RECONSTRUCTIONS OF THE RURAL HOMELAND IN NOVELS
BY THOMAS HARDY, SHEN CONGWEN, AND MO YAN

by

DONGHUI HE

B. A., Hebei University, China, 1982
M. A., Hebei University, China, 1985

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Department of **Comparative Literature**

The University of British Columbia  
Vancouver, Canada

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ABSTRACT

This thesis studies fictional narratives of the countryside by writers of rural origin in English and Chinese literature in relation to the "countryside ideal." The term, borrowed from Michael Bunce, describes an ancient as well as modern theme in literature, which sees the countryside as a desirable "home." The conventional construction of the countryside by urban writers sustains this ideal with simplistic and static images. My thesis extends the discussion beyond the idyllic countryside in the mainstream of Anglo-American culture and the genteel culture in China to concentrate on Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), Shen Congwen (1902-1988), and Mo Yan (b. 1956), who all have personal relations with the countryside and who enrich its image with accounts of actual life, reconnecting it to authentic home place.

I discuss fictional narratives of the rural homelands of the three writers not as unmediated transcriptions but as cultural constructs, which are shaped by different literary traditions and responsive to specific historical contexts. My approach is mainly text-based, but supplemented by references to each writer's cultural and historical contexts. The Introduction situates these writers and their rural homelands in relation to the specific interest in the countryside in each writer's cultural milieu. Chapter One reads Hardy's reconstruction of the countryside in light of the struggle for existence in a Darwinian natural world. Hardy's sombre-looking rural landscapes highlight the complex difficulties of rural life and the moral and intellectual qualities required to survive in such a world. Chapter Two studies Shen Congwen's justification of rural culture in the midst of nationalist aspirations for globalization. His multi-layered fictionalization of the rural homeland centres on the image
of water, a root symbol of Chinese culture, merging traditional Chinese culture with modernist vitalism. Chapter three examines Mo Yan's reconstruction of the rural homeland after the severe disruption of Chinese culture during the Mao era. Mo Yan's magic realist reconstruction testifies to the repression of the genius loci of his rural homeland by politics and expresses a desire to be reconnected with the original homeland through sensual bonds rather than detached observations.

These writers' narratives redefine the countryside in relation to "home" as a centre for meaningful activities. The fact that they reappropriate and situate rural life and work in specific cultural traditions and diverse forms of modernity is manifested in their unique and irreplaceable literary constructions. I will offset Hardy's writing against that of the two Chinese writers, in order to clarify their rich and diverse cultural implications. Whereas Hardy subjects his fictional rural landscape to a scientific approach, Shen Congwen reconfirms traditional Chinese culture, linking it with the ideals of the May Fourth movement for renewal and revitalization. Mo Yan, for his part, combines the rural perspective and faith in the land with a modernist use of magic realism. Fictionalizations of the rural homeland thus reveal complex interactions with modernity.
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my father, Yongyan He, and numerous Chinese intellectuals, who went through rustication during the Cultural Revolution.
Introduction: The Countryside as a Cultural Construct

The countryside invites images of home. However, as Michael Bunce observes, the countryside is a "culturally constructed" term (3). In North America the countryside, which includes both the wilderness—the frontier and "Old West"—and the agrarian areas, invites both homelike and heroic images (David Bell 95). In countries like China and Britain, however, the countryside is a "settled landscape" (David Bell 95), a mode of settlement (Williams 1; Knapp 1) that mediates between the natural world and the human world:1 "[the countryside] shows how humans can escape nature's rawness without moving so far from it as to appear to deny roots in the organic world" (Tuan, *Escapism* 125). As a "middle landscape between the big artificial city at one extreme and wild nature at the other" (Marx 100), the countryside in English and Chinese concepts of the word represents what Tuan Yi-fu describes as "the model human habitat" (*Escapism* 125). Enriched by the presence of both the human community and nature, it has served for centuries as an "imaginative resource" for an ideal habitation that gives a homelike feeling of contentment and security. As Annie Hughes notes, "authors concerned with the meanings of rurality have highlighted the centrality of home and community to dominant constructions of the rural" (125). To redefine the construction of "home" therefore becomes central for the understanding of rural fiction.

My thesis reads fictional narratives of the countryside by writers of rural origin in an attempt to explore how the countryside ideal is strengthened and reconstructed with knowledge of living in the countryside. The writers I have selected for discussion are Thomas

1The word "nature" or "natural" in this thesis is used in a restricted sense as "the layer of the earth's surface and the air above it that have been unaffected, or minimally affected, by humans... what remains or what can recuperate over time when all humans and their works are removed" (Tuan, *Escapism* 20).
Hardy (1840-1928), an English author of the late Victorian period, and Shen Congwen (1902-1988) and Mo Yan (1956-) who are associated with Chinese rural fiction of the 1920s and mid-1980s respectively. The countryside all three represent overlaps with the rural homelands they have left for the city and returned to in literary representations. Although these writers are of different style, temperament, and cultural, historical, and social background, they exhibit a noticeable commonality in their construction of the rural world: they celebrate the countryside with "the view from within" (Bunce 59) as the centre of existence—a world that has sustained human beings since time immemorial and is still lived in by people the writers either identify with or are directly related to. Their constructions of the rural homeland substantiate the countryside ideal with dynamics of rural life.

By considering their work in discrete discussions, I hope to accumulate sufficient material to make the following points: First, fictional narratives of the countryside by writers of rural origin in distinct cultures play significant roles in delineating the central anxieties that arise in times of change and thus define the historical and moral values that allow for continuity. Second, these writers "update" the countryside ideal, or in Keith Halfacree's words, make a "contemporary (re)appropriation" of the rural world (82) by interpreting and legitimating actual rural life in light of modernity instead of enshrining the idea of the countryside as a historic curiosity. Their rural homelands therefore merge a modernist desire for stability with the dynamics of rural life. While challenging the traditional moralistic approach to the countryside expressed through rural idylls, they lay a foundation for a new moral and aesthetic evaluation of the countryside.
Reactionary modernism, cultural nostalgia, and the countryside ideal

However, the writing of the rural homeland is also a continuation and development of an ancient practice of nostalgic reconstruction of the countryside ideal. Indeed, to reflect on the countryside is itself a form of cultural nostalgia. Michael Bell observes:

It is a familiar characteristic of human nature that almost every step towards what would generally be regarded as increased sophistication or progress is accompanied by misgivings frequently leading in turn to doubts about the whole enterprise of civilization. (1)

This anxiety over modern progress contains the seeds of cultural nostalgia. Writing about the countryside has frequently come to serve as a convenient medium for the expression of this anxiety and its resultant nostalgia.

