historical materialism in the social sciences and humanities, also exerted great influence on literature, especially among Left-wing writers. Not only strong concentration on social reality but also an increasingly ideological undertone begins to be detectable in their works. These writers consciously apply a “scientific” method — analysing the nature of Chinese society through economic and social theory — to guide their depiction of Chinese society in the novel. Leftist writers like Jiang Guangci (The Howling Earth,

35 For the suggestion that Chinese literature is less concerned with universal themes than with social questions, see the debate between Jaroslav Prusek and C. T Hsia. Actually Hsia’s statement about Chinese writers’ “obsession with China and Chinese people,” and Prusek’s defense of this tendency, ultimately prove the same thing. See the Appendix in Prusek, The Lyrical and the Epic: Studies of Modern Chinese Literature, Indiana Univ. Press, 1980.
Baoxiao le de tudi 咆哮了的土地, 1930), Hua Han 华汉 (The Spring, Diquan 地泉, 1930) and Ding Ling 丁玲 (Water, Shui 水, 1931), even produced proletarian literature about the revolution in the countryside and cities complete with formulaic plots and revolutionary didacticism. However, with their depictions of faceless masses and the obvious attempt to produce works based on theory rather than observation of real situations, they can hardly be termed successful.

Nevertheless, some novelists who adopted a leftist approach managed to keep their “realistic integrity” despite their theoretical pronouncements. Writers of the “social-analysis school,”36 like Mao Dun, Wang Tongzhao, Wu Zuxiang 吴组缃, and Sha Ting 沙汀 were particularly adept in this regard. Mao Dun, in his Midnight and trilogy on the countryside, consciously uses economic and political theory to analyse his characters’ situations. Wang Tongzhao who previously wrote about the May-Fourth “wandering” generation, now turns his focus to the countryside and peasant life in Northern China, and explains the motivation of his works as “aiming to describe the reasons for and phenomenon of the decline of the Northern countryside, and the awakening of the peasants.” This social consciousness in their writings acts as an indictment of evil in society, for which only a revolution can provide a solution — all these works end with a portrayal of violent revolution. The apparent attempt to use the novel as a force for revolutionary mobilization, clearly embodied in their works, foreshadows the subsequent development of the Chinese novel in the 1940s.

With the coming of the Sino-Japanese war between 1937 and 1945, the national emergency brought on by the war pushed Chinese writers further in the direction of emphasizing the purely utilitarian function of literature. The tendency to equate literature

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36 This term was coined by the Chinese scholar Yan Jiayan 袁家炎 in a study that tries to examine literary history according to the development of different schools. See his Zhongguo xiandai xiaoshuo liupaishi 中国现代小说流派史 (History of Modern Chinese Literary Schools), Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1989, Chapter 5.
with other social documents, including journalism and propaganda, is justified in the name of salvation of the nation. The themes and characters of novels and even the nature of the reality that they express are all prescribed in advance: their ability to mobilize the Chinese people for war becomes the only evaluative criteria. Not surprisingly, heroic events and characters provide the most important content of the literature of this period, and with the strict enforcement of a unified patriotic ideology, "reality" in the novel must involve only depiction of the heroic struggle of the Chinese people and their revolutionary awakening in an optimistic light. The main protagonists include the awakened masses and heroic soldiers; little interest is shown in other groups of society. The critical distance towards society and the national character that once preoccupied May-Fourth writers now gradually disappears. With such strictly-enforced outside factors, it is not difficult to imagine the uniformity and over-simplification of life and reality in Chinese novels written to accord with the war time ideology.

However, besides mainstream war literature, some Chinese writers, particularly among those who survived from the May-Fourth period, still managed to find some space to voice their own visions of reality, avoiding complete surrender to propaganda and keeping the war in the background. Other writers, especially in the areas occupied by the Japanese, were able consistently to explore more universal human themes, and to try to go beneath the surface of immediate social problems.

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38 This elimination of a critical attitude is typically demonstrated by the criticism of Zhang Tianyi 张天翼's satirical story "Hua Wei xiansheng" 华威先生 (Mr. Hua Wei) at the beginning of the Sino-Japanese War. The satirical tradition originated in late Qing and was greatly developed by Lu Xun in his exposing of the "national character." However, since the late 1930s and early 1940s, the new politically-oriented heroism and idealism had been in great conflict with this tradition.

Shen Congwen, who set his stories in a moral and regional transitional zone, explored “permanence and change,” pondering whether humanity and morality can persist through changes in the surrounding world. His scenes and characters are simple but his lyrical and philosophical style suggests an alternative approach for the Chinese novel which would prove influential much later in the century. Another exception to the novels typical of the Sino-Japanese war period is Qian Zhongshu's *Fortress Besieged* (*Weicheng*). In a satirical but also sympathetic light, this novel depicts a Western educated intellectual trapped within a turbulent Chinese reality, which seems full of existential absurdity. Other writers like Ba Jin, in his *Ward No. 4* (*Disi bingshi*) and *Cold Nights* (*Hanye*), create tragedies of common people in wartime, which transcend the run-of-the-mill heroic mode of war literature.

During the war period, the most distinctive voice expressing a personal vision of reality and individual fate in the May-Fourth tradition was that of Lu Ling. His *Children of the Rich* (*Caizhu de ermumen*), is probably the last impressive achievement of the modern Chinese novel before the 1980s. This novel, although also dealing with the social changes and national crisis of the late 1930s, nonetheless adopts a subjective and individualistic standpoint in viewing the relation between society and the individual. It thus gives a radically different perception of reality from that found in other contemporaneous works. The first part of the novel, which describes the decline of a gentry family and the childrens’ search for their respective destinies, reveals a society in rapid transition, with many people lost, dispersed and suffering. The second part is a bildungsroman of a young intellectual: his search for meaning in his own life and for the nation as a whole, and his subsequent disillusionment, against the broader background of the Sino-Japanese war.

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Although there is a certain inconsistency between the first part, a family chronicle involving dozens of characters, and the second part that revolves around the pilgrimage of just one of these characters, the success of this novel lies in the fact that it has captured the conflict between reality and ideals, and the complexity of the relationship between the individual and the reality he is trying to understand. The terrible situation of war is perceived through the individual’s growing consciousness and feelings, and reality consists not just of the social reality of struggle and confrontation outside, but also of the internal struggle and inner confrontation of an individual who senses and attempts to come to terms with himself within society. Lu Ling’s internal focus results in powerful and unique images and symbolism, which above all demonstrate the artistry of this work.\(^4\)

The death of the bourgeois intellectual protagonist Jiang Chunzu 蒋 纯 祖 in the chaos and wilderness of war and revolution at the end of the novel seems less a closure for this particular novel than an allegory of the destruction of the individual vision and perception of reality in the modern Chinese novel. After this work, the individual vision of reality was more or less completely absorbed into public necessity, and the possibility for individual consciousness to lead the exploration of reality in the novel was removed.

If in the earlier period of the thirties, propaganda literature was mostly a spontaneous outpouring of writers’ concern for their country’s survival, the utilitarian orientation of literature during the war years resulted from a further political and institutional restriction. During the 1940s, political control became even tighter both in liberated Communist areas, and nationalist territories, and the struggle for advantage between these two sides became extremely bitter. Just as the Communists were able to take advantage of the war to build up a strong groundswell of support, so in a similar way,

\(^{41}\) Regarding the symbolism and imagery in *Children of the Rich*, see for example the detailed analysis of the image of the wilderness in Kirk Denton, “Lu Ling’s *Children of the Rich*: The Role of Mind in Social Transformation,” in *Modern Chinese Literature*, vol. 5 no. 2 (Fall, 1989).
war literature proved crucial in the Communist project of politicizing the field of literature. This is embodied in the widespread publicity given to Mao Zedong’s “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art.”

In these talks, Mao made it clear that literature should serve the revolutionary effort, and should be written for the masses. Writers should thus reform themselves according to the tenets of Marxism-Leninism. As a theory based on the political approach to literature, Mao’s talks in themselves are not particularly harmful; it was the subsequent use of the talks as an excuse for manipulating Chinese literature and restricting expression to a single, narrow approach that proved disastrous for the development of the novel in the next few decades. As T. A. Hsia puts it: “One doesn’t have to quarrel so much with Mao’s theory as with the fact of control” (McDougall, 23). The politicizing of literature minimized subjectivity and creativity in writing, and made literature a simple, unquestioning interpretation of the dominant ideology. The “Yan’an Talks” were the first sign of the new Communist policy of controlling literary and artistic production, a control which was to expand dramatically in the following decades.

As a result, the investigation of reality in the novel was no longer the individual enterprise of writers. The well-known critic Hu Feng’s argument in support of the “subjective fighting spirit” of realism, over which controversy raged from the 1940s to the 1950s when Hu was purged, can be seen as a failed challenge, by a critical mode of realism upholding the individual’s consciousness in understanding social reality, to the new socialist version of realism which interpreted reality in terms of political and literary formulae. With its newly enforced Party ideological vision of reality and humanity, the

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42 For the English translation, see Bonnie S. McDougall, *Mao Zedong’s “Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art”: A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary*, Univ. of Michigan, 1980.

mode which was to dominate Chinese literature for the next three or four decades is generally termed "Socialist Realism." For the Chinese novel, Socialist Realism means specifically that characters and events must embody the revolutionary process as interpreted by the Chinese Communist Party and be written according to the viewpoint of the Communist party, "which is the representative of the masses."

Corresponding to this politicizing of the general function of literature, there was also a change in the form and language of literary works from the 1940s onwards. May-Fourth Westernized elitism gave way to popular styles that were mixed with traditional art forms of the masses and folk culture. With war literature emphasizing the mobilization of the populace against the enemy, especially in liberated areas, and later with the revolutionary mobilization to liberate the nation from the Nationalists, the masses became the primary audience for literature, since it was their support that was crucial for victory. The strong emphasis on "returning" to traditional Chinese forms not only shows a reaction against Western influence, but also implies a revival of the didacticism of pre-May-Fourth literature.

In the area of the novel, the pre-modern chapter-divided form and colloquial style is reincorporated, and once again the narrator, explicitly or implicitly, functions as a conformist who "guides" the readers to remain in line with Communist ideology. Works

44 This concept, first coined in Soviet Union, was introduced to China by Zhou Yang 周扬 in 1933. Since then it has greatly influenced leftist writers’ understanding of the reality they tried to capture in their works. In China, it became the dominant creative method (chuangzuo fangfa 创作方法) during the early 1950s. "Socialist Realism" is supposed to reflect socialist reality under the Communist Party’s leadership, and it should create new socialist heroes to educate the people with the spirit of Socialism. It should also be guided by Marxist and Maoist theory. See Wen Rumin, Xinwenxue xianshizhuyi de liubian, Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1988. 135-148; and Zhongguo dangdai wenxueshi chugao 中國當代文學史 初稿 (The First Draft of Contemporary Chinese Literature), Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1980, chapters 1 and 2. Socialist Realist works produced in China in the several decades from 1940s to 1970s often narrow human nature and human relations down to economic classes and class struggle and fit reality into a pattern of historical development according to the Chinese Marxist view. They are usually highly politicized and formulaic.
like Zhao Shuli 赵树理's *The Verses of Li Youcai* (%E7%89%A9%E5%8E%9F%E7%88%B1%E5%90%8F)*, Kong Jue 孔厥 and Yuan Jing 袁静's *New Biographies of Heroes and Heroines* (%E5%85%8B%E7%A9%B6%E7%A9%B6%E5%90%8F%E5%8D%A1) and Kong Jue 孔厥 and Yuan Jing 袁静's *New Biographies of Heroes and Heroines* (%E5%85%8B%E7%A9%B6%E7%A9%B6%E5%90%8F%E5%8D%A1) are representative in this context.

From the mid-1940s, this revolutionary ideological writing was to dominate the Chinese novel. Between the late 1940s and early 1960s, the Chinese novel became the "epic" that recorded the history of the revolutionary course led by the Communist Party. Overwhelmingly, these novels deal with public events, or so-called "significant subjects" (zhongda ticai 重大题材), from peasant revolution and land reform in the countryside, for instance Ding Ling’s *The Sun Shines Over the Sanggan River* (1948), and Zhou Libo 周立波’s *The Hurricane* (Baofeng zhouyu 暴风骤雨, 1949), through Liu Qing 柳青’s *The Builders* (Chuangye shi 创业者, 1960), and Liang Bin 梁斌’s *Chronicle of the Red Flag* (Hongqi pu 红旗谱, 1958), to the depiction of underground struggle and revolutionary warfare, as in Du Pengcheng 杜鹏程’s *Defend Yan’an* (Bao wei yan’an 保卫延安, 1954), Luo Guangbin 罗广斌 and Yang Yiyan 扬益言’s *Red Crag* (Hong yang 红岩, 1962) and Wu Qiang 吴强’s *Red Sun* (Hongri 红日, 1964), to accounts of pro-Communist student movements, like Yang Mo 扬沫’s *The Song of Youth* (Qingchun zhi ge 青春之歌, 1960). Joe C. Huang’s observation is certainly correct when he

45 *Ernu yingxiong zhuang* 儿女英雄传 was a popular chapter-divided knight-errant novel (xiayi xiaoshuo 侠义小说) of the late Qing. From the dramatic plot to the characterization of the hero, the new version inherits the formula of the original, but changes the setting to the Anti-Japanese War.

46 Joe C. Huang has written a major study on the contemporary Chinese novel and gives a detailed division of the novels published in the period between the late 1940s and early 1960s. His sociological approach, reading Communist novels by dividing them into several categories according to historical periods and particular aspects of the revolution, such as "The Underground Struggle in ‘White’ Areas,” “Guerilla Warfare” and “Land Reform,” reveals the narrow interests and interpretation of history in these novels. His main task of analysing the characters, divided into hero-cadres, villains, and people in the middle also shows the simple political types used for characterization in these novels. See his *Heroes and Villains in Communist China: The Contemporary Chinese Novel as a Reflection of Life*, Pica Press, 1973.
writes: “Chinese Communist novels without exception focus on certain phases, aspects, and periods in the course of the revolution. Not a single novel dwells on the private life of an individual”(10). The characters are also simple and easily distinguished, the heroes are inevitably revolutionaries from among the awakened peasants, workers or cadres; other less heroic characters and villains act as foils for the heroes. Although there is a difference in degree among these works in balancing the dominant ideology with loyalty to personal observation, basically the element of propaganda prevails over artistic credibility.

Ding Ling’s novel *The Sun Shines Over the Sanggan River*, which won a Stalin Prize in 1951, set the criteria for how a socialist realist work should be produced and used. It represents the overwhelming control of the dominant ideology in cultural production. First of all, for the writer, this novel was a product of her transformation from a bourgeois intellectual to a revolutionary, and was written explicitly to help the cause of revolution. Previously, Ding Ling had been famous for her writing on the psyche of the westernized May-Fourth female and for her feminist insight. However, after her long journey to Yan’an, and especially following the cultural purges there in which she was criticized, Ding Ling became deeply involved in land reform. In 1946 she worked as a Communist cadre to help the peasants “overturn” (*fanshen* 翻身) their oppressors. *The Sun Shines Over the Sanggan River* was finished in the summer of 1947, using material from her own recent experiences, and revealing that she treated her novel-writing as a political duty no different from her work as a journalist in Yan’an.

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47 This work is, first of all, a result of Ding Ling’s work as a Party cadre in the land reform movement; after it was finished, it drew the attention of CCP cultural officials. Published immediately, in 1948, after being “checked” personally by Hu Qiaomu 胡乔木, it was also very soon translated into Russian, and won a Stalin Prize. Later, it was revised and reprinted several times after 1949, to keep its contents in line with frequently changing CCP policy regarding rural land reforms and the peasant revolution; see for example, the 1950 and 1955 versions. For more details, see Gong Mingde 龚明德, “*Taiyang zhaozai sangganhe shang* xiugai jianping 太阳照在桑干河上修改箋评 (Commentary on the Revision of *The Sun Shines Over the Sanggan River*), Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1984.
The work was hurriedly published and issued as a textbook and policy manual for cadres. The writer clearly takes a cadre’s point of view in “observing and understanding what is happening in the countryside.” Land reform, seen from the vanguard point of view of this Communist cadre, becomes a significant step in the process of changing the old unjust social relationships and redividing property, thus building a better society through class struggle. The characters and their relationships have clear political significance — an obvious influence of Mao’s analysis of the classes of Chinese society each of which has well-defined personality traits — with firmly established identities and strictly specified roles. Compared with the confused and uncertain individual voice of the narrator in Ding Ling’s previous works, the narrator of this novel is confidently omniscient, a public persona speaking in the name of history.

In the decade from 1966 to 1976, the Chinese novel disappeared almost completely. Not only were comparatively few works written, and limited human life depicted in them, but those that were published, like the works of Hao Ran 浩然, are crude political allegories without any genuine inquiry into human life.50

In a paper entitled “Change and Continuity in Chinese Fiction,” Cyril Birch compares three novels from three successive periods, the late Qing, the thirties and the

48 Ding Ling, “Preface” to The Sun Shines Over the Sanggan River, Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1984.
49 To “observe life,” writers had to understand reality according to the correct worldview, that is Marxist and Chinese Communist Party policy. Ding Ling has written extensively on how she adjusted her plots and characters — in some cases following the “advice” of the CCP cultural official Hu Qiaomu — to stay in line with the current Party interpretations. See note 46 above, and her prefaces to the 1948 version, 1949 Russian version, and 1984 version, in Ding Ling, Wo de shengping yu chuangzuo 我的生平与创作 (My Life and My Creative Writing), Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1982.
50 For instance, Hao Ran’s Jinguang dadao 金光大道 (Golden Road) has two volumes, published in 1972 and 1974. From the hero’s name Gao Daquan 高大全 to the nature of the experience presented, that of peasants being led by the CCP on a socialist pilgrimage, this novel is representative of political allegories written in the Maoist era.
post Yan'an period. He argues that a work like Mao Dun's realist novel *Midnight* is an anomaly in the history of Chinese fiction and emerged only under the influence of Western literature. However, the periods before and after it share similar narrative modes, displaying an affinity for the indigenous Chinese tradition through their narrators, characterization, and didacticism. They are more like allegories, romances or satires in the Western tradition than novels in a strict sense.

The most important characteristic of a realist novel is the emergence of a new authorial persona who takes an individual, independent, and often alienated standpoint when observing and analysing the world. During the development of the Chinese novel up to the 1970s, as Birch observes, there was only a short period, basically during the 1930s, during which reality was explored by means of an individual vision, and this tendency was soon drowned in a sea of ideology.

We may call the May-Fourth period the starting point in the long process of modernization of Chinese fiction, yet the modern Chinese novel of the twenties, thirties and forties, despite its many innovations, by no means exhausted the potentialities of the genre. During this period, Chinese novels managed to depict immediate reality from an individual point of view, and the lives of ordinary people in all their varying aspects, especially the intricacies of social existence, are explored critically to an unprecedented extent, establishing a distinctive tradition of social realism. Yet these humanitarian writers, "obsessed with China and Chinese people as a whole," tend to concentrate on depicting society and its people from their outward aspects. That is, they see reality mainly as a social-political reality, and human personality as the product of circumstances, affected in an uncomplicated manner by those circumstances. The achievement of the Chinese novel in this period is to bring immediate social reality into the fictional world, and in the best works, to create an integrated individual vision of reality.
However, large spaces remained unexplored, especially with regard to personal and private life and profounder questions regarding human nature. The human perception of reality is seldom described as if from within. Unlike short stories, modern Chinese novels seldom show any fascination with the inner world of the individual, or with human consciousness as an intrinsically interesting subject. Without attempts to depict the richness and particularity of the human spiritual world in novels, a crucial part of reality remains unexplored. The consequences of such an omission become obvious from the 1940s onward, when social reality is increasingly narrowed down to the exclusively public and political areas. The characterization of ordinary people abandons its dependence on careful observation, relying instead on crude stereotyping, and any hint of individual distinctiveness is strongly criticized as petty bourgeois and counter-revolutionary.

It is against such a background that the revival of novel writing during the 1980s should be judged. As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, the most recent novels not only display a renewed interest in the individual, as opposed to the social, but go far beyond even the best works of the pre-Communist period in their detailed description of the inner life of human beings. Following the gradual turn towards outside society that occurred over the greater part of this century, this refocusing on the life of the personal as well as the spiritual in the novel is a dramatic indication of a new tendency in Chinese literature which I have termed an "inward turn." I will now examine this inward turn in more detail through the works of three representative novelists.
Chapter 2: Crying in the Fine Rain

"For a long time, my works have all originated from the tension between myself and reality . . . And I was for a very long period an angry and cold writer . . . With the movement of time, my inner anger has gradually calmed down, and I have started to realize that truth is what a real writer is looking for, the truth that eschews moral judgement. The mission of a writer is not to air his grievances, or to denounce or expose; rather he should show people nobility. This nobility is not simple beauty, but a transcendence which comes after understanding all things, treating good and evil equally, and looking at the world with a sympathetic eye."

Yu Hua, preface of To Live

"The invention of a narrative for one’s childhood is therefore to some extent a creative discovery of the self."

Seamus Heaney, foreword for

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl
Paradox of Violence

Among contemporary Chinese writers, Yu Hua is the one most concerned with the profound relation between individual discovery of truth and the form of fiction. In his few but nevertheless powerful theoretical essays, he claims that all his effort in writing is “to approach reality even closer,”¹ and that the only way to find that reality is to base writing on the individual spirit or consciousness, instead of on an established and rational “common sense.” Thus reality in fiction must be different from reality in our daily lives because it is reinvented through “personal imagination and personal understanding” (个人想象和个人理解) (Yu, Collected Works, 292) and form is not just related to technical and stylistic design, but also to the way the subject perceives the world.² This statement, which may not sound so innovative to those familiar with Western modernist literary theory, yet marks a new attitude in China — an individualist way of writing — that breaks with the collectivist, ideological writing of the past decades. This subjective approach to truth, added to his complete suspicion of any convention, makes Yu Hua one of the most penetrating explorers and trenchant observers of contemporary Chinese society and Chinese subjectivity.

Yu Hua made his name with a series of “violent stories” (暴利小说) published in the late 1980s. These stories, concentrating on the cruelty and chaos in ordinary peoples’ everyday lives, build up a horrifying picture of human violence and cruelty. In a way seldom seen previously in modern Chinese fiction, Yu Hua presents a consistently bleak and pessimistic view of human life and human nature. His bold sensory

¹ Yu Hua, “Xuwei de zuopin” (虚伪的作品) in Yuhua zuopinji 余华作品集 (Collected Works of Yu Hua), 3 Vols. Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue yuan, 1995, Vol. 2, 277. All Yu Hua’s works cited in this thesis, unless otherwise indicated, follow the page numbers of this version. Hereafter I refer to it as Collected Works. All the translations of Yu Hua’s works are mine.

² Apart from the above two articles, another two, “Chuanduan Kangcheng he Kafuka de yichan” (川端康成和卡夫卡的遗产) (The Legacy of Yasunari Kawabata and Kafka), and “Hebian de cuowu houji” (河边的错误后记) (Afterword of “Mistakes by the Riverbank”) express similar ideas. See Collected Works, Vol. 2.
descriptions of bloody violence have consequently shocked Chinese critics and readers alike. These readers are forced to face an unfamiliar and painful truth — that cruelty, destructiveness and violent impulses are embedded in the Chinese mentality and hence in their everyday life.

Now it seems hardly a coincidence that Yu Hua began his truth-telling with two initiation stories, “Leaving Home and Travelling Afar at Eighteen” (Shibasui chumen yuanxing 十八岁出门远行) and “The April Third Incident” (Siyue sanri shijian 四月三日事件). The former story, a work of less than 8,000 characters, gave Yu Hua a reputation as one of the most promising new writers, and the renowned critic Li Tuo used it to demonstrate that “we might be faced with a new kind of writer, and an unfamiliar writing that we have never before confronted.”4 Narrated in the first-person, it tells of the first day’s misadventures of a young man (“I”) in the world, after he leaves home on a journey. The main event of this memoir-like story is his being robbed and beaten violently by some unknown people while taking a ride in search of a hotel. The narrative ends with his being deserted in a dark wilderness. The latter work is a similar story of one day’s events which, although not using a first-person narrator, also focuses on the experience of a paranoid boy. On the eve of his eighteenth birthday, he suspects the people around him of arranging a conspiracy, “The April Fourth Incident,” aimed at killing him. Frightened and alarmed by this confusing mix of illusion and real happenings, he flees, and ironically his action becomes “The April Third Incident.”

Similar in their thematic concerns and subjective perspective, these two stories disclose a shocking and painful experience of “growing up” that will reappear again and again in Yu Hua’s works: initiation as a violent loss of innocence. Both protagonists are at the threshold of adulthood (the particular significance of being eighteen years old is

3 The former story was first published in Beijing wenxue, 1987/1. The latter in Shouhuo, 1987/5. Here I use the version in Collected Works.
4 Refer to Li Tuo, “Xuebeng hechu”雪崩何处 (Where is the Avalanche?), preface to Yu Hua, Shibasui chumen yuanxing, Taipei: Yuanliu, 1990.
emphasized in both stories) and for the first time they are suddenly exposed to a strange world where they stand alone (wuyi wukao 无依无靠). In these two youths’ panic-stricken eyes, this world is a huge monstrosity, frightening and alienating, which threatens them with its senseless violence beyond any reason or explanation. Sometimes the agents of this blind force are the very people who are supposed to love and protect them—their parents. The only major difference between these two stories is that, in the former, home still remains in the distance, radiating warmth for a wounded heart deserted in the dark wilderness: “I lie in the heart of the truck, and recall a sunny and warm afternoon when the sunshine was so beautiful. I remember that I had played outside for a while, and then I went back home, and saw my father packing a red backpack in the room...” (Vol. 1, 9). But in the latter, even this last illusory refuge becomes suspect, when the paranoid boy finds that his parents are not only indifferent strangers but also the main instigators of a conspiracy against him. The only recourse left is to escape from this home, to “run wild” and go far away.

In my opinion, the main point in “The April Third Incident” is not so much whether all the events are illusory or real, since this boy is clearly paranoid; rather, the point is to ask from where this paranoia originates. Actually, by deliberately limiting the narrative perspective to that of the frightened boy, Yu Hua sympathizes with this character and seems to imply that there is a similarity between fantasy (or nightmare here) and reality. The fear felt by the characters in Yu Hua’s works has so violently shaken their established and rational way of perceiving the universe that the objects around them start to show themselves in a distorted way. Like the madman in Lu Xun’s “Diary of a Madman” (kuangren riji 狂人日记), who finds the “truth” of cannibalism underneath the three thousand year history of the so-called virtue of “benevolence,” the nightmare of this paranoid boy also raises an alarm about the cruelty and violence in the human psyche, in everyday behavior, and in ordinary human relations. By using two alienated adolescents as the protagonists, Yu Hua also shows the terrible effect that severing human bonds has
on our existence. The removal of the sense of trust, security, and harmony and the loss of hopes and dreams are the deplorable price of being an adult.

The adult world first glimpsed by these two young men soon becomes the only absolute existence in Yu Hua's fictional world. In works completed between 1988 and 1989, Yu Hua presents a living hell ruled by violence and blind force that strike remorselessly and continuously. Even the inner tension and confrontation between the individual and an alienated world in the two stories above disappears, replaced with an objective, "matter-of-fact" narrative. Among these works, there are half a dozen novellas that present an especially bleak picture of human life, and a deep underlying current of despair runs through all the stories.5

These works are usually set in an anonymous town, representative of thousands of other towns spread all over China. In this seemingly normal and ordinary setting, however, there are frightening things going on every day. In "One Kind of Reality" (Xianzhi yizhong 现实一种), it is bloody killing within a household, involving two brothers and their families: a trivial incident brings out mutual hatred and revenge that finally leads to the disintegration of the extended family. Two children are killed, followed by the vicious murder of two adults, leaving an old complaining grandmother and two wives who abhor each other. In "Fate is Inescapable" (Nantao jieshu 难逃劫数), it is the successive destruction of a small circle of people who become acquainted at a wedding. The bride and bridegroom are bound together only by lust, and soon the lust changes into hatred and revenge; an innocent boy is mercilessly beaten to death just because he happens to come

5 Since this thesis involves the development of Yu Hua's writing, here I give the dates of these works' first appearance. These stories include, "Yijubaliu nian" 一九八六年 (Nineteen Eighty Six), in Shouhuo, 1987/6; "Xianshi yizhong" 现实一种 (One Kind of Reality), in Beijing wenxue, 1988/1; "Hebian de cuowu" 河边的错误 (Mistakes by the Riverbank), in Zhongshan, 1988/1; "Shishi ruyan" 世事如烟 (The Ephemeral World), Shouhuo, 1988/5; "Nantao jieshu" 难逃劫数 (Fate is Inescapable), Shouhuo, 1988/6; and "Gudian aiqing" 古典爱情 (A Classical Romance), Beijing wenxue, 1988/12. The translations of the titles are Zhao Yiheng's. See his "Yu Hua: Fiction as Subversion," in World Literature Today, Summer 1991.
across a love affair; a young woman's vanity leads her to self-destruction; the boredom and resentment of two men lead to sadistic behavior. By the end, both victims and victimizers head in one of two directions, either to death or prison, and nobody escapes. In “The Ephemeral World” (Shishi ruyan 世事如烟), it is again human violence and cruelty that permeate every corner of family and community life within a small neighborhood: parents exploit and secretly murder their children; incest and betrayal replace love and support; people suffer from inner turmoil and outer chaos, and they die unnaturally and prematurely. In Yu Hua’s fictional world, naive or sophisticated killings and destructiveness provide the main components of the plot, and the characters are indifferent and cruel creatures who act mechanically and senselessly, like walking corpses or puppets.

In his later works of this period, like “The Ephemeral World” and “A Classic Romance” (Gudian aiqing 古典爱情), the horror of existence has reached such an extreme that the boundaries between the dead and the living, nightmare and reality are constantly crossed. The ghostly haunted characters, “half bright but half gloomy” (yiban hen xianyan, yiban que hen yinchen 一半很鲜艳，一半却很阴沉) can hardly be recognized as human beings. Existence has become a frightening nightmare, heading towards destruction. And nobody can escape: the only end is for people to die one after another, old and young, weak or strong, innocent or evil.

Using simple structures and adopting a reserved, economical style, Yu Hua gives these nightmares a realistic appearance and vivid immediacy, with particular “naturalist” attention to the concrete details of physical violence and blind killing. The following scene

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6 Yu Hua, “Shishi ruyan” 世事如烟, in Yu Hua zuopinji. vol. 2, 61. In terms of depicting the horror of chaotic existence, Yu Hua has successfully incorporated some of the themes and techniques of traditional Chinese genres, such as Zhiguai 志怪, and Chuanqi 传奇. Martin Moen has written a detailed study of this aspect of Yu’s work; see his M.A. thesis “Blurring the Lines--Postmodernism and the Use of Tradition in the Works of Yu Hua,” University of British Columbia, 1993.
of revenge and murder from “One Kind of Reality” can best illuminate this graphic descriptive style:

Shangang walked in front of Shangfeng, pushed his son forward, and said, “I give him to you.”

Shangfeng raised his head and took a look at Pipi and Shangang. It seemed as though he wished to stand up, but his body only moved a bit. Next, he averted his gaze and looked towards the yard outside the house. Then he saw the pool of blood. The blood appeared quite dazzling in the sunshine . . .

Standing there, Pipi was obviously bored. He raised his head to look at his father, but his father’s face was expressionless, just like Shangfeng’s . . .

Shangfeng now stood up, and said to Shangang, “I want him to lick clean that pool of blood” . . .

Then Pipi’s mother said to Shangfeng, “Let me lick it: he was not old enough to know what he was doing.”

Shangfeng didn’t respond, but headed outside dragging the child. Thereupon she also followed them out. Shangang hesitated for a bit, then returned to his bedroom, but just walked to the bedroom window.

Shangang saw his wife bend down and start licking as soon as she got close to the bloodstain; his wife had a very greedy look. Shangang saw Shangfeng kick his wife in the ass, and she fell to one side and knelt there vomiting violently — her throat produced a sound that would make one’s hair stand on end. Next he saw Shangfeng push Pipi’s head down, so that Pipi lay prone on the ground. He heard Shangfeng say in a tone that sounded like his wife’s vomiting, “Lick!”
Pipi lay there, looking at the pool of blood that shone brightly in the sunlight, reminding him of a kind of bright-coloured fruit jelly. Sticking out his tongue, he had an exploratory lick, and a brand new flavour emerged. So he was then happy to continue licking. He felt that the concrete was very rough, and very soon his tongue grew numb, and several threads of flowing blood appeared on the tip of his tongue; this blood made it even more tasty, but he didn’t know that it was his own blood.

Shangang then saw his sister-in-law rush out covered with scars; she shouted: “I’ll bite you to death!” and threw herself on Pipi. At the same time, Shanfeng drove his foot into Pipi’s groin. Pipi’s body flew into the sky, then immediately crashed head-first onto the concrete surface with a heavy thud. He saw his son struggle a few times, then stretch out his four limbs as if paralysed.7

This kind of cold and clinical description of cruelty and violence in human nature has provoked heated debated about Yu Hua’s violent stories. Some critics censure him for only focusing on the evil and ugly side of human nature. For example, Wang Binbin argues that Yu Hua, like his contemporary Can Xue, lacks the humanistic concern of an earlier writer like Lu Xun when he criticizes “national character,” because his works are too cold to provide any hope.8 By contrast, radical young critics like Zhang Yiwu and Cheng Xiaoming, draw another conclusion from Yu Hua’s “cold-blooded” “addiction to

violence.” In his “The Crisis of Human Beings” (Ren de weiji 人的危机), and later “The End of Idealism” (Lixiang zhuyi de zhongjie 理想主义的终结), Zhang Yiwu announces that he has discovered “a postmodernist self” without subjectivity in Yu Hua’s works. And this postmodernist self, according to him, represents the crisis of the May-Fourth humanist approach. According to Zhang, by presenting his characters as violent and mechanical creatures, Yu Hua implies that human beings are not subjects at all, and the idea of a self is thus deconstructed by violence and language. Zhang also describes Yu Hua’s works as self-deconstructing texts where there is a discrepancy between the violent events (content) and the cold, objective narrative (form). In order to accomplish this postmodernist approach to self and subjectivity, Zhang believes, Yu Hua adopts a neutral standpoint towards violence, refusing to make value judgements about it.9

While this argument has received much support, especially among younger critics,10 my reading of Yu Hua indicates that it should be viewed with suspicion. It is true that Yu Hua’s subject-matter is bleak, and the characters lack subjective consciousness, but to conclude from this that Yu Hua’s own attitude is anti-humanist is an over-prompt and simplistic approach. Evaluating the ethical concerns of Yu Hua’s work requires a careful examination of how violence is presented in the texts, especially within the context of violence11 in Chinese culture, literature and mentality. I will briefly suggest some of the issues involved.

11 For violence here I use the dictionary definition: “The exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury on, or cause damage to, persons or property; action or conduct characterized by this; treatment or usage tending to cause bodily injury or forcibly
First I would like to place my discussion of Yu Hua’s theme of violence within the broader context of the general attitude towards violence and cruelty in Chinese culture. Here I will concentrate on literary examples. Several of the most representative samples of the Chinese mentality towards violence are found in vernacular fiction, whose version of history and heroism seems to present the prevalent attitudes within popular culture. For instance, in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* 三国演义 and *The Water Margin* 水浒传, apart from chivalry and rebellion against injustice, the heroes tend to exhibit “sexual puritanism,”12 and are proud to be the greatest eaters and drinkers among their fellows. However, another darker characteristic, which certainly reveals an implicit view of life, is their propensity for merciless killing. From the upper class heroic kings, knights and ministers in *Three Kingdoms* to the low class protagonists of obscure origins in *Water Margin*, the characters share a common thirst for power, revenge and for treating people in a brutal manner, a trait insidiously concealed behind their professed concern for loyalty interfering with personal freedom.” *Oxford English Dictionary*. My analysis of Yu Hua’s representation of violence in daily life mainly refers to this primary definition, although it sometimes includes psychological violence, which is another kind of cruelty. However, it definitely excludes “formal violence,” a term certain critics use to describe the way a writer arranges texts. I think there is a clear distinction between formal violence in texts and actual physical violence, but unfortunately, recent discussion on violence in literature tends to confuse the two.

12 C. T. Hsia, *The Classic Chinese Novel: A Critical Introduction*. Indiana Univ. Press, 1968, 88. Here I need to mention that recent scholars like Andrew Plaks argue that the depiction of violence in traditional Chinese fiction is such that it forces the reader to reevaluate such behavior, thus it is an ironic rather than serious “praise” of heroic violence. However, keeping in mind the fact that these works are so popular that they have been adapted as household entertainments and stories performed in public places, such sensitivity to ironic readings is hardly to be expected from most readers. I feel that most audiences would still admire the violent heroes of these works for their superhuman power. An interesting argument should be mentioned that supports my analysis: in a review of a recent TV series adapted from *Three Kingdoms*, Wang Meng 王蒙 also raises the same doubts about the main characters’ impulse to seek power and their desire for heroism, and the persisting popularity of such stories among Chinese. See Wang Meng, “Sanguo yanyi li de qianxiandai” 三国演义里的前现代 (*Premodernity in The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*), *Dushu*, 1995/2.
and benevolence. The cult of the hero is thus nothing but "gang morality," as C. T. Hsia terms it in *The Classic Chinese Novel*, and in spite of "its affirmation of heroic ideals, its actual endorsement of savagery and sadism makes the *Water Margin* a document of disturbing significance for the cultural historian of China" (Hsia, op.cit., 104). From a liberal humanistic point of view, C. T. Hsia criticizes this mentality prevalent in popular culture by making a comparison with the Western Icelandic sagas: "Unlike the Chinese novel with its equivocal stand on justice and its childish enjoyment of mere violence, the best sagas depict with tragic irony man's disposition to malice and aggression" (Hsia, op.cit., 105).

This cult of violent heroism extends to modern Chinese culture too. In revolutionary literature since the leftist movement, violence has constantly been justified in the name of revolution and class struggle. Once violence is ideologized, for instance as red violence vs. white violence, a dangerous inhuman impulse towards hatred and revenge, which blindly neglects the value of individual existence, is given free rein. In this whole turbulent century full of war and revolution, violence and cruelty have thus become deeply embedded in the Chinese psyche. For people who have lived in China, it is not difficult to notice a pervasive lack of respect for the life of each individual, and a lack of care, understanding and love towards human bodies and minds. People are frequently mistreated and their human rights violated; resentment and revenge have been suppressed, but once allowed a chance they erupt like a volcano. The most terrible thing is that such behaviour is encouraged in the name of revolution and justice. A philosophy of hatred rather than love is nourished. The recent exposure of cannibalism in Guangxi Province during the period of the Cultural Revolution has shown how far human beings can go when savagery and cruelty are encouraged instead of being controlled and restricted.¹³

¹³ The Chinese writer Zheng Yi 郑义 has collected detailed data on this topic, and risked his life to bring it out of China and publish it in book form. Unfortunately, I have not managed to find the reference at time of printing.
If in real life violence and hatred as part of the condition of human existence cannot be diminished, literature with a humanistic concern should be able to explore darkness and savagery in the human psyche, and thus help people to rediscover some kind of conscience. However, modern Chinese literature, with its enthusiasm for social-political discourse, has failed to fulfill its moral responsibility in this area. In their recent research on Chinese revolutionary literature, Liu Zaifu and Luo Gang argue that, since the late-1930s, during these past decades of bloody war and revolution, the leftist literary movement has developed a tradition of revolutionary literature that actually celebrates class hatred and revolutionary violence. This tradition justifies “heroism” in a manner not much different from vernacular novels in the pre-modern period. The socio-historical approach to human relations and human nature, especially when it is influenced so strongly by Marxist ideology, fails to realize the deeper moral and religious causes of violence and cruelty, and thus frequently over-simplifies the complexities of human nature. China has never produced writers such as Dostoyevski or Victor Hugo, who voice genuine concern over the human impulse towards violence and question its destructive effect on our existence. Likewise there is a distinct lack of writers who expose the inhumanity of institutions (Franz Kafka) or express distrust for strong men or heroes (George Orwell), and there is nobody to compare with Dostoyevski in asking ontological questions regarding sin, salvation and punishment. Most modern Chinese writers either deny that such questions exist, or politicize them — the humanist idea of treating people as ends in themselves, not using them as means, seldom gains a foothold. This lack of a

15 This argument is also made by Liu Zaifu and Lin Gang, see note 14. I basically agree with their conclusions. In fact, it is only after several years of living in a Western society and frequently reading Western literature, that I have realized the relative lack of a spirit
humanistic critique of violence is manifest in the language used to describe violence and cruelty in “revolutionary literature.” Seldom dealing directly with the effect of violence on the human psyche, such language consists of abstract and ideological terms and judgments, which are often emptied of sensory particularity and emotional strength.  