Comparing modernity to a journey from the pre-modern, Nikos Papastergiadis describes cultural nostalgia as "a way of reflecting back, making sense and working out one's bearings while in the midst of journeying" (167). The fear of getting lost in the process of progress in the modern world is figuratively illustrated by T. S. Eliot: "as we grow older /The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated /Of dead-and living" (22). This feeling of confusion and fear epitomizes the reactionary program against the complexity of the

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2 I use the term modernity mainly in its dictionary definition as the mentality of being modern, more specifically as "the consciousness of an epoch that relates itself to the past of antiquity, in order to view itself as the result of a transition from the old to the new" (Habermas 3). The modernity of the May Fourth movement was to enhance the mentality of being modern in the absence of material modernization. It was anti-tradition, and sought globalization.

3 Nostalgia is often related to passivity, to refer to the desire to withdraw from the current life. The word was originally used to describe a psychological symptom of not being able to function away from home. The medical implication is only retained in a sentimental sense in the current use of the word. Nikos Papastergiadis argues that nostalgia is future oriented in view of its capacity to idealize the past (166). David Der-wei Wang's observation about "imaginary nostalgia" ("Imaginary Nostalgia" 107) is another way to describe such creative nostalgia.
modern world,\(^4\) which parallels the nostalgic construction of the traditional countryside. For Eliot the steady point of reflection is home in the sense of "where one starts from" (22). "Home," defined as the point of departure for the metaphorical journey of life and the progress of civilization, provides an excellent model for the construction of the countryside as a changeless ideal, although the nostalgic reconstruction of the countryside is not related to modernism as a cultural and aesthetic movement.

Reflections on the rural past, attempting to rediscover the aesthetic, moral, or psychological assets of the earlier countryside, are abundant in both Chinese and English literature.\(^5\) The earliest attempt to reconstruct an idealized rural past in English literature can be traced to the Middle Ages. "Piers Plowman," an allegorical poem written in the fourteenth century, provides an early example of cultural nostalgia for the "good old England" constructed in opposition to what the poet conceives as the corruption and degeneration of the peasants in the medieval English countryside (Williams 9; Langland). In China, nostalgic reflections on the self-sufficiency of the earlier countryside date back two thousand years.\(^6\) Introspective interest in the rural past has therefore served as a "positive nostalgia," with an imagined past used actively as a utopian vision with which to critique the present" (Halfacree 82). Thus nostalgia recreates the past as an ideal. The attraction of the countryside as a

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\(^4\) I discuss the modern age in a general, rather than in an academic, sense, as the post-industrial age in the West and starting in China in the late nineteenth century, following China's contact with the West.

\(^5\) This theme is not restricted to English and Chinese literature either. Greek and Roman poetry provide classical examples of pastoral and Arcadian countryside (Bunce 5–7; Short 28–35). However, writings of the countryside in other cultures are beyond the scope of this thesis.

\(^6\) Lao Tzu envisions a completely self-sufficient rural life in the past when "[the] nation is small with few inhabitants... The next place might be so near at hand that one could hear the cocks crowing in it, the dogs barking; but the people would grow old and die without ever having been there" (Waley 241–42).
constructed past lies in its perceived function as an unchanging ideal through the ages.

The nostalgic bent towards the rural world asserts itself most vigorously in times of social change or material progress. Thomas Hardy, Shen Congwen, and Mo Yan wrote of and lived in just such periods, when consciousness of the city was being sharpened by factors such as urbanization or efforts to modernize. In Victorian England, the post-industrial material world gave birth to a visible reaction to modernism. Rural idylls,\(^7\) popular in the Victorian period, articulated a conservative moral stance oriented against this modern material progress. In China in the early twentieth-century, the May Fourth effort to reinforce a mentality of modernity through a desire for globalization, contrary to its ostensible purpose, triggered a hesitant but unmistakably nostalgic reflection on the countryside. As a result, Chinese writers wavered between leaving home and reclaiming the "cultural home" lost through interruptions of the literary tradition. In the 1980s, a vigorous interest in traditionalism surged as a dissident response to the official discourse of socialist realism, which renders the countryside into neatly defined fronts of class struggle. The nostalgic reconstruction of the rural world, though varying in its degree of assertiveness in English and Chinese literature, is expressed with unprecedented intensity in the form of rural fiction in these three time periods.

Furthermore, as Michael Bunce notes, the countryside ideal not only reflects a universal human desire for harmony with nature, but is also at the same time "a cultural construct and a social ideal" (2). The association of the countryside with "home" is related to different traditions and expressed very differently in the English and Chinese literary

\(^7\)"Idyll" originally refers to short poems dealing charmingly with rustic life. I use the term as defined by Alex Preminger: a narrative of "picturesque rural scenery of gentle beauty and innocent tranquillity and ... of some simple sort of happiness" (92). In Victorian rural writing, prose rural idyll is more popular than the
imagination. In English literature, the countryside generally signifies the garden of Eden, the archetypal "home" where human beings are blessed with an original harmony with and innocence about the world. The pastoral and rural idylls are simply variations of this tradition.

In Chinese literature, the countryside is also presented as a "home" through family bonds, but is located in personal memory rather than in a collective myth. It is directly associated with each individual's ancestral hometown, constructing the roots of his identity.

However, in modern Chinese literature and nineteenth-century English literature the idealized countryside is situated, though in different respects, in opposition to worldly experience. While the countryside as an unchanging ideal imparts the nurturing comfort of "home," it is the dynamics of journeying and worldliness that provide one's livelihood: "to live, one has to labour, work, and take risks in alien places" (Tuan, "Geography" 189). In other words, the cultural nostalgic writing of the countryside reconstructs a pure ideal at the expense of actual life in the countryside. Raymond Williams expresses a powerful allegory of pastoral due to its association with domesticated rural landscapes.

My working definition of the pastoral comes from T. V. F. Brogan in The New Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms to mean the fictional imitation of the life of shepherds, in which romantic love plays a prominent part (221). Critics describe the pastoral differently. The emphasis falls invariably on its tendency to idealize primitive life. Alexander Pope describes the process of constructing a pastoral: "We must therefore use some illusion to render a Pastoral delight; and this consists in exposing the best side only of a shepherd's life, and concealing its miseries" (10). Brogan observes: "Only when poetry ceases to imitate actual rural life does it become distinctly pastoral" (221). W. J. Keith describes the pastoral with an emphasis on its setting. In his definition, a distinctive characteristic of pastoral is that it represents an allegorical setting (Rural Tradition 4). More often the pastoral is used loosely to refer to idealized rural life in literary representations (Short 30–35).

Michael Jackson postulates an interesting parallel between the stasis of the "home" and the motion of the "journey." He observes: "The places we feel most at home are like nouns in sentences... But sometimes it is imperative... to risk oneself in the world, to recognize the power of verbs, prepositions, and copulas" (6). As a modern writer Jackson apparently is in favour of worldly experience—"journey." He adopts a traditional trope but gives a new interpretation of it. John Berger also uses the figure of "home and travel" to indicate the binary of stasis and motion, maintaining: "To approach experience is not like
the relationship between rural and urban which points to the countryside as completely uninvolved with "real" life: "unalienated experience is the rural past and realistic experience is the urban future" (298). Williams discusses the rural ideal with reference to English literature. Yet the broad parameter of his observation is equally valid for Chinese rural fiction, which tends to value personal or family connections with the countryside in its rural ideal. The city may be morally questionable. It is, nonetheless, the place for "real life"--as the centre of cultural economic activities in England and as the centre of cultural-political activities in China, where scholar-officials fulfil their political ambition. The countryside ideal often makes the countryside vulnerable in its authenticity as a place. It is "too good to be real," while the city is too real to be good.

**Fictional rural homeland as substantiated countryside ideal**

Fictional rural homelands, though overlapping with rural idylls in their reaction to material advancement, cannot be explained away simply as cultural nostalgia. John Short maintains that "novels construct a world of their own. They draw upon the external world for meaning, but always from a particular viewpoint" (166). The different structures of the idealized countryside and the fictional rural homeland are indebted to different viewpoints with which the rural world is reconstructed. The idyllic countryside as a form of the countryside ideal features the perspective of urbanites as distant observers, presenting a limited and partial interest in rural life (Relph 52). Victorian idylls construct the countryside as

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10. Traditional Chinese scholars are also called scholar–officials if they succeed in passing the civil exam and receiving government appointment. The ideal of the Chinese scholar was to fulfill his duty to the state. Modern Chinese writers like Lu Xun retained much of this political orientation in their structure of knowledge.
an "aesthetic and social ideal" (Bunce 3), focusing on the rural scenery and imagined contentment of living in this homelike landscape (Mitford 3). In Chinese literature the imaginative re-creations of childhood home and intimacy among family and friends fend off the turmoil of politics in the court. In both traditions, the idealized countryside reveals a highly selective construction that closes off the travail of life.

Fictional rural homelands, on the other hand, are viewed from a holistic interior viewpoint. Brought up in the countryside and leaving for the city at adulthood, the three writers discussed in this thesis all come to have a sense of rootedness about the countryside—a feeling that E. Relph attributes to one's "real, active and natural participation in the life of the community" (38). They regard the countryside as "home" on the strength of their involvement with and participation in the life of the rural community.

Tuan Yi-fu's observation that travel "increases awareness, not of exotic places, but of home as a place" ("Space and Place" 235) provides a fitting description of the relationship of these writers with the countryside and the city. This "domicentric view" (Sopher 133), with home as the point of departure, is incorporated in the construction of the rural homeland. To various degrees, these writers perceive themselves as existential outsiders in the city—feeling "a rejection of an individual by a place which he is condemned always to observe as though from outside" (Relph 51). Both Shen Congwen and Mo Yan openly admit their desire to immerse themselves in urban life, yet feel excluded from and unable to relate to it. Hardy's

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12 Shen Congwen's early stories in urban settings describe his feeling of being an outsider rather than a
sensitivity at being an outsider is directly related to his being labelled a rural writer—and thus a
writer only fit to write on rural themes. He feels prevented from writing about the city.¹³

These writers' frustrated desire to participate in urban life heightens their sense of
belonging to the countryside, which in turn creates for them a profound centre of
connectedness, and therefore, a substantial and meaningful existence. In contrast to their sense
of dislocation in the city, they exhibit a sense of "belonging . . . and deep and complete
identity" with the countryside, which, according to E. Relph, is characteristic of "existential
insidedness" (Relph 55). Unlike an outsider's perception of a place, such as the largely visual
impressions of a tourist, the rural homelands are noted for their multi-dimensional structure,
which comprises both the functional and aesthetic/moral value of the rural world.

A distinctive characteristic of the rural homeland is that it embraces a wider range of
rural life than conventionally admitted in the literary imagination of the countryside. This
unfamiliar countryside, located in the geographical specifics of a region, accentuates the
presence of elemental nature, a nature absent in pastoral, idyllic, or social realistic
representations. The conspicuous presence of nature emphasizes the durability of the rural
world in opposition to the potentially ephemeral man-made world of the city. In spite of their
participant in urban life. He uses his autobiographical persona's desire for an urban woman and the latter's
indifference toward him to symbolize his frustrated desire to become immersed in the urban scene (WJ 9: 16,
20). In a half teasing manner, Mo Yan portrays his predicament at dinner parties to symbolize his difficulty
in relating to urban culture: for him eating is a necessity, but for the urbanites it is culture ("Embarrassment"
312-13). The fact that he is ridiculed whether he finishes his food or not points to his inability to decode this
culture. According to E. Relph this "awareness of meaning withheld and of the inability to participate in those
meanings" would be a typical experience of the existential outsider in a certain place (Relph 51).

¹³Hardy was sensitive that indifferent receptions of his novels with urban settings meant mistrust of his
writing about city life. He wrote under his wife's name in his autobiography, "knowing every street and alley
west of St. Paul's like a born Londoner, which he was often supposed to be; an experience quite ignored by
the reviewers of his later books, who, if he only touched on London in his pages, promptly reminded him not
different topographic features, each fictional homeland displays a solidity and self-sufficiency bestowed by the original touch of nature.

Meanwhile, the rural homelands override the changelessness of the countryside in rural idylls to emphasize the dynamics of natural life. Nature as an independent and dynamic force contributes to the movement in the rural homelands of all three writers. Thomas Hardy's Wessex, composed of many different landscapes, emphasizes the indifference of nature to humankind. The prevalence of water in the green mountains, on which Shen Congwen builds his West Hunan, is both the well-spring and grave of life; Mo Yan's world of red sorghum is built on the black soil of Gaomi, fertilized by blood and desire. The core of their rural homeland, or in Hardy's words, "the deeper reality" of rural life (Life 185), lies in an organic interaction between human beings and nature—the persistent efforts of human beings to survive in a harsh natural environment.