It is in this dark context of Chinese culture and literature that Yu Hua’s stories of violence should be placed.

Yu Hua was certainly aware of the persistent presence of violence and cruelty in life when he chose violence as his subject-matter. In his article “False Works” (Xuwei de zuopin), he examines violence from the perspective of human nature:

Indeed it is so, that because the form of violence is full of passion, and its force comes from the inner desires of human beings, it made me fascinated and bewitched. The ancient scene in which the master sits at one side to watch slaves kill each other has been consigned to history by modern civilization. However, this form (of the master watching slaves killing each other) always makes me feel it is a modernist tragedy. The evolution of human civilization has helped us understand how this savage behavior threatens our existence. But sports like boxing have replaced it, and here we can find the secret yielding of civilization to savagery. Even the

of love in Chinese society and modern Chinese literature. Of course, I am not claiming that the Western world doesn’t have violence. It is clear that violence is a big social problem from big cities to Hollywood movies, from terrorism to family abuse; but one major difference is the awareness of this problem and criticism and examination of it in cultural forums and literature. Certainly from mass media to elite literature, violence is much more a matter of concern here than it is in China.

16 Liu Zaifu and Luo Gang have made a detailed analysis of how revolutionary literature, such as Ding Ling’s Taiyang zhaozai sangganhe shang 太阳 照 在 桑 干 河 上 (The Sun Shines Over the Sanggan River) and Zhao Shuli’s Lijiazhuang de bianqian 李 家 庄 的 变 迁 (The Changes in Lijia Village) present the peasants accusing and denouncing landlords violently, but without any concrete description of suffering. See note 14.
Fighting Crickets in Southern China can show clearly how deep are the roots of violence within the human heart. In the face of violence and chaos, "civilization" is only a slogan, and "order" becomes mere decoration (Yu, Collected Works, vol. 2, 208).

This short paragraph shows the ambiguity and sophistication of Yu Hua's understanding of violence and chaos in human nature. First, unlike most people, he doesn't immediately make a conventional black and white judgement on violence and its origins. Instead, he is painfully aware of violent impulses within every person, ancient or modern, civilized or savage, so he is quick to recognize those impulses in their various modern guises, from sports to popular games. Violence as a subject attracts him because he finds that it is a unique and effective perspective from which to understand human beings. Second, while understanding the inevitable existence of violence in life, and that this impulse is deeply embedded in our psyche and will always take destructive forms, Yu Hua's attitude towards violence is nonetheless a critical one tinged with a certain sadness. He has found that this savage nature threatens our existence; he concludes that life is a modernist tragedy in which human beings can't prevent chaos and violence but can only replace them with what one might call savagery masquerading as civilization.

Thus, to judge by his own theoretical expression, Yu Hua's way of dealing with the subject of violence and cruelty among human beings is not neutral. He certainly doesn't enjoy and celebrate it, denying all humanistic concerns as some critics claim. This conclusion is also substantiated, as I will show in the following discussion, by Yu Hua's treatment of violence in his shorter fiction. Since the perspectives and themes of these works are quite relevant to my later discussion of Crying in the Fine Rain (Zai xiyu zhong huhan 在细雨中呼喊), here I will briefly examine his fictional presentation of violence.
First, as I have shown above, the bleak description of the predatory and ruthless side of human nature is one of the major characteristics of Yu Hua’s fictional world. Yet more striking and unique is the context of his works, the fact that Yu Hua often depicts the appearance of this ruthlessness in ordinary, everyday situations. Usually the social background and temporal aspects are purposely kept very vague, and thus the timelessness and immediate impact of the violent events are foregrounded. In Yu Hua’s world, these acts of cruelty, violence and destruction are not associated with political or social catastrophes, like war, massacres, concentration camps, nor even the activities of gangsters or criminals, but are firmly situated in a family and personal context. It is in those everyday situations, which people have apparently accepted without question for years, that he finds separation, abnormality, cruelty and mutual destruction. Right from the beginning, Yu Hua chose the family as the typical representative of the everyday. From his earliest work, “April 3rd Incident,” to the most recent ones, such as *Crying in the Fine Rain*, his stories invariably describe family tragedies in which mutual indifference, hatred, exploitation and even blind killings supplant love, care, understanding and mutual support. In Yu Hua’s stories, one might say, a Kafkaesque nightmare takes the form of family life, and in extreme cases, family cannibalism. 17

Secondly, Yu Hua’s concern is not so much with violence in its historical dimension as in its existential dimension; thus personal suffering and the breaking of human bonds as general topics become his central preoccupation. He seems to avoid giving simplified single causes for these problems, instead concentrating on the hurt and harm that result from violence. The victim’s point of view portrayed in Yu Hua’s earlier stories — those on the theme of initiation — is very suggestive in this respect. Here violence without meaning or context is depicted as a frightening and alienating force

17 Yu Hua’s view of family seems to have softened in later works, such as *Huozhe* 活着 (To Live, 1992) where an ordinary family has the power to love and help each other and resist the eroding forces from outside. Yu Hua, *Collected Works*, vol. 3. See below for discussion of this development.
affecting an individual. The fear and pain the victim feels, and the tension created between a cruel reality and a feeling subject are, in my opinion, the clearest indications of humanistic concern in Yu Hua's earlier works.

In subsequent stories, although the point of view changes to an objective one, with cruelty and violence depicted in the style of a matter-of-fact report, criticism of these terrible occurrences nevertheless still persists implicitly in the stories' visual message. In other words, the shocking effect of a violence that threatens human existence is achieved through manipulating the reader's response by means of concrete descriptions of physical pain and suffering. One of the characteristics of Yu Hua's descriptions, as many interpreters have noticed, is that they provide such sensory and realistic detail that they stimulate in the reader almost physical pain as well as detestation. A paragraph like the following from "Nineteen Eighty-Six" (Yijiubaliu nian - 九八六年), a story that includes an extended and graphic depiction of a madman's masochism, well illustrates this feature:

He shouted "Bi!" then positioned the hacksaw under his nose, the teeth of the saw towards his nose. His lips, which were as black as his arms, started shaking as if he was laughing. Then his two arms began swinging forcefully back and forward, and with each swing he yelled "Bi!" with all his might. The hacksaw started to cut in, and the blood started to seep out. At this, his black lips began to go rosy. Soon, the saw cut into his nose bone, producing a slight rasping sound: sha, sha. Now, he didn't shout as before, but slightly swayed his head, and his mouth produced a rasping sound in response: sha, sha. The way the saw cut into his nose bone made one think that now he was happily playing a mouth organ. But it was not long before he shouted wildly several times in succession, as a much deeper pain followed that brief moment of numbness. His face became distorted. After
cutting a bit more, he simply couldn’t stand the pain, and took out the saw, placing it on his legs. Then he raised his head and gasped for breath, his mouth wide open. Blood now flowed down smoothly, and in a short while the whole of his mouth and chin were covered in red; on his chest appeared countless twisted, criss-crossing streams of blood; some streams even flowed onto his hair, and crept down along the hair strands, finally dripping onto the concrete ground like scattered sparks of fire. He took a deep breath, then once more raised the hacksaw to eye level and examined it carefully in the sunshine. Then he extended an extraordinarily long and by now red-dyed fingernail, and dug out the slivers of bone between the teeth of the saw; the slivers of bone were completely soaked in blood as well, and they shone bright red in the sun. His movements were very careful, and also very deliberate. After picking for a while, he conscientiously examined it again. And then he pulled his nose out a bit, and with his other hand put the hacksaw back in. But this time his hands didn’t swing back and forward: he just made an empty show of wild shouting. Then he took out the saw, and wobbled his nose with his hand, and it started swaying on his face like a swing.

18 Yu Hua, “Yi jiu ba liu nian” — Nineteen eighty-six, in Collected works, Vol. 1, 161-162. This paragraph describes a wrongly-accused man “returning home” after the Cultural Revolution. He is now totally mad and mutilates himself according to the manner of various ancient Chinese punishments, just in front of his own house. His wife and daughter suffer from this painful past, but lack the strength to deal with it, and simply turn away. The other people in the town show indifference, even a certain level of enjoyment at the poor man’s suffering. This disturbing story goes to a much deeper level than the happy stories of returning home by other writers of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Yu Hua underlines the fact that bringing an end to political chaos doesn’t necessarily halt the suffering, indifference and cruelty so prevalent in the preceding period. He implies that madmen as the ghosts of the past will continue to invade life in the present. The names and the manner of his punishments, which all have historical origins and are clearly related to cruelty in traditional Chinese culture, take the story far beyond a political indictment of the Cultural Revolution alone. This deliberate use of traditional
The primary message behind these images is clearly one of horror and suffering. This destructive violence is ugly and it hurts: one doesn’t want this kind of violence and destruction to be inflicted on oneself. On close examination, this message underlies almost every paragraph of Yu Hua’s descriptions of violence and cruelty, whether that of human beings towards each other or against themselves. Moreover, Yu Hua implies that such violence leads nowhere: it is a total waste of life. The unpleasant and disgusting images have a deeply disturbing effect, shocking the reader into a greater awareness of the horror and blind destruction in life. Of course, this horrific description could be interpreted in the opposite manner if we detach it from its context, the world in which it originates and the people who commit these acts of violence. The crucial deciding factor in interpreting Yu Hua’s stories must therefore lie in his characterization.

Thus, thirdly, the characters in Yu Hua’s fiction before To Live display a degenerate, dehumanized quality that renders them unable to love and care for anyone, let alone engage in moral reflection. They can be divided into four basic categories: one is the small group of demonic figures, like the fortuneteller in “The Ephemeral World” and the traditional Chinese Doctor in “Fate is Inescapable.” These characters are simply natural killers without any possibility of displaying the slightest humanity. At the other extreme is a group of victims. Usually they are children, youths, women and artists, the weak or the old. They are fragile and helpless before a ruthless reality and are very often crushed by it. However, their dread of violence as well as their longing for beautiful things shows them to be the only people with souls. The third group includes the mass of indifferent and isolated faceless people, who although not involved in the killing or violence, show remarkably little care for and understanding of each other. Seeing the mad protagonist in “Nineteen Eighty-Six,” even his estranged wife and daughter are isolated from his punishments to indicate the historical origins of cruelty is a conscious practice, just like his use of traditional ghost stories: see note 22.
suffering; so too with the grandmother and two wives in “One Kind of Reality.” This silent and cold mass of people constitutes a dark background to all the bloody killings. Yet Yu Hua concentrates most intently on the fourth group: characters who have lost their human feeling and sense of reason, and hence act mechanically and instinctively, without the slightest moral and intellectual reflection. As Anne Wedell-Wedellsborg points out, the characters depicted in Yu Hua’s fiction only have sensory perception but are incapable of intellectual reflection. They see and hear but they do not think, or reflect on what they have done. They are individuals without self. In some ways, they are also victims of forces they are unable to control: greed, desire, and vengeful impulses. This lack of human consciousness is illustrated in the following description of a character who coldly and mercilessly kills an innocent boy in “Fate is Inescapable”:

When Guanfu scrambled to get up from the ground, the child was still sitting there. He looked back and saw Caidie; she was just scrambling to get up. Then he walked towards the child, with the child gazing at him all the time, his two eyes like a pair of fireflies. The child sat there motionless, and the moonlight shone on his body as if covering it with droplets of water. Guanfu walked in front of him and stood there for a while, pondering which part of the child’s body he should start with. Finally, he settled on the child’s chin; at that moment the child’s pointed chin appeared luxuriantly white. Guanfu took a half step backwards, then raised his right foot and aimed a violent kick at the child’s chin — he saw the body of the boy turn over lightly, then lie sideways on the ground. Guanfu took a few steps to the side, and this time settled on the child’s waist. He saw the moonlight flow down from the

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child's shoulder and, after reaching his waist, leap like a fish up to his backside. Having settled on the waist, he raised his right foot and kicked ruthlessly. The child's body turned over heavily, and lay prone on the ground. Now Guanfu felt it was necessary to turn the child over, because Guanfu liked the look of him lying face up. So he stuck his feet under the child's belly and gave a little jump: the child's body turned over and lay face up. Guanfu saw that the eyes of the child were wide open, but no longer resembled fireflies. His eyes were like two buttons on an overcoat. Blood flowed out merrily from the side of the child's mouth, and in the moonlight the colour of the blood was just like mud. Guanfu looked the child's chest up and down for a while, and felt that it wouldn't be bad if he could listen to the sound of the ribs cracking. While he was thinking in this way, his feet were treading on the child's ribcage. Then he trod on the stomach as well. Finally, he looked back to see Caidie — Caidie had all along been standing at the side looking on — and he said to her: "Let's go."20

Yu Hua's world is thus peopled with such characters who live without authentic existence, and for whom there is no difference between being alive and being dead. In this light, the ghost-seeing characters in "The Ephemeral World" — the midwife; "6" (the father who sells his daughters, and even their corpses); and "2" (who mercilessly humiliates the driver and forces him to kill himself) — are typical examples of this kind of "living dead." Not only do they cross the boundary between the human and ghostly world, living a ghostly life,21 but they are subject to malevolent supernatural forces, which drive

20 Yu Hua, "Nantao jieshu" 劫 数 难 逃 (Fate is Inescapable), in Collected Works, vol. 1, 190-91. This paragraph describes a young man, annoyed by a boy who has accidentally witnessed his love-making with a woman, mercilessly killing him.
21 Here I agree with Martin Moen, who suggests that Yu Hua borrows the pre-modern Chinese idea of the difference and relation between the human world and the spirit world.
them to destroy others. Similarly, “Mistakes by the Riverbank” implies that the murderers are just playing the idiotic and senseless game of madmen, without any motive, and no law or morality can accommodate or punish them. Yu Hua’s fiction is permeated with despair and profound doubt about the possibility of being human.

Another way in which Yu Hua, as implied author, detaches himself from the violence of his characters is by exaggerating their inhuman and laughable side to a grotesque or farcical degree. Although almost all his stories involve the destruction of life, they seldom allow the sense of tragedy to arise in us because this destruction is meaningless; it lacks nobility. Instead we often feel these characters and their indiscriminate killing to be absurd and ridiculous. For example, the depiction of the flight, execution and even division of the corpse of Shangang in “One Kind of Reality” is full of ridiculous details and keeps the reader from feeling sympathy for this dying man.

However, my justification of Yu Hua’s violent themes doesn’t necessarily overcome the criticism that his works written prior to 1989 project an unduly depressing and gloomy picture of the human world. In fact, I feel that the disappearance of an inner tension between the alienated, feeling individual and an absurd reality, which had been evident in his early works, leads to Yu Hua’s failure to present a centre of spiritual strength from which the evil is somehow censured. As a result, in many ways the matter-of-fact, naturalistic description of the vicious cycles of revenge, hatred and destruction of life is a rather disturbing and self-defeating approach. His violent stories seem to involve a paradox in that, on the one hand, he reveals that inhumanity lurks in the depths of peoples’

The heroine in a famous vernacular story “Yangsiwen Yanshan feng guren” (Yang Siwen Encounters an Old Friend in the Yan Mountains) in Gujin xiaoshuo 古今小说 (Stories Old and New) says, “The boundary between human beings and ghosts is very clear in peaceful times; but in today’s world, ghosts and human beings are mixed.” The story is set in a time of political and social chaos immediately after the fall of the Northern Song. This quotation can serve as a useful explanation of the social background to the collapse of boundaries between human and spirit worlds in Yu Hua’s fiction.
minds, and by describing its terrible effects and the intensity of dread that it engenders, he deplores the meaningless destruction of human life by thoughtless individuals. Yet on the other hand, his exploration is an incomplete and crippled venture, which discovers only one side of a complex human reality. This drawback is evident not only in the oversimplification and stereotyping in his creation of characters, which I have discussed above, but also in the way he structures his works and their endings. The structure of most of the novellas published between 1988 and 1989, as Yu Hua himself realizes, is an imitation of outside, objective reality—a cause-effect, chronological order—and there is no room left for characters to express human choice. This naturalist darkness leads to an ending where everybody, both victim and victimizer, dies. As the Chinese critic Dai Jinhua points out, “From beginning to end there is no-one to witness Death... For a race that has lost its desire and ability to reproduce, Death means an absolute extermination.”

However, one fact we must keep in mind when we evaluate Yu Hua’s works is that he is a relatively young writer whose vision is developing and maturing as he continues to write. He once declared: “The structure of this world provides more than one possibility. Thus after ‘The Ephemeral World,’ my continuing search for other structures is still meaningful” (Yu, vol. 2, 286). For Yu Hua, fiction is not a vivid and exciting photocopy of human character or environment, but a symbolic existence, “the symbol of our living in this world” (Yu, vol. 2, 288). And in fact, he himself is a very self-conscious writer who finds that his writing originates from the tension between himself and the world. Writing for him is a never-ending struggle against ignorance, a quest to

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discover truth by adopting a new perspective.\textsuperscript{24} The result is that his fictional writing has exhibited a continual evolution.

I would separate his works into two distinct stages, with “The Ephemeral World” as the point of division. In the first stage, he steadily drives his fictional world to the outer limits of absurdity and ultimately dehumanizes his characters. In the latter stage, he becomes engaged in the search for a new form of consciousness within that world, an inner order that exists in opposition to the surrounding chaos and violence. One recurring feature of his works after 1989 is thus the use of first-person narrative, which can be read as the (re)birth of “the witness of Death,”\textsuperscript{25} and recurs from the short story “Ancestor” (\textit{Zuxian 祖先}) (1992) and the novella “This Story is Dedicated to the Girl Called Yangliu” (\textit{Ciwen xiangai shaonu yangliu 此文献给少女杨柳}) (1989) to his latest novel \textit{To Live (Huozhe 活着)} (1992). This change in narrative technique indicates that Yu Hua’s focus has shifted from the radical “objective” description of a living hell of disorder and violence to a lyrical, reflective narrative of the existential awareness of people about their situation. In his renewed search for the consciousness of human beings, the subjective perspective that appears in his earliest works seems to return now with a much richer content.

From 1989 to 1991, Yu Hua spent two years working on his first novel and revising it several times. The result was an 80,000 character work \textit{Crying in the Fine Rain (Zai xiyu zhong huan 在细雨中呼喊)}, which had originally been 160,000 characters but was cut to its present length before publication. Although Yu Hua himself was very satisfied with this work, it didn’t receive much attention from critics. Yet \textit{Crying in the

\textsuperscript{24} Yu Hua, “Hebian de cuowu houji” 河边的错误后记 (Afterword to “Mistakes by the Riverbank”), \textit{Collected Works}, vol. 2, 289.

\textsuperscript{25} Considering the existence of the first-person narrator and the initiation theme in Yu Hua’s earliest works, like “Leaving Home and Travelling Afar at Eighteen” and “The April Third Incident,” I feel that his works after 1989 are a return to and continuation of this perspective.
*Fine Rain*, using as it does an autobiographical persona to relate the childhood and adolescent years of a peasant boy in his family and school, is one of remarkably few novels from mainland China to explore this period from childhood to adolescence from the perspective of personal growth. Yu Hua has drawn an impressively detailed panorama of the cruelty practiced in everyday life; but at the same time, by adding to this picture the story of the growth of Sun Guanglin 孙光林, the reflective narrator-protagonist, from childhood to maturity, he produces a very effective account of developing human consciousness and moral choice.

"The House of Pain"

For certain critics who have become accustomed to reading all modern Chinese literature as political allegory, the majority of Yu Hua’s works disappoint, because of their vague, ahistorical setting and disinterest in any socio-political approach. At most, what they might conclude is that some stories imply the general historical background of the Cultural Revolution. However, as I have indicated, even in such works, Yu Hua shows an interest in delineating the much deeper origins of human suffering. For example, in "Nineteen Eighty-Six," a novella that describes the catastrophic effect of the Cultural Revolution on an ordinary family, Yu Hua juxtaposes a contemporary madman’s masochism with the sophisticated punishments detailed in ancient Chinese historical accounts. He implies the persistence of the impulse towards violence and cruelty in human nature and human history. To reiterate, like other younger writers of the 1980s who have modelled their writing on modern Western literature and have adopted a belief in personal discovery, Yu Hua is not interested in the socio-historical approach to human life and the political didacticism of previous writers like Lu Xun, Mao Dun and Wang Meng. The particularly distinctive feature of Yu Hua’s vision, as I noted above, is that it often takes place in private situations, most notably within families, and characters are treated more as individuals than as classes or groups. Instead of finding a socio-historical cause for
every crime, and blaming cultural tradition, class repression or social injustice, Yu Hua implicitly argues that cruelty and violence are moral errors that originate from ignorance, impulses, desires, and especially from a lack of conscience or capability for moral reflection.

However, this preference doesn't necessitate the conclusion that Yu Hua and his works are devoid of social meaning and moral message. Milan Kundera, pondering the similarity between the fictional world of Kafka and the reality of totalitarianism in modern history, says: “The psychological mechanisms that function in great (apparently incredible and inhuman) historical events are the same as those that regulate private (quite ordinary and very human) situations.” In this light, Yu Hua’s special approach to human life is worth examining in its own right, and Crying in the Fine Rain is his most extended treatment of such “private situations” to date.

Furthermore, the most subversive feature of Yu Hua’s literary exploration is its challenge to the long-lasting myths of family life: unconditional parental care and sibling love and support. Instead of the usual comfortable, pleasant view of the family, Yu Hua, with the clinical precision of a surgeon, exposes bloody violence and cold separation between family members, whether spouses, parents and children, or siblings. Family life becomes an existential hell and, in its extreme form, degenerates into family cannibalism. As a reminder of Yu Hua’s earlier treatment of families, one could

27 In modern Chinese literature, especially May Fourth period, family myth was challenged in the works of Lu Xun, in Ba Jin’s Jia (Family), and Lu Ling’s Caizhu de ernumen, 财主的儿女们 (The Children of the Rich). However their approach is an anti-traditional, anti-feudalist one, where the old and young generations are simply opposed to each other. Yu Hua is more interested in dealing with individual morality in family life. In terms of the cannibalism depicted in his fiction, Yu Hua reminds us of his relation with his May-Fourth predecessors, especially Lu Xun. However there are some differences between the two generations in the interpretation of the origins of cannibalism. The May-Fourth writers, including later left-wing writers and Communist writers, believing either evolutionary theory or Marxism, often present cannibalism and violence,
mention the curious disintegration of an extended family depicted at the end of “One Kind of Reality,” which runs parallel to the dissection of the body of the main character, the brother Shangang. After he is executed for murder, Shangang’s resentful sister-in-law gives his body to a hospital for use in transplants and experiments. The narrator describes the dissection of the body limb by limb in a clinical but also farcical way. The last line is given to the doctor, who takes Shangang’s skeleton after the other doctors have collected what they want of his organs: “He pinched the powerful muscle on Shangang’s leg and said: ‘Although you are very strong, once I put your bones in our research office, you will look so weak that the wind could blow you over’” (Yu, Collected Works, Vol. 2, 45).

Putting this sentence into the context of the family’s disintegration, Yu Hua seems to imply that the structure and idea of a family is also so fragile that it cannot endure a gust of wind. Without real substance, real “flesh and blood” of human affection, a family will be nothing but a pile of dead skin, organs, and bone. However, with a touch of black humor, Yu Hua designs a sharply ironic ending: the transplanted penis of Shangang makes a woman pregnant and now Shangang has a kind of descendant. The whole cycle of revenge, which originated with the death of a toddler, and culminated with Shangang’s sister-in-law giving his body to be cut up by doctors, now seems about to begin again in yet another family. With this seed of ignorance and hatred, Yu Hua implies, this kind of family life still has the possibility to carry on, and to continue destroying itself, as long as people remain unaware of their absurd behaviour.

One of the main features of Crying in the Fine Rain is its continuation of the examination of family relations. This time the focus is a poor peasant household of three
generations in a suburban village called South Gate 南门, which has lately been redesignated a town. The narrator-protagonist Sun Guanglin is the second son of this family, but at the age of six he is given for adoption to a young couple living in another town. This early experience of being deserted foreshadows his experiences later in life. After his adopted parents leave him five years later, he comes back to his real parents’ house, only to find that he is now a stranger in his own home. This situation of being estranged from parents and siblings as well as from villagers causes him deep fear and suffering, and feelings of loneliness and abandonment. It is through the point of view of this orphaned and alienated boy that the novel presents its sad and gloomy picture of childhood life.

The novel is divided into four chapters, each chapter dealing with one period and/or aspect of the narrator-protagonist Sun Guanglin’s childhood. Chapter One gives a broad picture of the Sun family in South Gate, which includes this boy’s being mistreated in his own home, his younger brother’s death, his older brother’s marriage, his parents’ relationship, and also some episodes of village life. Chapter Two concentrates on the narrator-protagonist’s middle-school years; the main events involve his adolescent awakening, the growth of his sexual awareness, and his search for friendship. Chapter Three focuses on his grandfather’s life, from his youth right up to his miserable later years and death. This chapter undoubtedly stems from the protagonist’s childhood experiences living with his grandfather, and emphasizes the common features in the situations of the old man and this boy. The last chapter narrates the five year period when the boy was staying with his adopted parents, and the friendships with neighbouring children that he developed at that time.

This account of childhood is told by a first-person narrator, who is an adult recalling his own past suffering. Compared with Yu Hua’s previous works, which also describe separation and destruction within a family, this novel deepens the theme by
focussing on the victim's experience — what has been called "the wounds inflicted upon the individual." 28

The story begins with the narrator-protagonist Sun Guanglin's two earliest memories:

In the year of 1965, a child's intangible fear of the dark night began. I remember that night when fine rain came fluttering down: at that time, I had already gone to sleep; I was so small, like a toy put in the bed. The dripping from the roof only made the presence of the silence clearer, and my gradual falling to sleep was a gradual forgetting of the raindrops. It must have been at that moment, when I fell safely and peacefully to sleep, that it seemed as if a quiet, secluded road appeared, with trees and bushes on both sides: the tearful cries of a woman came from a distance; and the sudden sound of this hoarse voice on that incomparably peaceful dark night made the childhood years in my recollection of this moment tremble ceaselessly.

I see myself: a shocked child, opening his frightened eyes wide, the shape of his face vague in the darkness. The crying of that woman lasted for a long time. I was so anxious and scared waiting for the arrival of another voice, a voice that would appear to answer the woman's cries, which would be able to stop her weeping, but it didn't appear. Now I am able to realize the reason for my terror at that moment: it is because I never did hear a voice that came to answer her. There is nothing that makes a person tremble more than lonely helpless crying in a rainy, empty expanse of dark night. (Yu, Collected Works, Vol. 3, 4.)

This sensory and symbolic imagery, although first presented as this protagonist’s memory, actually establishes both the perspective and the theme of the novel. If the dark rainy night is the environment of human life in the narrator’s eyes, then crying is the suffering and despair of human beings as isolated individuals. This first memory, as the first appearance of consciousness, is crucial because it is closely connected with real events in the narrator’s life. First, the boy hears the woman crying one night in 1965. In the same year, he is given away by his parents, probably due to financial considerations. At that time, his grandfather is paralysed and can’t work, and the parents have three children and an elderly man to feed. So the crying foreshadows this boy’s whole childhood experience, as we later discover when reading about his family and school life. Even the image of crying in the rain later finds imagistic echoes in his life: the mother’s desperate shouts in the snow the night before her miserable death; and the boy’s helpless crying in the wind when he is first adopted by strangers, and later his adoptive mother Li Xiuying’s hysterical crying when she is abandoned by her husband.

Secondly, this memory is soon related to the narrator-protagonist’s first experience of death: he witnesses a man in black clothes commit suicide just days later, and immediately connects it with the crying on that dark night: “In a wet landscape, a strange man walks towards me. The clothes he wears are all black, and as he comes walking along, those black clothes sway just like banners under the gloomy sky. This approaching scene suddenly brings to my mind once again the clear cries of that woman” (Yu, Vol. 3, 5). This image of a strange man in black is a symbol of death and the boy’s memory of him has definite metaphysical implications. The fact that the events and images surrounding that death are repeated again and again later — his younger brother’s death, his mother’s death, his grandfather’s death, his adopted father Wang Liqiang’s death and the death of the old woman in Guoqing’s neighbourhood, all of which accompany the adult narrator’s meditation on life and growing up — prove this point.
In this way, the development of knowledge and memory in the young child involves his initial realization of the dark and corrupting forces attacking life; death is inseparably joined with suffering and impotent cries for help. This memory especially stresses the fact that what most frightens the child is not the crying itself but the fact that such lonely, helpless crying is never answered and never receives the consolation of others. The image of crying in the rain, chosen also as the title of the novel, therefore encapsulates the separation and suffering among human beings that are the main concern of the work.

However, the next image in the novel is also essential for our understanding of the work as a whole: “Another memory that follows is of several white lambs walking up from a grassy field on a river bank. Obviously this is an impression from the daytime and it brings consolation for the disturbance caused by the previous memory. It is just that I find it difficult to fix my position when I receive this impression” (Vol. 3, 4). This sun-filled, safe and warm image from the daytime appears quite clearly as the diametrical opposite of the crying in the darkness. The narrator calls it a consolation for the first memory. However, he can’t locate his place in the image, and reading the novel, we notice that the only equivalent of this sunny picture in the narrator-protagonist’s actual life is the short, innocent and happy time before his initial desertion: “I remember a morning like this, a clear, transparent morning. I was dashing after several children of the village, and underneath our feet was soft earth and green grass dancing in the wind. At that time, the sunshine was more like mild colour spread over our bodies, not yet brilliant rays dazzling our eyes. We dashed along, like those lambs beside the river.”(5)

The main body of the novel, coming after this introductory meditation, starts when the boy is deserted for the second time and is forced to return to South Gate, so that this “Garden of Eden,” which represents the wholeness and innocence of life, can only be remembered as an absence in real life. He loses the vision irretrievably just when he starts to understand it. This makes this vision of happiness and wholeness a fantastic and dream-
like occurrence, a psychological reflection of the desire for a lost paradise, for goodness and beauty, security and love — all those qualities that are lacking in real life. And yet, although very dream-like and rarely present, the very existence of this contrasting image is nevertheless important for us, when it comes to understanding the narrator’s dialectical vision of human life and the human spirit. On the one hand, darkness and suffering provide the conditions for a person’s existence; but on the other hand, the narrator does not mechanically accept the darker influences in his life as the only shaping forces in his personal growth. Thus, perhaps as a corollary to this second image, Yu Hua allows us the faint hope that acquaintance with pain, fear and trembling will ultimately bring wisdom, compassion and resolution. This is implied in the narrator’s description of the sincere friendship and love between himself, his neighbours and his friends, in his understanding of family members from the vantage point of his adult years, and in his persistent pursuit of greater maturity and a better life.

Immediately following these two highly symbolic memories, there comes not the expected chronological order of events, which should include the narrator’s five years from age six to twelve with his adopted parents, but a jump to his darkest experience of returning home as a twelve year-old stranger, with its consequent alienation and mistreatment: “In my twelfth year, after Wang Liqiang died, I returned all alone to South Gate. It was as if I had once again begun life as an adopted child. In those days, I constantly had a strange feeling: it seemed that Wang Liqiang and Li Xiuying were my real parents, and this family in South Gate was only giving me charity”(8).

Not welcome in his family, this boy who comes back by himself becomes an orphan in his own home. His father hates him because his return adds another burden to his life; often he is hostile to and resentful of the boy, mistreating and beating him. His mother, with hard work to do in the fields as well as housework, neglects him; his two brothers, half out of childish malice, half imitating the parents, distance themselves from him and bully him. Even his grandfather, another victim of the family’s hostility, seldom
dares to show any affection or support for him, since this will only create more difficulties for him.

There are numerous scenes that show the boy’s unenviable plight: he is beaten by his father when falsely accused by his siblings; he is deliberately ignored by the family and other villagers; he is even forced by his father to play a humiliating role in hastening his grandfather’s death. The following description of his begging for love and attention is especially touching: when Sun Guanglin is badly ill and lying in bed, the family still busy themselves with the birth of a lamb and leave him there alone; for the family, the lamb is more important than an unwanted child. Later the doctor is called in, and the memory the boy retains is of the doctor’s warm touch. Even such a simple and professional touch creates in this desperate child the illusion of being loved, and from that time on, he tries to attract the doctor’s attention: “After I recovered, the child’s sentimental attachment for the adult that was hidden inside me started to stir . . . . At first, I often waited on the road along which the doctor would pass when he came home after work, watching him approaching from afar, imagining the intimate words he would say to me when he came near, and hoping that he would stroke my forehead with his wide palm” (Yu, Vol.3, 12). Unfortunately, the boy’s feelings are not understood at all by the busy doctor: “He always passed me in a hurry, only occasionally even casting a glance in my direction. It was the kind of glance with which a stranger looks at another stranger” (13).

This cold and hostile environment causes the narrator-protagonist to experience separation and desertion very early in his life. Alienated and neglected, he takes the solitary stance of an outsider. Unlike happy children protected by their parents and appreciated by their peers, such as the Su brothers, he is more or less exiled from the house, spending most of his time sitting beside a pool in the fields: “But after I returned to South Gate, I suddenly had no-one to rely on” (12). “I could only spend lengthy periods longing for my past life in Wang Liqiang’s family, and my childhood companions in Sundang. I remembered innumerable happy past events, but at the same time I couldn’t
get rid of the feelings of sadness. I would sit alone beside the pool, intrepidly travelling into the past. My lonely smile and flowing tears greatly surprised the villagers. In their eyes, more and more, I seemed like an alien” (8).

This experience, which forces the boy to grow up prematurely, is a demonstration of the hurt and suffering caused by a lack of love and care in his family life. Yu Hua stresses that this separation from parents and siblings is the most painful and wounding occurrence during the boy’s whole childhood and adolescent years.

Nevertheless, the mutual estrangement of the boy and his family makes the narrator-protagonist a remarkably sharp witness to the abnormality of human relations and living conditions in the village. Through his eyes, therefore, the novel gives a biting and realistic picture of life in the Chinese countryside. As with other peasant families, poverty is the major problem in his home. As a result of poverty, the children and the old man are treated as burdens. Sun Guanglin’s initial dispatch to a foster family probably occurs because his real parents can thereby get rid of a mouth to feed, and receive some extra money in the process. Likewise, the details about the brothers jealously peering at the dinner table of their neighbour the doctor, the children fighting over food and sweets at a wedding, and especially the mistreatment of the grandfather by the father are all connected with the poverty that most characterizes the Chinese peasant family.

However, poverty is not necessarily the cause of cruelty. The narrator indicates that people can care for and support each other even in difficult times, giving the example of his grandfather’s filial obedience towards his parents and gentle love for his wife. And by contrast, a person like Guqing’s father can act in a shamelessly cruel manner towards his nine year-old son despite his comfortable financial situation. The boy’s own experience implies that most of the suffering does not originate in poverty but in different kinds of separation, and lack of love and sympathy. We notice that, instead of close ties and unconditional love, which are supposed to be most perfectly embodied in family
relations, what completely dominates this family is betrayal, exploitation, hatred and mistreatment. The human bond here is just a form without real substance.

This separation and mutual destruction prevails in almost every relationship within the family. The husband and the wife lack love and communication, only retaining their sexual urges and habitual maintenance of the outward form of a marriage. Even this slight connection is smashed when the father publicly has an affair with a widow and gives away his wife’s property. The siblings show even less affinity and love for each other, exhibiting a propensity for making use of each other for practical ends, and frequently fighting and bullying those weaker than themselves: as an example, the elder brother tries to grab sweets and food from the younger brother, and also bribes the younger brother to lie for him to avoid being punished by their father. Clearly, their behaviour is modelled on their parents.

At the centre of this series of abnormal relations and characters is the figure of the father. The father is depicted here as totally despicable. He is a brazen patriarch who has lost all his humanity and sense of shame, as well as any sense of responsibility for fatherhood or filial behaviour. He is not only a failure in all these family relationships but also hurts and brings trouble to everybody who crosses his path. He is an alcoholic, a sexist, a sluggard and a liar. He insults his silent wife by encouraging his mistress to fight with her; he steals the meagre property of this poor home to satisfy his own lust; he destroys his elder son’s marriage by insulting his daughter-in-law. Yet the two most shocking examples of his predatory exploitation of the family members concern his youngest son and his elderly father. With the former, he dreams of using his accidental death (while saving another child) as a ladder to climb up the social scale and transform his life of poverty. With his own disabled father, he doesn’t give him enough food and curses him continuously, right up to the time of his death. This character totally neglects the virtues of fatherhood and humanity, and he displays no filial feelings, no protection or love, and no loyalty.
The narrator-protagonist's attitude toward his father is one of total alienation and rejection. The way he addresses him formally by his name, "Sun Guangcai 孙广才," is just one example of this detachment. When depicting his father, the narrator-protagonist adds touches of black humor to make him appear a completely bestial and absurd creature. There is, for example, the scene of his death. Abandoned by all his relatives, the father becomes an alcoholic. One night he becomes drunk and falls into the village manure pit and dies there, and another character Old Man Luo 罗老头 mistakes his body for that of a pig. The narrator not only treats this foulest place as his father's life destination, but also connects him with the most detestable animal in Chinese culture.

The narrator-protagonist must keep his distance from other members of this family as well. Although they are not as mean and shameless as his father, their ignorance, indifference and malevolence hurt other people without their seeming to realize it. However, they themselves are often depicted as victims at the same time. In this respect, the characters in this novel are more rich and many-sided than those in Yu Hua's previous novellas. An example is the elder brother, who during his adolescent years is in many respects the miniature image of his father. He bullies the weak and young, takes advantage of women, acts in an opportunistic manner, and is lazy and lacking in sympathy. However, the difficult conditions of poverty and his father's bad behaviour force him quickly to grow into manhood, and with his own experience of suffering, he gradually begins to show more humanity and sympathy towards others: he supports his younger brother the protagonist's decision to go to university, and increases his filiality to his sick mother, his love for his wife and child, and anguish about the wickedness of his father.

The other major characters in the family are themselves mainly victims. In particular, the mother is depicted as a hard-working and silent woman, the victim of poverty, her husband's tyranny and her own ignorance. All she does is maintain this family, but in the end every member of the family betrays her. She endures all the suffering and hurt silently during her lifetime, and only at the end of her life does her
uncharacteristic crying and cursing release all her sadness, resentment, and anger. This episode is the real-life echo of the symbolic shouting and crying in the protagonist’s memory at the very beginning of the novel:

Brother sent a letter telling me: that day it was snowing very heavily outside. Mother, on her last legs, spent the final day of her life in the cold. Yinghua sat beside her all the time, and mother’s appearance on her deathbed seemed calm and composed. When evening came, this woman who had been silent all her life started to shout loudly, and her voice was shockingly piercing. All her shouting was directed at Sun Guangcai, and even though she had said nothing when Sun Guangcai conveyed the family property to the widow, her dying shouts proved that she had never forgotten it. Before she died, my mother repeatedly shouted: “My chamber pot! Don’t take it away; I still need it!” And: “Give me back my foot basin!” (49)

Another victim in this house, one whom I briefly mentioned above, is the grandfather. In Chapter Three, the narrator-protagonist digresses from his own story to tell that of his grandfather — the imaginary history of the grandfather as a filial and strong craftsman is interwoven with his miserable later years as a cowardly, pitiable, sometimes insidious old man. In this chapter, the narrator attempts to put together the fragments of the past that he has collected from his grandfather’s telling as well as from his own personal observations. He depicts his grandfather as a young craftsman with traditional Chinese virtues: hard-working, honest, filial, and even respectful to his wife. Yet this glorious history contrasts with the present situation of domestic abuse, and the father’s mistreatment of the grandfather. Disabled in his later years, the grandfather, this formerly
witty and strong man, has to bow to fate and his unfilial son. And this shameless son (the protagonist’s father) even uses various ploys in an attempt to hasten his death.