By incorporating physical nature and what Jane Austen refers to as the "vulgar economy" (139)—the day to day sustenance and living—into their representation of rural life, writers of fictional rural homelands contribute to an authentic and thus believable countryside, though they still subscribe to a "home" ideal. Susanna Egan raises a point about the complex structure of Hardy's rural novels, maintaining that "Hardy's contribution to the literature of rural life . . . cannot be said to exist in the glimpses he gives us that life was indeed hard" (17). This observation sheds light on the construction of the rural homelands by Shen Congwen and Mo Yan as well. To read the rural homeland only as an anti-pastoral subversion of the idylic vision (Short 36) would reduce the complexity in their reconstruction of the countryside as a

to write of a place he was unacquainted with, but to get back to his sheepfolds" (Life 62).
home place. The rural homeland supplies what is missing in rural idylls as a representation of a countryside ideal and reconstructs the countryside ideal on this new foundation. The fictional rural homelands of Thomas Hardy, Shen Congwen, and Mo Yan blur the dichotomies of material and spiritual, realistic and aesthetic, and the realistic and idealistic—dichotomies that sustain the idealized countryside—to strengthen the countryside as a "home" place.

As Sylvia Bowerbank maintains, a sense of place is grounded in the social and cultural space of the writer (447-48). Although writers may be inclined to imply otherwise, the rural homeland is neither located outside specific temporal and cultural space, nor is it structured upon unmediated nature. The landscape images that the writers choose to represent their rural homelands are culturally significant and charged with social values. Rural homelands are always constructed for the specific cultural environment in which they are situated. They compel attention to what Wai-lim Yip calls the "deeper, differing working dynamics" in English and Chinese literature (3). In fact there is hardly any surface resemblance between the rural homelands constructed by different writers. Differences in the cultural backgrounds of the writers and their literary traditions are manifested in the textures, contours, and colours of their rural homelands.

I will not discuss the fictional rural homelands as representatives of English or Chinese concepts of nature or the countryside exclusively.14 Although I will touch on the Darwinian interpretation of nature in Hardy's reconstruction of the rural homeland, the Taoist perceptions of nature in the Shen Congwen chapter and the peasants' reverence for the earth

14Stephen R. Kellert's "Concepts of Nature East and West" provides an example of comparative studies of Western (Judeo-Christian) and Eastern (Japanese) perceptions of nature.
in the discussion of Mo Yan, the fictional rural homeland is never produced in a single cultural medium. These cultural concepts of nature are frameworks the writers work within and use to structure their rural homeland. The rural homeland is also structured to incorporate specific concerns each writer has with the positioning of the countryside in contemporary life. Hardy describes his time as "a sudden bringing of ancient and modern into absolute contact" (*Life's Little Irony* 165). This confrontation between the remains of the rural world and the new industrial world or new modernist aspiration for change is manifested in the construction of the rural homeland by each of the three writers. For example, Hardy's "featureless" landscape of Weatherbury rejects scenic interest in the countryside or the privilege of the outsider's view of the rural world by calling attention to the subtle and mysterious motion of the rural world. Shen Congwen restructures the rural homeland by bringing together the multifarious meanings of water with the May Fourth interest in mobilization. Mo Yan's sanguine homeland of red sorghum articulates a non-conformist attitude towards the confines of the official discourse of socialist realism. I am interested in the interaction between the connection of the writers with the countryside, the cultural frameworks they adopt for its representation, and their current social values, finalized in the specific structure of the rural homeland. My examination of the structure of the rural homeland takes into consideration the countryside ideal as constructed in rural idylls in the writer's specific time period, the inner coherence of their rural homelands, and their moral or aesthetic endorsement. These considerations will also serve as a framework for the discussion of each writer in the next three chapters.
Structure of the thesis

Chapter I

I begin the chapter on Hardy with a discussion of Mary Mitford's bestseller *Our Village* (1824-32). As a classic of the Victorian rural idyll, *Our Village* is structured with the dualism of nineteenth-century modernism that Perry Meisel observes as "both the invasion of the country by the city and the sanctity of the nature it violates" (*Myth* 23). Nature in *Our Village*, charged with religious feelings, is nonetheless represented by peaceful, cultivated, and secluded agricultural scenes.

*Our Village* introduces a specific rural region in place of a mythical locale, in keeping with a significant change in English fiction in the Victorian period. As Roger Sale observes, locale in English literature up to the end of the eighteenth century "tends to be generalized." The rural terrain is understood as a kind of place, such as the pastoral land or Eden, that can only be located in literary descriptions (3). When industrialization repeatedly encroached upon the rural space and physically challenged the permanence of rural order, English rural writing, the output of which grew noticeably in the nineteenth century, responded by efforts to establish "a verifiable connection with the existing countryside" (*Keith, Rural Tradition* 4). *Our Village* underscores its "verifiable connections" with a farming village, as it includes in its picture, in Mitford's opinion, all classes of the rural community, even the influence of poverty on the life of the rural folk.

However, Mitford's realism is undercut by an idyllic view of what she depicts. P. D. Edwards describes *Our Village* as an attempt to make the idyllic view adaptable to "the requirements of realism" (2). Mitford submits rural life to a distant view--the basic
requirement of the pastoral or idyllic according to William Empson (11)—to give rise to an
idealization of the actual countryside. As the subtitle "Sketches of Rural Characters and
Scenery" indicates, Our Village filters everyday life through the lens of a pictorial view. This
landscape interest in the countryside endow it with the stillness of a picture, which is activated
by the perceiver alone. "Rural" and "agricultural," therefore, are given the connotation of
changelessness, regularity, and a resultant familiarity. The writer’s interest in the uneventful,
everyday experience in a rural community reveals an aspiration for the comfort of routine—a
source of familiarity and therefore of security.

The stability and peacefulness of Mitford's small village, and especially the contentment
of rural folk, bear witness to an overt projection of the narrator's subjectivity. While the small
village is structured as significant in polar opposition to "feverish London" and the flux of the
modern world, it also depends on the city for perspectives. As a retreat from the city, it relies
on the city for selection and interpretation of the rural scenes. The small village, the timeless,
"half imaginary and half real little spot on the sunny side of Berkshire" (228), presents a desire
for tranquillity provoked by the flux of the modern world.

The fact that this "rural scenery" is adopted by George Eliot (in spite of her resistance
to it) and by Hardy in his first rural novel, Under the Greenwood Tree, indicates its influence
on Victorian rural fiction. Merryn Williams notes:

Throughout the century the stereotyped representation of a happy and innocent
countryside where all the vicars were hard-working and all the girls virtuous
remained very popular with urban readers, although it was ludicrous to
anybody who knew the real facts. (15)

Victorian rural idylls constitute their own convention, which expresses little curiosity for the
mentality of the rustics and lacks motivation to deepen its knowledge of nature.\textsuperscript{15}

Gillian Beer maintains that the Victorians were "living in a Darwinian world in which old assumptions had ceased to be assumptions, could be at best beliefs, or myths, or, at worst, detritus of the past" (6). However, the countryside ideal remained impervious to the new exegesis in a time when a changed concept of nature affected the position of human beings in the entire intellectual discourse.\textsuperscript{16} Mitford's homelike countryside has its foundation in a psychological and moralistic bias towards the familiar world of the past, although it may appear to be fragile as a representation of rural life. This idealistic as well as simplistic representation of the countryside as moral, aesthetic, and spiritual in binary opposition with the realistic and material city remained relatively stable until Hardy challenged its validity.

My discussion of Hardy is based on his early novel \textit{Far from the Madding Crowd} (1874), with some reference to \textit{The Return of the Native} (1878), a novel published four years later. Both novels are centred, though in different ways, on the rural community. With \textit{Far from the Madding Crowd} Hardy introduces the farming community, Weatherbury, "a perfect example of the nucleated settlement, with its farms, inn, malthouse, church, and great

\textsuperscript{15} Raymond Williams points out that the love of the countryside "persisted with extraordinary power, so that even after the society was predominantly urban its literature, for a generation, was still predominantly rural" (2). But nineteenth-century English rural fiction, which reveals largely an introspective interest in the traditional countryside, is (with few exceptions) nostalgic and sentimental.

\textsuperscript{16} One should note the remarkable popularity of Darwin's writing. Interest in Darwin's theory of evolution was not restricted to philosophers and theologians but spread to general readers. The fact that \textit{The Origin of Species} (1859) engaged the imagination of individuals was partly due to the general concern with ontological issues in the Victorian period, and partly to its easy accessibility by the general public. Scientists in the nineteenth century still shared a common language with their readership, and knowledge about scientific discoveries was disseminated in articles published in popular magazines instead of being circulated among a selective readership.

However, rural writing remained largely impervious to this intellectual trend. Hardy, who described himself as an early "acclaimer" of Darwin, was possibly the first writer to introduce Darwinian nature into
monastic barn" (Keith, "A Regional Approach" 41). However, this self-sufficient settlement, as Hardy stresses in his novel, is built on a changeable nature, and requires human efforts to sustain its stability. Despite the effort it takes to be adaptable to rural life, the rural world, represented by Weatherbury in the earlier novel and Egdon in the latter, is an ideal home for people interested in purposeful living.

My discussion of the novel starts from what Hardy refers to as "a full look at the worst" which, in the context of Far from the Madding Crowd, is represented by the unpredictability of rural life. The novel rejects the complacency with the countryside in Victorian rural idylls by changing its image from a picturesque village—a widely accepted indication of a benevolent and domesticated nature—to a place of Darwinian nature: a nature that is indifferent to human welfare or aesthetic preference. It highlights an organic interaction between human beings and nature in the human effort to achieve a balance with and thus survival in harsh environment.

The second part of my examination of Hardy's construction of the rural homeland explores the moral and intellectual values he attributes to rural life. Hardy not only shatters the idyllic vision of the countryside but also reconstructs that vision, centring on the morality of survival. He confirms the "simple" rural virtues such as purity and honesty. However, he makes it quite explicit in the novel that to survive in the rural world one needs to be equipped with much more than these static virtues. He emphasizes a set of dynamic qualities required for survival in the rural world such as perceptiveness, moral strength to face reality, and a sense of responsibility. I will refer to his presentation of three characters, Gabriel Oak,
Bathsheba Everdene, and Frank Troy, and their ability to survive in the rural world, in order to trace Hardy's perception of the relationship between moral qualities and survival. The three characters' experiences in Weatherbury, the rural community, provide evidence of a peasant's judgement that "[t]he earth shows up those of value and those who are good for nothing" (John Berger, *Pig Earth* 195). In Hardy's fictional rural world, the value of an individual is manifested in his or her ability to form perceptive views, which in turn is crucial to his or her ability to survive in the rural world. In other words, to survive in the rural world is ultimately determined by his or her moral qualities. Furthermore, as the survival of an individual is interwoven with that of the community, rural life is the only mode of existence that engenders a caring human community and a true sense of community.

The last part of my chapter on Hardy examines the "seclusion" of Hardy's rural community. Reconstructed in the face of the harsh environment, it is not a home that everyone can claim. With the impossible homecoming for natives who have estranged themselves from farming life, Hardy makes it very explicit that central to the countryside is a way of life--people's interaction with both the natural and the human environment. Unlike writers of rural idylls, Hardy highlights the dynamic seclusion of rural life instead of a static rural past or locale.

Chapter II

In the chapter on Shen Congwen, my thesis moves from Wessex in Victorian England to West Hunan, an inland rural area in southwest China of the 1920s. I begin the chapter with an examination of the Chinese writers' hesitant expression of their attachment to the countryside in the midst of a powerful modernist discourse of globalization.
In contrast to Victorian rural writing that continues a love of the countryside in English literary tradition, modern Chinese fiction challenges the countryside ideal from the very outset. Taking shape in the cultural reform movement, modern Chinese fiction is instrumental in promoting a particular modernity Naoki Sakai refers to as "a spatial relationship with the West."17 Entrance into the modern era for China was marked by an awareness of China's disadvantageous position in the age of imperialism and consequently an aspiration for power. Despite misgivings about western imperialism, radical Chinese intellectuals advocated revitalizing Chinese culture with Western ideas.18 Traditional Chinese culture, on the other hand, was looked upon as the cause for the problems China faced in modern times. This blending of nationalism with a wish to change the perceived image of China, or as Kirk Denton sums it up, "nationalism and iconoclasm" (7), served as the bedrock

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17 Naoki Sakai describes the implication of this modernity with a summary from Takeuchi Yoshimi: "Modernity for the Orient... is primarily its subjugation to the West's political, military, and economical control. The modern Orient was born only when it was invaded, defeated, and exploited by the West... The truth of modernity for the non-West, therefore, is its reaction to the West" (Sakai 496). Historians set 1840, the date of China's first conflict with the West—the Opium War with the East India Company and then Britain—as the beginning of modern Chinese history. China's capitulation to the British navy in the first Opium War (1839–42) not only revealed the fragility of China's political and military system to the world, but also aroused questions among radical Chinese intellectuals as to the competence of Chinese culture.