Separation and cruelty between human beings is not limited to this family. Such is the vision the narrator-protagonist adopts for the whole of South Gate: the world of its adults, and the hostile circumstances in which he grows up, and from which he becomes totally alienated. In fact, we learn later that after he graduates, he can’t wait to escape that place and wants to forget it completely. South Gate, made up basically of families like the Sun’s, is a place of ignorance, opportunism, and gloating over others’ misfortunes.

When he recalls this poor and immoral place, represented by the Sun Family, the narrator arranges the different sections to show the different stages of human life: childhood and adolescence through himself and his siblings; marriage through the farcical wedding of Wang Yuejin; giving birth to a child, growing old, and dying through his parents and grandparents. This makes South Gate a microcosm of the whole human world and life cycle as perceived by the narrator-protagonist. The sensitive boy’s solitary but sharp observations on its ugliness and absurdity are likewise perceptions of the human condition and existence in general.

Apart from the typical example of the Suns, the human tragedy of love and beauty destroyed in South Gate is also augmented by the story of the woman Feng Yuqing. Initially Feng is remembered by the lonely boy as a beautiful, gentle young girl who is an ideal love for many of the villagers (chapter 1). However, this goddess-like image is soon destroyed in real life when her lover betrays her and marries another girl. Being thus insulted publicly and losing face for her family, Feng threatens to commit suicide at the
wedding. In this way, the wedding, as a ritual that symbolizes the noble and close ties between separate human beings, is here ironically presented as a tragicomic farce of betrayal, separation, and lack of sympathy.

This abandonment has clearly changed Feng’s life irrevocably: the second time the narrator, as a grown young man, encounters her (chapter 2), he finds that she now lives a difficult life with an illegitimate child. In the daytime she works as a laundress, and at night as a prostitute, an occupation that soon lands her in prison. This destroyed woman is another victim of the poverty and cruelty that surround her in South Gate.

This vision of a life of miserable suffering without love and sympathy between human beings is later extended beyond the Sun family and even beyond South Gate, when the protagonist is adopted by a couple in the town called Sundang 孙荡. In Sundang, where the narrator-protagonist lives for five years with his adopted parents, the same loneliness, cruelty and separation are apparent. In this respect, the place is no different from South Gate. In the family of his adoptive parents, sexual disharmony leads the man to an extramarital affair, and finally results in a violent action in which he kills several others as well as himself, which leaves this boy again an orphan.

In this section, the narrator presents another account of abandonment, that of his childhood friend Guoqing 国庆. Guoqing lost his mother earlier, and is abandoned by his father at the age of nine. Unlike the Sun’s, this is not because the father cannot afford to raise the son, but simply because he wants to live with another woman. The story is especially moving since it is told from the naive viewpoint of Guoqing, and shows his
persistent longing for his father’s love and his continual returning to look for him. We are
given a description of his premature adultlike behavior:

Guoqing woke up one morning when he was nine years old, and he had to
master his own fate. When still very far from being an adult, still far from
throwing off his father’s control, he suddenly gained his independence. This
premature freedom forced him to shoulder his own fate, just as if he was
shouldering heavy luggage, and to stumble about on the crowded streets
without knowing where he was heading. (168).

The boy then stops going to school, and becomes the youngest labourer in the town.

If Guoqing’s experience is a variant of the protagonist’s experience of being
abandoned, then similarly the account of the lonely old woman who is Guoqing’s
neighbour also echoes that of the narrator’s grandfather. Her lonely and strange life is like
that of a ghost, a ghost whose last moments are disturbed by the dog that has always
scared her. She dies on the way home after buying groceries, and her death is explained by
Guoqing, the only person who comprehends her superstitious ways:

Guoqing told us later that the old woman froze to death when she got lost.
She was in too much of a hurry when she went to the nether world: she
even forgot to wear a winter coat and carry an oil lamp. The road to the
nether world was too long to reach the end, and it was both dark and cold.
She walked and walked in a darkness in which one could hardly see one’s
own hands, and as a result she lost her way. The cold wind attacked her
from the front, and she was so cold that she trembled. She really couldn’t carry on, and had to sit down. This is how she froze to death. (182)

This superstitious belief about death reveals not just the sadness of a lonely old woman’s existence, but also the deep fear and darkness in a twelve year-old boy’s heart, which enables him to experience and sympathetically comprehend such a painful event despite his inability to relate to it in an adult fashion.

Moreover, the sadness and separation extends even to the seemingly civilized and happy local family of the Su’s, as the narrator-protagonist finds on gradual acquaintance with the Su brothers. This family, though not so overtly violent as the Sun’s, demonstrates a similar lack of mutual care and real communication: the parents are so busy with their own work that they neglect their children, so that even the sudden death of their son is discovered not by a family member but by an outsider. Su Hang’s moral decline into an ignorant hooligan, and Su Yu’s suppressed curiosity about sex, which leads him to commit a crime and, finally, his unnoticed death, are symptomatic of the coldness and lack of communication that prevail in most of the families depicted in the novel.

Whether we consider the physical abuse rampant in the Sun Family or the spiritual isolation of the Su Family, the crude violence of South Gate or the slightly more disguised emotional neglect at Sundang, these families and the villages or towns where they live are simply extensions of those unnamed towns in Yu Hua’s early works, but with a more realistic appearance. Again and again, the whole concept of family and the possibility of healthy human relations is challenged by this boy’s real experience in life. Separation, fear and pain seem the universal constants, and human bonds are almost completely severed, with the weak, the elderly, and the children becoming the victims who suffer the most.
From Initiation to Personal Growth

As I have mentioned in my introduction, one of the most distinctive features of the younger generation of Chinese writers, including Yu Hua, Ge Fei, Su Tong and others, is the artistic sensibility of "Youth Consciousness," which is manifested in their concern with personal growth, their autobiographical, self-assertive narrators, and their distinctively lyrical, sometimes sentimental, style. To a certain degree, this phenomenon can be compared with the May-Fourth "romantic generation," in that the subjectivism and individualism displayed in the literature of both periods marks the awakening of a consciousness of self both on an individual and a national scale.29

With regard to Yu Hua, this consciousness of youth is most clearly embodied in his consistent concern with adolescent experience, which in his later works develops into the realm of personal growth.30 As I noted above, Yu Hua began his writing career with stories on the initiation theme, like "Leaving Home and Travelling Afar at Eighteen" and "The April Third Incident," involving the strongly subjective perspective of an anguished

30 In order to help readers assess the value of Crying in the Fine Rain within its context, I should mention the relative lack of novels from the Mainland concentrating on personal growth in its own right before the mid-1980s — even, perhaps, during the whole modern period in China. This is a strange phenomenon especially worth noting when we compare it with the Western novel, in which personal origins and experience and their relation with individuals' intellectual and ethical maturation have become one of the main concerns of the genre. And as one scholar has rightly observed, the Bildungsroman is actually the dominant form of Western narrative. The Chinese situation arose partly because of its evolution as a distinct literary tradition (see the first part of my Chapter 1), and partly because even after the May-Fourth "cultural enlightenment," when individualistic philosophies were introduced, the concept of the individual and individualism were still not broadly accepted. And this is not to mention the subsequent violent suppression of individualism during the Communist regime, which wiped out even such meagre beginnings.
young man. And during the past ten years, Yu Hua has constantly returned to this process of maturing and coming-of-age.

Especially since 1989, he has developed the theme of personal growth with extreme enthusiasm, publishing "Love Story" (Aiqing gushi 爱情故事) (1989); "This Story is Dedicated to the Girl Called Yangliu" (1989); "Summer Typhoon" (Xiaji taifeng 夏季台风) (1990); and his first full-length novel Crying in the Fine Rain. All these stories share with the two early initiation stories a preoccupation with adolescent experience, involving a young man’s encounter with an alienated world, and his establishment of selfhood as a protection against outside chaos. Although some are told using third-person narrative, and some using the first-person, these initiation stories all perceive the world from a subjective vantage point, and reconstruct events around the polarity of self and alienated world. On one side, there is a sensitive and innocent, but also frightened and wounded young man. On the other side, the cruel, blind and violent world. The alienation of the one from the other constitutes the inner tension of these stories.

Considering the highly “mature” and didactic narrative voices holding forth in previous literature from the Mainland, this adolescent perspective and experience, admirably matched with a reserved and well-crafted style, is fresh and provocative when viewed in its Chinese context, not naive or immature as some Western readers have felt. 31

Another distinctive feature of these stories is that all the protagonists are placed in an existential situation that might be termed first separation, or even “abandonment,” although in most stories it is a spiritual, rather than physical, loss of home; the adolescent protagonists, neglected by and separated from their parents and persecuted at school, are

31 Andrew F. Jones gives some examples of this response in his article “Chinese Literature in the ‘World’ Literary Economy,” in Modern Chinese Literature, 1994 (Fall) 189.
left alone to face the first shocks of confronting the outside world.\textsuperscript{32} This identification with an adolescent perspective in Yu Hua’s fiction actually inspires its most powerful quality: the ability to evoke an experience of fear and trembling.

In his later works, Yu Hua has also subtly shifted his focus from the unrelenting cruelty of a totally destructive world — apparent in his earlier stories — to the protagonist’s development of the inner order and strength necessary to deal with that same outside world. For instance, in “This Story is Dedicated to the Girl Called Yangliu,” the protagonist appears as a recluse who only goes out in the night and makes no friends with others. The description of events in this novella rejects the conventional outside order, and instead totally accords with the protagonist’s psychological experience. The only reality thus consists of memories, fantasy and dreams that appear even more real and authentic than outside events. Also, the protagonist seems not to care much about the outside world: shock and fear is thus replaced by contempt and alienation. We can sense that a relatively calm and confident self-perception and self-discovery is going on, although of course confusion and pain are also apparent.

I have also become aware of an interesting development in these later stories, that is, the appearance of a retrospective point of view. For example, in “Love Story,” \textit{Crying in the Fine Rain}, and the most recent novel \textit{To Live}, the childhood and adolescent experience is recalled by an adult or an old man, providing the structural juxtaposition of

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{32} This adolescent experience of separation and loneliness is probably related to Yu Hua’s own personal experience. Yu Hua has disclosed that he was very lonely in his teenage years and his parents, like the Su’s in \textit{Crying in the Fine Rain}, were busy doctors who seldom communicated with their children. In some ways, his family seems a typical, though rather extreme, example of provincial town intellectual families, with the parents working all day, and the two children (he has a brother) locked in the home before they were old enough to go to school. It is not clear whether he really had major conflicts with his parents, but it is almost certain that they did not show any concern for his inner development. As a result, the feeling of being trapped and the desire to escape from home are prevalent in most of his writings. See Zhu Wei 朱伟, “Guan Yu Hua” 关于余华 (About Yu Hua), in \textit{Zhongshan}, 1989/4; and “Zizhuan” 自传 (Autobiography) in \textit{Collected Works}, Vol. 3, 381.}
past and present, and his mature, reflective tone adds to the story the sense that it is possible to overcome the difficulties of existence, and grow into manhood.

This is a new theme that Yu Hua’s early initiation stories lack. A comparison of his manner of dealing with “abandonment” in the earlier and later works will clarify this point. In his earlier stories like “April Fourth Incident,” Yu Hua depicts abandonment as closely connected to the cruelty and lack of love between human beings, and shows how it brings deep shock and fear to individuals, especially to innocent, but guilt-laden, adolescents. And when limited to the perspective of anguished teenagers, existence is certainly like being trapped in a maze leading nowhere. But by the time Yu Hua comes to write To Live he has, as he himself claims, moved to the next stage of his life; he has certainly gained a broader perspective on life, and realizes that “the mission of a writer is not to air his grievances, or to denounce or expose; rather he should show people nobility. This nobility is not simple beauty, but a transcendence which comes after understanding all things, treating good and evil equally, and looking at the world with a sympathetic eye.” 33 In this way initiation develops into enlightenment.

To illustrate further, in To Live, Yu Hua opens up both his perspective and subject-matter, depicting how ordinary Chinese people endure and survive various catastrophes, and the “young man” retreats into the background as the recorder of others’ experiences. However, even though the novel doesn’t confine itself to adolescence and the experience of youth, the theme of personal growth and enlightenment through life still lingers. The protagonist is a centenarian man who has experienced all the vicissitudes of modern Chinese history, and his account of his own life story constitutes the major part of this novel. The narrator, however, is a young man who wanders around and collects folk ballads in the countryside, and in one of his journeys, he meets this old man, who tells him his life story from youth to old age. This novel thus contains two related themes, revealed

33 Yu Hua, preface of Huozhe 活着 (To Live), Collected Works, vol. 2, 291.
through Fugui, the old man’s life story as well as through the dialogical relationship between the old man and the young narrator “I”: one is to make known to the world the suffering and survival of ordinary people, here represented by a Chinese peasant family, and the other theme is that of personal growth and enlightenment. Originally a “wanderer” with a decadent lifestyle, Fugui endures all kinds of difficulties and ends up as a survivor who finally understands the simple but profound truths of life. More subtle, but equally important for understanding the work, is the connection between this account and the life of the young man who listens to it. The novel opens with the narrator’s self-portrait in which he depicts himself, too, as a wandering young man just starting his life journey and looking for the true meaning of life. His travels into the lives of ordinary people are thus suffused with the atmosphere of self-education. Now and then, the narrative is also interrupted by the narrator’s own comments and reflections on the old man’s story:

This old man was the one I met first. At that time, I had just started my wandering years; I was young and free of care, and every new face interested me; anything I didn’t know attracted me deeply. It was at that moment that I met Fugui . . . The meeting with Fugui filled my later days of collecting folk ballads with happy expectation. I thought there would be numerous people like Fugui in that fertile and prosperous land . . . However, since then I haven’t met such an unforgettable man as Fugui, one so clear about his own experience, who could talk about himself so brilliantly. He is the kind of person who can see his own self in the past,

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34 According to the ancient anthology the *Classic of Odes* (*Shijing* 诗经), every year the ruler would send a government official to the countryside to collect folk ballads as a means to know the peoples’ feelings. Such collected songs supposedly formed China’s first poetic anthology. This tradition has certainly been kept alive by Chinese writers over thousands of years. They have constantly seen themselves as the voices of the people.
who can precisely see the way he walked when he was young, and can even see how he got old. (Collected Works, vol. 3, 256-7)

Therefore, even though the narrator assumes the position of recorder of the people, he is still a young man like Yu Hua's other protagonists, on the threshold of manhood, searching for the meaning and truth of life.

Thus, Yu Hua's recent works have shown that the "adolescent" perspective, which he intuitively adopted at the beginning of his writing career, has developed into a set of mature, dialectical visions of human life. He seems to imply that on the one hand, separation, and abandonment are existential problems that bring pain and suffering; on the other hand, however, they also set the stage for growing up and living independently in the world. True initiation or revelation is only achieved when there is a self growing against, but not denying, that harsh and alienated world. To use the metaphors from one of his stories "Summer Typhoon," if the inner growth of the boy Baiyang 白扬 can be described as a storm inside, it happens against the background of an unpredictable natural catastrophe—an earthquake.

Such a dialectical understanding of individual growth and its cruel human environment also dominates the development of themes in Crying in the Fine Rain. To conclude my analysis of this novel, therefore, I would like to redress the balance between destruction, and growth overcoming destruction, by detailing several examples of the latter.

Let me start with the central experience of being abandoned and the dominant motif of home in this novel. As I mentioned above, the protagonist Sun Guanglin was abandoned three times before he reached the age of twelve, twice by his real parents, and once by his adoptive parents. This abandonment constitutes the most painful event of his life.

Unfortunately, in the film version of "To Live," this perspective or framework is lost.
adolescent years. And it is treated as both a real and figurative experience of leaving home — that is, home not just as a physical structure but also as a spiritual “place” where a person can find shelter as well as identification. I also noted that the novel opens with the boy’s first memory of leaving his real parents’ house and being taken away by a stranger, his adoptive father Wang Liqiang. At that time, this boy was too young to realize what was happening, and only much later does he become aware of the situation of being in a strange place without seeing familiar people:

When I was approaching my seventh birthday, the changes in my life seemed to make me into another person. I should say that at that time I was always very confused about my situation: it was almost as though the drifting childhood years changed me in an instant from the Sun Guanglin in that noisy South Gate home to the constantly frightened me between Li Xiuying’s moaning and Wang Liqiang’s sighing. (158)

The boy has become confused with his own identity and lost his sense of continuity. Such confusion and despair is most vividly described in the episode when, on his way to school, Sun Guanglin mistakes a strange boy for his brother, and after running after that boy and finding out that he is not his brother, in that instant he becomes aware that he won’t ever go back home: “Suddenly I realized that I had long since left South Gate, and this abrupt shock of reality made me very sad. That was the moment I most wanted to go back to South Gate, but in tears I walked on in the howling north wind” (161). The sense of place and belonging that children develop when they start to notice the world around them thus appears to this boy only in the inverted guise of separation and displacement.

A similar series of events surrounds his second abandonment. It is only after the boy becomes used to his adoptive parents and new home, and starts to establish his own
“social relations,” for instance with his peers at school, that his adoptive parents leave him one after the other. His step-father Wang Liqing’s extramarital affair is exposed, and his resentment leads him to homicide as well as suicide. The widowed Li Xiuying then shouts all day to express her sadness and anguish, and decides to leave town to return to her mother’s home: “Li Xiuying forgot me: an overdose of sadness made her forget everything except herself. As the day gradually dawned, I, just twelve years old, suddenly became an orphan” (224). During this whole time, the adults care only about themselves, never showing any responsibility or consideration for the child, who needs most care at that moment. Now the boy is left with only one choice: to find his way back to the family that had abandoned him five years earlier.

Here I should also draw attention to the interesting structure of this novel, which helps to illuminate this leaving home motif. As I mentioned, the novel, after some fragmentary memories of early childhood and being taken away from home by the adoptive father, starts with the boy’s teenage years after he returns to his real parents’ house as a stranger. After an account of his adolescent years since his return, the last chapter is devoted to the years in his adoptive parents’ house immediately before he returns home at twelve, and the novel ends having come full circle to the point where it opened: the boy, after overcoming all kinds of difficulties, finally arrives home. He proudly announces in front of his real parents’ house: “I am looking for Sun Guangcai (my father).”

This circular arrangement, of ending the novel at the point where it starts, reveals a sad but also sophisticated understanding of the concept of home. On the one hand, this innocent announcement sounds ironic, since we already know from the previous chapters that what follows is not reunion and identification but entrapment and estrangement — the father doesn’t want this son and the home is a house of pain. On the other hand, this ending bears witness to the hidden progress of the protagonist’s growth into a young man who can find his way, who has matured from the little boy who was thrown away and had
no control over his fate six years ago. His trek and search for his home in the countryside depicted in the last part of the novel is therefore a meaningful symbol revealing that even though his life is destined to be a further series of abandonments, the boy can still persist in claiming his right to grow up, and in searching for his home.

This home motive is further developed through its connection to the adult narrator’s present life. During his account of the past, the narrator frequently interrupts to tell us the origins of this account and his present situation. We find out that the narrator-protagonist left home and went to university in Beijing at the age of eighteen. He once tried to forget his unhappy past, to escape from the shadow of South Gate:

After I went a long way from South Gate, my old home of South Gate would never be able to make me feel any affection. For a long time, I stubbornly defended this idea. . . . Once there was a young woman who politely inquired about my childhood and hometown, but I actually became very angry with her: ‘What right do you have forcing me to accept the reality I have already escaped?’ (17)

However, ten years later when he has grown older, returning to his hometown awakens his memories of childhood life in another light: he soon realizes that the past still remains there as experience to help him find a better life. At worst, it can serve as a warning to remind him that the past moral degeneration of others shouldn’t be repeated in his own life:

More than ten years later, I returned to my hometown, and arrived at South Gate alone in the night. . . . Although everything was completely changed, I could still precisely locate the site of my former home and the pool. . . . The sudden appearance of the pool exposed me to another attack
of emotion. The pool in my memory had always brought me warmth; yet actually appearing now, it awakened the reality of the past. Looking at the floating dirt on the surface of the water, I knew that the pool existed not for consoling me but, more precisely, as a sign of the past — not only has it never disappeared from my memory, but still persists there in the fields of South Gate, in order to remind me forever. (17)

To return to one's childhood is thus "a search for one's inner standing,"\textsuperscript{36} and returning home spiritually means to come to terms with the past. In real life, the progression from child to adult is certainly an irreversible process; however, an inner growth towards understanding often manifests itself in the form of a journey back along the river of time. These two contrasting processes, which take place simultaneously, form the hidden structure of this novel. On the surface, we read a story about a lonely boy's childhood; underneath, the reflective tone reveals a process of self-revelation.

There may be careless readings that assume that this novel is told from a child's point of view, that of Sun Guanglin as he is experiencing the events.\textsuperscript{37} Yet unlike those naive narrators who are child-like or mentally immature, this is a childhood story recounted by a much more mature adult narrator, and there is not only temporal distance between the protagonist and narrator but also a cognitive privilege and mental maturity. This process of recalling inevitably involves regrouping and interpreting past experience from the standpoint of the present. This explains why in the novel, childhood events are not reconstructed in chronological order, from his sixth to eighteenth year, but instead they are cut and regrouped into different categories according to the present narrator's meditations on life. Under "South Gate," the narrator describes the environment of his

\textsuperscript{36} Hodgson, \textit{The Search for the Self}, 19.
childhood; under "Trembling," he describes the adolescent experience, and under "Abandonment," he describes the desertion and betrayal of the children by adults. On the whole, the retelling of the past is integrated with his understanding in the present.

Hence, putting the theme of the growth of the narrator-protagonist in an alienating and destructive world, that always threatens to deprive him of the possibility of growing at all, or even surviving, Yu Hua emphasises that the individual has to resist that environment and overcome the various difficulties — both outside and within his mind. This overcoming is sometimes achieved by the protagonist gaining the ability to love and to empathize with others, or finding the strength to pursue persistently what he believes, or simply by enduring the pressure and hostility against him.

To illustrate, as he grows up, the narrator-protagonist constantly encounters the alienated world in the form of careless parents, bullying siblings and classmates, unjust teachers and ignorant villagers. So it is not surprising that alienation, rather than identification, becomes the only way that his self can assert itself and develop according to a different pattern from that of his demonic father, bullying elder brother, irresponsible teacher and abusive classmates. He must close himself off from these "others" in order to be himself. Thus, we notice that Sun Guanglin from a very early age has developed a solitary and observant personality. He is always sitting alone to one side, silently, critically looking at those things that happen around him. This detachment and distance originate in part from his exclusion from his family, but gradually develop into a conscious moral choice accompanied by suspicion of the behavior of adults. For example, in the family fights with the neighbors, the Wangs, in his brothers’ bullying of other children, and in the abuse of the grandfather, he remains an outsider and never involves himself in such bad behavior. When he is mistreated by classmates in school, he decides to be alone rather than remain part of the crowd.

Another kind of overcoming emerges in the novel when, in spite of the separation and loneliness that are essential conditions for growing up in the Crying in the Fine Rain
ethos, the narrator-protagonist chooses to identify with those who are, like himself, young, weak and helpless. Several lyrical and moving scenes take place among the children in this book when sincere care and warm love appear despite the indifferent adult world around them. Examples include the protagonist's two childhood friends when he is in Sundang; the sympathy and friendship between Lulu 鲁 鲁 and the protagonist, which overcomes the difference in their ages; the friendship between the protagonist and Su Yu 苏 宇; the protagonist's identification with his grandfather, and, finally, the attachment and love Lulu shows to her. The love that Lulu, Feng Yuqing's illegitimate boy, shows to his mother is especially demonstrated when he overcomes all difficulties to reach the prison and be close to his mother. This filial effort is such a contrast to the abandonment the adults, including the father of the protagonist's friend Guoqing, inflict on their children. It is in these simple but pure forms of partnership that sympathy, compassion and identification between human beings are displayed. Planted and grown in a harsh and barren soil, their fragile flowers bloom with even greater fragrance. This is a noticeable change in Crying in the Fine Rain, when compared with Yu Hua's previous works. With the novel's extended length and more comprehensive picture of human life, Yu Hua's vision of human nature and human relations is thus enriched, and contains a certain amount of warmth and hope.

Another form of personal growth presented is physical maturation into adulthood, with its first stirrings of sexual impulses. This novel explores adolescent life both from the point of view of psycho-physical development and from the influence it brings to the protagonist's life. The onset of puberty is described as an experience of "trembling" (zhǎnli 颤栗):

When I was fourteen, I discovered a mysterious activity in the dark night, which presently gave me a strange but wonderful feeling. At the moment when this incomparably intense pleasure appeared, the first experience of
trembling also made me very startled. This was the first time I discovered my body using a reaction of terror to express its happiness. (66)

This scene of sexual awareness might be compared with another famous scene in a story by Yu Dafu 郁达夫 written early this century, “Sinking” (chénlún 沉沦). However, whereas Yu Dafu’s May Fourth generation usually linked personal obsession with its social implications, Yu Hua’s generation emphasizes more the significance of personal life in itself. Celebration of the human body and physical development is an underlying feature of their works.

Chapter Two of the novel examines this progression to adulthood in detail, a progression combining happiness and guilt in a curiously Chinese way. The narrator-protagonist shows how, in an ignorant and careless environment, this natural process can become a personal odyssey in which the protagonist has to struggle for years against ignorance to reach enlightenment. There is a long memory of the experience of masturbation, describing the times when he would feel trembling and excitement by night but guilt and remorse in the daytime. Unaided by either parent, and unable to confide in his teacher, or even his siblings and classmates, he must struggle alone to understand what is going on. The following passage reveals this adolescent’s lonely struggle: “My physical development went on as my face grew ever paler. I often stood by the pool of South Gate, watching my own reflection in the water. I saw an emaciated jaw and tired-looking eyes drifting listlessly in the water. . .”(72-73). The teenagers in the novel have to deal with these unsettling experiences alone, trembling in the darkness. Often they cannot overcome the psychological pressure and are destroyed by it, as the experience of the brothers of the Su family shows. Su Hang becomes a shameless hooligan and Su Yu commits a sexual

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assault goaded by insatiable curiosity. As for the narrator-protagonist, he describes being trapped in masturbation, and his struggles with sexual impulses as some of his darkest experiences.

Personal growth in this novel, however, gains its most profound expression in the growth of consciousness, a development that distinguishes it from Yu Hua’s other stories. This theme of spiritual growth and maturation is even presented through the choice of the retrospective form: an adult narrator looking back on his childhood and adolescent years. The intriguing relationship between the protagonist — a lonely, awkward and wounded boy — and the narrator — a much calmer, more confident adult who is trying to come to terms with his own past — is both one of identification and of distancing. And the two worlds of past and present are clearly joined by the reflective tone of the narrator. The function of the narrator — an adult ‘I’ in his thirties — is not only to tell what happened in his past, but also to act as a reflective and understanding interpreter. His reflective tone permeates the whole story and gives the work a thoughtful atmosphere. This reflective awareness of self and self-development apparently reflects a belief that only if one knows and understands one’s own being can one reach fulfilment of self and gain the ability to shape oneself.39

This narrative position is made clear at the very beginning, when the narrator discusses his first memory in life:

I see myself: a shocked child, opening his frightened eyes wide, the shape of his face vague in the darkness. The crying of that woman lasted for a long time. I was so anxious and scared waiting for the arrival of another voice, a voice that would appear to answer the woman’s cries, which would be able to stop her weeping, but it didn’t appear. Now I am able to

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39 Refer to The Search for the Self, op.cit., Appendix 1.
realize the reason for my terror at that moment: it is because I never did hear a voice that came to answer her. There is nothing that makes a person tremble more than lonely helpless crying. (4)

Not only are the events or feelings from the past mediated by being placed in the form of the narrator’s memories, but his own analysis frequently accompanies what he describes in this manner. Throughout the novel, this consciousness of the adult narrator throws light on the benighted past by constantly intruding into the story to give deeper psychological analysis, moral judgment and sympathetic understanding for the characters, as well as for the narrator-protagonist himself.

This capability of understanding presents itself especially in the evaluation of the various characters in the novel. Yu Hua has produced an imaginative and powerful narrator who can explain the characters and himself much better now than in the past when he encountered them as a protagonist. One example is the narrator’s account of the grandfather’s story in Section Three. This section is divided into two parts: the first is the account of the grandfather as a young craftsman; the second involves the grandfather’s later years in South Gate. Both are connected with the narrator’s own childhood experience.

The former account, as the narrator indicates, comes from the grandfather’s telling: “I can’t find out any more about my grandmother’s life in that family. Their past life has been buried with themselves. In the first few years after my grandfather lost his wife, loneliness and sadness made him very enthusiastic about relating grandmother’s past, and when his dim eyes shone, my grandmother revived in his telling” (111). The latter account is partly the narrator’s observations when he was a child at home. Yet the peculiarity of this whole section is that most of it consists neither of eye-witness accounts nor of the narrator’s personal experience. For instance, many of the occasions when his father mistreats his grandfather take place when he is away in the adopted family. He acts
like an omniscient narrator in order to imagine the past and to understand the mysterious figure, his grandfather, who has left such a puzzle in his childhood life. Sometimes he is a kindly, calm old man with a strong will; at other times he is a coward, laughable but calculating underneath: “When I became an adult, I started to establish the true image of my grandfather . . .” (107). In this way, the narrator is able to complete his own version of his family history, and the need to trace his ancestors, even when no certain facts support his conclusions, demonstrates his growing consciousness of self and its links with the past. 40

The significance of this reflective narrator makes itself obvious when we consider most of the characters in Yu Hua’s other stories: those destructive, unthinking creatures without authentic existence and devoid of inner emotions. In *Crying in the Fine Rain*, as I have mentioned above, the characters are much more rounded and have more human touches. And this change, although it may have its “real-life” basis too, reflects the growth of the narrator’s consciousness and ability to understand. As an example, I would cite his treatment of the elder brother’s change from the image of his father to that of a relatively mature individual, mentioned above.

The most important result of this personal growth is self-knowledge gained — “the discovery of one’s true identity and beliefs.” As I have indicated, the adult narrator realizes that from the beginning this retrospection is a consolation that finally comes to soothe the wounds of the past. Recalling his dark experience of masturbation, the reflective narrator has undergone a change of self-judgment: “That worn toilet made me ashamed when I recalled it later, and for a long time, I couldn’t help blaming myself for doing the ugliest thing in the ugliest place. Now I refuse such an attitude of self-recrimination. The choice I made in the past has made me realize that I was a boy who couldn’t find any place to hide. This choice was forced on me by outside reality, and was

40 This aspect is dealt with more fully in my chapter on Wang Anyi’s *Fact and Fiction*.
not my own will” (67). It is in retracing the past that the narrator-protagonist realizes the self that had been crushed by reality; it is in interpreting the past that the narrator-protagonist reasserts his self as a growing consciousness. By emphasizing the reflective understanding of growing up in that difficult social situation, the narrator-self is proven to be a truly conscious subject who can care and understand, as well as give meaning to his own life. By attaining the status of a mature narrator, this character in Yu Hua’s novel has overcome the terrible obstacles of existence, and managed to discover the depth of life.
Chapter 3: On the Margins

... when I awoke in the middle of the night, not knowing where I was, I could not even be sure at first who I was. I had only the most rudimentary sense of existence, as if lurking and flickering in the depths of an animal's consciousness. I was more destitute than a cave-dweller; but then the memory — not yet of the place in which I was, but of various other places where I had lived and might now very possibly be — would come like a rope let down from heaven to draw me up out of the abyss of non-being, from which I could never have escaped by myself. In a flash I would traverse centuries of civilization, and out of a blurred glimpse of oil-lamps, then of shirts with turned-down collars, would gradually piece together the original components of my ego. ¹

Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*

When I was young, I used to feel excited by sudden storms. I would stand in front of the window, looking at the raindrops chasing the people in the fields, looking at the white curtain of rain hide pieces of the forest, and I would feel so satisfied. Later, I found that (writing) fiction provided me with the possibility of reviving such memories, and I always set the time of my stories in the summer. Sometimes, with the change of seasons, the protagonists might stroll under trees in the fall, but in a short while, the air would become wet, the summer would come around again, and the storm would begin without any hesitation — I became really addicted to it. ²

Ge Fei, “What is Fiction?”

² “Xiaoshuo shishenme?” 小说 是 什 么 (What is Fiction?), *Beijing Wenxue*, 1989/3. 100.
Ge Fei is one of the young Avant-Garde writers who first emerged in the second half of the 1980s, publishing several well-crafted stories like “Lost Boat” (Mizhou 迷舟), “Blue Yellow” (Qinghuang 青黄), “The Flock of Brown Birds” (Hese niaoqun 褐色鸟群) and “Whistling” (Hushao 哼哨). His works distinguish themselves by their carefully selected perspectives, labyrinthine structures, and allusive and imagistic language. Sometimes, they appear “obscure” to more traditionally minded readers who are looking for “stories”: they feel that his use of Borgesian-type imagery such as chess-boards and mirrors is too delicate and riddle-like, that his lyrical and tranquil accounts lack real events, and contain too many “narrative lacunae.” However, Ge Fei’s narratives go far beyond mere technical experiments, and to decipher them we must seek the origins of the philosophical concerns behind his fictional world.

In an article entitled “The Core and Configuration of a Story,” Ge Fei provides an analysis of the techniques of modern fiction. He feels that the structure of modern fiction has greatly departed from traditional models. The latter were based on temporal continuity and the cause-effect principle, which imitate “objective reality.” Modern writers, however, no longer try to represent such an objective reality: instead they present

3 “Narrative lacunae” (xushu kongque 叙述空缺) is a useful concept for describing the structure and even the philosophical concerns of Ge Fei’s fictional world. As for the origin of his style, some critics find it in the postmodernist narrative techniques of the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges; others however feel it is related more closely to a traditional Chinese aesthetics of lacunae: see Jing Wang’s discussion of Ge Fei’s fiction in her “The mirage of ‘Chinese Postmodernism’: Ge Fei, Self-Positioning, and the Avant-Garde Showcase,” in Positions, Fall 1993, 365. My understanding of Ge Fei’s use of lacunae is that it cannot be treated as a separate technical issue, but must be related to his whole concern about presenting human existence in the marginal encounters between memory and reality, past and present. Hence, in my subsequent analysis, I generally concentrate on the function of Ge Fei’s various stylistic features, and their relation to the world he describes, rather than merely seeking technical influences from Western or Chinese literature.

4 Ge Fei, “Gushi de neihe yu zouxiang” 故事的内核与走向 (The Core and Configuration of a Story), Shanghai wenxue, 1994/3, 70-76.
the "reality of sense" (ganjue de zhenshi 感觉的真 实). This shift towards emphasising what we might call psychological reality almost inevitably leads to abandonment of linear structure, and the adoption of an open (or "radiating") structure in its place.

In this latter case, Ge Fei maintains, the configuration of the story is decided by the core of that story. Thus when a writer starts a work, he or she often has an initial image or picture in mind. Such an initial image is the first indication of the story’s core, and from here the writer develops the story in all temporal directions. Moreover, this core is often the central concern of a writer, an embodiment of his or her existential anxiety and personal obsession. According to Ge Fei, all serious writers have their own overriding preoccupations, which colour their personalities, emotional and intellectual conceptions, and individual worldviews. Such preoccupations will reappear in various guises, constituting the core of each writer’s works.

These comments on the technique of modern fiction are certainly relevant to Ge Fei’s own writing. When surveying his works since 1986, that year that he published his first short story, it is not difficult to detect that the core of his writing is the representation of human memory. Ever since his first story “Remembrances of Mr. Wu You (Non-existence)” (Zhuiyi wuyou xiansheng 追忆乌牧先生), Ge Fei’s exploration of reality and human life, and especially of human consciousness, has been closely tied to this particular subject.⁵ The exercise of memory can save people from the mistakes of their ordinary judgments and reveal to them truths they had forgotten (“Remembrances of Mr. Wu You;” “Blue Yellow “); memory evokes deeply-hidden desires and dreams but ignores impending danger in real life (“Lost Boat;” “The Poem of an Idiot “); memory can also revive real feelings and sensory perceptions that would otherwise disappear in the grey monotony of everyday life (“The Background”[Beijing 背 景]; “The Trip to Yelang”[Yelang zhi xing 夜 郎 之 行]). Even though sometimes “memory is poisonous

⁵ For Ge Fei’s early works, see his short story collections Mizhou 迷舟 (Lost Boat), Zuojia chubanshe, 1989, and Hushao 嘘 哨 (Whistle), Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 1992.
wine, "it provides the only traces of one’s past life, which, in Ge Fei’s fiction, is the only place where human beings can experience the ecstasy of being alive.

As a result, the characters in Ge Fei’s stories frequently find themselves helplessly drawn down into the river of memory like sleepwalkers, bewildered or enlightened by the moon of the past reflected in the waters, and unconcerned about events still happening all around them. As one critic points out, in Ge Fei’s fictional world, “the act of remembering becomes the meaningful centre,” and memory comes to occupy almost the whole of peoples’ existence. If Ge Fei’s stories often appear to be detective stories, then their only fugitive is memory, and to find clues and traces leading to the past constitutes their only plot.

Moreover, memory is not merely the subject of Ge Fei’s works, but also a guide to the logic of their labyrinthine structure. In most of them, external events or actions are rare, especially those seen from an outer perspective. Instead, he normally presents events surviving within a particular character’s or group of characters’ memories. So each real event is “suspended,” and internalized into a human psychological reaction. Characterization is also usually achieved through presenting characters’ tortuous memories, rather than by describing their behaviour or physical appearance: in this way, Ge Fei reveals their deepest desires, fears or confusion.

Very often these memories are contradictory and fragmentary, riddled with gaps and blanks; sometimes, the introduction of more than one person’s version of events complicates the picture further. Yet though the juxtaposition and interweaving of

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8 Zhang Xudong 张旭东 finds that the structure of some of Ge Fei’s works is similar to that of detective stories, beginning with suspense but very often leading to no solution, “Ziwo yishi de tonghua: Ge Fei yu dangdai yuyan zhuti de jige wenti,” 自我意识的童话: 格非与当代语言主体的几个问题 (Fairytale of Self-consciousness: Ge Fei and Several Themes in Contemporary Chinese Literary Discourse), *Jintian 今天* (Today), 1990, No. 2.
different memories gives his stories a labyrinthine feel, actually Ge Fei’s narrative style is not that difficult if the reader discerns the outlines of the lingering memories that lead the narrative forward.

Ge Fei tends to end his stories in one of two ways, both of which illuminate his conception of the relation between memory and reality: one way is to conclude with a moment of revelation when memory encounters reality, as in “Lost Boat.” The other way is to leave the work open-ended, implying that each memory leads only to the next, and no “definite reality” exists, as in “Brown” and “Blue Yellow.”

Of course, memory is not a new topic in literature, whether Western or Chinese. Especially in modernist Western literature, with its great interest in presenting human psychological reality, memory has been explored to an unprecedented degree. Increasingly during the twentieth century, artists and writers have noticed and sought to describe the profound relation between memory and artistic or literary representation. For example, the French writer Marcel Proust based his whole writing on the idea that creation

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9 Here I am using “memory” (jiyi 记忆) in its broader meaning, including both the acts or performances of remembering, and the general category of that which remains of the past. As an important mental activity, memory holds a significant place in the learning system and aesthetic experience of human beings. Research has shown that memory not only has the passive ability to retain the traces of past experience, but is also a creative, generating and transforming mechanism of human consciousness. It guarantees the continuity of personal identity, sustains living links with others, dead or alive, and helps to make sense of our lives. It also imposes an aesthetic unity on the multiplicity and diversity of experience through time, by establishing relations of similarity and contiguity. In other words, memory (re)constructs reality. Finally, memory might be further divided into its cultural or collective, and its autobiographical or individual, aspects. See “Memory and Poetics,” Chapter 1 of Diane Oenning Thompson’s *The Brothers Karamazov and the Poetics of Memory.* Cambridge University Press, 1991.


is the translation of memory. He believed that “the function and the task of a writer are those of a translator.” 12

Thus, on the one hand, the intimate bond between human life, personality and memory has become a favorite artistic subject, and its implications and significance for personal experience and especially self-consciousness have been explored with great enthusiasm. On the other hand, the mechanism of memory has been used as a dominant means of organising the artistic system of the novel, whether structurally, aesthetically or semantically. 13 Typical methods include using a retrospective framework for the narrative, the technique of association, and synthetic (rather than chronological) structure. Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* exemplifies all these methods to the highest degree.