18"In the Chinese context, modernization was conflated with westernization and fuelled ambivalent feelings in the court. The court started to introduce western technology, especially weaponry in the 1860s, in an attempt to maintain its existing political structure. Yet the Chinese government, suspicious of western ideas, emphasized retaining the existing order and thus inhibited speedy development. Until the end of the nineteenth century, there was no visible sign of modernization in China. The telegraph network and modern postal services were installed with western management in the 1890s, but were actually limited to treaty ports for the following decades. Railway building in China was not significant until the early twentieth century and China's traditional cultural, economic and social structure remained intact well into the twentieth century (Rozman 39). On the other hand, many intellectuals involved with the May Fourth New Culture Movement shared the feeling that in China ideological revolution was a more urgent need than advancement in science and technology. A number of students who went to Japan to study science, including Lu Xun, Zhou Zuoren, Yu Dafu, and the left wing writer Guo Muoruo, abandoned science for literature, which according to Lu Xun answered the need to "cure the spiritual disease" of the Chinese.
of the May Fourth New Culture Movement, a cultural reform movement in the early twentieth century\textsuperscript{19}—as well as setting the anti-traditional and anti-rural keynote for modern Chinese literature.\textsuperscript{20} As Ellen Widmer observes, "the typical early May Fourth literary figure was a modernized, urbanized intellectual" (xi). This image signifies an effort to be distant from and critical of traditional Chinese culture and the countryside.

The countryside ideal, on the other hand, becomes a minor voice in the midst of the nationalist discourse of globalization. In the first part of the chapter I will include some well-known examples of nostalgic representation of the countryside in the 1920s, such as "The Old Home" and "The Village Opera" by Lu Xun, and "The Father's Garden" by Xu Qinwen, to demonstrate the reconstruction of the countryside ideal by Shen Congwen's predecessors. As these short stories indicate, attachment to the traditional Chinese countryside is manifested in modern Chinese fiction almost simultaneously with critical examinations of the countryside. However, unlike English rural writers, who are impressively articulate about their rural ideal,

\textsuperscript{19}In the narrow sense of the word, the May Fourth Movement refers to the May Fourth Incident, a students' demonstration in protest against the Peking government's servile attitude towards Japan and Western powers at the Versailles Conference of 1919. My dissertation uses the term mainly in its broad sense to refer to a cultural reform movement, also known as the New Culture Movement 1917-1921 (the dates of the period vary; some scholars set it from 1915 to the late 1920s; Chow 1-6; Larson 1-2). However, the influence of the May Fourth cultural reform movement extended much beyond this period. The May Fourth generation of writers remained active on the literary scene into the mid-1930s, and thus May Fourth literature refers roughly to literary works produced up to the mid-1930s (Larson 1-2).

\textsuperscript{20}Modern Chinese literature differs from premodern Chinese literature in using vernacular Mandarin in place of classical Chinese for literary language as well as in thematic interest. Modern Chinese fiction reveals a strong political orientation. For instance, Liang Qichao, an intellectual leader in the cultural reform movement started in the late nineteenth century, proposes: "The reformation of the government of the people must begin with a revolution in fiction, and the renovation of the people must begin with the renovation of fiction" (81). In its initial stage, modern Chinese fiction discontinues many popular themes in classical Chinese literature like romance, nostalgia for home, and an eremitic interest in nature and landscape.
Chinese writers express their attachment to the countryside quite unassertively. Nostalgia for the countryside appears to be politically ambivalent and lacks any claim of a social ideal. The "old home" as represented in these stories testifies to the writers' connection with the rural world, which is a connection with a personalized past. The countryside is therefore constructed only with an abundant investment of sentiment. This flimsy "old home" is strengthened only when Shen Congwen reconstructs it in his rural fiction.

My discussion of Shen Congwen's West Hunan is based on his selected West Hunan stories (published from the late 1920s to the middle of the 1930s), which trace his effort to develop the rural homeland from a social landscape into a multi-dimensional world of rural life, from family compound to open fields, river, mountains, the entire region of West Hunan, and by extension rural China. The reading of Shen Congwen's West Hunan stories will attend to his effort to reconstruct the rural homeland as home to intrinsic human values as well as to justify his rootedness in the countryside.

I start the discussion of Shen Congwen by delving into a distinctive topographic feature of West Hunan—the prevalence of water. Shen Congwen's construction of West Hunan draws on the multi-faceted meaning of water in relation to life. As attested by the vital, and colourful landscape and healthy-looking people, West Hunan, which is symbolized by water in the form of the river and moist green, is the source of life. It is where people have lived one generation after another. Life in the countryside--to survive in the presence of the elements--for Shen Congwen represents fundamental existence, just as water flows according to gravity. On the other hand, nature is destructive as well as constructive in West Hunan, just as the river is both sustaining and at the same time indifferent to people. Yet living close to
nature and interweaving one's life with it never fails to bring the best out of a person in Shen Congwen's rural fiction. Nature stimulates life and provides cosmological wisdom to the countryside people. As with Hardy's country people, life in the presence of an unpredictable nature provides a feeling of affinity among human beings. In Shen Congwen's West Hunan this feeling of sympathy is manifested in people's tolerance and generosity towards one another.

On a metaphorical level, water in its close association with life serves as a close analogy with spontaneous life in West Hunan. Indebted to the image of water and the Chinese cultural concept of water as a cosmological force, Shen Congwen develops a natural ethic and applies it to West Hunan. He juxtaposes the life of the West Hunanese with the movement of water, which the ancient philosopher Lao Tzu uses as an agent to illustrate the existence and movement of the Tao, to suggest that life in West Hunan is naturally regulated. The idea of a natural way of life—submission to one's natural inclination and indifference to social ascendance correlative with Lao Tzu's concept of "wu wei" (freedom from worldly desire) contributes to the purity of West Hunan. West Hunan stands its ground as a home to human nature in contrast with the outside world where preoccupation with worldly things such as wealth and respectability leads people to deviate from life's natural orbit.

Like water that coheres and merges, Shen Congwen's West Hunan connects itself as a cultural frontier with Beijing, the centre of the May Fourth movement, by highlighting the vitality embedded in rural life. Although Shen Congwen locates West Hunan outside the pale of the mainstream of Chinese culture (Confucianism and the May Fourth cultural reform movement), West Hunan is firmly built on a natural tradition in Chinese culture or a popular Chinese ontology. Rural life, like water that moves in a self-sufficient system, integrates the
fragmented landscape of the rural homeland. Meanwhile, through the water metaphor, Shen Congwen appropriates rural life in light of the May Fourth interest in power and renewal. Shen Congwen's West Hunan stories, which Jeffrey Kinkley aptly describes as a political apology for West Hunan (*Odyssey* 5), nonetheless also legitimize the sensibility derived from rural life.