Ge Fei’s approach to human life through memory and his conception of the essential connection between memory and fiction are unique in modern Chinese literature. In large part, this fascination with memory is a personal obsession. 14 Thus he often uses highly descriptive language imbued with personal sensory impressions to answer abstract questions like “what is fiction?” or “why do you write?” He says, for instance: “Fiction writing is the most important part of my daily life: it brings me into a free space which I can go through alone, and it gives me the chance to revive some undescribed experiences of reality and memory. In writing, the passing of time makes me feel peaceful.” 15

Yet this extensive and conscious utilization of memory in Ge Fei’s writing should be considered along with two important factors, which have largely shaped the cultural milieu of post-Mao China. It is only against this cultural background that we can hope to

12 “Time Regained,” in *In Search of Lost Time*, op.cit.
13 Diane Oenning Thompson’s research on *The Brothers Karamazov* sees memory as “a dominant means of organising this novel’s artistic system.” Refer to Thompson, op.cit. 1.
14 In a personal letter of Sept. 15, 1995, Ge Fei writes that he agrees with a French writer’s statement that “writing is a battle with forgetting” (xiezuo jiushi fan yiwang 写作就是反遗忘) and he has even published an article called “Xiaoshuo yu jiyi 小说与记忆 (Fiction and Memory) to discuss the central relationship of the two.
understand the emergence of Ge Fei's concern with memory. First, there is the profound influence of modern Western literature and philosophy on the Chinese mind, especially among younger intellectuals. Among these Western currents of thought, works on Existentialism (Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre and Camus) and Psychoanalysis (Freud, Jung) have been most frequently translated into Chinese, and have consequently exerted the greatest influence on Chinese writers' understanding of the human condition as well as the relationship between human consciousness and reality. These philosophies have also helped to open up a new perspective among Chinese intellectuals regarding the existence of the unconscious and subconscious in the human psyche.

The fact that these two schools have had such an overwhelming influence on the Chinese consciousness certainly has its sociological causes. After the nightmarish and catastrophic experience of the Cultural Revolution, all optimistic worldviews became suspect and their foundations were challenged, just as in the post-Second World War period in Europe. On the one hand, this resulted in claims for "the absurdity of existence." On the other hand, there was an urgent call for a new humanism that demanded respect for the rights of each individual and recognition of the central and unique value of individual consciousness. Since the writings of the existentialists tended to emphasise the will of the individual, "humanist" Chinese intellectuals have found much of their philosophical support from the school of the absurd.

Another channel through which "post-revolutionary" Chinese intellectuals have received their inspiration is Western literature, especially that of the so-called Modernists,

16 A large number of the books published in the 1980s were translations of Western thinkers and writers since Nietzsche. See note 9 in my "Introduction." Just one example can show the influence and popularity of Existentialism and Psychoanalysis among urban educated Youth: popular local Beijing writer Wang Shuo 王朔's "Wanzhu" 顽主 (The Jokers), which describes the life of a group of wandering youth in Beijing, provides a cynical depiction of this "fashion": whenever one of them tries to attract a girl, he begins to talk about Sartre or Freud to show off to her. This detail is indeed characteristic of Wang Shuo's "anti-intellectualism," but it is quite a realistic reflection of Chinese urban youths' enormous enthusiasm for Western culture.
beginning with Dostoyevsky, Kafka and Proust, and including Faulkner, Borges, Joyce, Woolf, and Márquez, and poets like T. S Eliot and Yeats. It is not only their experimental forms that have greatly influenced the younger generation of Chinese writers, but also the changed paradigm evident in their perspective on life, their challenge to all manner of conventions, both literary and social, and their conception of reality — especially revealed by their extreme interest in peoples’ interior lives.

In many ways, therefore, Ge Fei is typical of his generation of intellectuals. He entered university in Shanghai in 1981 majoring in Chinese literature. After graduation, he remained at that university teaching Chinese literature and creative writing: a position he still holds today. As a college-educated youth of the 1980s who started writing while still at college, the above-mentioned Western influences were central to the formation of his intellectual perspective.

Ge Fei, like his contemporaries, has cultivated a rebellious attitude toward the socialist tradition of modern Chinese literature, which views literature as a simple mirror or record of a time and society. By contrast, he feels more affinity towards modern Western literature and classical Chinese literature. He declares that Borges and Marcel Proust are his favorite writers, the former for his idea of literature as philosophical game, full of symbols and ingenious structures, and the latter for demonstrating that creation is the translation of memory. Both exemplify the idea that “a fiction writer must simultaneously be a philosopher,” which Ge Fei has set as a criterion for his fiction. Certainly in his apprenticeship period, one can detect an obvious imitation of these writers’ styles, and even frequent borrowing of symbols and images from their works.

17 From Ge Fei’s speech at a conference entitled “Xiaoshuo benti yu xiaoshuo yishi” 小说本体与小说意识 (The Essence and Concept of Fiction), *Shanghai wenxue*, 1989/6.
18 Some critics have already noted the symbolism in Ge Fei’s works; one brief analysis of “The Flock of Brown Birds” by Chen Xiaoming reveals the close ties between Ge Fei’s early works and those of Borges. Refer to Chen, ed.: *Zhongguo xianfengxiaoshuo*
He has also been influenced by Classical Chinese poetry and philosophy. As a result, his imagistic and allusive language, and frequent use of classical imagery and figures of speech give his fiction a refined but lingering charm.\(^{19}\)

Along with the influence of Western ideas, the second cultural factor important for understanding Ge Fei's preoccupations involves the revival of personal memory in a post-revolutionary society. A noticeable phenomenon in countries that were formerly totalitarian societies, such as China and the former Soviet Union, is that an awakening individualism and confirmation of self has gradually emerged to challenge the former collectivist ideology. As is well known, revolution, nationalization and collectivization once not only deprived the people of their private property, but also formalized their ways of working, living and even thinking. The communist depreciation of the worth of the individual, the enforced suppression and annihilation of the self, and the subordination of the individual to the group were once so complete that even diaries, private letters, and communications between lovers and couples were examined by the authorities without any

\textit{jingxuan} \text{中国先锋派小说精选 (Selection of Chinese Avant-Garde Fiction).} Gansu renmin chubanshe, 1993. 105-107.

\(^{19}\) My first meeting with Ge Fei influenced greatly my understanding of his works as a whole, and \textit{On the Margins} in particular. That was in the summer of 1990, at the Institute of Comparative Literature, Peking University. Like many literary seminars and salons at that time, this seminar, which was entitled "modernism and contemporary literature," included several literary critics, scholars, university teachers, graduate researchers (both Chinese and foreign) and writers. Yu Hua, Ge Fei and Liu Yiran were among them. Ge Fei didn't talk much, but he mentioned Borges and Proust several times, and seemed very much to admire them for their ability to express philosophical ideas in literary works. During the lunch break, I had a chance to talk. The conversation started with the book he was holding. It was the second volume of a Chinese translation of \textit{In Search of Lost Time}. The translation of this seven-volume masterwork was a huge project still in progress. Ge Fei recommended this work so enthusiastically that he even offered to lend me the first volume when I told him I had difficulty finding it. Obviously he had also brought it to Beijing with him. That day, two young writers impressed me with their different styles: Yu Hua, with his ironic comments on Zhang Yimou's "Romanticism" in his cinematic works and his careless manner; and Ge Fei, with his "dream-walker's" eyes and expression, and, despite his reticence, his real enthusiasm for Proust. It was at that time, I believe, that Ge Fei was preparing or even starting to write his "Proustian" novel \textit{On the Margins}, published at the end of 1992.
regard for personal privacy. The very idea of personal identity, with its private feelings and individual memories, was naturally denounced as inessential, even harmful for peoples' public identity and collectivist consciousness, hence it was to be obliterated.20

Scholars of sociology, history and the arts have in common noticed the changing nature of the relation between the state and the individual in recent Chinese society. A general trend towards increasing individual autonomy and reestablishing personal identity has occurred, cheek by jowl with the newly developing market economy supported by the “perestroika” policies of the Deng Xiaoping era and the resultant collapse of the Communist ideology regarding human nature and consciousness. Not surprizingly, when people are granted some freedom to express their true inner concerns, they will enthusiastically explore private spaces once more, including particularly their personal memories.

One scholar of Russian literature has noticed that a major theme in the literature and literary scholarship of Russia (formerly part of the totalitarian Soviet Union) is memory.21 There, individual memory becomes a synecdoche for reviving a lost wholeness. There is a parallel process going on in China today, though with a slightly different appearance, since the government and officialdom still exert quite strict control over cultural production. Chinese expressions of private sensibility can be found most notably in two guises: there are the dozens of autobiographies and memoirs continually being published in English about the personal experiences of Chinese individuals, now expatriates, during the revolutionary period — two of the most famous being Wild Swans:

20 I still remember that even in primary school, Mao’s criticism of petty bourgeois consciousness would be quoted to children who were just starting to display independent and outstanding thinking.
21 Diane Oenning Thompson points out that “memory has recently become a major theme in Russian literature and scholarship. This interest has arisen largely as a response to those Soviet policies which aimed to suppress and efface whole areas of Russian history and culture.” See Thompson, op. cit. preface, 13.
Three Daughters of China, and Life and Death in Shanghai. These stories are written overwhelmingly from an individual perspective, and concentrate on the private lives of their subjects, yet also reflect a whole historical era. Another manifestation, less straightforward but more relevant to the artistic world, is the profound change occurring in contemporary literature within China. The literature of the 1980s, especially the works of young writers emerging in the late 1980s, has taken a different route from the mainstream of previous modern Chinese fiction, i.e. socially-oriented realist works which concern themselves with public events and often neglect the presence of inner human experience. Recent writers have not only expressed to a great degree anxiety about lost identity and an orientation toward reestablishing the self as an individual entity; they have also been at the forefront of a movement which aims at freeing literature from the violence of politics and reviving artistic autonomy in the name of the subjectivity of literature.

With these factors forming the background for his writing, we can better understand why Ge Fei has chosen to explore a fictional field seldom examined by previous modern Chinese writers. From the very beginning, Ge Fei’s experiments with narrative, which positioned him among the group labelled as avant-garde or experimental

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23 The declaration “I do not believe” (wo bu xiangxin 我不相信) by the poet Bei Dao 北岛, and the question “Who Am I” (wo shi shui 我是谁) posed by the novelist Zong Pu in the late 1970s seem to mark the ideological starting point of contemporary Chinese writing after Mao’s death. See Bei Dao, “The Answer” in Geremie Barme and John Minford, ed. Seeds of Fire: Chinese Voices of Conscience, Bloodaxe books, 1989. 236; and Zong Pu, “Wo shi shui 我是谁, in Zong Pu xiaoshuo sanwenxuan, Beijing chubanshe, 1981.
24 As I mentioned in my introduction, in the mid-1980s, an article entitled “Lun wenxue de zhutixing” (On the Subjectivity of Literature) by Liu Zaifu, provoked a nationwide debate, and this controversy can be seen as a theoretical expression of the persistent concern for individual perspective and artistic autonomy since the later 1970s. For Liu’s article, see Wenxue pinglun, 1985/6 and 1986/1.
writers, should be attributed to this new concern with peoples’ interior world and consciousness, and especially the significance of memory in their lives.

Before *On the Margins*, the majority of Ge Fei’s fictional works had already explored human existence and consciousness through memory. In fact, some of these works are simply, according to my understanding, allegories of memory, for instance “The Trap” (*Xianjing* 陷阱) and “The Flock of Brown Birds.” However, in these shorter works he wasn’t able systematically to develop his idea of the central place of memory in human life: it is as if he could only capture some traces of recollection. Also, it seems he hadn’t yet found a form where memory — that universal, eternal experience of human beings — could be presented through a particular historical being. Perhaps, that is why sometimes Ge Fei’s early works give the impression that there is too much craft in their narrative technique but that they remain relatively light in substance — here, the title of his first story, “Remembrance of Mr. Nonexistence” might be an ironic comment on this drawback. However, with the publication of *On the Margins*, Ge Fei finally discovered a way to explore memory on a much broader canvas.

**A Shattered House and a Destroyed Self**

*On the Margins* was written in 1991, and according to Ge Fei, the conception of this novel was directly related to his experience befriending an old man called Zhong Yuelou 仲月楼 in his hometown, who became the real-life prototype of the narrator-protagonist in *On the Margins*. Zhong, like the narrator “I,” had been through all the

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25 In the preface of *On the Margins*, Ge Fei writes: “The influence on my writing of the contact between Zhong Yuelou and myself has more to do with stylistic factors than with subject matter and ideas . . . Maybe the characters in *On the Margins* have nothing to do with Zhong Yuelou, but I know very well that they face exactly the same fate.” See *Bianyuan*, Zhejiang weyi chubanshe, 1993. 2. In subsequent references to the novel, the page numbers are given in parentheses according to this edition. This novel was first published in *Shouhuo* 收获 (Harvest), 1992/6. All the translations of Ge Fei’s literary works, articles and letters in this thesis are mine. It is to the real Zhong Yuelou that this book is dedicated. Confusingly, Ge Fei uses the same name, Zhong Yuelou, to refer to the
vicissitudes of life in the rapidly changing years of the twentieth century. During the Cultural Revolution period, he was one of those singled out for terrible humiliation, and his close friend, undergoing similar suffering, could not bear it and committed suicide. Before this friend died, he sent the old man a letter telling him his intention. Understanding the friend’s bitterness, the old man didn’t prevent him, but instead sent him an elegy as he had requested, including the lines: “The same sounds I echo; the same spirit I seek” (tongsheng xiangying, tong qi xiangqiu 同声相应，同气相求). Yet despite all this pain, the old man survived to witness another huge change during the Deng Xiaoping era, and died a natural death after On the Margins was published.

Compared to the death of the other man, the real Zhong Yuelou’s determination to live on inspired Ge Fei’s writing of this novel. It moved him to pose the question: “In a country with such a practical sense of reality, if a person like him experiences all kinds of vicissitudes, yet still lives on, then what kind of thing supports his existence?” It was to look more closely at the catastrophic effects of society on the self, and the human ability to endure and even recover, that Ge Fei composed his novel. And inevitably, he looked for answers to this problem that would transcend the conventional concepts of reality, self and society provided in previous paradigms of “socialist alienation” and its “objective” approach. As a result On the Margins concerns itself exclusively with “a self-motivated process of de-alienation from within.”

narrator-protagonist’s friend in the novel — who commits suicide in the Cultural Revolution. The fictional character Zhong Yuelou in fact resembles the friend of the real Zhong: see main text below.

27 In these previous works, as I suggested earlier, the approach to reality is exclusively a social and historical one, and historical determinism by its very definition makes history the destiny of the individual. If, as these works claim, the identity and substance of a human being depends totally on his or her public life and historical position, then the narrator-protagonist of On the Margins is nothing. He has failed at climbing the social hierarchy, is treated as a counter-revolutionary in political terms, becomes a cuckolded husband in his family life and ultimately a despised, lonely old man in his village.
Relatively short for a novel, the structure and content of *On the Margins* nevertheless provide an excellent case study of the new narrative mode of the late eighties and early nineties, which can claim to have totally broken away from the social realist tradition. One could call Ge Fei's work a mimesis of consciousness, in which the only protagonist is "this varying, this uncircumscribed spirit with as little admixture of the alien and external as possible." 29

Like Ge Fei’s other pieces mentioned above, *On the Margins* is once again a mental narrative with inner life as its focus. The framework of this two hundred page novel is relatively simple, and can be summarized in one sentence: an old man recalls his personal past. Told from a first-person, autobiographical perspective, the narrator "I" is a bed-ridden old man in his late eighties living in a southern village, who describes himself in a series of vignettes from different stages of his life and in various places.

Using the theoretical terminology of Dorrit Cohn, we can describe *On the Margins* as a combination of autonomous monologue and memory monologue. 30 It consists of forty two episodes, clearly divided between two spatio-temporal realities. One is that in which the “I” narrator is remembering — a relatively short period from sometime in the late 1980s to the spring of 1990 — and the setting is the narrator’s home, Garden of Date and Pear (*Zao li yuan* 枣梨园). 31 It is worth noting that even in these remembering-narrative sections, we do not see merely a momentary present without temporal substance, but instead notice the passing of time and subtle changes of emotion and growth within a mind. As I will demonstrate, these sections display a process of overcoming nothingness

31 Since the names of the characters and places in this novel often have meaning, rather than being randomly chosen, I translate them into their English equivalents wherever possible, and give the Chinese only after the first occurrence.
and death to reach peace and understanding. This act of remembering is presented as an autonomous monologue — the old man’s perceptions of his surroundings — which evokes the other part of the novel — memory monologue.

The other spatio-temporal reality is that which the “I” narrator remembers. These remembered episodes cover a whole lifespan running from the narrator’s early childhood through his adult years right up to the moment when they merge into the remembering act of the present. The memories involve the narrator-protagonist’s various adventures, or more accurately displacements, as well as the different women, friends and enemies he has encountered in society. Not explicitly stated, but still carefully implied, is the fact that this eighty-year personal life parallels the most turbulent time in modern Chinese history, from the early Republican period in the 1910s to the Deng Xiaoping period beginning in the late 1970s, and on to 1990.

It may be helpful, first of all, to unravel the complex thread of this personal life, with reference to its social context, and then to show how Ge Fei obscures that context by concentrating on private concerns. The narrator-protagonist’s journey in life starts on the eve of the Republican revolution, when his father, a Qing government official, leaves the old city of Jiangning to flee back to his hometown, Wheat Village (Maicun 麦村). His father dies soon afterwards, and the boy’s childhood is overshadowed by his mother’s depression, and his own nightmares and loneliness. Quite early on, his father’s maid initiates him sexually. He is determined to escape this old place, full of death and ghosts

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This is a process (rather than just a moment’s realization) which is not made very explicit in the novel, but I was able to deduce it after reading the novel for the second time, especially after careful examination of Sections 4, 18, 22, 33, 37, and 42. For example, in Section 4, it is summer with rainy weather, and Leper Song is still alive. Xiaoqin is still innocent and quite friendly to the old man. In Section 18, it is fall, and the old man is on the verge of death. In Section 22, it is winter with snow, and Xiaoqin is gradually becoming impatient with the old man; in section 42, the story moves to spring, Xiao Qin has become totally estranged from him, and the old man is left utterly alone.
of the past, but his journey is delayed again and again by an arranged marriage with one Azalea (Dujuan 杜鹃) and the death of his depressed mother.

Finally, he becomes a student in a military officers’ school in the early 1920s, and after graduation he takes part in several battles, which are among the major confrontations of the Northern campaigns and the first Civil War period. During that time, he meets a person who becomes his lifelong friend, Zhong Yuelou 仲月楼, who is a doctor in the army. The narrator-protagonist gradually becomes tired of the cruelty and meaninglessness of war and attempts to escape.

The outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, far from inspiring him to acts of patriotism, only exacerbates his weariness, and once wounded in battle and saved by local villagers, he seizes one chance to escape. However, during his period of recuperation in Eastern Station (Dongyi 东驿), he witnesses a raid by the Japanese against Chinese civilians, including their public rape of his lover Butterfly (Hudie 蝴蝶), which will destroy her and her family forever.

The narrator-protagonist finally returns home, only to find that his wife, Azalea, has had an affair with the village head, his enemy Leper Song (Song Laizi 宋癞子), though this was owing to her mistaken belief that her husband had died. Since Azalea is too old to bear children, she asks him to sleep with Little Button, the maid who had stayed in the household even after the narrator’s father died. Little Button leaves after she gives birth to a stillborn baby.

It is now the 1940s, and an underground revolutionary movement gains support in the village, a sign of the impending change to a new Communist “dynasty.” After the 1949 revolution, however, Leper Song still remains as the village leader. The narrator-protagonist is expelled from his household in the Garden of Date and Pear and moves to a smaller house outside the village. Soon, he is accused of counter-revolutionary activities, sent to a reform camp, and forced to work there for more than ten years.
Zhong Yuelou, the narrator’s fellow soldier in the Nationalist army, is also regarded as a “class enemy.” During the Cultural Revolution, he and Zhong undergo even more humiliation, public criticism, insults from the villagers and betrayal by relatives and friends. Zhong cannot stand the pressure and commits suicide. However, the narrator-protagonist survives, outliving even his beloved Azalea and his enemy Leper Song.

In 1981, after he is rehabilitated, he visits Butterfly, his erstwhile lover, whose transformation into a totally alienated person makes him realize the irreversibility of fate. Finally, with the deaths of his enlightened teacher Xu Fuguan and the maid Little Button, he becomes the oldest man in the village. He is occasionally visited by the great granddaughter of Little Button, and it is her arrival that brings him to reminisce about the past.

The narrative shifts repeatedly from moments of remembering to remembered events, and the power of the novel lies in the relationship between these two worlds. The coexistence of two spatio-temporal realities in *On the Margins* emerges as particularly distinctive when one compares the novel with Yu Hua’s *Crying in the Fine Rain* which, despite its similar mixture of remembering present and remembered past, doesn’t attempt to elaborate upon the circumstances surrounding the adult narrator’s monologue. By contrast, Ge Fei clearly indicates that only through the narrator’s remembrance can fragments of the past emerge like ice from water, and his present consciousness inevitably shapes the past, changing and transforming it and investing it with meaning. One cannot overlook the fact that past events are presented as remembered parts of the narrator’s consciousness, triggered successively by his present situation. And this double reality gives us a clue not only to what is remembered but also to how and why it is remembered, namely, that the activity of remembering somehow restores a sense of worth to the protagonist.
Since this design is an important device for understanding the theme of self in *On the Margins*, I would like to take a closer look at the kinds of circumstances that trigger the remembering mind of the narrator.

There are six complete sections — sections 4, 18, 22, 33, 37 and 42, as well as some introductory and concluding sentences in other sections, which concentrate on the moments of remembering, and they take place exclusively in the Garden of Date and Pear. More precisely, the “I” narrator is now virtually confined to bed in one room within this house, and his remembering occurs in that room.

This physical setting, the only reality now perceived by the old man, seems to be a projection of his psychological state. He has lived in this house, on and off, ever since his early youth, and it bears traces of much of his personal experience. To the old man, it seems to have “become dilapidated and ruined in one night . . . and through the window, I can see the broken walls and ruined pavilions hidden behind the trees” (88). The decline of the house is due not only to the ravages of time, but also to lack of care over the last couple of decades — it was taken away by the village leader and used as an office, and only recently returned to its owner, who is now alone. As the old man’s memory revives the prosperous days of his early years when human sounds and flourishing plants filled the house and garden, its present deserted state reminds us that the old man shares a similar experience with his house. He too is in bad physical condition, and after years of suffering and neglect, is waiting for his last day: “I am already old, just like a dying tree, breathing my last breath in silence” (15).

More significant than this shared decline are the personal relations and private memories embodied in and evoked by this old house. As the old man’s monologues jump from his visual and auditory perceptions of the house to the scenes from his past evoked by those perceptions, we gradually come to realize his deep attachment to this place: the hidden relationship between the narrator and his home.
Since his childhood during the Republican revolution, when his father fled from the chaotic urban world back to his rural hometown, this house has been a kind of witness to his growth as well as to his suffering. Inherited from a local gentry family, it was initially an almost utopian retreat distanced from the violence of warlords and revolutions, and the narrator-protagonist stayed here until he first left home as a young man. In this place, he experienced the death of his father, the secret affair of his mother, early feelings of paranoia, first love and marriage. And in his subsequent wandering years, this house became the symbol of peaceful domestic life. After he returned exhausted from his travels through the country in the late 1930s, he again stayed in this house, living the life of a recluse. However, the social turbulence that had seized the world outside finally invaded this secret rural place. During the mass campaigns and collectivization of the early 1950s, the narrator was expelled from his house, and it was taken over by the village government. The house was only returned after the old man’s rehabilitation in the early 1980s, but by this time he has become a lonely and destroyed person just like his ruined dwelling.

The second characteristic of the Garden of Date and Pear is its function as an outward manifestation of and inspiration for the introverted and self-generated remembering mind. As with the settings of Ge Fei’s previous works, which are usually on the margins of society and isolated from the real world, such as the “waterside” (shuibian 水边) in “The Flock of Brown Birds,” and the “Madhouse” (Jingshen bingyuan 精神病院) in “The Verses of an Idiot,” the Garden of Date and Pear as location for the remembering mind is far more than simply a rural courtyard. Rather, it is a regained private space whose walls shut out the noise of the outside world. We notice, too, that the Garden of Date and Pear, like its lonely owner, stands out in the village, and later this uniqueness is transformed into a kind of isolation and enclosure, especially after the years when class division and class struggle had cast their shadows over peoples’ relationships.
Real people now seldom visit this place, and no events of significance take place there: the sense of enclosure has become almost overwhelming.

In the first three of the six sections where the present situation is described—Section 4 “Little Button” (*Xiaokou* 小扣); Section 18 “The Death” (*siwang* 死亡); and Section 22 “Xiaoqin” (*Xiaoqin* 小琴)—the old man frequently mentions his rare contacts with the outside world. Through his description of his surroundings, however, we notice the changing seasons, going from summer to autumn to winter—and hence the infrequency of those contacts. We discover, that the only time the villagers visit him is when he is about to die, and they are in a hurry to bury him. We also discover that there is a retarded girl called Xiaoqin who shows some compassion and visits him now and then, and occasionally, when she brings some food and cleans the house for him, she also brings some news about the village. The old man tries to tell her about the past, though she shows little interest in his story. But as the narrative continues, it becomes clear that Xiaoqin has also grown into just another young local, ambitious to leave the village and find work in town. She begins to show her impatience with the old man, comes less and less frequently, and finally doesn’t show up at all, even pretending not to know him. She, too, becomes one of the “others.”

In the other three parts describing the present—Section 33 “The Destination” (*Guisu* 归宿); Section 37 “Little Button” (*Xiaokou* 小扣); and Section 42 “The Sound of Silence” (*Jijing de shengyin* 寂静的 声 音), even those peripheral contacts with the outside world disappear: not only does the surrounding world retreat still further, but even the sense of passing seasons is lost. Now what the old man perceives are only objects in his immediate vicinity: a cup, a withered flower, a radio in his room. There is no longer any communication with others or with the world outside the house. He has completely become “a prisoner of the past,” and one might say that the narrative now proceeds with
the only remaining member of the audience having disappeared. It has become the lonely monologue of a person aiming to communicate only with himself.33

Thus when I say that this novel presents an “interior monologue,” I do not simply mean that it is unvoiced, but also that the remembering mind belongs to such a solitary and anti-social person.34 As a result, “memories have replaced concrete living as the locus for human significance.”35

The physical separation of the old house from the outside world is also a projection of the spiritual alienation of the old man from the people around him and society and history in general. It reveals a mental orientation of deep suspicion towards the outside world and defensive withdrawal to the subjective inner self. Several passages in the novel illustrate this point. For instance: “Every morning, I carefully distinguish the various noises from the village . . . No matter from which remote corner they come, when they reach my ears, they have transformed into an indistinct hum”(88). Everything in the world merges into a single formless mass and this mass is definitely hostile: “The new generation in the village looks at me with a curious and scornful contempt, as if they feel impatient with my being over eighty and still living”(15). “I have spent the majority of my life in the village. But now I feel totally estranged from it again . . . I am afraid of bumping into anyone, just as one with diseased eyes is afraid of sunshine” (15). As the narrative

33 This situation, where the recaller is totally isolated from the world and drawn deep into his inner world, is typical of the characters in Ge Fei’s fiction. We may remember the writer “I” in “Brown Birds,” who hides himself in an other-worldly place called “Waterside,” or the urban youth who is lost in a modern city in “The Trip to Yelang”; or the psychologist who finally becomes an inmate of a madhouse in “The Poem of An Idiot.” Even in those seemingly action-oriented stories like “The Organ” (Fengqin 风琴) and “Lost Boat,” the characters are also trapped in memory and forget the world around them.

34 This inwardsness and solitude becomes particularly noticeable when contrasted with the public spaces in previous Chinese novels: streets, squares, battlefields, workshops in factories, busy fields in the countryside, or even crowded households of several generations. See my Chapter 1 on social realist novels.

gradually unfolds, we find that this sense of agoraphobia and paranoia has its origins in depression, from which he has suffered ever since he was a child, added to fear of others that is largely a result of years of being humiliated and mistreated as a "counter-revolutionary" since the early 1950s.

The hostility of others causes in the old man persistent doubt about his self-worth and a continuous anxiety of identity. Like the majority of characters in Ge Fei’s other stories, this old narrator is timid, introverted and sensitive, sometimes even displaying an artist’s sensibility. Unlike the "heroes of the epoch" (shidai de yingxiong 时代 的 英 雄) found in socialist realist works, these people are just small figures who are drifting on the tide of time, having little control over their fates. Born in this changing and chaotic period, they very often cannot deal with what life throws at them, and are miserably destroyed by the outside world. The narrator-protagonist of On the Margins was originally a descendant of country gentry, but later became a Nationalist military official and hence, in the Communist period, a counter-revolutionary. He was thrown into prison and only rehabilitated in the early 1980s. These enforced identities have made him lose confidence in his humanity, causing constant feelings of inferiority and nothingness. Hence his comment: “I am afraid of bumping into people, just as a person with diseased eyes is afraid of sunshine... In the village, I tremble all the time, and dare not go out in the daytime. Sometimes when I have to go to the grocery store to buy some cigarettes, or some toilet paper, I have to go along a remote path under the cover of darkness. I say to myself, I am a poisonous weed, which grows only in shit” (15-16).

This shame and sense of being nothing especially makes him anxious about the coming of death. It is very evident that the old man’s recalling starts and ends with the deaths of his lover, Little Button (in Section 4), and of his childhood teacher, the centenarian Xu Fuguan (徐 复 观 in Section 42) respectively. The deaths of these two, his contemporaries, forcibly remind him of the unavoidability of his own death, and in fact during his recollections there is a moment when he comes face to face with death: “I am a
dying person. In the eyes of the villagers, I have died already” (88). In this case, the ruthless villagers feel that he has lived too long as a burden to society (he is among the few old men who need their help); and some even suggest burying him before they have made sure that he is dead. This recurring anxiety of identity and confrontation with the emptiness of mortality drives the old man to redefine himself, not according to the standards of the outside world or the perspective of others, but by his own act of remembering himself.

A Private Vision of History

Discussing the importance of events and chronological order in the development of realist narration, Terdiman points out: “The essence of the realist paradigm is its portrayal of the world as a terrain of human action . . ., [and] the dynamic tone of realist narration . . . is the account of a concrete event.” 36 This emphasis on action and events must base its logic of causality on a time chain. And in fact, as Marston Anderson argued, modern Chinese fictional narrative, with its social promises and with Marxist theory as its ideological base, evaluates highly the progressive aspect of human life, and class struggle as the dynamic force to push history forward. Thus events consisting mainly of tangible activities become the basic elements in such works, which inevitably build up to their only end: provoking the masses to revolution. 37 As a result, such a linear structure and attempt to imitate real events has, as I mentioned earlier, become almost a definitive requirement for the modern Chinese novel.

By contrast, we notice that On the Margins does not attempt to tell a story where events are related in the sequence of their occurrence. Instead, in the form of remembrance and interior monologue, it describes the imprint left by events on a memory

and sensibility and displays a private and personal perspective towards history and reality. Hence this novel confines the reader’s attention to the inner world of the protagonist-narrator, not to the activities of the past life itself, and the 42 episodes that constitute *On the Margins* are actually mental scenes joined loosely through mental association, rather than dramatic events joined by temporal or causal order.

To illustrate this point in more detail, we notice first that in all forty-two sections of the novel, a complete objective account of an event is never even attempted. These episodes present a kind of coverage of the past, but do not fill in the blanks; thus they remain like so many fragments. Each section presents one or more of these fragments of past events as it happens to be remembered, including subjective impressions, reactions and inner reflections about the outside world. Continually, the account emphasizes the narrator-protagonist’s feelings and reactions, both in the past and present. These basic units I call mental scenes, to indicate their imagistic and emotional character.

For example, in the mental scene of his years as a Nationalist soldier, the narrator hardly gives any idea of which battle and exactly what year he is talking about — the public facts beloved of historical fiction — and instead emphasizes scenes in which his peaceful village was destroyed by the fighting, his memories of young women and their warmth, and the fear and horror he experienced when burying wounded victims on the battlefield while they were still alive.

In some sections, all significant actions or events seem to be deliberately avoided. For instance, Section 24 describes the protagonist returning home in the late 1930s after having wandered around the country for about fifteen years. It concentrates on his first catching sight of his home in the distance. After the narrator-protagonist briefly recounts the seven-day journey and the tears forming in his eyes when he first recognized his village, the rest of the episode is dedicated to a description of the village under the midday sun. No events of significance take place: there is only a stream of visual and auditory
impressions. However, the reader gains a sense of the importance of this place in the narrator’s mind.

Even in those sections that do involve events or actions, the emphasis lies more on the side of the narrator-protagonist’s subjective reaction to them; frequently, too, the events are just used as a prelude to more reminiscence about the past, and thus are not related completely. Section 9, “Butterfly,” is the account of his two encounters with a woman called Butterfly, in which he emphasizes the elegant, restrained and beautiful impression she leaves. Both are descriptions of his observation from a distance, giving hardly any idea who this woman is, or what the people in the scene are doing. The section starts with the narrator-protagonist watching Butterfly’s father and fiancé (though the identity of these two is not made clear at this stage) as they persuade her to leave. In fact, even this small detail is not made clear and only by relating this episode to later sections can we find out that she is fleeing from the Japanese. What we read here is only that two men talk with her one after the other, and finally the young woman reluctantly gets on a cart. This is the narrator’s first encounter with her. Then follows a description of the narrator-protagonist’s watching Butterfly riding a horse and saving her from her mount when it runs out of control, an episode that happened half a year later. Despite the factual confusion, the narrator’s adoring impression of Butterfly is unmistakable throughout the section.

Similarly, Sections 28 and 29, entitled “Xu Fuguan” and “Crossing the River” (Yuehe 越河) record the period in the early 1950s when the narrator-protagonist was sent to labour-reform prison. Life in prison also starts with a memory of childhood: the sudden change brought on by the family’s move to the countryside and his parents’ isolation from the outside world. A transitional sentence then joins this memory with a parallel reality — another sudden change in his life caused by imprisonment, which he feels is similar to his mother’s confinement to the village in his early years: “During those days in Crossing the River labor-reform prison, the surrounding wall cut off my relations with the outside.
Gradually, I even forgot where I was” (154). Now we realize that the preceding memory of his home is what he dreamed or recalled while in prison: “through the twinkling stars I see the past: I drown myself in the blue moon, and I smell the fragrance of the withering flowers, grass and trees in my memory” (154). After giving an account of his surroundings and boring life in prison, a casual remark while chatting with the other prisoners triggers his next memory of the past: a recollection of the woman called Flower and the Beekeeper House where she lived, which leads into Section 30. The prison is forgotten.

Obviously, the narrator cares little about how and why he is put into prison, or about providing information on prison life and what goes on between the prisoners. Instead what concerns him, and what the novel overwhelmingly presents, is a psychological vision of reality, not a description of reality itself. The narrator breaks up the original events and rearranges them according to a psychological order, to form the basic units, or mental scenes, of On the Margins. A process that Richard Terdiman has called “depreciation of action” is taking place.

The clearest consequence of such a subjective approach to human life is that when the past is examined, we receive a private vision of “public” history. As I mentioned above, since he is aiming to redefine himself through recalling his past, the memories of the old man in On the Margins are almost exclusively concerned with the personal, private “history” of one individual. “Public” history is relevant only insofar as it fits with the protagonist’s attempt to rediscover himself through his memories, i.e., only in a very indirect sense.

Although the eighty years of the narrator-protagonist’s life coincide with almost all the important social events of modern Chinese history, events that could so easily lead in the direction of publicizing, or overlooking, the private — as in much previous Chinese fiction — On the Margins instead heads in the opposite direction, transforming even major political revolutions into mere stages in a personal journey.
Illustrations of this emphasis on personal life, and consequent depreciation of social and public events, abound. The clearest indication of the reversed priority lies in the subtitles dividing the sections of the novel, which show the narrator's tendency to dwell on particular themes. They consist either of the names of people important to the old man, for example, the women he loved — Azalea, Flower (Huar 花儿), Butterfly, Little Button — his friend Xu Fuguan, and his enemy Leper Song, or of dates that have deep significance for him, like “The Winter of 1925” (Yijiuerwu nian de dongtian 一九二五年 的 冬 天), “1949” (Yijiusijiu nian 一九四九年), and simply “May” (Wu yue 五 月). Certain places occur too, such as “Wheat Village,” his home village; “Eastern Station,” where he stays for two years recuperating from a wound before finally returning home in the late 1930s; and “Crossing the River” a labour-reform prison where he is incarcerated for over ten years from the early 1950s to mid 1960s. Finally, the major events in his personal life are indicated with titles like “I Lost My Father” (Wo shiqu le fuqin 我 失 去 了 父 亲), “I Got Married” (Wo jie le hun 我 结 了 婚), “I Arrived in Xinyang” (Wo daoda le Xinyang 我 到 达 了 信 阳); and his general meditations on life come up in sections entitled more abstractly “Road” (Daolu 道 路), “Shadows” (Yinying 阴 影), “Death” (Siwang 死 亡), and “Enduring” (Renshou 忍 受).

Judging by the titles, it is obvious that very few of these episodes of reminiscence are concerned with the broad historical picture. Instead, the autobiographical memory emphasizes landmark events in the narrator-protagonist’s personal history, such as the family moving, his marriage, the first time he goes into battle, expulsion from his house, incarceration in reform prison, and the like. Interspersed with such major personal events are numerous mundane occurrences of everyday life that have stuck in his memory: a moment of puzzlement when he discovers his mother having an affair; a vivid memory of the smell of his lover; or the enormous fear caused when one of his nightmares comes true.
If there is a sense of important historical events vaguely lurking in the background, it is only because they have touched an individual life and not because of any intrinsic importance or interest they might claim for themselves. For example, when recalling his wartime experience during the 1920s and early 1930s, the narrator gives hardly any clue as to what is the site of the battle, which two sides are fighting, or whose army he is in. Because the events have now become recollections of this disillusioned old man, all wars seem equally unbearable, no matter what cause the army is fighting for. This version is certainly different from earlier patriotic novels, which concentrate on a wider historical perspective and ignore the complexity of individual motives.

Even if the reader can patch together the references to campaigns and revolutions, what is presented in the novel is primarily the psychological impact on one protagonist of all the experiences of his life, which impact certainly differs from that for any other individual.

Two further examples will demonstrate this point. The first episode in the narrator’s recollection involves his family’s move from the provincial town of Jiangning (江宁) to their old hometown in the countryside. The historical background is the 1911 Revolution, certainly a significant event in modern Chinese history. However, the narrator does not include the revolution as an explicit item, but instead gives only his own perceptual impressions as a four or five year-old boy.

There are three scenes indicating the historical background. First there is the brief but very sombre dialogue between his father and mother. The father says: “I think I have already reached the age when I must return to the countryside and read books”(2). This tendency to “be an official when the state is prosperous, and become a recluse or scholar when it is chaotic”(Zhi ze shi, luan ze yin 治则仕, 乱则隐), the typical moral mode of traditional Chinese scholars, may remind the reader of the changing times, and the probable overthrow of the dynasty. But the narrator is not interested in presenting this
broad historical picture; instead, he directs the reader to the responses of individual people to these events, and their effect on an ordinary family.

The second scene occurs as the family passes the city gate, and has to stop because a group of "criminals" are being executed: "After a while, I heard shots. At that time, I didn't know what was happening in this world, and neither did I know where this red sedan chair would take me. I only felt vaguely that an ominous fate was dropping down silently around us"(3). Here again, we see only "my" response to the revolutionary chaos.

The third intrusion of revolutionary disturbance occurs as the family is escaping the city. They stumble across what seems to be a battle in a country field, which forces them to hide in a haystack: "Just after we blew out the lamp and hid in a stack of wet hay, we heard horses coming over the water. The sounds of shots whistled strangely above the wild and empty field, lingering in the air for a long time, as if waiting for the next volley to converge with them. My body shuddered spasmodically, as if every shot was hitting me. My mother trembled even more than me, as she wept in the wet hay. It was obvious that she didn't care about my fear at all"(4). Thus the historical events are limited to "my" perspective, the understanding of a boy just a few years old. We see his view of the gloomy face of his father and his mother's trembling body. The novel avoids all expression of "public" significance, apart from what can be glimpsed through the clouded vision of a child.