I end the chapter on Shen Congwen by looking into the perspective he takes. As John Berger observes, "the region in which a painter passes his childhood and adolescence often plays an important part in the constitution of his vision" (*About Looking* 134). Shen Congwen, like his contemporaries, acknowledges the connection between his "taste" and childhood experience. Yet he differs from other provincial writers in that he upholds this connection with pride and confidence rather than with resignation. Moreover, he consciously develops this connection into a "countryman's" perspective. Shen Congwen proudly displays West Hunan as his roots, from which he looks at the world. The substantially constructed landscape of rural life in his fictional narratives spreads this pride, and legitimates Chinese intellectuals' attachment to their cultural roots.

Chapter III

In the chapter on Mo Yan, the thesis moves over a period of fifty years from Shen Congwen's waterfront in a southwest border town in the 1920s to the agrarian region of Shandong in northern China in the 1980s. The five decades between the 1930s and the Cultural Revolution witnessed the formation of a dominant social-realistic discourse and its transformation into an officially enforced socialist realism (Leo Ou-fan Lee "Postscript" 302),
which officially silenced Shen Congwen and the cultural appreciation of the traditional countryside in the 1950s. The writing of the countryside was then mapped by political agendas of the Communist Party in various stages. It was not until the mid-1980s, with the rise of the fiction of cultural exploration, that writers began to turn their attention to the rich involvement of the countryside in Chinese life and culture.

I begin this chapter with a discussion of the new surge of cultural interest in the countryside in Chinese fiction in the mid-1980s. After the Cultural Revolution, the first Chinese literary works that succeed in breaking down the confines of the official discourse of socialist realism and reach for authentic and original literary expression are those set in the countryside. Many of these fictional narratives of the countryside are known as the fiction of cultural exploration.

The fiction of cultural exploration is an umbrella term bringing together diverse fictional writings interested in exploring the role of traditional Chinese culture in Chinese life. Writers affiliated with the group vary in their approaches to the Chinese cultural heritage, their positions ranging from being critical of traditional Chinese culture, searching for a sustaining

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21 Shen Congwen was not admitted to the All China Writers' Association, which meant that he was not recognized as a professional writer by the Communist Party. In the early 1950s, he was sent to the People's University to improve his ideology.

22 Rural writing constituted the mainstream of modern Chinese literature in the 1930s and remained popular from the 1930s onwards. From the 1930s to the 1980s, the countryside was utilized mainly for propagating the political agenda of the Communist Party, including war mobilization, class consciousness raising, land reform, the commune movement, and the Cultural Revolution. While it advocated the education of peasants to make them into conscious fighters for the Communist cause, the peasants' values were criticized, but their speech and manners were retained for a feeling of realism.

23 Zheng Yi, a writer from Shanxi in central China, is a representative of this trend. He continues the May Fourth tradition of cultural criticism, trying to explain the Cultural Revolution through an examination of Chinese culture. Zheng maintains that he is motivated to write fiction by the urge to
value system (Ah Cheng and Li Hangyu), to exploring primitive vitality (Zheng Wanlong and Zhang Chengzhi), and finally attempting to resume interrupted literary traditions (Han Shaogong). Despite different approaches to and understandings of Chinese cultural traditions, fiction of cultural exploration, with few exceptions, is set in rural areas. Wang Anyi, a writer from Shanghai, observes that "they [writers of cultural exploration] looked at the countryside as the tree from which they, the fallen leaves, have drifted away" (Leung 187). The countryside, that was treated as a reservoir of the evils of traditional Chinese culture in May Fourth literature, is accepted as fertile soil for cultural exploration by Chinese writers in the 1980s.

reveal "the historical and cultural elements that led to the present political and social phenomena," in contrast with the purely socio-critical approach that only "exposes some surface problems" (Leung 268). Yet his fictional narrative of the rural areas in Shanxi accommodates both sympathy with the peasants, in their perseverance in making the dry upland their permanent home, and doubt as to the worthiness of their efforts. A complete rejection of rural culture in favour of an industrial culture as exemplified by He shang (The River Elegy) is not easy to find in the fiction of the cultural exploration.

Both writers explore the spiritual support offered by traditional Chinese culture. Li Hangyu describes his attempt to trace the distant past as an effort "to absorb the essence of Chinese culture so as to enrich oneself and find his identity" (Leung 95).

Some writers joined the trend of cultural exploration with their writing of the "village in the city," that is, certain older communities in the city, such as those of small business owners, craftsmen, artists, and descendants of aristocratic families. These novels concentrate on the impact of modernity on the relatively established ethical codes in a community or reconstruct the past image of the traditional small town environment. Feng Jicai from Tianjin may be regarded as representative of the former, while Wang Zengqi represents the latter with his fictional presentation of small towns in Jiangsu.

Examples of the regional approach to cultural exploration can be found in Han Shaogong, Li Hangyu, and Jia Pingwa. Han Shaogong searches for Chu culture, an ancient southern culture which once enjoyed comparable prestige with the northern culture but has become obsolete in modern times. Li Hangyu traces the traditions of the ancient state of Yue in the Zhejiang countryside. Jia Pingwa's writing about Shaanxi presents an ethnological interest in the connection between the local culture and the influence of Qin. Some writers like Han Shaogong and Li Hangyu make a special point of excavating the cultural heritage of a specific region. Others, like Ah Cheng, detect the influence of Confucianism and Taoism in rural areas.
However, the countryside, the treasure chest for traditional cultural heritage, is also noted for its stagnant poverty. Writers like Shi Tiesheng and Zhang Xianliang foreground poverty in their presentation of the countryside but are appreciative of the traditional virtues preserved in the absence of social ambitions. I will cite Zhang Xiangliang's *Mimosa* (1983) to reveal a nearly nostalgic depiction of material scarcity by writers of urban background. Zhang's novel tends to idealize people at the lower end of the social ladder. Hunger that humiliates the autobiographical persona and his colleagues does not have any degenerating effect on the farm workers. The moral integrity and loving kindness of the farm workers make them a mysterious object upon which the narrator meditates and philosophizes.

Mo Yan abandons the conventional stand of the intellectual or thinker. He positions himself as a participant rather than spectator of rural life in his representation of the countryside. He frankly identifies himself with peasants in his practical and defiant world outlook by incorporating their aspiration for wealth—a popular motif of peasant culture excluded from genteel literature. Unlike urban writers who perceive poverty as innate to the countryside, Mo Yan reveals the deterioration of the countryside over the last fifty years and represents poverty as a betrayal of the original fertility of the native soil. He is quite explicit that he does not feel at home in the poverty-stricken countryside.