As a second example reveals, sometimes the personal experience of historical events is quite different from the collective memory or official version of that history. Thus, in the Sino-Japanese war period, the narrator-protagonist is a military official. Yet his work is certainly not inspired by patriotic emotions, since he admits that, after several years of witnessing the absurdity and cruelty of war, of seeing former enemies (probably Communists and Nationalists) pretend to become reconciled, and high officials desert on the eve of battles, he is tired of any involvement in war whatsoever. As a result, he falls into deep depression once more, exacerbated by the terrible fear of facing Japanese
barbarity and worry for his wife who is left alone at home. Even when he is mistaken for a patriotic official by the demonstrating masses and asked to give a public speech, he can say nothing and thus is treated as a "traitor": "In those days my depression, which had not really been cured since my childhood, revived. In the time of Japan's invasion, my unhappy appearance led him (Zhong Yuelou) to conclude that I was frightened to death by the Japanese. He was so anxious to convince me, to awaken my consciousness that had slept for years. But I responded to him with sad pride and indifference... and as this misunderstanding deepened, I could only deal with my darkness alone"(95-96). He is certainly not a standard patriotic hero, but rather admits, to his recollecting self at least, typical human weaknesses. Such a confession reveals the true humanity of a tired soul.

The numerous political campaigns of the Maoist regime are also presented indirectly, but because the old man is always a victim of these campaigns, his memories of that period inevitably dwell on wrongful treatment and personal suffering. He has no good words to say about Communism. During the mass campaigns to suppress "Counter-Revolutionaries" and the so-called class war against the "Five Antis," both occurring in the early 1950s, the narrator-protagonist is thrown into prison for over ten years.38 His memory deals with this episode first by selecting a conversation he had with his teacher Xu Fuguan one afternoon, in which Xu warns him of the coming mass movement. Then he

38 According to the novel, it seems that the narrator-protagonist was arrested and put into prison around the fall of 1953. The reason is hinted at during Xu Fuguan's conversation with the narrator-protagonist (149-152), in which the point is made that he lives in a large house while other poor-peasant revolutionaries must put up with much worse conditions. Though the four main mass campaigns in the early period of the P.R.C. took place in quick succession, considering the narrator-protagonist's identity as a Guomindang military official as well as his gentry family background, I would guess that his arrest was related to one or both of the campaigns mentioned in the main text. The Suppression of "Counter-Revolutionaries" took place between 1950 and 1952 and was directed against millions of Chinese who served in the GMD armies or organization, but later remained in their hometowns. The Five Antis Campaign (1952) was a class war directed against the bourgeoisie and businessmen in cities, and against rural landlords in the countryside.
catches a glimpse of a newspaper article that confirms this news. Totally overcome but helpless, he has a nightmare about being thrown into prison; and later the nightmare is actually realized during the above-mentioned campaigns: “When I dreamed, I didn’t realize that I had experienced reality ahead of time” (152). A month later, he is taken away to a labor camp. The account finishes with a fortuneteller’s subsequent interpretation of this strange occurrence: “We often think that dreams are imitations of real events, but actually it is just the opposite. Reality is just a simple imitation of our dreams” (152).

The historical events are not made clear — in fact we are left without knowledge of the precise crime with which he is charged — but his huge fear and sense of inescapable fate are especially emphasized through descriptions of his feelings, his worries, and his dream. Rather than directly condemning the “Red Horror” of Communist rule, the novel describes a personal tragedy in terms that verge on black humour, and thereby demonstrates the absurd consequences of political events, as seen from an individual’s perspective.\footnote{We are given the impression that political violence leaves all people who dream of living a peaceful life in a terrifying situation where nightmares turn into reality.}

\textbf{Structure of \textit{On the Margins}}

Having noted the general emphasis on the inner life in \textit{On the Margins}, I would like to examine the basic techniques that Ge Fei uses to structure the novel and bring this emphasis into relief. There are three basic narrative techniques that he adopts.

The first involves the interweaving or juxtaposition of past and present, or of remembered moments and moments of remembering, in which the latter help to explain the former. As I noted above, there are six sections where the monologue clearly deals with the present situation: Section 4, “Little Button”; Section 18, “The Death”; Section \footnote{The absurdity of the situation is especially clear with the narrator-protagonist, who, despite having once served in the GMD army, didn’t exhibit any brutality in the past, and had no intention of engaging in domestic subversion. Hence the injustice he suffers raises serious questions about the humanity of these political campaigns.}
22, "Xiaoqin"; Section 33, "The Destination"; Section 37, "Little Button"; and the last section, "Sounds of Silence." These parts on the one hand, clarify the circumstances in which the remembering takes place, and on the other hand, function as transitions and clues to the memories of the past.

For example, the first three episodes are memories of childhood, then in Section 4, the autonomous monologue of the old man appears, and the manipulation of subjectivity gradually begins to reveal itself. Following the rain at the end of Section 3, during which as a boy he is puzzled after coming across his mother's affair with Xu Fuguan, Section 4 begins with: "Now, the rain starts again," a description of his present situation, in which he is an old man reflecting on and understanding what has happened. Thus through the association of the rain, two spatio-temporal realities are merged, and the latter explains the former.

Later in this section, a girl visits him, and brings him the news that Little Button (the great grandmother of the girl) is dead. This news then leads the narrative to Section 5, which revives the occasion when he first saw Little Button in the Garden of Date and Pear when he was very young. Next, the contemplation of mortality aroused by Little Button’s death brings back childhood memories of witnessing the death of Miss Song, and his own visions of his father’s ghost and their effect on him, namely depression. This can be considered the continuation of the first three sections after a digression into the present. Similar shuttlings between past and present are clearly indicated in the several sections whenever the old man talks about his present situation, and are also manifest in numerous transitional reflections scattered throughout the novel which help to join the memories of different places and times together.

The second organizing technique is to give the memories of the past the general configuration of chronological order. The forty two episodes of this novel, if one were to arrange them in chronological order, consist of personal recollections of past events, moving from childhood through adolescence, adulthood and maturity, and finally to old
age: the memories of the journey of a particular being through time. The beginning of the novel is also the first sensory memory of this narrator-protagonist, and the child’s indistinct, dream-like sensory perceptions gradually solidify into scenes from real life. The first three sections are obviously arranged according to chronological order. The family moves to the countryside, settling down in the Garden of Date and Pear; and then father dies. After inserting a monologue from the present in Section 4, this memory narrative continues in Section 5 and the following sections. The rest of the novel exhibits a similar basic temporal progression.

However, while it is true that the memories proceed along more or less temporal lines, also noticeable is the fact that there are few logical connections between events in different sections or even between events in a single section; rather, they seem to hover around one theme or one figure. As a result, the transition from one section to another indicates not so much a natural development of events, but more an abrupt change of subject. As I discussed earlier, the subtitles actually summarize particular themes or motives. Each section thus revolves around a central idea, image or figure indicated by its title, rather than continuing a story from the beginning to the end of the novel. Section 5, entitled “Shadows,” deals with several events happening in the narrator’s childhood that are all related to the shadows of fear and death, but do not follow each other in any causal order. Section 6 involves memories connected with the mysterious figure Xu Fuguan, and also describes the narrator’s childhood years, and Section 7 recollects a woman called “Flower.” However in this first mention of Flower the narrator remembers her death, and his previous acquaintance with her is not brought up until much later in the novel (Sections 20 and 30). Again, there is no direct relation between this section and either the preceding or following ones: it belongs here simply because the death of Flower occurred at some point between the protagonist’s first feelings of paranoia and his marriage — subjects dealt with in Sections 6 and 8.
Although the general configuration of the novel maintains some kind of chronological, or biographical, order, its micro-structure thus stresses more the idea of psychological progression. This is the third organizing technique, which gives the narrative a sense of variety and dynamism. The chronological order is constantly interrupted by sudden associations or conceptual leaps within the narrator’s mind. Since this technique is the most important and idiosyncratic feature of this novel — an attempt to present the free movement of “the varying and the uncircumscribed spirit” — it is worth examining in more detail. Ge Fei tends to utilize three major types of psychological “interruption.”

The first is to juxtapose different times and events through associative or mental leaps. I touched upon this aspect already when I pointed out that each section is organized around a single theme or subject. I will give one further example to elucidate the point. Section 25 describes the narrator-protagonist’s friend Zhong Yuelou, who has become the victim of political persecution since 1949. It is inserted between the narrator-protagonist’s return home in the late 1930s and the sections on the changes in the village that he observed before 1949. However, the section on Zhong Yuelou is not limited to this period: instead much of his life, including especially his suffering from the late 1940s to the 1960s is also included here.\(^{40}\) In a manner similar to that of Sections 12 and 17, which introduce other aspects of Zhong Yuelou’s character, this section obviously uses the initial events of the 1940s as a springboard from which to launch into a discussion of Zhong’s personal suffering. Events that occur over different times, but are clearly associated in the narrator’s memory, are brought together.

The second kind of interruption involves the intrusion of a sudden recollection of another time and/or place into the account of a particular event. Sometimes such recollection will occupy a whole section, at other times only a paragraph or two.

\(^{40}\) These events include his enthusiastic involvement in the Sino-Japanese war, his confusion about which side to follow in the civil war before 1949, his exposure as a counter-revolutionary in the early 1950s, his visit in 1966, and his public criticism in 1967.
Depending on the chronological relation of the interruption and the main event, we could call this technique a memory-flashback or memory-anticipation. Examples include the insertion of Section 9 — the narrator’s encounter with “Butterfly” in the late 1930s — into the account of his marriage and feelings for his wife from the early 1920s; a similar case is the insertion of Section 20 — memories of “Flower,” his “secret” childhood love — into the account of his being wounded in a battle with the Japanese.

Such chronological jumps also occur as relatively short units, paragraphs within the main account, as when the narrator mentions reading a report on East Station in 1952 in the midst of his description of staying in that station in the late 1930s (107); or when the memory of his childhood experience of going to school with his father surfaces while he is being publicly accused in 1967. Such inserted episodes are often presented as memories occurring within other memories. That is, they lie at a double remove from the remembering present. In such cases, we see not only that the narrator’s intense inner life was a feature of his early years just as much as in his old age, but also that memory can help to provide a reflective illumination or ironic contrast to these often painful events as they happen. I will enlarge on this point below.

The third kind of interruption occurs when instead of a complete, unified account, one event is broken into several pieces in the narrator’s memory, and retold in different sections. It may even happen that some crucial parts of the tale are concealed at first, and only revealed at another time, in a chance burst of emotion. The story of Butterfly, which is one of the most touching episodes in the novel, is presented in three parts. The narrator-protagonist’s encounters with her mainly occur from the summer and fall of 1938 to the spring and summer of 1939. According to the basic chronological outline of the novel, this episode should probably come around Section 20. However, the first part of Butterfly’s story shows up much earlier, in Section 9, which follows immediately upon Section 8, “I Got Married,” hence it seems initially to be set in the early 1920s. Yet Butterfly is introduced here because the narrator associates her with the beauty, gentleness
and innocence of his wife Azalea: "The day I left home was the first gloomy dawn of October. I walked far away along the road at the foot of Orange Hill. Azalea still stood there leaning on the door, still with the look that she had when she looked up at me in the past, as if I would change my mind suddenly and return to her side. All through my long military years, until I saw Butterfly for the first time in Dongyi, I remembered clearly that look" (34-35). Section 9, in which he is attracted to Butterfly, follows, and we soon determine that this actually happens much later, in the summer of 1938.

Butterfly’s beauty and pride on that peaceful and sunny afternoon contrast movingly with her later appearance. On this second occasion, in Section 23, she is raped by the Japanese. The whole account is a depressing story about the destruction of beauty. However, this part still conceals some information relating to the narrator-protagonist himself, who was a witness at that time. His response doesn’t come into his memory until section 32, in the early 1970s when he is still despised as a class enemy. He is forced by Leper Song to give a confession of his behavior on that day. Owing to his cowardice then and to pressure from the silent villagers (since if anyone rebelled, more people would have been executed), he as a military man didn’t stand up to the Japanese. His shame and guilt suppressed this memory into the depths of his consciousness, until outside forces once again brought it to light. Through the division of the story of Butterfly into these separate retellings, Ge Fei is thus able to suggest the sheer pain of the narrator’s shameful memories: he cannot fully acknowledge them until many years later.

Another example of concealment in one place, and later revelation of the same event with surprising changes, concerns the narrator-protagonist’s memory of coming across his wife’s affair with the Village Head, Leper Song. Sections 24 and 26 describe the first days after he comes back to his hometown and is reunited with Azalea, in 1939. Here, the account simply portrays the joy of finally returning home, along with a feeling of estrangement from his wife. However, the affair that he had actually discovered immediately after he came back isn’t even mentioned in these sections. It only emerges
much later, in the early 1980s, when Leper Song is going to die and wants to tell this secret to the cuckolded husband as a final humiliation. This situation revives the narrator's repressed memory: “Actually I knew very well the thing that Song didn’t have time to tell me: it had become a tight knot in my heart over these long and depressing years”(195). Then he gives another account (Section 39) of that day when he returned from his travels, and this time the peaceful surroundings, which he had apparently celebrated in Section 24, imply some potential danger: “I entered into the depths of the Garden under the lazy afternoon sun, and the self-pity aroused by this familiar scene prevented me from realizing the danger that was silently approaching”(195). Then comes the shocking scene of discovering his wife making love with Song, and his escape from the Garden to spend the night outside. On the next day he returns home again, and the account merges once more with what has been described previously in Section 26. Azalea’s shock then was not only a result of the unexpected return of her husband, but also, as we now know, a guilty response.

Here, shame, anger and sadness combine to suppress this memory until some outside event forces it to re-emerge. The narrator’s memory doesn’t present this past event in its original order, but instead follows a psychological order. The result of this utilization of the logic of the human mind is a less mechanical and more complicated understanding of human beings and the nature of reality.

Lastly, in this examination of the structure of *On the Margins*, I would like to spend some time analysing the transitions between the various episodes in the novel. As with the initial choice of which episodes to retell, the transitions between each episode seem also to be arbitrarily decided by the reflective mind of the narrator.

Sometimes, we notice a vague association between events that follow each other: the resemblance of a certain image or figure in both. For instance, the narrator uses a common climatic phenomenon to draw together one childhood night and his present situation, thus making a transition from the past memory to the present monologue: “I saw
the heavy rain of that last night (past) . . . Now, the rain starts again (present)" (14).

Another example is the transition from the account of a battlefield scene to a memory of kite-flying in childhood. The transition is smoothly accomplished by means of the image of hay burning from the roof of a farm house, taking flight like a kite.

Sometimes the transition is rather abrupt, taking the form of a general summary or announcement, which suddenly moves the account from one topic to another. The opening of Section 8, "I Got Married," starts with the narrator’s general comments on his dislike of marriage. These sentences have no relation to the preceding section, which describes his experiences of death and fear in his teenage years, and there is no transitional image or sentence. At most, we can say that there is a vague chronological progression, from the events of his teenage years to those surrounding his marriage and domestic life before he leaves home in the early 1920s. And his comments are followed by a group of related subjects: his arranged marriage, the wedding ceremony, the gradual establishment of mutual feeling between himself and his wife, and his lover’s jealousy.

Finally, there are frequent intrusions of the narrator’s reflections, which at first seem like transitions to new subjects, but soon revert to the original account: what we might call temporary digressions. An example is the following paragraph inserted into the account of his sexual initiation with his father’s maid, Little Button, in Section 16: "I often ponder what it was in Little Button that touched my body and soul? In my older years, the arrival and departure of Xiaoqin would always revive the figure of Little Button. I would watch her moving, and the old, but still fresh, memory of the past would often cause my tears to flow" (80).

No matter what kind of transition is used, it is clear that the sovereign mind of the narrator creates the logic of the tale, and his consciousness manipulates the presentation of the past, directing the narrative from one subject to another. Below, I would like to examine the consequences of this constant focus on the narrator’s mind. I will suggest that by using this technique, Ge Fei not only draws attention to the centrality of the inner self,
but also suggests that one can attain a sense of moral integrity and mental enlightenment even when nothing remains of one's life but memories.

**Salvation of Memory**

Besides shifting the focus of the novel to the private and personal sphere, the subjective approach towards human life in *On the Margins* also makes a more sympathetic exploration of psychological reality possible. As my examination of the novel's unique structure and its use of psychological time has shown, *On the Margins* is a sophisticated portrait of memory that presents the inner world of a human being: a rich and complicated field for a long time neglected in Chinese literature from the Mainland. Perhaps the most significant aspect of this approach, and a major achievement of this novel, is that it affirms the spiritual dimension of human existence, the survival and growth of inner humanity even when outside circumstances have remained unrelentingly grim.

Returning for a moment to my analysis of the symbolic setting of *On the Margins*, the Garden of Date and Pear, as pointed out, is an enclosed and private space, existing in a state of nearly absolute silence and isolation. Located in a deserted corner of the village, no events take place there and seldom does anybody visit. We notice only a steady decline after years of neglect and harsh weather conditions. As I suggested, the house seems to mirror the state of the narrator-protagonist himself: his appearances in the novel, apart from a few scenes where he moves around his room to satisfy his biological needs, consist solely of him lying on the bed and remembering his past. I pointed out that this situation implies a state of paralysis and impending mortality.

At the same time, however, we should also note the dramatic contrast between the old man's "paralysed" body and his mind, which is in constant and turbulent motion. There is also a parallel here with the stagnant appearance of the house, which conceals a vibrant life, captured in the sounds of insects, birds, and leaves in the deserted garden, and
contains innumerable imprints of the past in its old rooms, furniture and accessories, waiting to be triggered by the old man's fertile memory.

I also mentioned that the "I" of this work, like the narrators in Ge Fei's other novels and stories, is an isolated recaller, whose memory often slides over social and political events, to meditate in lengthy fashion on the "irrelevant details" (xizhimojie 细枝末节) of daily life and ordinary personal relationships: "My memory is formed from those trivial details which seem hardly relevant to my story; from those passing things that have already decayed: the brown-colored riverbank and almost heart-rending scenes from the four seasons. Yet I forget the main stem of things."41

Sometimes the narrator’s memory leads him to the brink of ecstasy when confronted with the pure and simple beauty of nature: a date tree in spring (Section 3, “I Lost My Father”); or wild flowers (Section 30 “Beekeeper’s House” Fengfang 蜂房). At other times, his memories evoke deep sadness over what has been lost or destroyed. Thus, the narrator recalls the former peace of harvesting in a countryside now destroyed mercilessly by war (Section 13, “The First Time I Went to Battle” Wo diyici shang zhanchang 我第一次上战场). Alternatively, memories recur of the fragrance and face of a woman with whom he was intimate (Section 20, “Flower”); of the deep sympathy he feels for those who suffer but cannot be helped (Section 21, “Eastern Station”); of fear when his nightmare turns to reality (Section 28, “Xu Fuguan”); and of shame at seeing the faithlessness of his wife (Section 39, “Azalea”). These "trivial" things, which are only trivial when people treat outside, historical events as more important than inside, spiritual ones, act as concrete embodiments of universal feelings and emotions, of the eternal rhythms of nature and ordinary experience. Such inner emotions have never been presented so vividly and powerfully in the literature of Mainland China over the past forty years.

41 Ge Fei, “Xianjing” 陷阱 (The Trap), in Mizhou, Zuojia chubanshe, 1989. 11
The psychological truth of Ge Fei’s portrayal is even more forceful because these trivial impressions or feelings usually come into consciousness unexpectedly, like the involuntary memories in Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*. They might arise through a confrontation with something as ordinary as a spring tree, or a flower. Such preoccupations reveal a deep human need to pursue goodness and beauty in life: a kind of necessary aesthetic sense that is part of human nature.

Moreover, this sense often emerges suddenly from the moments of greatest cruelty and chaos around us, and becomes a source of strength encouraging a person to persevere. In *On the Margins* the narrator-protagonist’s memory of playing with a kite and watching an old craftsman occurs just when a battle is raging around him: seeing hay from a burning barn roof flying high like a kite, the similarity of the image stimulates the memory, re-awakening the expectations and pleasures of childhood and of a peaceful life in harmony with nature. Such peace and joy are a strong contrast to the blood and death of war, and are probably the source of the narrator’s ability to endure that terrible reality.

Another example is his recollection of the sweet village woman called Flower (who is much older than he), while he is on the battlefield in the midst of the Sino-Japanese war (Section 20). In his semi-conscious state after he is wounded in the battle, there first emerges a memory of the fragile flowers in his home garden; then this image of flowers transforms into a woman with a related name, Flower, who, like Little Button, was one of his sexual initiators. The memory of the fragrance of her room and her gentle smile works like a ladder to draw him out from the muddy surroundings and terrible pain of his wounds.

A similar situation occurs in Section 30, when he is locked in prison and can only dwell in his memories of past joys as a means to sustain his life. There is a recollection of Flower’s beauty and sweetness and the desire of other men in the village for her, including his first visit to her beekeeper’s house. With these trivial but persistent memories, the
narrator-protagonist somehow drags himself through an existence of outward suffering, demonstrating the effectiveness of association as a means to transcend a horrifying reality.

Thus we find that the human spirit must struggle with the outside world to affirm its pursuit of peace and beauty, and to achieve completion. Remembrance can even help one belatedly to understand the extent of others’ suffering, and in that light, come to terms with one’s own similar feelings. Section 21 tells of an episode during the narrator-protagonist’s stay in East Station, when Yuxiu, a woman successively deserted by several men and laughed at by her fellow-villagers and even by her own mother, shows some affection for him and offers herself to him. He refuses her, and her deep sense of shame leads her to commit suicide. The night before her death she sobs all night beside him, and the memory of that sad and wounded crying connects itself with a much earlier episode, one afternoon in his childhood, when he had felt similarly deserted by his sleeping mother. This very trivial detail, with its authentic depth of feeling, clearly reveals his new-found sympathetic understanding of the situation of that poor countrywoman.

From the above examination of Ge Fei’s structuring of the novel, we might conclude that psychological reality is the main focus of the representation of human life in On the Margins. And clearly, in the centre of this reality is a profound and lasting fear, aroused by the violent turmoil of the outer world, the eroding of human relationships, the unpredictability of fate and the inevitability of death. This sense of fear has accompanied the narrator-protagonist as far back as his memory can reach, from the moment when, as a young child, his family moved back to the countryside due to the Republican revolution and the overthrowing of the Emperor.

Returning to his ancestors’ house at the Garden of Date and Pear as a child doesn’t bring this narrator any peace and protection. The decadence of an old-fashioned

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42 Likewise, the later understanding he gains of his mother’s suffering is also realized as a result of his own suffering: see Section 10 “Huhan” (Shouting) and Section 17 “Renshou” (Enduring).
lifestyle and culture present in the household is augmented by his father’s depression and his mother’s resentment and hysteria. Yet with the death of his father the narrator-protagonist is exposed to an even more frightening reality — his sleepwalking and later depression originate from insecurity after his father’s death, combined with shock at witnessing the death of a girl from the same village and her brother’s threatening attitude toward him. He starts consciously to fear the outside world, in which his fellow-villager Song has become a human devil.

The sense of insecurity, of being left alone to face the secret darkness (since the mother is depicted as a weak, hysterical and self-centred woman) exacerbates his fear of death, which first emerges when as an adolescent he confronts the meaninglessness of existence. This relatively abstract and mysterious fear grows much more concrete and real when he leaves home to become a soldier in the warlord period, when people seem to cherish hostility and to fight each other at the least provocation. Seeing soldiers raping women, he worries about his wife at home; seeing the blood of warfare, and fire that destroys the corpses, he succumbs to chronic depression. Fear of human cruelty and abhorrence of peoples’ bestial side even prevents him from becoming a patriotic hero like his friend Zhong Yuelou: all he wants is to flee from all kinds of warlike practices.

As I noted, the 1949 revolution brings no end to the narrator-protagonist’s frightening experiences, but merely tempers the physical violence with psychological humiliation. He is numbered among the small group of counter-revolutionaries who are constantly subjected to threats and attacks. What little he possessed in life is now taken from him: he loses his home, the rights and dignity of a human being, and becomes like a

43 The death of a father, almost a typical occurrence in modern Chinese literature, signifies the loss of the old social order and traditional culture. The May Fourth generation, with their iconoclastic position, celebrated this death. For example, Bajin’s Family, and Lu Ling’s The Children of the Rich. However, in recent works of the younger generation by writers such as Ge Fei, Su Tong, and Hong Feng, this death of a father is colored with a sentimental and nostalgic mood and a sense of bewilderment and anxiety of identity is detectable.
walking corpse, a living shadow. The humiliation he undergoes at the hands of Leper Song and the “proletarian dictatorship” clearly stems from personal resentment — the hostility between the two men starts from their young adulthood and deepens as a result of the affair between his wife and Song — but is disguised under the name of revolution. As a result, he suffers many injustices, ranging from being forced to kiss a chicken to being suspected of stealing a gun. And though a life experience such as his might seem extreme in its undiluted suffering, it is certainly the case that fear has been the normal experience of the majority of ordinary people in a society as chaotic and confusing as that of modern China, hence the narrator’s account has quite far-reaching relevance.

If fear is the main reaction of the human soul to an unbearable situation, then the act of remembrance provides the only protection and consolation to a helpless and powerless figure like Ge Fei’s narrator. His friend, Zhong Yuelou, commits suicide because he can’t bear that burden of fear. The reason that the narrator-protagonist survives is largely because of this ceaseless inner activity. Not only does the narrator-protagonist exercise his memory when he grows old; he also finds himself remembering past events throughout his life, which, in fact, is a way for him to come to grips with and seek to understand that reality.

The reason that spontaneous memories emerge particularly when he is confronted with a terrifying reality and feels its unbearable emptiness, is because remembrance allows him to turn away from that reality, to look for another source of vitality in beautiful moments, beautiful objects and feelings of the past. There are numerous such recollections that come suddenly, with no apparent function other than to prevent the narrator-protagonist “I” from giving up on life too easily. Apart from those mentioned above, a particularly representative example comes at the most unbearable stage of the Cultural Revolution, when he is being publicly criticized and paraded around the streets. As he is taken into custody along a familiar country path, he remembers the morning his
father first took him to school, when the freshness and attractions of human life offered such a contrast with his present situation:

When we were following the raised dyke in the middle of the rice paddy towards (the primary school), I felt as if I were walking on the old road of twenty years earlier. Early that morning, father was taking me to see Master Xu Fuguan for the first time. The world then was so fresh and clear. Light mist was covering the river bank, and reeds were wafting their fragrance; in the grassy thickets by the road, clumps of strawberries and cranberries were saturated with dew. The sunlight radiated through the fog beyond the hedge, transforming it with a multitude of colors. Young birds twittered, their sounds crisp and piercing, yet with a dense, moist tone. We walked onto the wooden canal bridge, and heard the gurgling sound of the flowing water; the boats on the canal were moving along in the thin mist. The sails on their masts came flapping down, like a flock of pigeons flapping their wings as they fly away into the distant sky . . . That ancient picture has always stayed in my memory, and infiltrating my dreams it silently grows in my disturbed sleeping. (135-136)

In this way, the narrator implies that one’s spirit is not a direct reflection of reality; that sometimes it develops in a direction opposite from the one that reality leads one to expect. With the working of this human spirit to oppose arbitrary identities, memory never merely “photocopies” or imitates the outside world, but rather forgets, conceals, highlights or eternalizes. Memory imposes order on events and reveals the “I” as a substantial subject capable of understanding and sympathizing, of appreciating and reflecting — a spiritual identity that prevents the person from degenerating into an animal.

So by the end of the narrative, the narrator-protagonist finally reaches a state of completeness where peace, beauty, sympathy and understanding — qualities so lacking in
real life — are attained in his inner world. He now vividly remembers the morning he first saw the proud, beautiful young Butterfly, and forgets the terrible ugly old woman of the present. He also finally forgives his wife Azalea for having an affair: “I now feel, in those years it was her disgrace that proved her chastity, since we can only see dawn from the dark night. Now she will never know my eternal longing for her” (216).

In the narrator’s words, he has learned the secret of “silent sounds,” experiences when “even in the the most intense moments of the war, pervaded with the smell of smoke and gunpowder, we can also sense the fragrance of the earth, and the warmth of the eternal sunshine. . . . Zhong Yuelou said that only during breaks in battles can we truly be inspired by the peace and calm of country life and know our longing and desire for the earth. . . . My memory is like a moon hanging high in the sky of night, stopping on the margins of time. It passes a china cup, lays its light on my bed, and brings me inexpressible sadness, compassion, and deep longing for the past” (215-17). Deception, betrayal, insult, abandonment, and disturbance finally give way to silence, peace, understanding and reunion.

Again, in the section “The End of a Journey” we read: “At the moment that my life is going to end, I suddenly consider again that I only experienced some fragments of what happened. . . . Those pure and beautiful pictures prevent me from giving a simple conclusion to my life, for example, deducing a certain meaning or a certain kind of people” (169). The external idea of identity is replaced by a self, an individual subject, which unifies and understands the past, the Other, and the world. Now, in the experience of remembrance, he finally discovers a sense of peace that has somehow outlived that fear.

**Poetry of Prose**

In his 1985 study of post-Mao period literature, *Blooming and Contending*, Michael S. Duke expressed his genuine hopes for Chinese fiction to develop beyond realist poetics: “Perhaps only a generation of writers younger than Dai Houying can reach
beyond the boundaries of Marxist ideology and realist poetics to probe deeper into the psychological depths of the individual and produce something closer to the poetry of prose.™44

Duke’s disappointment about the lack of such a poetic quality in modern Chinese literature, as I understand it, is a criticism of the lack of the aesthetic and transcendent aspects that we often expect in an artwork. Because literature, unlike historical or social documents, is concerned with the human heart and spirit, it should always reveal something that transcends particular social circumstances and immediate reality (poetry is perhaps the most representative form in this respect). Indeed the most deplorable feature of modern Chinese literature is that even the particularity and richness of human experience and the sense of the poetic present in classical Chinese literature have largely been lost.45

By portraying a particular human being’s inner spiritual world, Ge Fei seems to display an understanding of reality and of the relation between the human spirit and the real world that differs from previous “realist” paradigms. He is successful in searching for the part of reality that distinguishes human beings from animals and helps them to transcend particular social circumstances and immediate reality. Ge Fei expresses in his novel the elevation of remembered reality over any objective record of events, and by doing this, he revives in his novel the poetic aspect of modern fiction.

The poetic quality of On the Margins springs first of all from its basic assumption that human beings possess a lyrical soul that can transcend immediate reality and reach a state of enlightenment. It is for this reason that Ge Fei purposely utilizes an experiencing, reflecting self as narrator, since, as I have suggested, memory tends to merge inner

45 Reading Owen’s Remembrances, op cit., I wonder why such a universal experience as memory, so important to the classical Chinese tradition, has apparently seldom been explored in previous modern Chinese literature.
reflections and perceptions of the past inseparably with the object remembered. The lyrical impulse of the soul can therefore be articulated through this “I” narrator, who remembers events and reflects upon them like a poet — crucially, too, a poet in an utterly unpoetic time.

From the autobiography of this narrator, we recognize at once that he is not a hero of the times but a political outcast and social exile. The inexpressible sadness that runs through his whole narrative comes from the great emptiness and terror that confront a human being deprived of the usual trappings of happiness and inner peace. Yet at the same time his memory also reveals another side to his self. His propensity for lyrical reflection and remembrance demonstrates that he is rich and strong within, gives him strength to live on, and makes his life an example of the human spirit overcoming the chaos and darkness of history. *On the Margins* therefore is a “poet’s” vision of his time as fashioned by his memory.46

The poetic spirit of the novel’s overall approach is both matched and mirrored by the details of its linguistic texture. In this aspect, among modern writers, Ge Fei is one of those who has contributed most to the restored lyricism of Chinese fiction. It is immediately apparent that *On the Margins* incorporates a great amount of evocative descriptive language and poetic imagery. The traditional conventions of narrative demand that a novel present a dramatic plot or character development according to a well-defined chronology, and the resultant orientation towards the neutral reporting of action and events in many ways prevents concentration on the imagistic language of poetry. The occasional scenic descriptions in Chinese works of formal realism tend merely to reflect

46 The self-depiction of a youth lost in a strange city in another work of Ge Fei’s sheds some light on this kind of character: “I am a displaced person (buhe shiyi de ren 不合时宜 的 人): in an accidental moment of the past, I was thrown out by the tide of fashion, like a fish thrown onto the riverbank by waves. I live in the past with the aid of memory and imagination.” Likewise the narrator of *On the Margins* is also a failure in dealing with the outside world, and can only live in his memory and imagination. See Ge Fei, “Yelang zhixing” (The Trip to Yelang), in *Hushao*, Zhejiang wenyi chubanshe, 1992. 155.
the physical surroundings in which the action took place. *On the Margins*, however, with its aim to explore human consciousness and sensibility, largely eschews concentration on the development of events, replacing it with the careful elaboration of mental scenes woven in a colourful fabric of imagery and replete with sensuous details.

Ge Fei's use of imagery ranges from striking individual sentences to whole sections where picture rather than action dominates. An example of the former occurs when the narrator recalls his father's face during their flight from Jiangning: "My father's face emerged out of the night. It was like an old tree soaked for ages in the rain, looking ghastly in the blue moonlight" (3). An instance of poetic description at greater length is the simple, static pastoral picture that greets the narrator-protagonist when he returns home from his travels as a soldier, and which remains in his mind for several decades. Only such a picture of peaceful "non-activity" could hint at the deep ecstasy of returning home, the sudden relief of a tired soul, and the quietness and seclusion of a place removed from the chaotic world crippled by war:

After I came round the greener southern side of Julu mountain, that dilapidated village suddenly came into my sight. Lines of tobacco plants flourished along the canal and extended far into the distance. The ripe cotton waved in the breeze, basking under the sun. I crossed the wooden bridge over the canal, and smelled the fragrance of burning charcoal and coal from the tea supply house in the village.

The Garden of Date and Pear was empty, the branches of its date and pear trees crackled in the breeze. The vegetable field had been fenced with new bamboo, covered with ivy and wisteria, their flowers already withered. The room where we kept silkworms was tightly shut: I noticed that its door was covered with high weeds, and several little chicks were scrounging for food, carefree in the grass." (126-27)
Such vivid imagery originates from intense memories of past scenes, people, fragrances or sounds. It occurs spontaneously in the narrator-protagonist’s mind and is closely related to his mood and feelings. Whether the narrator-protagonist is describing his longing for a young woman he loves, his terror and panic on the battlefield, or even his contemplation of the meaning of life and death, sensuous depiction almost always replaces conceptual statement as his main mode of discourse. This tendency reveals a vibrant sensibility in the human spirit, which asserts itself again and again in spite of disturbances from outside — in fact, it is largely such disturbances that provoke the spirit to seek an alternative means of fulfilment. 47

It is not surprising therefore, that the imagery in On the Margins usually evokes an atmosphere of peace, beauty and harmony, which contrasts greatly with the outside reality of turbulence and violence. Noticeable is the fact that even cruel and ugly things in reality are often transformed into harmonious or beautiful images in the narrator’s poetic vision. For example, death is obviously a terrifying experience when considered from an ordinary perspective, yet in Section 18, entitled “Death,” the narrator describes a dying person in this way: first there is a sense of sunshine, which joins the present moment with his past experience of battle and with his childhood; then follows an image of the Garden of Date and Pear and the fields before fall harvest seen from his window: “Through the window, I see broken walls and ruined pavilions hidden behind the trees. Further away, there are fields of ripe rice and cotton plants. On the plain and in the brilliant fields, the sunflowers stand here and there, swaying in the winds of fall. Sometimes, I confuse them with the scarecrows” (88). Next he describes the sound of the trees in the garden, which

47 Psychologists have discovered that memory only lasts especially long for recollections of everyday occurrences “when they have a high level of sensory or aesthetic quality, which can provoke the pleasure of recalling them.” See Katherine A. Benson: “Socio-Historical Context and Autobiographical Memories: Variations in the Reminiscence Phenomenon,” in Martin A, Conway, et al. ed.: Theoretical Perspectives on Autobiographical Memory. Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991. 320.
also brings back the voices of the women who once planted them, now living in another
world. Then the narrator-protagonist talks about listening to the sounds from the village
as his only link with the outside world. There follows a contemplation of death, which
ends with another image: “The living and the dead are separated by only one fence, once
you cross the fence, the flower of life will wither” (89). Finally, he completes this vivid
image to describe his experience of dying: “Now, the fence before me is being broken. As
for death, embodied in my body, flowing in my blood, I can feel its existence all the time”
(89). Thus images create a kind of aesthetic pleasure, which can transcend and transform
painful reality.

Finally, connected with the stylistic aspect of the novel is the symbolic dimension
of its imagery. Although as I mentioned before, a large number of the memories in the
novel are of ordinary, daily life scenes — irrelevant details of “my” life — due to their
recurrence throughout the narrative, and especially their reflective and speculative tone,
they often take on a more universal import, and greatly help to emphasize the basic themes
and rhythms of the work.

One such image that runs throughout the narrative is that of the road. The novel
opens with it:

Now, I can remember clearly the road that leads to Wheat Village. For
many years, it has been like a shaft of dim and shaded light glimmering in
my memory. . . at that moment, I didn’t know that this bare road actually
included all the secrets of my long, but seemingly short, life. Now, at the
other end of the road, my memory is still not enlightened. . . I only
remember a pink picture, only that it spreads out like a bottle of coloured
dye overturned in water. It is the glow from a sunset, and from it gradually
emerges my father’s figure. (1)
This image of the road has three levels of meanings. One is the real road that leads to Wheat Village, which the narrator-protagonist has walked on numerous times throughout his life, ever since the family moved to the village one day in his childhood. This is the most basic and literal meaning of the road. However, with its context as part of the memory of a whole lifespan, its symbolic second meaning as a personal journey from innocence to maturity also emerges, especially in the peaceful and enlightened final section of the novel:

During the moments around midnight, I often have this feeling that I am sleeping beside my mother, and fall into a deep sleep in the night of the remote past. But when I awake in the first light of the morning, I have already become an old man. When the road of my memory is suddenly cut, my mind is lost and memory becomes blank, but in front of my eyes there always appears suddenly a pink picture. I see the April rain, and us sitting in the sedan chair, going further and further on the muddy and steep road.

(215)

Finally, a third meaning of the road would see it as the route of memory that leads from the present to the past: such an image emphasizes the similarity between remembrance and a journey crossing space and time. Thus emerges the idea of memory as revisited and revisioned reality.

Other images in the novel, such as rain, flowers, the Beekeeper’s House, kite-flying, and more active figures like “shouting” (jiaohan 叫 喊), also contain philosophical implications that enrich their descriptive function. Like the recurrence of the road figure, they greatly enhance the poetic quality of the narrative language. 48

48 I should also mention that along with its being permeated with visual imagery, the narrative of On the Margins is also characterized by the undisguised reflective tone of the
Now we are in a position to try to decode the title "On the Margins." There is no place in the novel that explains this title, but as the author points out in his preface, the idea of being "on the margins" embodies his whole philosophical understanding of the links between reality and human life: "In the spatial relation between individual and reality, we often live in some kind of marginal space (we are not outsiders). Seen from the temporal dimension, this is even more the case. I feel that reality is abstract — prior to experience, and thus empty — but existence includes rich possibilities, and even includes history."49

Relating the title to the novel's focus on autobiographical memory and personal history, "on the margins" likely refers to the position of the self, especially with regard to those individuals forced to the margins of social events. Exemplified by the narrator-protagonist, they are not the heroes of an epoch but ordinary little people, or even those suppressed by society. They are the unwelcome persons always left behind by social fashions. However, their true existence and identity cannot be summed up with the labels attached to them by others, by outside reality, labels like "descendant of country gentry," "nationalist military official," "counter-revolutionary," or simply, "a nobody." These identities only shatter a whole people into pieces, reducing them to category and type. They neglect the true nature and authentic feelings of each individual human being. It is opposition to, and anxiety about, these "objective" identities that triggers the act of remembrance. As Ge Fei's narrator puts it: "Reality is tiring; it is the monotonous and

narrator. The frequent insertion of the old man's comments, explanations and reflections is accompanied by an overwhelmingly subjective syntax, revealed in phrases like: "Now I still remember clearly that . . ."); or "At that time I didn't know that . . ."; "I notice that . . ."); or "I vaguely felt that . . .". The movement of the plot in the prose narrative is thus well balanced with frequent reflections by the narrator and with the description of the sensory particulars of every moment, conveying a sense of contemplation about the meaning of life throughout the novel.

awkward repetition of the past. And when a moment comes back, memory will make a necessary revision of it” (216).

“On the margins” could also refer to any individual discourse in a revolutionary and totalitarian society, especially one that considers the significance of remembrance for human life. As Zhang Min points out in his preface to On the Margins, private experience is repelled to the margins by the centralized version of history promulgated in such a society.50 Fragments of personal life are pushed into the corner of the garden of major events, so that their flowers of memory can only grow up on the margins of reality.

And yet ultimately the memories of a centenarian man, though merely a private discourse, stress the centrality of humanity to history, and prove the necessity for self-awareness in the struggle to accept harsh reality. Even the fragmented self can be repaired through remembrance. The narrator-protagonist “I” of the novel, as a remembering being, seems unconsciously to echo the words of Kafka:

Anyone who cannot come to terms with his life while he is alive needs one hand to ward off a little his despair over his fate — he has little success in this — but with his other hand he can note down what he sees among the ruins, for he sees different (and more) things than do the others; after all, dead as he is in his lifetime, he is the real survivor.51

Chapter 4 Fact and Fiction 纪实和虚构

After all, the creation of a world is not a small undertaking except perhaps to the divinely gifted. In truth every novelist must begin by creating for himself a world, great or little, in which he can honestly believe. This world cannot be made otherwise than in his own image.

Joseph Conrad, “Novel as a World”

Wenwen first got to know others, then she got to know herself.

Wang Anyi, Class of 69 Junior Graduate
The changes in literary ideas and narrative form that mark a new literary
generation are not only manifested in the works of those the critics would call Avant-
Garde, or New Wave (Xinchao 新 潮) writers, but are also revealed by the internal
changes within the works of certain not so young writers. This latter case is illustrated
typically by Wang Anyi, a prolific and conscientious female writer\(^1\) whose recent
development demonstrates a concern with selfhood and an experimental approach to
narrative language similar to that exhibited by the two writers I have just discussed,
though her life experience and writing practice have followed a quite different path.\(^2\)

In a speech on contemporary Chinese literature, Wang Anyi divided the current
Chinese writers still active in today’s literary world into two groups according to their
origins and development. One is a younger group: those who started writing after mid-
1980s, such as Yu Hua, Su Tong, Ye Zhaoyan and Sun Ganlu. They are usually called
Modernists or New Wave writers. Wang points out that this group started with
perspectives and techniques borrowed from modern Western literature but a relative lack
of real life experiences. As they have gradually reached maturity and gained experience,
their own more original vision of the world has come into focus.

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\(^1\) Wang Anyi has written half a dozen novels, dozens of novellae, and hundreds of short
stories — altogether more than 5,000,000 characters. Not merely a prolific writer, Wang
is also a very self-conscious writer who consistently changes her perspective and subjects.
Dealing with themes ranging from the exile and return of Urban Intellectual Youth (Zhishi
qingnian 知识 青年) to male-female sexual and romantic relations, from Urban
Literature (Chengshi wenxue 城市 文学) to the Root-Seeking School (Xungenpai 寻 根 派),
from conventional realism to meta-fiction, Wang Anyi’s works encapsulate the
development of contemporary Chinese literature in a period of exploration and confusion,
with all its limitations, experiments, maturation process and creative potentiality.

\(^2\) Ge Fei and Yu Hua have had most of their literary education after the Cultural
Revolution, and they are well acquainted with modern literary theory and works. However
Wang Anyi was brought up during the Cultural Revolution. She not only lacked access to
an alternative literary legacy, but even to a liberal education. This experience of
intellectual poverty explains, at least partially, the style of Wang’s early works and their
inherited realist conventions.
The other group consists of slightly older writers, like Han Shaogong, Zhang Chengzhi and Zhang Wei. They started writing in the late 1970s, utilising knowledge about the world gained not from Western books, but from their own experience. While they have deepened and broadened their exploration with the help of Western literature, the original mode of viewing the world with which they started, whether realist or romantic, soon began to collapse — "the once well-ordered world revealed its non-realist state" — and in reaction they became extreme formalists (xingshizhuyi zhe 形式主义者). Wang adds the comment that, although these two groups had different origins and have taken different approaches, both have now reached a kind of consensus, namely, "to be closer to the true world of our souls, and create a mental scene for the physical world."  

In fact, Wang's description of the second group in some ways acts as a summary of her own literary practice in the last two decades. Born in 1954 into a relatively privileged family in Shanghai. Her first 20 years can be summarized as a series of interruptions and incomplete stages. In 1957, her father was charged as a rightist. A few years later in 1966, the Cultural Revolution broke out as she was finishing primary school, and this is all the formal education she received. After three years spent wandering around instead of attending junior high school, in 1969 she was sent to the countryside in Northern Anhui to be "reeducated," like most urban youth of that time. Not surprisingly, she disliked life there and longed to return home. In 1972, she was transferred to a local art troupe to play cello. Finally in 1978, with the help of her mother she returned to Shanghai after nine years' absence, and started work as an editor of a

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3 Wang Anyi, "Women zai zuo shenmo" 我们在做什么 (What are we doing?). Wenxue ziyou tan 文学自由谈, 1993/3. p. 59
4 Her mother Ru Zhijuan 茹志鹃, is a well-known Communist writer and cultural official in Shanghai, and her father, a returned overseas Chinese, is a playwright and director.
children's magazine. At the same time, she began to use her experiences in the countryside and local art troupe as the basis for writing works of fiction.

When she first started her fiction writing in 1980, Wang Anyi had only taken five years of formal education in primary school along with a short training course on creative writing given by the Chinese Writers' Association, a government cultural organization. Nevertheless, in her quest to become a writer, she did receive a great deal of help, both in practical and literary matters, from her mother, Ru Zhijuan, a well-known fiction writer and cultural official.

At first, like other “spontaneous” or untrained Chinese writers in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Wang Anyi overwhelmingly used her personal experience as her raw material, fitting it into the ready-made realist norms established by earlier writers. Fiction was considered “a slice of life” and reflected the world in a mimetic way; likewise, there were virtually no alternative epistemological and aesthetic models available at this stage to compete with socialist realism.

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5 *At Ertong wenxue* 儿童文学 (Children's Literature Magazine).
6 Ru's life is itself typical of the revolutionary generation of Chinese writers. Since her personal information will be helpful for us in understanding Wang's autobiographical work, here I would like briefly to delineate her life story: A child of a bankrupt urban artisan family, Ru became an orphan in a Shanghai missionary orphanage. Later, she escaped and went to a liberated area in Northern Jiangsu. There she became a resolute and firm revolutionary and member of a team of “art workers,” writing and performing propaganda verses to “encourage the comrades to attack the enemy.” She and her husband soon became officials in the liberated city of Shanghai. She worked as an official in charge of the art and literature department of the city government. At the same time, she was writing fiction. An open-minded revolutionary intellectual, Ru is famous for one short story with human touches in 1950s, "Ye baihehua" 野百合花 (Wild Lily). Her husband was charged as a rightist in 1957, curtailing his work, and she herself didn’t produce much until the late 1970s, during the post-Mao "second blooming of hundred flowers" period. She published *Caoyuan shang de xiaolu* 草原上的小路 (The Path in the Grasslands), and *Jianji cuo le de gushi* 剪辑错了的故事 (The Story Wrongly Cut). Typical socialist realist fiction in its subject and form, Ru’s best works, while reflecting the social changes of the times, still manage to convey gentle humanist touches. She returned to the position of cultural official in the late 1970s.
In her first series of short stories revolving around the protagonist Wenwen (雯雯), whose experiences were clearly based on her own life, Wang Anyi’s fiction describes a small, sincere and pure world, with a simple hope for love and understanding between human beings. A representative work of this series entitled “And the Rain Patters On” (Yu, shashasha 雨，沙沙沙) is one of Wang’s well crafted early stories, structured as the interior monologue of a young woman on a rainy evening, who recalls a former encounter. The juxtaposition of different times successfully presents the protagonist’s complex psyche, which longs for trust, love and friendship in a society just recovering from a nightmarish period of upheaval. The vivid description of Wenwen’s psyche and the rhythms of nature in particular disclose Wang’s literary talent. Unsatisfied with the small world of an individual self and wishing to explore a broader field of experience, Wang soon turned to the society around her and began to observe the lives of ordinary people from various backgrounds.7 Her subjects included urban intellectual youth (Zhishi qingnian 知识青年), descriptions of life in the countryside and the day-to-day existence of local art troupes. The numerous strange occurrences affecting peoples’ lives during the recent catastrophic social turbulence now became the most precious source for her writing. At the same time, she also attempted to paint a picture of daily life in the city, and to describe the ordinary people whom she had regularly encountered since her childhood.8 She was diligent and remarkably prolific, and soon become one of the better-known Chinese

7 Descriptions of her writing pilgrimage in the 1980s can be seen in her afterwords to the following works and collections, Yu, Shashasha 雨,沙沙沙 (And the Rain Patters On), Baihua wenyi chubanshe, 1981; Liushi 流逝 (The Lapse of Time), Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1983; Xiaobaozhuang 小鲍庄 (Little Bao Town), Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1986; and a collection of lyrical prose Pugongying 蒲公英 (Dandelion), Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1988.

8 These stories are collected in Yu, Shashasha, op.cit. An English translation of several of Wang’s works published during the first half of 1980s, including “And the Rain Patters On,” is Howard Goldblatt, et al, trans., The Lapse of Time, China Books, San Francisco 1988.
writers, winning several government-sponsored literary prizes. By 1987, she had become a professional writer and made several trips abroad in that capacity.

Wang Anyi's writing before 1985 might be termed humanist realism. During this period, she is obviously most comfortable writing within the conventional realist mode. She has a sensitive awareness of the potential of ordinary scenes and is able to capture and present them in vivid fictional worlds. Using impersonal, omniscient narrators, with conventional concepts of structure, plot and character, her stories run smoothly to their expected conclusions. They are usually set in typical social surroundings, be it a local work-unit or an over-crowded urban family space, and focus on a single protagonist's activity, with minor characters to provide contrast. With their realistic details and vivid dialogue, sometimes venturing into descriptions of psychological states, such works could be termed "slices of life" from different layers of Chinese society. As for content, they usually deal with the trivial joys, worries and sadness of ordinary people, and end with the warm, humanist hope that love, understanding, and dreams will survive despite the net of mediocrity that seems to cover their lives.

Wang reached the peak of her realist efforts with her award-winning novella “Lapse of Time” (Liushi 流逝) (1983), the story of a young woman in a once wealthy family in Shanghai who manages to support the whole family through difficult times as she grows into maturity during the Maoist period.

Wang’s consistent interest in the growth of an urban girl into a woman is also apparent in her first novel published in 1984, Class of '69 Junior Graduate (liujiu jie chuzhongsheng 六 九 届 初 中 生). The growth of the protagonist, again called Wenwen, during the turbulent times of the Cultural Revolution is once more largely based on Wang Anyi’s own life and that of her young friends. The novel starts with the girl’s first vivid sensory impressions, around the age of two or three, and continues until she grows into an ordinary young urban woman, married with a child of her own, thus completing a life cycle. Though the work is apparently supposed to present the wasted life of a whole
young generation, it is actually a rather plain record of the first half of a person’s life, without much attempt at profound reflection. There are some sparks of psychological insight, but they are carelessly drowned in the flood of plain description without being developed to their full potential.

In fact, taken as a whole Wang’s works before the mid-1980s are not very impressive: there is little philosophical inquiry or unique personal discovery, and the reader can hardly detect any deep personal concern or obsession on the part of their implied author. In terms of form, she takes verisimilitude as a norm and applies literary realism in its most naive shape, directly and objectively reflecting real life. Apart from momentary sparks of inspiration, her literary language is simple and plain, remaining on the imitative level and lacking depth or imaginative power.

Unlike the older generation of Chinese writers, such as her mother Ru Zhijuan, who will doubtless maintain this realist approach for the rest of their careers, Wang Anyi is maturing as a writer in a time when constant introduction of new literary ideas and exploration of the literary possibilities available for presenting human life have forced all serious writers to rethink the basic assumptions of their writing, and to seek new narrative techniques to express their fresh experiences. Wang is well aware of this situation, which she calls “winds from every direction” (bamianlaifeng 八面来风), and she has also had the opportunity to move outside her familiar world. In 1983, she was invited to take part in an international writers’ workshop in Iowa, and spent four months in the United States. As she notes of this experience, “the broadness of the world helped me emerge from my humble abode. The crowds of people caused me to make a more accurate evaluation of our own position.”

Although her real transformation in writing wouldn’t take place until much later, this trip and later visits to European countries, as her subsequent writing shows, caused

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9 Afterword of *Xiaobaozhuang*, op.cit.
her to venture deeper beneath the surface of reality, and treat problems of human relations and human existence from a more universal perspective. For example, in a series of novellae published between 1986 and 1989,\textsuperscript{10} she consciously uses fiction to explore the possibility of the relationship between man and woman, in both its spiritual and physical dimensions. Set in different times and places: big cities, small towns, the backward countryside, periods of sexual repression and relative liberation, and including protagonists from all kinds of social and educational backgrounds — from teacher, poet and editor to actor, urban intellectual youth, housewife and peasant — these stories constitute a systematic examination of basic human relations, of love, sex, and marriage, and their connection with more existential concerns, especially the growth of sexual consciousness in the mind of a woman. The attention Wang had previously given to representing a life-like world gradually yields to this consistent quest to explore the possibilities of sexual relations.

As I mentioned above, Wang started her novel-writing in the mid-1980s, and before completing \textit{Fact and Fiction}, she had published three novels: \textit{Class of '69 Junior Graduate} (1984), \textit{A Man from the Old Course Of the Yellow River} (\textit{Huanghe gudaoren}),\textit{Thirty Chapters of Floating Years} (\textit{Liushui sanshizhang}). These are all character-centred works depicting the growth of a particular hero or protagonist in a style reminiscent of 19th century Western realism.\textsuperscript{11}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{10} This series includes her famous “\textit{Xiaocheng zhi lian}” 小城之恋 (Romance in a Small Town); “\textit{Huangshan zhi lian}” 荒山之恋 (Romance in Barren Mountain); “\textit{Jinxuigu zhi lian}” 锦绣谷之恋 (Romance in Brocade Valley); “\textit{Gang Shang de shiji}” 岗上的世纪 (The Century on a Hillock); “\textit{Shensheng jitian}” 神圣祭坛 (Sacred Altar); and “\textit{Zhulu zhongjie}” 逐鹿中街 (Fighting for the Throne on the Streets). English translations of some of these works can be found in Bonnie S. McDougall, trans.: \textit{Brocade Valley}, New Directions, 1992; and Eva Hung, trans., \textit{Love on a Barren Mountain}, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1991; and \textit{Love in a Small Town}, Renditions, Hong Kong 1988.

\textsuperscript{11} A central concern of Wang’s novel-writing is the fate and development of an individual resembling herself. As a “spontaneous” writer, Wang started her writing in her early 20s, and has frequently created characters, such as Wenwen who appears in her early
\end{footnotesize}
I suggested that in her first novel, *Class of ’69 Junior Graduate*, Wang has obviously tried to depict an individual’s experience within the framework of personal growth, but her depiction of wasted life, which is the common fate of the generation of the protagonist Wenwen, lacks the true depth of tragedy.

Her second novel, *A Man from the Old Course Of the Yellow River* describes a local provincial youth who educates himself to become a composer. The story is based on the experiences of Wang’s husband. It is structured along two temporal lines that combine a growing up process with a slice of the hero’s present life. The main body of the work is a day-to-day description of this young man during one year of struggle in his career and personal life in his late 20s. Paralleled with this present account are memory-like episodes from different stages of his life during the past 20 years: as an innocent boy becoming attracted to music, learning to play an instrument by himself, and finally his experiences in a local artistic and performance troupe. The end of the second temporal line is then the start of the first, as the story reaches the present. The second line is an interesting variation from Wang’s linear structure, and is presented largely from the perspective of the young man, as if those past events are triggered by his present feelings and emerge from his memory.

The next novel, *Thirty Chapters of Floating Years*, published in 1987, is a much richer work dealing with thirty years in the life of an urban woman. By this time, Wang has started her experiments with different methods of telling, to a certain degree rejecting her former attempts at “objective” representation. On the one hand, when there are presentations of the protagonist’s life, especially her inner life, they are given from the protagonist’s perspective, using a stream of consciousness technique. On the other hand, descriptions of other characters, events and the surrounding environment are told by an
omniscient narrator. Wang calls this approach “the fine combination of subjective and objective narration.” With great emphasis on the depiction of the protagonist’s psychological life and her conception of the world and interpersonal relationships, the theme of individual education is celebrated and developed much more convincingly here than in her earlier works.

These three novels, though differing in quality, all share some common characteristics and might be categorized as bildungsroman, “novels of formation” or “novels of education.” “The development of the protagonist’s mind and character, in the passage from childhood through varied experiences — and often through a spiritual crisis — into maturity and the recognition of his or her identity and role in the world” characterizes both the subject and form.\textsuperscript{12}

Wang’s three novels likewise show great interest in a particular individual’s existence, and they all develop along a linear axis based on the chronological “becoming” of the protagonist. This temporal process is a reflection of the passage “from a state of innocence to a state of experience, from that ignorance that is bliss to a mature recognition of the actual way of the world”.\textsuperscript{13} Moreover, among these three novels there is a gradual increase in emphasis on the inner growth of the protagonist, especially the protagonist’s realization of her/his relation to others, and her/his position in the world. Thus, in \textit{Class of ’69 Junior Graduate}, the development of the protagonist Wenwen is mainly presented as her physical growth, and finally she becomes just an ordinary worldly person (\textit{yongchang zhibei} 常之辈). But the hero in \textit{A Man from the Old Course Of the Yellow River} and the protagonist in \textit{Thirty Chapters of Floating Years} seem to have a much greater maturity and awareness of their inner selves, a characteristic largely due to the extensive space dedicated to the revelation of their consciousness in these novels.


Such a development illustrates Wang's strengthening belief that real personal growth lies in self-realization and inner maturity. In fact, on one occasion, in a discussion of the earliest novel, '69 Junior Graduate, Wang particularly stresses that although the protagonist's growing-up story is similar to her own experience, Wenwen, lacking the chance to gain an education during the Cultural Revolution, wasted all her good years in the countryside, and therefore failed to go to university and take chances in life. Revealingly, Wang considers herself far superior to her character insofar as her ability to find meaning in life through writing and experience a much richer inner life is concerned. She goes so far as to claim that the difference between her and Wenwen is "a difference between high and low states of living." 14 Wenwen is a character ignorant about the meaning of her life, but "I myself became a writer." Obviously, she finds that in her own case, writing has provided her with the chance to reflect on life, and give meaning to her otherwise "ignorant" and mediocre existence, enhancing it to a higher level.

Maybe it is this reflection on the important role of writing in her life that led Wang Anyi to the next stage of her artistic development, in which she composed several novellae deeply concerned with writing and artistic self-education. The narrative transformation evident in these works of the early 1990s directly influenced her writing of Fact and Fiction, 15 and so before I turn to the analysis of the latter I will take a close look at the

14 "Liangge '69 jie chuzhongsheng de jixing duihua" 两个六九届初中生的即兴对话 (The Spontaneous Dialogue of Two '69 Junior Graduates), Shanghai wenxue, 1988/3. In this regard, Wang reveals a disturbing contradiction: on the one hand, in the novel, although Wenwen later becomes an ordinary worker in Shanghai without much ambition in life, the implied author seems satisfied that the character has found meaning in her existence as a "green leaf" (a metaphor often used in China to educate people to do ordinary work to support the "red flowers" [i.e. outstanding people]). However, in real life Wang obviously doesn't think much of being a "green leaf," and often divides people into superior and inferior classes.

15 The Chinese critic Li Jiefei 李洁非 has suggested that one of these novellae, "Uncle's Story" prepared Wang both conceptually and technically for her most recent works: see Li's "Preface to Fuxi he muxi de shenhua 父系和母系的神话 (Myths of The Paternal and Maternal Line), Zhejiang wenyi chubanshe, 1994.
new thematic concerns and narrative experiments that helped to change Wang’s approach to the bildungsroman genre.

In the three novellas written immediately preceding *Fact and Fiction*, “Uncle’s Story” (*Shushu de gushi 叔叔的故事*) (1990); “The Pop Star Coming from Japan” (*Gexing riben lai 歌星日本来*) (1991); and “Utopian Verses” (*Watuobang shipian 乌托邦诗篇*) (1991), Wang Anyi is even more interested in dealing with the subject of artistic self-education than in her previous works. The first work involves a Chinese writer of the younger generation who rewrites the story of the older generation of Chinese intellectuals represented by her “Uncle,” a typical “rightist” writer. “The Pop Star Coming from Japan” describes the response of a group of Shanghai artists and musicians to the visit of a Japanese singer who was originally Shanghainese. The third novella, “Utopian Verses,” describes a Chinese writer’s encounter with a Taiwanese writer in the United States, and her reflections on the significance of this encounter for her beliefs and future career.

All three novellas have similar artist narrator-protagonists — who are identified to a large extent with Wang Anyi — and incorporate a great deal of autobiographical material. It is especially the use of a dramatized and very self-conscious narrator, a narrator who identifies herself clearly as a writer, which distinguishes these works from Wang’s earlier fiction. In Wang’s previous works, the narrator is often impersonal and hidden, and even when she occasionally appears to give commentary she remains faceless and lacking in character. The daily life scenes and the activities of the characters are “shown”, as if appearing “autonomously” before the reader. Now, however, what we confront are not events or people themselves but the direct confessions of an urban artist, who happens to be the narrator, and who presents these events and people through the

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16 *Shushu de gushi* first published in *Shouhuo*, 1990/6. The other two are collected in *Watuobang shipian* 乌托邦诗篇 (Utopian Verses), Huayi chubanshe, 1993.
mediation of her intrusive mind and distinctive speech patterns. Moreover, this narrator is also very self-conscious about her profession and her own actions, freely and extensively inserting comments, interpretations, reflections and analysis into her narration. This highly subjective voice constantly distracts the reader’s attention away from the story to the narrator herself.

These three novellas also share an essayistic style in which the main plot, if one exists at all, is often cut up or interrupted by other trivial digressions, so that the whole story appears relatively loose in structure. This looseness, coupled with extensive use of autobiographical material and the narrator’s straightforward comments and reflections, blurs the boundary between memoir, confessional prose, and fiction, between criticism, reflection and description, and makes the three works stand out as markers of Wang’s altered approach to fiction.

To illustrate these points in more detail, I will concentrate on “Uncle’s Story,” in which the self-conscious artist narrator makes her most noticeable appearance. Wang Anyi expresses her interest in the nature of writing and its subjective nature by depicting individuals belonging to two generations of Chinese writers: the first composes the original “Uncle’s Story,”—supposedly his own life story and the second rewrites that story

17 Wayne Booth points out that all fiction, no matter whether it takes the form of showing or telling, is controlled by the implied author. However, there is certainly a difference of degree between the implied author controlling Wang’s earlier stories, who rarely makes known her opinions, and this dramatic narrator’s self-conscious comments on her own writing.

18 The main “plot” of “Uncle’s Story” is uncle’s life experience in the past thirty years; that of “The Pop Star Coming from Japan” is the tour and performances of this “Japanese” singer in China; and that of “Utopian Verses” concerns two writers’ friendship. However, the theme and subject matter in the three novellas are much too complicated to be summarized by a clear plot-line, and the main theme only functions as a kind of bone upon which the impressions and reflections of an urban artist on life and the characters around her are fleshed out.
based on her own less complimentary memories of the protagonist’s life. Since this results in a story about a story, we could term this work a piece of metafiction.19

The act of writing in “Uncle’s Story”, or more precisely, what some critics would call the “deconstructive rewriting of the Literature of Rightists” (youpai xiaoshuo 右派小说), by a young author — the narrator “I” — is constantly alluded to in presenting the main theme. The narrator, who is also an important character in the novella and shares the fictional world with the hero “Uncle,” is supposedly writing the very story that we are reading, “Uncle’s Story.”20 Yet while she tells her version of Uncle’s story, she also

19 The author consciously plays with “Uncle’s Story” in the text, taking advantage of the title’s double implications, the story about uncle written by the uncle himself, and uncle’s story rewritten by “I,” a young writer. This novella, because of its controversial vision of Chinese intellectuals of the 1950s, and its experiments with the metafictional form, is certainly young Chinese critics’ favorite. Some read it as a feminist rewriting of the male text; others believe that Wang is writing a postmodern text where all definite meaning disappears. Some say that Wang expresses idealism, others see it as marking the end of idealism. See critical articles on “The Story of Uncle” collected in Dangdai zuojia pinglun, 1992/2 and Zuopin yu zhengming 作品与 争鸣, 1991/8.
20 The original “Uncle’s story” is almost too familiar to Chinese readers today, since it has been told and retold in real life and numerous literary texts from 1977 even up to the present. In previous fiction by the “uncle” generation, whether by Wang Meng 王蒙, Zhang Xianliang 张贤亮 or others, a young intellectual who is framed as a “Rightist” in the 1950s endures all kinds of misery and suffering over a twenty-year period simply in order to prove that he can remain a true Marxist. This “classical” version is subverted in the version of “my” generation presented in Wang Anyi’s novella. Despite the fact that the biography of the protagonist “uncle” does resemble the life experiences of writers like Wang Meng and Zhang Xianliang, as well as their fictional works, a careful reading reveals that the hero and plot of “the Story” that “I” wrote about Uncle is actually twisted from its original sources, becoming a kind of parody: the hero, a writer, starts his creative life in the 1950s as an intellectual loyal to the new government; unfortunately, it is his first work that brings him endless troubles in later years and changes his life forever. He is charged as a rightist because of a careless little piece written in 1957, and is sent to the remote countryside to be “reformed.” There he loses his idealism and “degenerates” into a senseless ordinary person. He marries a woman with whom he has little in common spiritually, but still maintains the relationship for practical reasons. After twenty years of uninspiring life, he is rehabilitated in late 1970s. He wittily but cynically expresses his realization that “all the misery and distress was preparation for the purposes of art.” Although in real life, he hates and wants to get rid of the burdens of his past — his wife, his son, his memories of shame and guilt — nevertheless in his fictional world, he treats this past as a test leading to revelation, and creates a plot that enhances his down-to-earth,
inserts her own life experiences, her reflections on writing, and her view of Uncle’s
generation. Judging from her life experiences and worldview, we can tell that she belongs
to a completely different generation. Such declarations as “Uncle has beliefs, ideals and a
worldview, but we don’t” here and there reveal the narrator’s self-consciousness of the
differences between two generations.

These differences naturally lead to different ideas about writing. Since she writes
in an individualistic time and sees both life and writing as playing a game and following
certain technical rules, she will inevitably rewrite the old, idealistic story told by her uncle
from a nihilistic standpoint. It is thus only natural that this rewriting subverts the plot,
myths and conventions of the previous work. The hero becomes a miserable gray figure
tortured by fate and politics, the tragedy becomes a piece of black humor, and the hero’s
unshakable loyalty and beliefs, as well as his heroic behavior, are either factually suspect
or treated as ridiculous.

However, a further parody within “Uncle’s Story” pushes the thematic concerns of
the work far beyond mere subversion of a previous story, to an extreme standpoint that
questions whether either version of Uncle’s story (“my” one or the one by “Uncle”
himself) is true. What we might term Wang’s parody of the position and limitations of the
young narrator herself is achieved by her ironic detachment from the narrator “I,” a
characteristic which has generally been ignored by Chinese avant-garde critics.21 Yet as

mundane life with the “holy light” of struggle within his soul. As a result of writing his
unique “Chinese” experience, he finally becomes a very well-known author, and “blossoms
in his second spring” both in public and private life. His works are given awards and he
regains the fame and position he lost; he has numerous young lovers who admire him and
want to marry him; he visits foreign countries frequently as a representative of Chinese
intellectuals. However, the shadow of the past, embodied in his conflict with his son who
refuses to be disowned, makes him realize that he is not such a lucky man as he had
believed. He remains torn between the past and present, between spiritual and physical
existence.

21 Not surprisingly, since they themselves belong to the narrator’s generation.
Applauding the fact that finally a Chinese writer has produced a “postmodernist” text that
“deconstructs” the myth of definite meaning in artworks, their criticisms are exclusively
Wang Anyi explains in her later interpretation of this work, the narrator, and by extension “our” whole generation (women 我们), has certainly subverted the myth of “Uncle,” but “our” writing also reveals its nihilistic (xuwnu zhuyi 无主义) nature and the tragedy of “our” generation, a generation confused, suspicious, lonely and lacking all beliefs. If the uncles are blinded by their idealism, “we” are also blinded by our nihilism.22

This self-conscious narrator, and Wang’s double parody, indicates that the real concern of “Uncle’s Story” is not the political fate of a Chinese intellectual — unlike the original story by her uncle. Rather, by presenting the process of a writer rewriting an old story, “Uncle’s Story” is much more interested in the subjective nature of all fictional writing, and the important role of the artist and his or her experience and worldview in writing. Unlike “Uncle,” who hides behind his story like an invisible God and tries to make the reader believe his fictional world, this narrator is cynical about her profession and is willing to expose completely all the hidden workings — what we might term the rules of the game — of the act of composition. She deliberately reveals her manipulation by means of the self-analysis, comments and interpretation of the characters, the plot, her personal motives and the artificiality of her design, and thus transfers the attention of the reader from the story told to the act of story-telling.23

22 Wang Anyi, “Women yi shui de mingyi 我们以谁的名义 (In Whose Name Are We) (Writing), Wenxue ziyoutan, 1995/4.
23 The narrator’s motive for writing is stated at the very beginning: for personal reasons, the narrator finds that Uncle’s story is very suitable for expressing her own feeling, that “I thought I was a lucky person before, but now I find that I am not” (Uncle’s Story, op.cit. 48). However, since she wants to hide her own story, she decides to tell Uncle’s instead. This motive is retold three times through the narrative, leaving no possibility of its being ignored. Regarding her collection and treatment of raw materials, she especially emphasizes the epistemological difficulty of finding out what really happened, due to the difference in time, experience, and the alteration of reality in uncle’s writing: “This is a patch-work, there are many blanks that must be filled by imagination and inference. Otherwise it is difficult to give a logical progression. The materials I have for this story are neither sufficient nor reliable. Some stem from gossip and his own telling, both of which might have fictional and unreliable aspects. The other source is my own witness of
The overwhelmingly self-conscious voice of the narrator in “Uncle’s Story” is echoed in the next two novellae. Both are also accounts, from the artist-narrator’s personal perspective, of certain events in her life, and it is the narrator’s reactions and comments that take over from the events to become the real interest of the works. The main plot of “The Pop Star Coming From Japan” is the tour and performances by the Japanese pop star in several cities around China, but presented from the narrator’s perspective, the central emotional focus of this novella is the confusion and bewilderment felt by urban artists (including the narrator) when faced with the changes occurring in contemporary Chinese society. Finally, “Utopian Verses” is presented as the narrator’s memoir of a spiritual pilgrimage starting with her visit to the United States and her encounter with a Taiwanese writer, and consists of a series of fragmentary scenes and reflections. The narrative is only tied together by the artist’s meditations on art and life, and in this way modern urban life, full of trivial and fleeting occurrences, is transformed into the backdrop for an artist’s pilgrimage towards self-education.

events, but such details are both meagre and too distant. Also, because of the difference in our ages, I cannot use my experience to understand and apply them properly”(48).

The narrator further unsettles the traditional-minded reader by “offer(ing) an autocritical account of the novelist’s own method of composition.” For example, in talking of the facts surrounding Uncle’s becoming a rightist, the narrator admits that “four versions are available, all indirect and difficult to distinguish, so I decided to combine three versions to produce the best account. This is a typological approach”(49). She also mentions that sometimes, for the meaning and integrity of the story, she must replace truth with imagination. And this imagination works by “designing the most reasonable, and thus most brief, transition between the two known episodes”(53). She uses such a method in treating the real relation between Uncle and his country wife, for instance. Likewise, the narrator declares that her structure is also artificial: “Although I use an ordered narrative, actually this is a reversal of the truth. I started to choose the materials, organize the story, and design the psychology of Uncle only after I knew the ending”(59). The effect of such analytical and exegetical portions is like that of Brecht’s experiments in theater “destroying the fourth wall,” so that even the sources of music and lighting are brought into view.
However, the self-important and self-aggrandizing narrator in these three novellae is certainly doing more than playing a random word-game — I will return to this point later in my discussion of Fact and Fiction. One could say, in fact, that she is simply an extreme manifestation of the awakening consciousness of the narrating subject, which has become more and more evident during Wang Anyi’s many years of writing. In some ways, because the narrator “I” in these three novellae is also supposed to be their writer, they make one feel that the formerly invisible narrator, always manipulating but pretending not to be there, is now suddenly so aware of her own existence, and of her desire for self-presentation, that she cannot help talking directly and incessantly to the reader, thus directing all attention from the story to herself, and also connecting all the stories she tells to her own self-education. In fact, Wang has claimed that her more recent works display a rediscovery of the nature of fiction, namely that “fiction is the speech of a fiction writer” (Xiaoshuo shi xiaoshuojia ziji de hua 小说是小说家的话).24

24 In Wang’s literary practice, since “Three Romances” in 1986, her writing has also undergone a change from the typical realist objective “showing,” with scenes and dialogue in imitation of “real life,” to a single narrator’s “telling,” although in the period before the 1990s, the narrator still remains relatively hidden. Wang Anyi calls this kind of telling “objective telling” (keguan xushi 客观叙述). However, gradually this narrator moves to the front stage, and plays a greater role in the fictional world. In the last story of “Three Romances,” “Romance in Brocade Valley,” the authorial narrator “I” actually appears in the story, and her observations as well as her act of writing are brought to light at both the beginning and the end. This impatient shadow of a narrator seems to demand the reader’s attention, indicating as much the fictionality of this work as the existence of the narrator. However, partly because this narrator “I” isn’t integrated into the whole design of the story, especially its thematic concerns, and also because the controversial subject matter grabs virtually all the attention of the reader, the narrative experiment in “Romance in Brocade Valley” hasn’t received much notice. Such a developing consciousness of the narrating nature of fiction is reflected by Wang on a theoretical level too. In 1989 She hosted a literary criticism column in a literary magazine, some of whose articles she later collected as a book, Gushi he jianggushi 故事和讲故事 (Stories and Telling Stories). In these critical articles, on other writers as well as her own works, Wang Anyi explores different aspects of the nature of narrative and narrative technique. She particularly emphasizes “the narrated” nature of fiction, and its “physical” side, the method of narrating (Xushi fangsishu 叙述方式). Here, she starts to challenge her previously accepted realist belief in verisimilitude, and discovers the subjective nature of narrative.
As I noted above, in her works of the early 1990s, Wang has begun to explore a genre new to her: that of artist fiction (künstlerroman). The theme of artistic growth and the discovery of an artistic vocation, as we shall see, is greatly elaborated in her subsequent novel *Fact and Fiction*, which is an ambitious attempt to delineate her own creation of a fictional world and her establishment of an identity through writing.

**Fact and Fiction**

*Fact and Fiction: One Way to Create a World* was first published in 1993 as part of an ambitious nativist or “root-seeking” project. *Fact and Fiction* is root-seeking on Wang’s mother’s side; and the other part of the project, a novella called “Sorrow of the Pacific Ocean” (*Shangxin taipingyang* 伤心太平洋) is on her father’s side. Both works include a great deal of autobiographical material, and basically concern themselves with family history. However, by combining the artist’s quest for her own identity with the search for family history, *Fact and Fiction* is more successful in the grand design of its structure and the reflexive mode in which the narrative is set. It is the most ambitious novel Wang Anyi has written to date.

And as I have shown, she soon used this discovery directly in her artist-fiction, where the writer’s personal concerns and her own speech patterns are dramatized in the self-conscious narrator.

25 The abridged edition of *Jishi he xugou* was first published in *Shouhuo*, 1993/2. The complete edition was published in book form by Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1993. Page numbers given here are based on the book version. Also an abridged version has been collected with a novella “*Shangxin taipingyang*” with the complete title as *Fuxi he muxi de shenhua* 父系和母系的神话 (Myths of The Paternal and Maternal Line), Zhejiang wenyi chubanshe, 1994.

26 Wang Anyi uses this term in its common sense of “looking for one’s ancestors.” Here, more specifically, it also refers to her attempt to discover the past and ancestors through fiction-writing. It is slightly different from the cultural root-seeking of the mid-1980s that was used more metaphorically to describe Chinese writers looking for their original cultural traditions. Wang has made some insightful comments regarding the connection and difference between these two uses of “root-seeking.” see *Jishi he xugou*, Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1993. 411-413.
In the preface and afterword of *Fact and Fiction*, the author makes a clear statement of the nature, the motive and the structure of this work. The author relates that, as a writer, she started her career by writing about other people, but gradually she found that “whether it was a good story didn’t matter so much; her attention was now directed to another problem, namely, while ‘this child herself’ was living in this world, what was her position in time and what was her position in space?”(5) In solving this problem she finds a huge story — a story about her self, about how she grew up and where she came from. In her writing, Wang Anyi seems thus to have found herself in a situation similar to her protagonist Wenwen: “Wenwen first got to know others, then she got to know herself.” Now, after more than a decade of writing about the outside world, Wang also “approaches” herself: “I collected the scenes from my memory, and I also collected the scenes that I observed. I collected these scenes in orderly fashion from the furthest to the closest . . . . Now I have become the last piece of scenery”(464).

She also tells us that the method she has used in creating this fictional world is both to “record the facts” (*jishi* 纪实) and to “fictionalize” or “make up” (*xugou* 虚构). On the one hand, she gives an autobiographical account of her growing up and her actual adventures searching for her roots, which is mostly factual.27 On the other hand, she makes up the extensive history of her family on her mother’s side just like any novelist imagining a fiction. The two plot lines of her story thus develop along two dimensions: horizontally with regard to her present social relations; and vertically with her historical relations. In other words, the novel deals with a slightly differing pair of questions, the answers to which might provide a solution to her anxiety of identity, namely, “how did I grow up?” and, “whose family do I belong to?”

27 Wang’s use of autobiographical materials can be recognized by comparing the events and people in this novel with journalist’s reports on her life, her own speeches about herself, and especially one well-known essay collection *Pugongying*, op.cit. In *Fact and Fiction* itself, she incorporates many accounts of how she wrote certain stories, which would be familiar to her previous readers.
Moreover, the “fact and fiction” in this novel, so the author claims, does not just refer to the autobiographical materials versus the fantasy she makes up about her ancestors. Rather, the two terms have philosophical implications that pervade all creative acts, fiction-writing included. Fact and fiction are the two sides of a single method used to create a world. In real life, she experiences anxiety and confusion, and must invent a fantasy to help her come to terms with that life; however, even during the process of making up, she still looks for a real, or convincing, factual basis for her fiction; and the more abstract her fabrication, the more concrete she tries to make her scenes. (465)28

With regard to its structure, this novel clearly develops along two contrasting lines: the autobiographical account of the narrator-protagonist growing up in Shanghai; and her imaginative root-seeking among remote ancestors, attempting to piece together her “family myth.” Specifically, chapters 1, 3, 5, 7 and 9 — and in order to distinguish the two accounts, I follow Wang’s terminology in referring to this plot as the “horizontal line” (hengxiang 横向) in the following analysis — describe her urban experience; and they are interwoven (jiaocha 交叉) with chapters 2, 4, 6, 8 and 10 (the vertical line 纵向), which consists of imaginary family history. In chapters 1 and 2, and once more in chapters 9 and 10, the two lines, of immediate reality and past history, converge (hewei 合围). Obviously, this transparent structure is designed to correspond to the pair of existential questions that she has posed.

A noticeable aspect of Wang Anyi’s authorial statement, apart from its clear summary of the novel’s structure, is the multiple levels of “I” that it implies, and the complex relation between them. The “I” in the preface and afterword is, technically, the author of this novel. However, as we will later find out, “I” is also the narrator as well as

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28 Wang Anyi claims, particularly answering some critics’ misinterpretations of the title, that “fact “ shouldn’t be interpreted only as the part of the novel dealing with her factual account of growing up, and “fiction” doesn’t refer only to the imaginary family history either. See Wang’s speech in the discussion of Fact and Fiction. Dangdai zuojia pinglun, 1993/5. 19.
the protagonist of the main text. Conspicuously, in the preface and the afterword, the author uses both the objectified expression “the child she” (haizi ta 孩子 她) and the subjective “I” (wo 我) to refer to herself, and these terms of address are frequently substituted for each other. In fact, the author seems unconsciously to mix together her identities, as a character in her story of an urban child, and as the writer of this story. For example, in the preface, when talking about the family’s move to Shanghai, the author uses “we” (women 我们); then, when she describes the city in her own eyes, she uses “the child I” (haizi wo 孩子 我); but later she changes the phrase into “the child she” to refer to the past self. This change in address brings about a narrative distance: “the child she” becomes objectified as if she is a character. Such a relationship is revealed in sentences like, “I think that the child she later becoming a writer originated in the fact that when the others visited relatives, but she could only visit comrades, she felt a bit lonely and this caused her to think deeply about her situation”(3). Actually, as we will see, the author’s brief account of the origin of her story in the preface is elaborated in the following chapter, and the self-referential “I” subsequently becomes the narrator-protagonist.

Similarly, in the afterword, the character “she” is suddenly changed midway into “I,” in other words, the writer of this work, the “I” who designed the structure and gave the title. Thus the complex juxtaposition in the preface is actually the first appearance of the close relationship, and the frequent shift of emphasis, between the protagonist, the narrator, and the author of this work.

This relationship is important not only for its emphasis on the autobiographical nature of the work but also because of its implications for the three facets of the “I” in the novel proper. Though the narrator in the “horizontal line” is telling her own story, in which she is also the protagonist, she is far from being identical to the protagonist, “the child she.” Not only is she the mature form of the protagonist, both physically and spiritually, but also her position as narrator distinguishes her from her self as character. At the same time, and complicating the relationship further, the narrator of this urban
experience is the writer of a family history in the “vertical line.” To explain matters from a strictly chronological point of view, the protagonist begins as a child, who then grows up in the course of the novel and becomes a writer; this writer turns out to be the introspective narrator “I” who is telling the whole story of her life in the “horizontal line,” and also the same writer who is tracing and writing her family history in the “vertical line.”

By drawing attention to this intriguing relationship between the author, narrator and protagonist, Wang inevitably reminds us of the reflexive dimension of the novel and its artistic effects. Not only does the vertical line, on writing a family history, describe a complete process of composition, showing how a writer creates a piece of fiction — and as I will demonstrate below, this line is presented as just such a fiction-writing process — but by juxtaposing this line with the horizontal one, about the child in an urban environment growing into a writer, Wang is also able explicitly to deal with her understanding of the relationship between art and life. In other words, the horizontal line provides the motives, the reality context, and the emotional origin for her imaginative endeavour in the vertical line. And in this way, the kind of story she chooses to create is illuminated and explained by her account of “how I became a writer.”

Although the two plots are closely interwoven, and must be read together in order to experience the richness of the work, for convenience of analysis, I will deal with them one by one. In this section, I will discuss what the author calls the horizontal line — her growing up story.

The five chapters constituting the horizontal line show the pattern of biological development of this specific individual “I” from an auto-introspective point of view, progressing temporally from childhood (chapter 1): beginning to identify herself through her relationship with her mother; teenage years (Chapter 3): the development of her sense of place, and of her first social relations with neighbours, friends and classmates; early youth (chapter 5): her first independence and various adventures in the world, especially in the countryside as a misplaced urban youth; later youth (chapter 7): love and marriage;
and finally, maturity as an artist with the creative capability to build imaginary relationships through fiction writing (chapter 9). Thus, corresponding to the biographical-chronological development from the state of innocence to maturity, there is also a deep thematic concern with various kinds of human relationships in real life, which later drives the narrator to create an imaginary world.

Another character of the narration in these five chapters, as I have indicated above, is the autobiographical perspective adopted by the narrator. That is, the process of growing up is completely contained within the recalling and reflecting voice of the artist narrator, who is trying to figure out her position in the world by means of this account. Thus, there is a dialogical relation between past experience and present narrating, and to a certain degree the narrator displays a cognitive privilege in explaining, commenting on, and universalizing her personal experience throughout this account. Moreover, though presented as a purely personal memory of growing up, this part also acts as a vivid depiction of the new kinds of interpersonal and social relations that develop during a revolutionary era, and the problems that they cause.

Examining this horizontal line in more detail, Chapter 1 deals with the narrator-protagonist’s early childhood experience of anxiety, especially regarding her relationship with her mother. Beneath her dependence on her mother, source of her life, lies a sense of unease, resulting from the fact that this revolutionary mother has cut off the possibility of this child’s developing a relationship with her past and even, to a certain extent, with her present surroundings.

The narrator-protagonist moves to Shanghai in 1955 when she is just one year old with her revolutionary parents, who are entering this city as its new masters. The relation between the city and its new “master families,” as the child experiences it, is also an uneasy one. Originally, the parents were among the people who worked to “liberate” this city, and in fact it was during that period that their marriage occurred and their daughter was conceived. After a short absence from Shanghai, during which the child was born,
they returned to Shanghai and settled down. Yet the result of this revolutionary transplanting is that “we have become like settlers (wailaihu 外来户) in this city Shanghai.”(1)

The distance between this family and the city is mainly embodied in the figure of the mother, who is a typical figure representing the Chinese “captive mind.” The mother was once given away as an orphan by a bankrupt family. She escapes from Shanghai, which she hates for its snobbery and class differences, and cuts herself off from her old social relationships, including all her blood ties. She later finds her new “home” in the revolutionary family, and establishes new relationships based solely on comradeship.29 The sense of a “captive mind” is vividly manifest in the child’s perception of her mother as a dictator-like figure pronouncing on this family’s relations with the city. For instance, the mother gives up her fluent Shanghainese dialect in order to learn Mandarin (Putonghua 普通话), and prohibits the whole family, including her child, from speaking the local dialect. Likewise, she educates her child according to the new Communist worldview and value system, forbidding her to associate with people in the neighbourhood, and hoping she will become a socialist “new human being” (xinren 新人). This situation causes “the child I,” to experience a sense of estrangement and inferiority through many trivial daily life occurrences. She cannot speak Shanghainese fluently, so she often has to be silent; she doesn’t have relatives or family to visit; she lacks real familiarity and acquaintance with the city compared with her petty citizen (xiaoshimin 小市民) neighbours. All these considerations add to her loneliness, and as she declares: “My family has become like an isolated island in this city”(10).

29 There is a popular expression in revolutionary Chinese propaganda: “The Communist Party is our mother,” and in fact in the early PRC regime of the 1950s and 1960s, this kind of “captive” education to replace the old ethics and traditional values and ideas with a new revolutionary ethic was one of the most important tasks that the CCP carried out to consolidate their authority.
However, paradoxically, the existence of the past is revealed precisely through the act of hiding and trying to forget it, and despite the fact that the mother is responsible for making this child into a lonely and isolated person who feels especially rootless in this city, she cannot avoid acting as her daughter’s main tie with the past. And this desperate and curious child soon finds out traces of her mother’s past, which can satisfy her vain desire to belong to this city. The description of the child’s detective-like tracing of her mother’s history is very vivid and full of psychologically revealing details, such as her secret feeling for the family’s old mansion, her noticing of Third Aunt, her love for old photo albums, and curiosity about visits to grandmother’s tomb. Gradually the child pieces together her mother’s hidden story. Finally, the account of the mother being orphaned by the bankrupt family and fleeing Shanghai emerges, and this account, which takes up the second part of the chapter, reveals just how complicated and intriguing is the relationship between the new inhabitants and the old city.

As I will demonstrate below, the attempt by a revolutionary generation to ignore their past, and the consequent sense of rootlessness experienced by the child, is continually developed and elaborated upon, both in this and later chapters, to produce a disheartening and alienating environment in which the child must try to grow and find some kind of meaning.

The narrator often implies that the situation of this family is quite universal, and one which other urban Chinese families had to face too in a society like this, so frequently subject to social mobilization. Their problems are only exacerbated by a revolutionary ideology that attempts to control ordinary peoples’ lives and change the more natural state of human relationships. The reflective narrator deliberately repeats and juxtaposes numerous similar daily life and family scenes, perceived by the child and involving the neighbours, the mother’s colleagues, and the child’s playmates and classmates. These ordinary scenes are often given metaphorical implications by the narrator: one example is her recollection that during the Cultural Revolution her grandmother’s tomb was
destroyed without the family's knowledge — since the parents were too busy engaging in revolution — and this loss erased the family's last tangible connection with the past. Yet she also discovers, through referring to the newspaper advertisements of that time, that large sections of many cemeteries in this city were destroyed to make way for new construction work, thereby removing the ancestral graves of many other families too. Thus one family's life reflects a whole social reality.

The narrator doesn't cherish this revolution, but rather deplores the destructive effect it has on people's sense of belonging and identity. However, instead of directly expressing her disappointment, she presents the general psychological consequences of this man-made break from tradition through the tangible situation of one child's early experiences of anxiety and loneliness. For example, the narrator thus describes her shock and despair when she finds out that her mother is an orphan and that they have no relatives in this city: "I lay by the window, watching my mother standing alone at the gate, and a feeling of sympathy rose from my heart. I thought to myself: she is actually an orphan. The word 'orphan' made me so sad ... No wonder we don't have any relatives in this city: it is all because my mother is an orphan. It turns out that I am the child of an orphan. This new discovery both moved and saddened me"(16). And: "The thought that my mother was an orphan occupied my mind. I felt, even at such a young age, that the loneliness of an orphan was much greater and deeper than being an outsider in Shanghai, and that there was simply no cure for it"(17). This relationship with her mother, as it is presented, is thus the first appearance of her relations with others generally, and rather than consolidating and confirming her identity, it brings her nothing but anxiety and loneliness.

One other point worth noting in this chapter is the story of the mother herself. Here, despite the basic autobiographical framework of the novel, the narrator inserts a story of her mother's early life from an omniscient viewpoint. However, the narrator has repeatedly made it clear that her mother is unwilling to recall the past, and also that she
has a bad memory which makes any fragmentary recalling that she attempts quite suspect. The narrator comments on the problems of her mother’s and a friend’s varying accounts of the mother’s early life, and her own solution, in this way: “They have told the story several times, but each time in a different version . . . . Their different versions have stimulated my imagination, and thus I am very hopeful that I will write a good story”(40). So here we should be aware that this story of mother is part of the narrator’s work of imagination, despite the sources from real life — which are fragmentary, inconsistent and full of blanks.

Structurally, as I will show later, mother’s story actually ties this opening chapter together with the last chapter of the novel, where the vertical line, the fictional exploration of her ancestors’ stories, finally reaches her mother’s generation. If mother’s story is a record of breaking away from the past, as the narrator sees it — “for mother, the move to the revolutionary base was another act of breaking away from history: in her life as an orphan, she will break away from history innumerable times”(44) — then this episode also provides a reason for the present “child I” to search for her past ancestors, and reveals for the first time the real life motivation behind the narrator’s fictional account of the past, namely, a need to fill the gaps in her mother’s story. In a sense, therefore, the mother’s story is a miniature of the basic relationship between real and fictional worlds, which this novel will illuminate.

The past experience recounted in Chapter 3 is arranged around the narrator’s house in Shanghai, and covers the events of her later childhood: experiences of making friends with the neighbors’ children, going to primary school, and later exploring the nearby alleyways. If in chapter 1, when she first recognizes her position in the world, she has to see herself almost completely in terms of her relation with her mother, now, venturing out of the house, she is able to start establishing her first social relationships with the outside world.
The historical context of this period of her childhood is early Maoist China in the 1950s and early 1960s, and the chapter ends with the start of the Cultural Revolution. Urban life of the 1950s is especially characterized by its various and conflicting life-styles, as the narrator declares: "The scenery of the city of Shanghai is really full of variety" (101). The multiple living styles and cultures prevalent in this period are embodied in the small neighbourhood the protagonist experiences as her first world beyond the house. The buildings are situated in what was formerly the most prosperous district of Shanghai. The landlord Mr. Zhang’s family represents the typical urban middle class from a bygone era: rich, snobby, sophisticated, and Americanized; yet at the same time, they belong to the declining class in this city, a fact hinted at by Mr. Zhang’s depression and his son’s over-flamboyant style. The protagonist and the neighbouring boy’s family move to this prestigious neighbourhood in the early fifties marks the coming of the new masters of this city: the working class, represented by the neighbouring boy’s family, and the revolutionary intellectuals, represented by the protagonist’s family. Likewise, at home, the narrator’s mother adopts a mixed combination of attitudes that reflect her original educated background and her transplanted revolutionary values. The description of the physical appearance of the prestigious buildings, the residences and the environment is thus both realistic and symbolic. In spite of the change in the social hierarchy and relative position of different classes, the old still lingers even while the new invades and occupies its former territory.

Moreover, the narrator is well aware of the fact that the separation and division between different classes and levels of culture are not as easy to demolish as the Communist leaders assert. The account of the conflict between the two neighbouring lanes is a vivid reflection of the way that constant changes and artificially enforced equality only lead to more conflicts and resentments. At first, these two worlds are separated by a real wall: on this side live the privileged, both from the old society — the Zhangs, and the proud, elegant and well-to-do family of the Chinese doctor — and the new revolutionary
elite — the families of the boy and the protagonist; on the other side of the wall live the ordinary citizens. As a result of Maoist social reforms, the wall is pulled down during the Great Leap Forward in 1958, and their conflicting life-styles and values are thus brought face to face. Ironically, however, “the wall was toppled, but the base still remained.”

The problems start with ordinary children from the other alley invading, and frightening the children on this side, an action that later provokes conflict between the adults. And this struggle between the two alleys is actually a prelude to the bigger change and turmoil that marks the Cultural Revolution. Thus, it is through the child narrator’s experience of the change and conflict within the neighbourhood that the frequent social-political changes of the Maoist regime are reflected.

It seems therefore, that such social change, instead of annihilating the division between classes and levels of culture, causes constant estrangement and resentment in the relationships between human beings. This is presented through the mixture of curiosity and frustration the girl experiences when she tries to go beyond her parents’ home. Her first experience of leaving home independently, when she gets to know the Zhang family, is crudely cut short by her mother’s prohibition and consequent tension between the two families. Similarly, she describes first attending primary school as like finding a new home, and establishing her own social relations for the first time; but the school is soon closed with the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution. Finally, though during the Cultural Revolution friendship does develop between three children — the protagonist and two neighbouring playmates — it is mainly due to their mutual boredom at having nothing else to do; and in fact the protagonist, unsatisfied with these superficial real life relationships, begins an imaginary communication with non-existent correspondents, from whom she

30 “Qiangji” 墙基 (The Base of the Wall) an earlier story by Wang Anyi must be based on the same materials. See my discussion below, and English translation in The Lapse of Time, op.cit., 81.

31 One reason for the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong claimed, was to carry out the proletarian revolution to the end and completely annihilate class differences.
constantly hopes to receive letters. The first experience of social relations with the neighbours, unsatisfying as it is, ends abruptly when the protagonist’s family moves to another district. As the narrator declares, “moving cut the continuation of my experience; the social relationships that I diligently established on my own finished here, and I had to start again.” The narrator concludes the chapter generalizing about the frequent moving of urban dwellers, which she believes results in their lacking a sense of place and lasting relationships.

If we read Chapter 3 along with an earlier short story by Wang Anyi, “The Base of the Wall,” the textual similarities and differences prove illuminating for an understanding of Wang’s developing sensibility. “The Base of the Wall” concerns a neighborhood quite like the one described in Chapter three of Fact and Fiction, in which two lanes are divided by a wall. The story’s impersonal narrator describes the people and their lives separately according to which of the two lanes they inhabit, in order to emphasize the differences between them. Thus we see a clear symmetrical structure in the work: Lane 501 . . . Lane 499 . . . Lane 501, etc. Nevertheless, the two child protagonists, each from one lane, cross into the other lane (the girl from Lane 501 hides in the boy’s home in Lane 499) and cause a positive change to occur in the relationships of the youngsters. In an optimistic and didactic tone, the narrator comments, “the barriers of bitterness and hatred could now disappear, and understanding and friendship could grow.”

However, this symmetrical design and the understanding that develops between the two protagonists disappears in the less carefully “designed” story of Chapter 3 in Fact and Fiction. Here, the account goes little further than the girl’s experience of differences and isolation both within one lane and between different lanes. The real exchange in the short story (where the boy comes across the girl’s diary and reads it) involves the lonely girl “I” in the novel who waits for an imaginary letter that never comes. Obviously, the autobiographical line of Fact and Fiction is more realistic and frank in terms of its loyalty.
to real life experience, and demonstrates that Wang has to a certain extent abandoned the simple didactic shaping of her early stories.32

In her teenage years, the narrator-protagonist moves even further from her own home and into the outside world, and chapter 5 describes the numerous chances for strange encounters (qiyu 奇遇) that she has on her adventurous journey. Again, however, these strange encounters in a chaotic time are ultimately unable to bring her any lasting or deep relationships. In fact, the idea of strange encounters in the Cultural Revolution is just a parody of Mao’s famous saying from that period, “We hail from all corners of the country and have joined together for a common revolutionary objective.”33

It is worth emphasizing that the narrator’s adolescence coincides with the most chaotic period in modern Chinese society, the Cultural Revolution, in which all traces of the established order are smashed and overthrown. She is left without a school to attend, and, neglected by her busy parents, spends her time exploring the outside world. On the surface, the sheer scale and multiple aspects of city life bring lots of possibilities for new encounters and relationships, especially during a political movement, when people from distinct classes and different families, even from different cities, can converge. And, as the protagonist feels, these fresh experiences do temporarily release her from loneliness and isolation: “The Cultural Revolution, in certain respects . . . made us try various kinds of human relationships, and greatly enriched our experience.” However, when all normal order is suspended, when forced relationships replace natural ones, when people cannot pursue their own true aims in life or express their real need for each other, these

32 Of course, this is only one part of Wang’s novel: see below for the contrasting vertical line, in which the shaping hand of the artist cannot be overlooked.
33 This saying, from Mao’s famous speech given in 1944 entitled “Serve the People” was widely recited during the Cultural Revolution. Chinese text is “我们都是来自五湖四海，为了一个共同的革命目标走到了一起来了.” English translation is from Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung, vol. 3, Foreign Languages Press, 1965.
encounters, caused by the sudden social changes alone rather than any deeper motivation, are bound to be superficial and temporary.

The protagonist experiences such superficiality in her several encounters with others: she becomes acquainted with the girl from a lower class family from the neighbouring lane, but they can only gossip to dispel their boredom and kill time. Next, by accident she goes into another household, only to become involved in a meaningless domestic dispute. Finally, she longs to build a sacred relation with the "sons of revolution," but discovers that these youths from high officials' families merely excel at empty talk and go about swindling people from one house to the next. Such encounters float away as quickly as they come, leaving her in deeper confusion and loneliness. Here, again, the growing distrust of these passing and unsatisfactory encounters contrasts strongly with Wang's former belief in people building understanding and friendship during difficult times.

The most important "strange encounter" the protagonist experiences in this period is during the movement to send city youth to the countryside to be "reformed" by the peasants, which the protagonist joins at the age of sixteen. This movement is perhaps the most typical embodiment of political and "artificial" new relationships attempting to uproot traditional human ties with their established sense of place and belonging. Yet when people leave their own native region and are transplanted into a strange place, the result is almost inevitably an even deeper sense of loss.

The narrator-protagonist describes this experience as a total failure of "human engineering." The superficially friendly relations between the urban youths and the local officials and ordinary peasants disguise a much more complicated sense of mutual estrangement, which no amount of revolutionary fervour can transcend. In practice, their lack of real common ground only provokes deep-rooted alienation and misunderstanding among individuals. A clear example is the case of the protagonist's awkward relations with a local official family. On reaching the countryside, she first lives with this family
because of her privileged background, yet with her sense of privacy developed in the city, she feels threatened by living so close to other people. She moves out of this local official's family to gain more independence. Unfortunately, in a small and traditional community like this village, such an act only brings trouble on herself and later places her in an isolated and difficult situation.

When this abnormal era ends in the late 1970s, the urban youth hastily return to where they came from, and the forced relations immediately disintegrate. The protagonist, having escaped from her parents' house and then from the city, looking for romantic adventure and close relationships, now returns home "empty-handed" after wandering round the country: "The Cultural Revolution failed to make a logical connection in our lives, and happened very suddenly. It neither inherited former relationships, nor left any relationships to continue afterwards. Those relationships that were formed in this period almost completely disappeared after it. When the games finished, we each went back to our own track, and didn't encounter each other again. And even if we should meet again, we will have become strangers already" (229).

The following chapter of this plot line, chapter 7, deals mainly with the period when the protagonist joins a local art troupe, having moved away from the countryside, and with the first few years after she returns to Shanghai in her early 20s. The central focus is her love and marriage. After several failures in her romantic relationships, the protagonist finally gets married and builds a home of her own. The narrator's intrusive voice is even stronger here as she recalls her several experiences of love in a twisted and puritanical society, and relates how her whole generation of urban youth has had to struggle by themselves to find some kind of sincere love between the extremes of purely platonic and merely practical relationships.

In this chapter, the central metaphors of life as a journey, and the encounters between human beings as those of passengers on that journey, are gradually developed.
And this is hardly a mere figure of speech, since the protagonist has literally been wandering alone in the world from one place to another, leaving her Shanghai home to go to the countryside; then to the local performance troupe; then back to Shanghai, and finally travelling between Shanghai and a local city to see her new fiancé, later her husband. She is thus perfectly justified in calling her relationships with several men along the way the meetings of passengers in different stations or destinations. In each case, either both sides are on the road, or one has to travel to the other’s place to meet. However, these passing acquaintanceships always attenuate with time, sometimes because of the ignorance of the two people involved, sometimes due to environmental factors, and it is only after the narrator-protagonist returns to Shanghai and faces a spiritual crisis that she is able to build what seems to be a really deep relationship, the one that finally leads to her marriage.

The development of this relationship marks a definite stage in her growth to maturity. After her return to Shanghai, she had found herself lost in the city’s crowds in an environment now grown strange after eight years of absence. The alienation and loneliness she feels make her realize more strongly than ever that only a deep and lasting relationship can give her a sense of identity and continuity. This need brings her back to a previously hesitant friendship with a man she has known for years: “I am lost in deep bewilderment. I must hold onto that friend who taught me to ride a bicycle, since he is a piece of my history, and can make my origins clear in the crowd. He can help me keep what remains of my integrity, and then I won’t be cut to pieces by this floating life. This is the salvation that our close relationship can give to our floating lives, and also the psychological destination of our search for deep affection” (307). As a result, the protagonist stops her passenger-like encounters and finds a certain stability: “I suddenly gave up all my longing for any kind of strange encounter . . . Once again I felt the desire for a deep relationship . . . from an extreme romantic, I was transformed all at once into an extreme realist” (300).
Although her relationship with her husband at first appears a successful one by contrast with the previous failures, the description by the narrator of this "realistic" (xianshi zhuyi "现 实 主 义") relation bears definite traces of doubt. Her account of the construction of their solid relationship is situated in an overcrowded, gloomy and exhausting city, where people have to struggle for the necessities of everyday life to such an extent that they exhaust all their romantic feelings. The narrator spends a great deal of time portraying all the intricate details of their efforts to buy cheap interior decoration materials for their kitchen. The construction of a home or of a new relation, the narrator implies, thus more or less stops at the practically-oriented, "realistic" level. For all its outwardly stable appearance, this relationship lacks much overt emotion or substance. The only description of a moment of romantic intimacy with her husband occurs during an earthquake, and here she contrasts their sudden closeness with the lack of romance or enthusiasm on ordinary days: "This is a moment when we share a common destiny, and all our conflicts disappear like smoke . . . . But the ordinary days are poisonous, and will return to corrode our hopes" (317). Finally, the narrator further implies the inadequacy of this relationship by going on to discuss how the frequency of divorce and of relationships built on appearances alone in the city are evidence of the general urban experience of fear and inability to establish real human ties. So this chapter, despite its portrayal of the apparent success of the narrator’s marriage, also ends with reflections on the limitations and inadequacy of human relations.

These first four chapters of the horizontal line, though presented as progressive stages in the protagonist’s growth, ultimately give a rather pessimistic account of human relationships in real life, limited as they are by time and space and the difficulty of establishing deep and lasting attachments. We are left with the impression that although the world expands further and further as the child grows up, from her house, to school, to the other parts of the city until she can wander about the whole country, the anxious
longing for real relationships seems never to be resolved completely in real life. Time and again, she just experiences the same kinds of disappointment and loneliness, and realizes that the obstacles and differences between human beings will never be overcome.

It is noticeable that this view of human communication and relationships contrasts dramatically with Wang's previous fiction, and it seems clear that her new outlook is based more closely on the raw materials of her life experience. As I briefly mentioned when discussing the differences between Chapter 3 of Fact and Fiction and her story entitled "The Base of the Wall," Wang seems consciously to avoid the artistic shaping process in this part of the novel. And the reason for her greater focus on believable life experience is finally elaborated by the narrator in Chapter 9 of the novel, the last chapter in this "horizontal" plot line. Therefore, this chapter is especially interesting and significant, considering that it concerns itself with building an imaginary relationship that seems to compensate for the unsatisfactory relationships described earlier, in other words, the chapter explains the relation between the narrator-protagonist's works and her real life.

In fact, Chapter 9 consists almost exclusively of the personal meditations of the narrator-protagonist on her writing practice. Now, as a narrator who is constantly reminding the reader of her identity as a writer, she gives a retrospective account of the origins, nature and development of her literary career. Her description of her experiences and literary works makes no attempt to conceal the fact that the narrator-protagonist is identified with the writer Wang Anyi in real life. Hence, like Wang, after the protagonist returns to Shanghai, she begins working as an editor for a childrens' literature magazine, soon becoming a famous and prolific writer, and by the mid-'80s, a career author.34

Her analysis of her literary career includes three aspects, beginning with her motives for writing fiction. She retraces the origins of her writing to the loneliness and isolation between individuals that she has experienced constantly since childhood. She

34 Though interestingly, she doesn't mention her mother's role in helping her to become a writer.
explains that it was the need to communicate that inspired her first literary piece, a poem
called “Bugubugu” 布谷布谷 (a title that imitates the call of a kind of bird), and she
subsequently associated this piece with her artistic destiny: “Bugubugu is actually a call
which never received an answer; it is the lonely sound of my childhood. This anxious
calling, looking for connections in the crowd, became a symbol of my whole later
life” (370).

She also analyses the reason for her choice to write fiction instead of poetry.
Poetry may act as an expression of her anxiety, but can’t satisfy her longing to build a
better imaginary world to replace the existing real one: “In those poems I revealed the
desire to rebuild my experience, but I was still confined to my existing experience . . . a
problem that remained even when I first started to write fiction . . . However, the longing
to reconstruct experience became stronger and clearer, and I had to abandon utterly those
methods of expression, until I reached a complete fictional world” (371). She thus finds
that fiction provides her with more freedom in reconstructing experience (chongjian
jingyan 重建经验). And this “rebuilding of a world of feeling and experience,”
including rebuilding human relationships on paper, is the only reason she writes.

She reaches such a conclusion here, that writing is “a need of each individual,”
after she has exhausted (or been disappointed by) the possibilities of human relations in
real life. Such disappointment is clear in the previous four stages of her autobiographical
account, as I have shown. Writing fiction therefore becomes for her a personal destiny, a
practice of using imaginary relationships to replace real ones.

In this chapter, the writer-narrator also examines the fictional relations in her
writings from “Yu Shashasha” to her later series of works exploring sexual relationships.
She makes it clear that she established these fictional relationships, so different from real
life, in order to make up for the inadequacy and imperfection of reality: “The relationships
in life always involve estrangement, and this makes people feel lonely. I want to give
meaning to all the trivial processes of human contact”(370). “I want to test the solidity and eternity of spiritual relationships, and I use fiction to make this test”(389).

Such explanations of her own fiction writing shed light on the formal designs of her fiction. She evaluates highly the fictionality of fiction, and its necessary function in remedying the defects of reality: “To establish new relationships is her (the protagonist-writer’s) ideal in life” (406). Fictional relationships are judged by their success in aiding the human search for meaningful, if imaginary, ties and for their exploration of the possibilities of life when reality fails to provide them. And she finds that her position as an artist is to create a bridge between real and fictional worlds, using the latter to make the former more bearable. These idealistic views about writing are certainly not original, but what makes this chapter distinctive and poignant is that the narrator’s highly self-conscious analysis and comment come after four chapters in which her own real relationships have been shown as failures. This chapter thus becomes a strenuous effort to make sense of her own life, and somehow to assert her self-identity.

The narrator’s view of her past thirty-plus years in the five chapters of this line, although certainly dealing with her own growth to maturity, show not so much a gradual coming to terms with life, but rather a disillusionment with reality, and finally an acknowledgement that only fiction-writing will satisfy her spiritual quest for relationships, and allow her to establish her identity. The transition from reality (the experiences of chapters 1, 3, 5 and 7) to fiction (the experiences of chapter 9) really marks her attainment of fulfilment and self-realization. And maturity for the narrator comes from awareness of the necessary interaction between reality (or “fact”) and fiction, of her destiny as an artist who stands between reality and the imaginative world.

This design suggests an interesting development from Wang’s previous works in bildungsroman form. In my discussion of Wang’s three previous novels above, I noted that it has been a long-term practice for Wang Anyi to write about individual life and
education, and to demonstrate deep concern with personal growth in the form of biographical accounts. In this sense, *Fact and Fiction* is a continuation of this typical bildungsroman theme. But now, uniquely among Wang’s novels, the narration adopts an autobiographical perspective on personal growth, resulting in much greater emphasis on the subjective and spiritual potential of human individuals. The relation between the narrator “I” and the protagonist “I,” or the present “I” and the past “I,” manifests Wang’s belief in the humanist and individualist idea that a person can understand, narrate, and shed light on his or her own life. This belief is not presented so clearly in her previous novels.

Another noticeable aspect of *Fact and Fiction* lies in its approaching personal growth from the still more particular perspective of artistic growth. In this respect, the thematic interest and formal design Wang adopted in the three “artist novellas” immediately preceding *Fact and Fiction* are also incorporated into this novel. With a writer as narrator-protagonist, and particularly with the self-conscious perspective of this narrator, the artist theme is further developed here in an even more ambitious design: an artist’s attempt to make sense of her own past goes hand in hand with her search for identity through artistic creation (I will clarify this point in the next section). The bildungsroman-like concern with individual development presented from an outside perspective, seen in Wang’s previous novels, is now internalized into the narrator-protagonist’s reflections on her own growing up and discovery of a creative self. Thus, I would categorize *Fact and Fiction* with the three immediately preceding novellae as belonging to a more specific subtype of the bildungsroman, namely, the kunstlerroman (artist novel), which examines “the growth of a novelist into the stage of maturity that signals the recognition of the protagonist’s artistic destiny and mastery of an artistic craft.”

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It is important to recall that *Fact and Fiction* is also an artist novel written from an autobiographical standpoint. The once invisible narrator of Wang's early works is now brought into the open to such an extent that she becomes the main character in the work — both as the subject of the novel and as the loquacious person telling us about that subject. Before progressing to the other plot line of *Fact and Fiction*, I would like to analyse in more detail the implications of this autobiographical standpoint, both in terms of the experiences explored and the narrative situation in which they are set.

As I noted, Wang presents the growth of an urban child in Maoist times as the recollection and reflection of a mature narrator who is also a writer. Since the narrator totally adopts the method of "telling," what we confront in our reading is her state of mind rather than any direct meeting with events or characters. For example, in chapter 1, we are exposed to an abundance of mundane recollections and everyday encounters from her childhood without a strictly temporal or logical connection: mother forbids the family to watch traditional plays; the old-style nanny is introduced; the child sees for the first time the old mansion that once belonged to her mother's Third Aunt, she describes a photo of grandmother, and a visit to grandmother's tomb; next, a memory of the old woman in the neighbouring house, and the conflict between mother and this old woman; a family from Ningbo 宁波 appears, and she makes acquaintance with the boy of that family; there is a visit to Hangzhou; she mentions her mother's old friend from the orphanage, and her grandfather, and so on... Wang convinces us that these are the kinds of floating images or groups of impressions from childhood memory that run through the narrator's mind. The events themselves are trivial, fragmentary, lacking in order: it is only the narrator's constant speech that joins them all together.

Moreover, between the separate scenes above, the narrator's voice frequently intrudes: "Along with this mansion, I should mention a female guest whom my mother called 'third aunt.' The reason she stayed in my childhood memory is because she was the only guest who could speak Shanghainese and did not belong in the group called
'comrades'"(4). "At that time I was also enthusiastic about looking through photo albums."(5) It is this consciousness that guides us in turning from one scene to another and suggests the continuity of experience, and of constant anxiety and loneliness, behind them.

In this way, we see "a being devoid of outline, indefinable, intangible and invisible," in Nathalie Sarraute's terms, "an anonymous 'I,' who is at once all and nothing, and who as often as not is but the reflection of the author himself, has usurped the role of hero, occupying the place of honour . . . The other characters, being deprived of their own existence, are reduced to the status of visions, dreams, nightmares, illusions, reflections, quiddities or dependants of this all powerful 'I'."36 This shift of the object of presentation, from the events and people in life to the narrator-protagonist's mind, from imitating objective life to imitating subjective life, indicates not only a great and rather egotistical interest in private, inner experience but also a strong faith in the ability to know and understand that experience. As is clear from even a cursory reading, these five chapters present only one character, the self, although it has two faces, that of narrator and protagonist. The other characters exist only to the extent that they help to bring out what is going on in the protagonist's life, and thus in the narrator's mind. Hence, once the narrator's account of a scene, event or figure finishes, its characters are dropped.

The constant presence of analytical and exegetical comment throughout the narrative is further evidence of the narrator's sense-making process. Clearly, the function of the narrator is not only to tell what happened, but also to interpret, comment upon, classify and universalize those experiences. Structurally, she arranges the different stages of her life around certain categories, like mother, house, strange encounters, love and marriage, and writing, and each of the five chapters deals with one of these separate themes. During the account of each theme, the narrator's tendency to reshape ordinary

individual existence into one of more universal human relevance is clearly detectable. For example, in chapter 7, where she discusses love and marriage, the basic concern is obviously the narrator-protagonist’s private life including especially her romances and sexual awakening. But this chapter opens with a general statement on love:

Now it is time to talk about love. Love is the favorite subject of people in our trade. There is no question about that. But I still ask myself, why is that so? I think it is because love is the best and simplest reason to join people together. What those in our trade most fear is that people will scatter all over the place and remain all by themselves. There must be more than two people for us to produce that that we call a story. And if there is love, no matter how different the two people are, they will meet together, and becoming tied together will create one story after another. So along with the Cultural Revolution, that I talked about in chapter five, love is another thing that can produce strange encounters (274).

This statement sets the following account of the protagonist’s romances in a general framework of interpersonal relationships, and shows how anxious the narrator is to place her personal experience in a broader human context, in order to justify the following account and bring significance to her own personal life. During this account, she also frequently makes general comments on sexual relationships, and brings the experiences of many different human subjects, ranging widely over space and time, together, their connection being only that they too involve sexual relationships. For example, after she relates her platonic relationship with a boy in the neighbourhood, she gives a general discussion of asceticism in Chinese society during the Maoist period (295-299). And after an account of how she and her husband build their home, she launches into yet another monologue on the problem of sexual relationships in the city of Shanghai (313-315).
True to her character as an artist, this narrator-protagonist, besides frequently reflecting on and interpreting her own experience, grants herself the further privilege of interpreting other people and the environment surrounding her growth in an "authorized" fashion. Sometimes she adopts an omniscient position in telling another's story, like that of her mother in chapter 1, which I mentioned above. At other times, her intent to interpret is manifested in her descriptions of other characters and perceptions of objects around her. One example is her description of the family Nanny. After she relates Nanny’s old-fashioned way of addressing the members of this supposedly revolutionary family, she then continues: “At the beginning was her manner of address. I feel that she made a great contribution in enabling us to enter the life of Shanghai.” Next, she describes how Nanny helped her develop new relationships, then comments: “This broadening of social relations beyond mere comradeship gave us another push into Shanghai society.” Then follows a discussion of her mother’s subtle conflict with Nanny; she explains that Mother’s anger is provoked because: “Nanny is a figure like the city postman, even like a spy. Such people can enter the inner room of their master, and using their specially alert senses, make a plot from the traces and then thread these plots from one family to another, and make the isolated families here communicate in spirit. I consider that my understanding of the whole surrounding environment started when she entered our household”(3). Presenting characters in such a way, the narrator reminds us of her privilege, of her real identity as an author who can impose meaning on what has happened.

The authorial self in this horizontal line, who thus interprets the life she is experiencing, would be less noticeable were it not for her much clearer presence as creator of the imaginary journey into the past that constitutes the second, vertical, line of this novel. The final part of my discussion will therefore examine the effect that this vertical line has on the reader’s understanding of the narrator-protagonist and on the general impact of the whole novel.
Creating an Imaginary Family History

Paralleling the autobiographical account of the narrator-protagonist’s growth into an urban artist in Shanghai, chapters 2, 4, 6, 8 and 10 present her as a writer who is creating an imaginary family history. This family history, ranging in time from her remote ancestors in a minority tribe who emerged during the 4th or 5th century in the Mongolian wilderness until the decline of a late-Qing gentry family in the 19th century, parallels the development of Chinese civilization. Here, in contrast to her trivial and everyday experiences in real life, the narrator-protagonist displays her “romantic” imagination, describing the glories of the past and the heroism of her ancestors. What makes this part more than just an historical fantasy, however, is that the writer-narrator continuously describes her thoughts as she puts the history together. In other words, the writing of family history is presented as a very concrete process of artistic creation.

As a necessary background for interpreting Wang Anyi’s act of family history writing in Fact and Fiction, and before analysing the second part of the novel in more detail, I would like to call attention to an interesting phenomenon, namely, the popularity among contemporary writers of so-called family chronicle fiction. Starting with Mo Yan’s Red Sorghum Clan (Honggaoliang jiazu 红高粱家族) in 1985 — a series of stories in which a narrator tells of his father’s and grandfather’s lives from the early Republic to the late 1970s — a fictional fascination with the past, especially in the form of personal or family history, has prevailed in the imagination of Chinese writers of the later 1980s and early 1990s. In this respect, Mo Yan’s Red Sorghum; Su Tong’s series of stories about Maple Village (Fengyangshu cun 枫杨树村), especially his novellas “Nineteen Thirty-Four Escapes” (Yijiusansi nian de taowang 一九三四年逃亡) and “The Opium Family” (Yingsu zhijia 毒时之家); Hong Feng’s “Desert Sea” (Hanhai 瀚海); Fang Fang’s “Grandfather in My Father’s Mind” (Zufu zaifu qin xinzhong 祖父在父亲心
and Wang Anyi’s *Fact and Fiction*, and “The Sorrow of the Pacific,” not only contain similar subject matter and thematic concerns, but also display some common narrative patterns. As one critic puts it, these works involve “a first-person narrator, who is the descendant of the family described; scenes of an old home that no longer exists; legends or achievements of past ancestors; and a family chronology that traces back three generations.” These works constitute a distinctive subgenre in contemporary Chinese literature, “family chronicle fiction” (*Jiazushi xiaoshuo* 家族小说).

An important innovation common to this group of writings is first-person narrators who identify themselves as the descendants of the characters. These narrators, often similar to their authors implicitly or explicitly, are urban-raised youths who have lost all links to their home in the countryside and know little about their ancestors or the past. In a very intrusive way, they constantly juxtapose past scenes depicting their ancestors with present meditations of their own. This feature not only establishes a dialogic narrative

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38 Meng Yue 孟悦, “Su Tong de ‘jiashi’yu ‘lishi’ xiezuo “苏童的家史与历史写作 (Su Tong’s ‘Family History’ and the Writing of ‘History’), *Jintian* (Today), 1990/2. 84.

39 This concept is used widely by Chinese critics to describe this group of writings, e.g, Chen Xiaoming: *Wubian de tiaozhan*. Below I point out the difference between this family chronicle fiction and family fiction. Family fiction is a well established subgenre in Chinese fiction, from the Qing dynasty writer Cao Xueqin’s *Hongloumeng* to Bajin’s *Jia* in the modern period. In such works, many Chinese writers have tried to capture human life and experience, and social and historical changes from the perspective of a single family. However, there are some important characteristics of “family chronicle fiction” not seen in such earlier works, for instance, the questioning of the reliability of the narrators’ accounts.
situation between past and present, but also emphasizes the sense of a personal quest for identity through the search for one’s past.\textsuperscript{40}

Presented as descendants’ visions of their ancestors’ lives, and narrated with a nostalgic voice, these works explore the reality of the past particularly on the family and personal level. The previously crucial theme of “revolution” is removed to the far background, and what is pulled up to front stage are the untold family secrets of the “grandparents” rediscovered by the descendant “I.” In these works, although the different authors’ views of the past are quite varied, some seeing it as heroic, some as decadent, history is far from embodying the inevitable progress of Marxist historical materialism. Rather, these works exhibit a shared vision of the present as a decline from the past, with none of the former vitality or wisdom surviving to later generations.

Usually, the grandfathers in these stories are heroic figures despite their unpromising circumstances. They dare to love, to hate, to die and to take revenge. They are also raised with the traditional virtues of filiality and wisdom. However, reaching the fathers’ generation, the vitality is lost: usually the fathers are silent figures, who are without much sense of ambition or achievement, and who lack the respect of their own children.

The narrators’ generation is even worse. These are urban youths with pale faces; wandering souls who are “unfilial descendants” (\textit{buxiao zisun} 不 孝 子 孙). However, it is through their awakening consciousness of the past, their search for a connection to lost

\textsuperscript{40} Zhou Yingxiong first points out this awareness of the narrator in his analysis of \textit{Red Sorghum}. He explains that it serves the theme and idea of mutual understanding and communication between ancestor and descendant, that “blood is thicker than water,” and elucidates the principle that human nature remains the same through generations. This point certainly explains part of the theme of family history. However, I would like to add the function of self-discovery by this “I” narrator in family history fiction. see Zhou Yingxiong 周 英 雄, \textit{Honggaoliang jiazu yanyi} 红 高 李 家 族 演 义 (On \textit{Red Sorghum Clan}), in \textit{Bijiaowenxue yu xiaoshuo quanshi} 比较 文 学 与 小 说 诠释 (Comparative Literature and the Hermeneutics of the Novel), Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1990.
history, that the past is perceived and interpreted. So these descendant narrators impose a lyrical tone upon the past, and a deep sense of nostalgia is detectable in their works.

This re-exploration of the past at the private and personal level is certainly a reaction against the literary practice of placing too heavy an emphasis on public events and their political implications, an approach popular since the May Fourth period, and almost exclusively adopted during the Maoist era. The personal life of the protagonists now becomes an interwoven tapestry of love, hate, desire and revenge, and in their accounts the narrators concentrate especially on the erotic, mysterious, and decadent sides of love and marriage. What emerges most notably from this fascination with the private and personal is a fresh understanding of the human situation, of historical processes, and the relation of human nature to circumstances. The “calculated absence” of public and political discourse, as some critics have sensed, makes this enthusiastic writing of family history a challenging alternative to the orthodox interpretations of history and human life in previous socialist-realist narratives.

Connected to this personalizing approach to the past is the fact that these writers deliberately dance on the boundary between fact and fantasy, history and fiction. Despite

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41 Chinese critic Xu Zidong 许子东 compares four works of fiction dealing with Republican history separately written in the 1950s, mid-1980s and early 1990s, concluding that these works represent widely different interpretations of revolutionary history. Those published after the mid-1980s have a strongly subversive tendency to rewrite the revolutionary models set by the works of the 1950s and 1960s. The radical mid-1980s avant-garde works even regard as suspect the narrative possibility of giving a reliable version of history. See Xu’s “Dangdai xiaoshuo zhong de xiandaishi” 当代小说中的 现代史, Shanghai wenxue, 1994/10. Meng Yue has also examined the writing of historical reality in fiction and the different modes of interpreting past existence since the May Fourth generation. She finds that the fiction of the 1980s has lost the desire to tell a complete integrated story, instead disclosing an impulse of anti-imitation of objective reality; but she also notices that new works emphasize more concrete and personal sensory perceptions. See her “Xushi yu lishi” 叙事与 历史(Narrative and History) in Wenyi zhengming 文艺争鸣, 1990/5, 6.

their claims that they are writing family history, they usually also make it clear that what they produce is “fictive.” In this respect, the narrator in “Nineteen Thirty-Four Escapes” is very representative. An urban youth, he is born without any real access to his past. All his family members escaped from their hometown long ago, almost all his relatives are dead, and the only survivor, his father, is a mute. The few means the narrator does have available to research the past include unreliable history textbooks, tiny fragments of evidence, and others’ stories or gossip. So he is forced to use imagination to fill in most of the blanks and join together the pieces.

Such nostalgic, imaginative narrators make it very clear that fiction is not a reflection of what really happened, but a personal ritual through which they attempt to search for a homeland and communicate with long lost ancestors. As a result, they display a new, assertive attitude as writing subjects who treat the fictive imagination as superior to the impersonal historical record. They imply that imagination can fill the blanks left by history: “I would not need to enter into the empty spaces left behind by previous generations, and I could still compose my family history.”

Though this nihilistic view of history obviously originates in a prevailing suspicion of the vision of history enforced by Communist narrative, it reveals at the same time a strong reassertion of personal imagination and subjective experience.

On the other hand, being “fictive” is also accompanied by efforts to seek “facts” and “truth.” One sign of this effort is the trend towards incorporating autobiographical materials, historiography, personal memoirs, and other factual accounts into fiction-writing. For example, regarding her story “Grandfather in My Father’s Mind,” Fang Fang

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43 Su Tong’s novella “1934 Escapes” best demonstrates the difficulty of knowing the past for the younger generation born in Maoist China, and their highly expanded personal imagination. The narration is accompanied with many contradictory assertions: “I have not seen nor could I ever see that . . . but right now I see . . .” (123); “As I look back on . . . I see that . . .” (115); “I don’t know . . . I know that,” etc. Refer to Michael S. Duke’s translation, Raise the Red Lantern.

44 Duke, Raise the Red Lantern. 159.
claims: “This is a real life record of my grandfather and father.” The work is presented as the narrator’s investigation into the real cause of the deaths of her father, a depressed intellectual of the Maoist period, and her grandfather, one of the final generation of traditional Confucian scholars. The account consists of the narrator-protagonist’s own personal witness and memory of events, her consultation of local gazetteers, her grandfather’s poems, father’s diary, and interviews with friends and relatives. At the same time, the narrator’s moving account of the family history is intertwined with meditations on the fate of three generations of Chinese intellectuals. A similar process is also evident in Wang Anyi’s novel, as I will show below. In this way, the stories of minor figures in history are left for fiction to uncover. Fiction becomes a new means by which to discover historical truth, only this discovery is mainly through the emotional pilgrimage of feeling and sensibility, rather than the bare factual record.

In the light of these thematic concerns and experiments with “I” narrators in family history fiction, returning to Wang Anyi we find that one major theme, of root-seeking, originated in her works as early as 1985, when she published a short autobiographical piece called “My Origins” (Wo de lai li 我 的 来 历). As the account starts, the narrator finds herself in a dilemma attempting to answer the question “where do I come from,” because both her “mother’s home” and “father’s home” are lost. In the first part, she recalls one trip to Hangzhou to search for the old house of her mother’s family there. In a plain and straightforward style, she describes in great detail her difficulty finding her ancestor’s place in a crowded modern city after an extended period of cultural destruction. The second part consists of memories of several visits over the decades by the relatives on her father’s side, who live in South East Asia. Separated by political pressures and

45 This piece is collected as a short story in her fiction collection Xiaobaozhuang, 1986.
cultural differences, the meetings of her family with their overseas relatives only underline the estrangement and distance between them.

Although thin in content and plain in artistic design, this work nonetheless conveys the mixed mood of curiosity and sadness in the mind of “a child of New China.” Through a character’s mouth, the narrator expresses her confusion about the family past with a sigh: “Almost a hundred years, and I can’t recall them: history is in a complete mess (yitahutu 一 踏 糊 涂), a complete mess!”

If “My Origins” reflects a modern young urban dweller’s deep regret for the huge blank in her family history and confusion about her personal identity, the next two fictional narratives, *Fact and Fiction* and “The Sorrow of the Pacific Ocean,” which Wang developed on the basis of the two parts of “My Origins,” represent an urban artist’s ambition, against all odds, to create a family myth in a modern city. As the narrator of *Fact and Fiction* asserts,

The vertical relation between human beings is a really good resource. I feel that family-clan fiction ... is a personalized, concrete manifestation of searching for one’s roots ... It also takes the form of searching in reverse. They (the authors of family fiction) set out from today’s self, and retrace to the sources of their history. They examine the history of human beings through themselves, through recounting the development of a concrete human being ... Family fiction brings with it the flavour of returning home, as if one is tired of wandering, and finally comes back home in a tranquil mood ... The word ‘root-seeking’ really touches me and attracts me to what happened at that time. Hidden within it is an extremely moving human relationship, and an explanation of the reason for our existence in the world. The word ‘life’ has its concrete expression in the (second kind of root-seeking fiction), family fiction: ... it
makes the abstract concepts of ‘life’ and ‘bloodties’ intimate and tangible.

What a beautiful experience!” (412-413)

When these two works were later collected in book form, the book was indeed entitled *Myths of The Paternal and Maternal Lines* (*Fuxi he muxi de shenhua* 父系和母系的神话). Together they depict the soul-stirring search of a modern young adult for a past lost, and ancestors forgotten. On one side, her imagination dives deep into the tunnel of time, retracing the footprints of her maternal ancestors, and makes up an heroic myth of a family’s two thousand years of adventure. On the other side, she travels afar over the South China Sea to the tropical islands of South East Asia, becoming reunited spiritually with the place from which her father originated. Family history and personal enlightenment thus are interwoven into a common structure.

In many ways, therefore, the vertical line of *Fact and Fiction*, developing in the even-numbered chapters of the novel, demonstrates the above-mentioned characteristics of family chronicle fiction-writing. But Wang Anyi attempts to surpass her Chinese contemporaries by going even further, not just in the sense that she traces her family back one thousand five hundred years, but because she develops the thematic concern of family history writing discussed above within the reflexive framework of a storytelling situation. Thus she creates a work whose subject incorporates an account of its own genesis and development.

In the second plot line, therefore, the narrator “I” is an urban writer who involves herself in the research and writing of a family history. The narrator’s self-conscious interruptions and self-analysis of her writing provide a constant accompaniment and counterpoint to the imaginary account of her family history that she is composing.

Chapter 2 starts with a generalizing of the rootlessness of the protagonist’s family, presented in chapter 1, to include the existential situation of virtually all people who live in
modern cities like Shanghai. The narrator especially focuses on the phenomenon of the loss of family myths as an indication of this rootless state, beginning with the fact that her own family has forgotten its ancestors and no longer possesses any family chronicle: “Ever since my mother’s family fell apart completely, the family chronicle on the maternal side was also cut short. Nobody tells us the myths about our ancestors. This kind of myth is seriously lacking in my family”(45).

She then extends the discussion to the disappearance and distorted forms of family myths throughout the city of Shanghai: fewer and fewer families remember their family myths; people have lost their sense of origins; and ancestors have become wandering ghosts, so that “family myth is well on the way to dispersing altogether.” The narrator then relates this loss to the urban problems of confusion and loneliness: “Confusion is the common mode in Shanghai”(49). “Without family myth, we have all become orphans, confused and perplexed. Our lives remain hidden in the darkness, and the lives of others become lost in the fog”(52). Finally, she again stresses the importance of family myth (jiazu shenhua 家族神话) for a modern urban dweller: “Family myth is a glorious heritage, a cultural and spiritual treasure of a family, in that it records the origins of the family. The importance of origins for us is that it can at least give us a one-sided vision so we won’t become totally lost.”

What is worth noting here is that the narrator defines “myth” as the kind of story about one’s family past that she desperately seeks and is later going to compose. Her choice of terms itself is an interesting revelation of the nature of the kind of story she is aiming towards. As is commonly known, myth usually refers to the early tales found in every culture that explain the origins of the world, and the way things came to be. These are related to the human fascination with the origins and meaning of the cosmos. Myth often involves supernatural phenomena and figures, and doesn’t necessarily aim to give historical truth — in fact, very often, it does not fit our modern beliefs about the physical world. The value of these invented tales, however, as anthropologists have pointed out,
lies in their outward projection of human desire, fantasy and consequent ontological insight. So myths are closely related to ritual, another kind of outward projection, and their power continues to be explored in literature even after people have stopped believing literally in the content of the mythical tales.

Seen in this light, the narrator’s naming her fiction “family myth” reveals not so much the style and genre to which her story belongs as its human importance for her. Her imaginary family history becomes a self-conscious construct aiming to fulfill a deep human need, a reaction to the imperfection and lack of direction in her present life.

As I discussed earlier, the horizontal line of this novel, while presented as an autobiographical account of the narrator-protagonist growing up, also gives a factual account of urban reality during a time of rapid social mobilization. The mobilization of the populace in social and cultural revolution has driven people from their homes, causing them to wander from one place to another, and finally to lose their sense of origin (as the account of the life of the narrator’s grandfather shows). This sense of loss is further exacerbated by the prevailing ideology of anti-traditionalism and breaking with the past that was encouraged in the Maoist period. Family chronicles are burned, old homes are changed, and ancestors are forgotten (as the mother’s story shows). This cutting off and forgetfulness, the narrator claims, though liberating in a certain sense, is also the origin of the loss of identity and anxiety of her own generation. She concludes: “The result is that, on the one hand, they (referring to her mother’s and grandfather’s generation who chose to forget history) unburdened themselves of history, but on the other hand, the history of our families became ambiguous and seemingly broken and fragmentary. But how much I desire to know along that path I came” (362).

Thus, the narrator’s act of writing a family history on her mother’s side is first and foremost a kind of wish-fulfilment; an imaginary creation that enables her to escape the dilemma of being an orphan of history: “I am a child who has only father and mother, neither a paternal grandfather and grandmother, nor a maternal grandfather and
grandmother. In my family, there is no old woman to tell us the ancient story. I can only tell it by myself” (153).

This imagined family history, acting as a compensation for the real life the narrator is experiencing, will therefore display a contrasting picture and follow a logic quite different from that reality. If, in the horizontal line, we have been exposed to a realistic description of urban society and life full of trivial fragments, lacking enthusiasm or direction, and for the growing urban child permeated with deep feelings of anxiety and loneliness, in the vertical line, we notice that the narrator invents a much more heroic and fulfilling vision of the past.

This urban child, inspired by her mother’s unusual family name “Ru 茹,” chooses the one possibility from various threads that suggests that her family originated from a primitive tribe. This choice gives her more space in which to flaunt her imagination, and “provide for her life a moving and tragic background “(53). Hence, she traces her roots back to a nomadic tribe called the Youran 柔然, which flourished in North China fifteen hundred or so years ago, and her family chronicle starts with the emergence of this tribe of heroes who have ambitions to create a strong race and country.

Placing the origins of her life in a solemn and stirring setting, a wild, dangerous environment where the only law is the “survival of the fittest,” the narrator imagines her ancestors progressing stage by stage from their beginnings as primitive pioneers, to their gaining independence as an autonomous people, surviving other tribes’ attacks and gradually developing into a nomadic state with its own leader.

So from the very beginning, she shows a romantic determination to celebrate heroes and heroism — which can be seen as a reaction to her own plain and rootless life — that suffuses her summary of the ancestors’ adventures and their glorious achievements in chapter 4: “I don’t believe that there is not a single hero in the several thousand years of this history. Even if there is indeed no hero, I will create one. I would like him to have brilliant achievements in battle, and become the ruler everybody desires to approach. The
hero's brightness will travel through the tunnel of time, and shed light on our plain life”
(138). In this way, she demonstrates a deep need in the human heart for another kind of
life that goes beyond today's plain everyday life deprived of meaning.

She also presents the family history as a difficult and tortuous struggle full of
dramatic ups and downs, through which outstanding heroes advance creating meaning and
gaining great achievements. The first glorious Youran State is demolished by the
Northern Wei 北魏 Kingdom, and the remains of the tribe flee and are scattered. In the
era of Genghis Khan 成吉思汗, her ancestors converge and rise again, fighting together
as brave warriors who support the Khan and relocate themselves in the Mongolian 蒙古
kingdom. Later, however, the ancestors' loyalty to the former Mongolian aristocracy
leads them to join the rebellion against the central Yuan 元 Kingdom ruled by Kublai Khan
忽必烈. Defeated, they are exiled to the south part of China as slaves in the 13th
century, and they adapt themselves from a nomadic life to an agricultural one.

This gloomy and sad experience of her ancestors living as slaves far from home is
followed by another resurgence: after many years, one outstanding ancestor among the
former tribespeople becomes a “number one scholar” (zhuangyuan 状元) and helps this
slave family rise to become members of the gentry class in the Qing 清 Dynasty. The
decline of this gentry family coincides with the turmoil throughout Chinese society in the
late Imperial period. The descendants become local artisans during the 19th century, and
the attractions of modern urbanization bring the narrator's great-grandfather to the
thriving provincial city of Hangzhou, thus severing completely the tie to agricultural life.
Unfortunately, this character's cautious and industrious amassing of a family fortune is
quickly undone by his son's adventurous and squandering lifestyle (this son being the
narrator's grandfather). The family's move to Shanghai ends with complete bankruptcy
and the dispersal of family members, and the mother becomes a deserted orphan who
finally chooses the revolutionary course.
It is not difficult to recognize that in the successive periods of this family "history," the narrator goes through all the basic stages of Chinese civilization, from primitive nomadic tribes through Confucian agricultural and bureaucratic society to modern urbanization. Yet there is a gradual change of color in the narrator’s depiction of these different stages. In chapters 2 and 4, she adopts the patterns of myth and romance: her portrait of the ancestors is nothing but a romantic tale full of legendary heroes and glorious achievements. She describes the ancestors’ life in the "law of the jungle" environment as brave, virtuous, loyal and vitally primitive. To add to her colourful picture, she also borrows supernatural figures and phenomena from folk culture to add to the mythical color of her heroic ancestors. For example, she relates some of the legends and myths surrounding Genghis Khan’s birth, his bravery and his achievements, adding admiring comments like: “The birth of a hero is a kind of miracle, I like to adhere to miracles”(140). With such a scenario, the defeat and dying out of the tribe and kingdom become immense tragedies of incomplete dreams.

The description of the local customs and characters of Shaoxing 绍兴, narrated in folk-story style in chapter 6, gives the first indication that the element of myth and romance is disappearing, and from now on, romance gradually gives way to the more realistic details of the novel. In chapter 8, although the Confucian scholar-hero is still a decent figure, his success in the arts of social climbing, his ambition to “order the state, regulate his family and cultivate himself,” and his frustration with his career all act as realistic touches, contrasting with the wild heroism of the earlier stages.

As the narrator’s imaginary family history gradually approaches the modern period, the romantic and imaginative component of her account steadily decreases and more and more sordid and distasteful details appear. Eventually the story runs into the mundane present reality of her own life in the horizontal line.

Strictly speaking, the version of “history” presented by the narrator is not original in itself; rather it is an imitation of a conventional conception of different stages of Chinese
civilization, and includes many stock literary images, for example, the vitality of primitive races, the glorious barbarism of the Mongolians, the harmony of Confucian society, and so on. Only when events approach modern times, as the narrator recounts the lives of her great-grandfather and later generations, does her story become less cliched and reveal a more personal understanding of the real situation. What makes this family history writing more intriguing, however, is the self-reflexive pattern in which it has been set, in other words, the artist narrator's self-analysis of how this family "history" is made up.

First of all, the narrator makes it very clear that this composing of a family history is a process of artistic creation, and spends much of her time describing her efforts to piece together the patchwork of historical materials. As she claims, the relation between past and present is really the relation between the unknown beginning and the known end of a story. And the huge space in between waiting to be filled is "plot." This plot must be designed in such a way that it leads to the narrator, to the present, and, at least in this narrator's case, fulfils her desire for a chain of life that has coherence, integrity and closure. In other words, her family history must resolve the following kinds of questions: "After my ancestors in the Youran tribe died out, how was their blood line passed on to me, and what kind of path did it take? How did the remnants of those remote Northern nomadic ancestors come South to my mother's hometown?"(135).

Throughout this reconstruction of family "history," the intrusive author-narrator reminds us that the principle behind her "history making" is what might have happened and what she wishes would have happened, but not necessarily what really did happen. Before every historical scene that she describes, she always makes clear its subjective origins: "I think" (wo xiang 我想), "I suppose" (wo shexiang 我设想), "I guess" (wo cai 我猜), "I would like" (wo yuanyi 我愿意), "I want" (wo yao 我要), and "I finally chose" (Wo zuihou xuanze 我最后选择). This emphasis on make-believe reveals that what the narrator looks for in her writing is not historical accuracy but wish-fulfilment, fantasy rather than history.
The artificially crafted nature of her account especially manifests itself in the way she deals with historical or factual materials, using them to serve her fantasy. On the one hand, though this self-conscious narrator claims that she is writing fiction from the very beginning, she still devotes considerable space to describing what historical materials she is basing her account upon, and how she visits real historical sites. Thus, tracing the appearance and achievements of her imagined ancestors, she often claims on the other hand to be engaging in an historical investigation, like an archaeologist or detective.

For every stage, she tries to find historical and factual evidence to support her imaginative leaps: “Although I know clearly that I am actually making up a family myth, still I can’t get rid of my confinement to authenticity (zhenshixing 真实性)”(64). For her unusual family name she consults dictionaries and anthropological works, and for major developments in the family “history” she checks official historical records like the Twenty Five Dynastic Histories (Ershiwu shi 二十五史), as well as other historical sources like local gazetteers, memoirs, and literary works. She also collects primary materials, visits museums, historical remains and possible sites of her old home, from Mongolia to Xi’an, from Shaoxing to Hangzhou, and is particularly keen to spot any traces of the past by scrutinizing her daily life and gleaning from her mother’s poor memory.

However, all this historical investigation is far from sufficient to reconstruct a past. And in fact, the narrator claims that the unrecoverability of objective truth in the search for a family history — especially with her roots stretching back over a thousand years — makes the use of subjective imagination unavoidable: “I lack almost all materials for writing a family history, possessing only bits of threads and traces. So I can merely piece together here and cut off and edit there, and add to it with necessary fabrications”(415). She claims that not only are the historical records too limited, too few, fragmentary and distorted; they are actually written by people with biassed views, supporting those in power. Hence, “we can only find some clues from the records of others, to deduce and
organize our ancestors' glorious aspects" (65). She concludes that she is forced to exercise caution when using historiographical sources written by others.

In fact, the reader soon realizes that most of the narrator's search for historical proof is only an adornment of the real nature of her writing — a make-believe fantasy. Typically, the narrator makes occasional revealing comments on her artistic design, for example, discussing the influence of heroism on her writing: "Sometimes I have the tendency to decide in advance the theme (zhongti xianxing 主題先行) in imagining my family history. Before I find all the materials, I have decided that I want to find a hero to be my ancestor." (140)

Likewise, there are several occasions when she finds that her determination contradicts the facts available. For instance, she finally discovers the native place of her mother's ancestors, only to discover that they were indigenous Chinese, not "barbarians," and that there was not one scholar recorded in the whole history of this family. This reality completely contradicts her imagined idea that the family descends from exiled slaves. However, she is determined not to change her self-fulfilling imagination, and finds some not so convincing proof to avoid doing so: "Root-seeking is actually reconstructing the ancestors' line by mediation and understanding, but my root-seeking has many threads and leads to many possibilities. I am fixed in this situation and I don't want to give it up... I will make an effort to resolve all these contradictions and ambiguities" (364).

At almost every stage of her family "history," the narrator must decide in which direction she should lead her ancestors. After the northern tribe breaks up, she has to ascertain why some of its members moved to the South, in order to fit the present reality that her family is in South China. Accidentally, she hears a saying from a historian that they are slaves exiled from the former Mongolian aristocracy; she then decides to fill in this historical blank by convincing herself that her defeated family later joined a group of active supporters of Genghis Khan. Since she admires the hero Genghis Khan so much and is so desperate to be his descendant, she designs the plot so that the remnants of the
Youran tribe merge with the Mongolians: "I would like to be a descendent of Mongolians, no matter what their fate was; even if finally they became offenders and slaves, I don’t mind" (138).

Similarly, when commenting on her search for her ancestors’ old home, a village in Shaoxing, her choice of the place is very subjective, clearly based on the spiritual consolation it gives her: “This Ru family village is suitable for my mysterious imagination of an old home. My whole root-seeking act is coloured by a fictional brush from the beginning to the end” (353). This determination to follow her feelings exposes all her efforts to look for historical and factual sources as simply the means of proving what she has already decided.

Thus in composing family history the two sources — fact and fiction — are needed simultaneously, and the latter is ultimately even more important than the former: historical investigation just provides the background inspiration for the narrator’s purely emotional engagement: “To pursue the traces of my ancestors is never easy; they hide in a deep pile of musty old books of history, they also hide in my blood and heartbeat, like invisible people” (259). Her quest is as much a journey into her own imagination as into the past. She mingles historical details with her own act of creation, to show that it is because of her ordering power alone that they hang together and come alive. At the beginning she says, “now I have decided to name my family myth: its name is Youran” (the name of the historical tribe the narrator identifies as her life source). Similarly, after she decides on the idea of her ancestor Shelun establishing a state, she says, “seeing that civilization has entered my ancestors’ tribe, I am really happy.” When she describes the magnificent scene of Genghis Khan inviting all the surrounding tribes and becoming crowned as their ruler, she begins by quoting the celebratory songs from the historical sources, then her imagination reconstructs the real scene as if she were actually present there, then reverses the process, concluding: “so I enthusiastically copy down the song declaring support for Genghis Khan, and it is as if I am singing myself. The song is finished, but the sound still
lingers; it echoes between Heaven and Earth, like a strong wind blowing through the
fields.” (162)

In a similar manner, throughout this vertical line the narrator parallels the
ancestors’ creation of real history with her own creation of a family “history” as an artistic
process; and keeps underlining the importance of the second kind of creation. For
example, she claims that the traces of her primitive ancestors have been lost because they
lacked someone to transmit their story (61-66); again, regarding more recent times, her
mother either refuses to acknowledge or has forgotten her genealogy. Hence it is only
through the narrator’s imaginative efforts that her family history comes into being: “My
thoughts are like a ship, which brings down my mother’s ancestors from the past”(249).

And in her search for a complete life story, this self styled “atheistic and rootless
wanderer” (meiyou zongjiao wugende youzi 有没有宗教无根的游子) (466), is even
drawn to seeing herself as a god, forming a world out of nothing:

My deep imagination is the memory of my flesh and blood; this is the
souvenir that my ancestors gave me . . . My deep imagination is like a
warm womb, breeding my ancestors who fight on horseback and wait for
the coming of their King. My deep imagination makes a broad and smooth
riverbed, and my family history is the river rushing down over it. My
ancestors revive in my deep imagination, just like my life bred in their flesh
and blood . . . Deep imagination is a light for enlightenment that my
ancestors left to me. . . My deep imagination is a cosmos. (143)

Imitating God, the creator, she finally removes every obstacle set by time and
space and creates an independent world on paper: “I suddenly find that the space between
the two dimensions (i.e. the horizontal and vertical sections of the novel) has closed up
like a dam” (466). She celebrates the completion of her ambitious work of creating a world, and proudly names her work, “Fact and Fiction — one way of creating a world.”

By this stage, the novel has accomplished its task of helping an urban dweller solve her problem of personal identity through a journey to a spiritual homeland. In a sentimental fashion, as she describes setting out to find her great-grandmother’s former home, the narrator declares that this writing of a family “history” is actually an imaginary return home: “The word home (jia 家) in Rujialou 茹家楼 made my heart beat fast; this was a great consolation, comforting our scattered family, our hundred years of wandering. We do have a home! This thought has called me, and I am really going to answer its summons. The words of great grandmother sounded in my ear: ‘Some day, I want to take you to kowtow at Rujialou.’ The ‘you’ in her speech now refers not to my mother but to me, her great-granddaughter. And that ‘some day’ has arrived. Great-grandmother, I am coming!” (324).

*Fact and Fiction* is certainly a unique novel both among Wang Anyi’s own works and in contemporary Chinese fiction, with its combined adoption of the artistic creation theme and an autobiographical perspective, and especially the existential situation of urban rootlessness it seeks to explore. The structure of this novel is also intriguing, if not unprecedented, with its intertextual references and reflexive framework.

The questions the narrator asks at the beginning, “Who Am I?” and “Where do I Come From?” provide the inner motivation for this novel. Around the narrator-protagonist’s anxiety of identity, the two lines thus represent two approaches through which the narrator-protagonist tries to fix her position and find her roots. In the horizontal line, she does this through figuring out her social relations with her contemporaries in reality, in the vertical line, through establishing historical relations with her ancestors in her imagination. Yet, both operations, as the narrator implies, simultaneously contain real facts on one side, and fiction, or fabrication on the other.
The reality of human life, which is always limited by time and space — as reflected in the narrator-protagonist's present urban situation filled with plain everyday life scenes and fragmentary traces of the past — is that it lacks real or deep relationships, ontological meaning, and a sense of origins and coherence. In order to fight against this "reality," the artist narrator especially emphasizes the importance of fiction to her achievement of a sense of identity. Not only can she invent a family history and ancestors for herself to identify with, but she can also establish relationships with others and the world by means of writing. Thus, both through living (as a writer) and imagining, she fills a huge blank in the past and establishes a personal identity — not only her imaginary identity as a descendent of imaginary ancestors, but also her real identity as a creator, an author of her story.

However, the "grand design" of the novel is not matched at the more detailed level by Wang's use of language. The novel as a whole gives an unrefined impression, and its images, descriptive details and style tend to lack originality and imaginative force, leading to a plain, rambling and repetitive surface texture, and a lack of inner tension or excitement.

Perhaps the major artistic shortcoming of the novel is that it is overendowed with half-formed but insufficiently developed, ideas. Wang obviously has many thoughts when she looks back over her life and her art, particularly regarding fiction, the profession she has engaged in for almost two decades. Yet it seems that she doesn't have enough patience, or else is unwilling to make the effort, to "concretize" her discoveries into original and vivid literary characters and images. Instead, she tends to speak her thoughts directly in an abstract, essayistic tone, which even reminds one occasionally of a work of literary criticism. In some ways, she has found a suitable vehicle for expressing her ideas.

46 Wang Anyi is famous for her prolific output. She finished this novel in one year (writing it from June 1991 to June 1992). The work's lack of refinement and repetitiveness is doubtless one result of this haste.
in the artist-narrator. However, since the discursive abstract reflections are simply transferred from Wang herself to this narrator without much apparent crafting, sometimes the reader is left with the impression that she is facing a loquacious and somewhat self-interested gossip, who is so desperate to tell others her discoveries that she continues her discussions endlessly. There seems little effort to treat the reader as an intellectual “friend”, that is, she doesn’t provide much moral or aesthetic challenge or inspiration.

To be fair, sometimes she does create moments of unique discovery and feeling, as when she talks about the boredom and loneliness an urban child felt in the Maoist period. But normally she doesn’t follow these insights through or explore them deeply. Unlike Yu Hua, whose penetrating insight into human cruelty is matched with powerful images and seethingly-restrained narration, or Ge Fei, whose lyrical and sensuous style successfully illustrates his vision of the rich inner life of human beings, Wang Anyi, with her “common language,” remains rather disappointing, despite the fact that she too is on a quest to “depict the inner world of our souls.”

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47 This is the word that Wayne Booth uses in his ethical criticism, see his *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. Univ. of California Press, 1988.
Conclusion

In an article entitled “The Solitary Traveller: Images of the Self in Modern Chinese Literature,” Leo Ou-fan Lee delineates the thematic journey of the modern Chinese self in Chinese literature of this century. He argues that by the time Liu E 刘鹗 wrote *The Travels of Lao Ts'an* 老残游记 in the late Qing, Chinese writers had set out on a double journey: an outward journey to explore contemporary society, and a spiritual journey of self-discovery and self-revelation. However, the first-person autobiographical narratives of May Fourth writers, for instance many of Yu Dafu's stories, despite their highly acclaimed subjective perception and focus on the self, reveal a spiritual void beneath the surface and an aimless and futile wandering soul disjointed from the surrounding world. And though it is true that an extremely tense feeling of social alienation prevails in the relationship between self and society in that period, it is not very long before the sense of social crisis leads most Chinese writers on a new journey investigating social and political territory, and their artistic vision is “extended from obsession with self to encompass social reality.”

Nevertheless, in these journeys from the late 1920s through 1930s and up to the mid-1940s, “social and political concerns are at most a vehicle for self-expression.” And due to the subjectivism and individualism among those of the May-Fourth generation, most of these writers, despite their self-appointed role as socio-cultural commentators and

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2. Ibid, 302.
their eagerness to become "educated," maintain in their works a critical, even alienated attitude towards the social environment, and their image of self is still presented as a solitary traveller searching for meaning, both in his or her life and in the fate of the nation.

But when a new social order is established in the late 1940s, and literature becomes completely politicized, the social alienation and combative ego of the modern Chinese self are soon nowhere to be found. In literature, the spiritual individual is lost among the hordes of revolutionary heroes marching confidently forward on their ideological pilgrimage.

The thematic journey of the modern Chinese self in literature before the mid-1980s, described above by Lee, can be summarized as a journey outward, that is, a self setting out to investigate social reality, which leads finally to the experience of self-effacement in a totalitarian society. It is not surprising that exploration of this self, when it re-emerges in the works of a new literary generation after nearly four decades, takes the form of a "journey within" — by which I refer to the movement in fictional narrative from representing social events and the external world from an objective perspective to exploring personal experience, especially the interior world of human beings, from a subjective point of view, in reflection, memory and imagination.

As I suggested in my introduction, by the end of the Cultural Revolution in the mid-1970s, the terrible consequences of the enforcement of socialist collectivization and political dehumanization had deprived Chinese people of their personal identity, suppressed their authentic experience and crushed their sense of self. Therefore, as the situation of the protagonist in Zong Pu's story "Who Am I?" demonstrates, the central concern of the post-revolutionary narrative of selfhood must be to re-establish a self, rediscover personal identity and once again authenticate personal experience.

My reading of three of the novels published in the early 1990s by writers of the younger generation describes just such a collective effort to overcome this dark experience of historical trauma. Such a deep concern with self has inspired not only thematic
concerns that differ from their predecessors but also a new narrative mode, a lonely but nevertheless assertive interior monologue.

Now, after my detailed textual analysis of these three novels, I would like to conclude by examining the inward turn represented by these first-person autobiographical works from three aspects: the manner in which they display new thematic discoveries, their presentation of a new understanding of selfhood; and the change in appearance of the modern Chinese novel that they exemplify.

First, their inward turn is marked by its unprecedented egocentric fascination with individual life and personal experience. The three novels examined here all turn away from the investigation of outside society and important historical events, and instead “give a new meaning to ‘the minor details of the life of the past,’”4 so that personal life, private sentiments and inner experience become the focus of the narrative. A boy’s growth into manhood in a harsh environment; a man’s personal recollections of a life frequently invaded by the chaos and violence of the age; or an urban artist’s maturation and discovery of the power of her imagination: these themes have replaced the public, social events that once played a central role in modern Chinese novels. Now, basic human relations and universal human experiences such as anxiety, fear and loneliness, desire and loss, suffering and endurance, love and friendship are explored through the concrete lives of individuals, and mainly through their inner beings. In particular these personal stories and accounts of inner experience positively affirm the process of growing up, of reaching maturity, of finding a real self despite the various barriers, whether these be political alienation, moral degeneration or social and historical mobilization, and thus demonstrating a humanist confirmation of the worth of human life.

Second, in presenting personal experience, these novels adopt a subjective point of view and use reflective and self-conscious narrators. So their inward turn also reveals a

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tendency to internalize reality, and the outside world becomes subordinate to individual consciousness. What we see in all three novels, running parallel with the explicit thematic metaphor of one person's life journey, is a spiritual journey, be it a remembrance of the past, reflections on family life and personal growth, or imaginative searching for a homeland.

This spiritual journey reveals a rich and complicated interior landscape of human consciousness that goes far beyond the passive reflection of reality in previous modern Chinese literature. In a way, all three novels propose a binary opposition between outside world and inner territory. The outside world mostly appears as a chaotic and alienating existence filled with war and "revolution," with hatred, violence or simply a drifting indifference prevalent in family life and other interpersonal relations; and everyday life as a continuously disruptive intrusion. Yet there is a dialectical relation between this existential situation in the world and the human spirit of the person who experiences it. The inner existence and mental life presented in these novels is sometimes demonstrated by a growing self that is capable of mental maturation and moral reflection, as with the adult narrator in *Crying in the Fine Rain*; sometimes by a combative self that maintains its own sense of order, tranquility, moral integrity and self-worth against the destructive chaos and violent assaults outside, like the surviving narrator in *On the Margins*; or, finally, by a creative consciousness that celebrates self-education, self-generation and imagination, as with the artist-narrator in *Fact and Fiction*.

Third, this inward turn is also a return to the autonomy of literature itself. In the past several decades, Chinese literature has been fundamentally a political writing that concentrated on describing the spiritual disease of Chinese people, criticizing social and political reality, and eventually on recording the historical process and mobilizing the masses. Its highest ideal was to become a national epic (*minzu shishi* 民族史诗). This monotonous approach to literature is reflected in the monotonous narrative rhetoric of the novels of this period: since the 1930s, the Chinese novel has been dominated by
impersonal, omniscient realist narration that objectifies the events and people it observes. There being a lack of narrative experimentation to present human life and human beings from other angles, modern Chinese literature produced few works of psychological complexity and personal imagination.\(^5\)

This stereotype of Chinese literature has now been shattered by the radical (in their context) narrative experiments popular among the new literary generation. The discovery of a reality different from that provided in former realist works naturally resulted in a search for new modes of expression.\(^6\) Among the three novelists I examine here, there is a pervading consciousness of the importance and flexibility of form. The careful design and choice of narrator and narrative situation, ranging from creating a distance between the narrator and protagonist to speaking through highly reflective autobiographical narrators; the variety and sophistication shown in their structural artistry, including memory monologues, reflexive frameworks and the like; the innovative use of narrative language, from an essayistic style weighed down with ideas to an imagistic texture permeated with sensuous details — all these innovations have hinted at the immense possibilities of the novel form. The three novels above, despite occasional traces of immaturity and inconsistency, are excellent examples of a personal vision of reality admirably matched with imaginative and well-crafted narrative techniques. The concern with individual life and consequent attempt to reveal consciousness in these works has greatly expanded the meaning of reality in modern Chinese literature and changed the appearance of the Chinese novel.

\(^5\) As a result, most Chinese literary works of this century have been read by Western scholars simply as social documents, one typical study being Joe C. Huang’s book, Heroes and Villains in Communist China: The Contemporary Chinese Novel as a Reflection of Life, New York: Pica Press, 1973.

Thus, notwithstanding some critics who claim that these Avant-Garde writers show a postmodernist approach towards self and literature, that recent Chinese works mark “a crisis of humanity”\(^7\) and “absence of the Self,”\(^8\) and attempt to deconstruct subjectivity in literature, my reading of the three novels indicates that, on the contrary, these works show a narrative desire to reestablish and substantiate the self, both as an experiencing self and a narrating self, and to reappropriate and empower the self in the subject position. This is a direct response to the subordination of the self in the former socialist society and to the self-deprived political literature produced in that society; it is also a re-affirmation of the saying that literature is the study of human beings (*Wenxue shi renxue* 文学是人学).

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\(^7\) This is the argument of the Chinese critic Zhang Yiwu, see his “*Ren de weiji: du Yu Hua de xiaoshuo*” 人的危机: 读余华的小说 (The Crisis of Humanity: Reading Yu Hua’s Fiction), in *Dushu*, 1988/1; and “*Lixiangzhuyi de zhongjie: shiyan xiaoshuo de wenhua tiaozhan*” 理想主义的终结: 实验小说的文化挑战 (The End of Idealism--The Cultural Challenge of Experimental Fiction), *Beijing wenxue*, 1989/4.

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