My discussion of Mo Yan's reconstruction of his rural homeland takes its point of departure from the dream land presented in his family saga *Red Sorghum* (1986). Mo Yan starts from the peasants' belief in the reciprocal relationship between human beings and the land. Through the lens of prosperity, he reconstructs a mythic homeland, where abundance and plenty mutually illuminate the heroism displayed by its residents in a land of red sorghum.
Red Sorghum presents two contrasting pictures. The picture of the profusion and hearty life of the past is juxtaposed with the poverty-stricken countryside of the narrator's childhood. Mo Yan's fictional narrative of the grandparents—the past glory of the region—foregrounds a self-reflexive autobiographical narrator, a person brought up in hunger and fear in the China of the 1960s and 1970s. Depressing poverty leads him to look longingly to the past glory of the region in a search for dignity and emancipation. Significantly, Mo Yan sets his imaginary homeland in wartime instead of peace. He stresses the energy released from an inseparable entanglement of binaries such as life and death, chastity and adultery, hero and bandit, which is emancipating in comparison with fear and depressing poverty.

The second part of the discussion introduces Mo Yan's three short stories published a year or two before Red Sorghum as a further explanation of the position of the self-reflexive narrator in the family saga. These stories contain multi-faceted depictions of hunger and the harsh struggle for survival in the poverty-stricken Chinese countryside of the 1960s and 1970s. On the one hand, Mo Yan explores the poetics of existence embedded in the peasants' tenacious hold on life. On the other hand, he demonstrates in life-threatening poverty the potential danger of making human beings degenerate into beasts, who, unlike their wild counterparts, prey on their own kind as food. His depiction of rural poverty expresses consistent sympathy for the people involved in this existential predicament, a critique of the political system that is at the bottom of the situation, and a refusal to eulogize rural poverty.

I will end the chapter on Mo Yan by juxtaposing his romantic reconstruction of the rural past with his depictions of the current countryside to show the ecological vision which he applies as a means of cultural and political criticism. The vital spirit of place, crystallized in
the image of red sorghum, which symbolizes the glorious past of the region, is accepted as a fact and applied as a criterion in Mo Yan's comparison of the present countryside with its legendary past. His critique of the *raison d'etre* of a landscape—the presence or symbol of a certain political system or approach to life—appears to be a peasants' version of ecological faith in the reciprocal relationship between land and people. Mo Yan attributes the poverty of the countryside to a disregard of the vital spirit of the earth and highlights a connection between a hostile attitude towards the land, a neglect of the interdependence between land and human beings, and the poverty of the peasants.

Mo Yan's reconstruction of the rural homeland expresses a peasant's faith in the land and in the resurrection of the spirit of the red sorghum. The reconstruction of the family history by a grandson, who relives in imagination the life of his grandparents, appears to support this optimism. Mo Yan identifies the vicissitudes of the home region with that of the family history to accentuate a sensory connection with the rural world. Fertility, which is the key to his homeland, is a source of physical and mental strength and literary emancipation—an expectation many writers of the 1980s hoped to fulfill. As with the fictional narratives of Hardy and Shen Congwen, human beings' organic interactions with nature lie at the bottom of Mo Yan's writing, his dynamic vision of rural life, and the association of rural life with contemporary values and ideals.

**Existing studies**

Many scholars have studied Hardy's perception of nature. John Alcorn, Gillian Beer, Perry Meisel (*The Return of the Repressed*), James Krasner, George Levine (*Darwin and the
Novelists), and Harvey Webster, among others, have explored the influence of Darwin on Hardy's perception and representation of the relationship between human beings and nature. They have convincingly traced Darwinian images (Alcorn, Krasner, Levine) and narrative (Beer, Alcorn) in Hardy's description and interpretation of nature by juxtaposing excerpts from *The Origin of Species* with Hardy's writing. I am especially inspired by James Krasner's *The Entangled Eye*, which illustrates the significant differences between Hardy's methodology and approach to nature and that of Darwin, while acknowledging the contiguity of Hardy's landscape imagery and Darwin's. However, instead of such relationships or influences, I am more interested in Hardy's use of adaptation and struggle for survival as a structuring principle in his reconstruction of the rural world. As George Wotton observes, "it would be a mistake . . . to think of Hardy's writing in terms of the elaboration of a philosophy, the expression or representation of philosophical beliefs" (79). Instead, Hardy uses these ideas to reevaluate and reconstruct his rural homeland. In his early novels in particular, Hardy uses Darwin's concept of adaptation and survival as a framework to present his vision of rural life that challenges the idyllic vision of the rural life, and provides a new criterion for the desirability of rural life.

Meanwhile, my discussion, which focuses on Hardy's effort to transform the harsh rural world into a home world, will cross some generally considered independent subjects in Hardy studies, such as his view of nature and his theory of perception, to underscore the connection between perception, adaptation, and survival in his construction of rural Wessex. As for perception and visual patterns, J. B. Bullen and Sheila Berger have both produced monographs studying the influence of the fine arts, perception theory, and the work of
aestheticians such as John Ruskin on Hardy's perception and representation. However, a visible connection between perception and survival in the rural world, central to Hardy's early novels, has yet to be emphasized. Bullen notes that, for Hardy, perception of the world, with which he distinguishes one character from another, is embedded in moral values (76). As I have stressed above, moral qualities, which are indispensable for clear-sighted perception, are of paramount importance for the ability to survive in Hardy's countryside. I highlight this fact by demonstrating that with the different qualities of perception and relation to the rural world in different characters, Hardy undermines the notion of a homogeneous countryside common in rural idylls. He enlivens the countryside not only with the dynamics of agrarian life but also with the country folk's perception. In Hardy's world they appear as observant perceivers instead of static landscape images.

In China, critical attention to Shen Congwen has not done sufficient justice to his achievement. His reception by his readers and by overseas scholars has been more encouraging. Many Chinese writers acknowledge their indebtedness to him as an early example of cultural exploration (Kinkley "Legacy"). He was nominated for the Nobel Prize for literature in 1987. Criticism of Shen Congwen in China has been distorted by ideological problems for decades and later by problems with methodology. For a long time Shen Congwen was not included in literary histories published in mainland China because of his political conservatism. It has been fashionable for critics in China to elaborate on his limitations as a "countryman" (Zhao Yuan 140; Pan Nan 66). Because May Fourth literature

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27This is confirmed by Sren Malmquist, a member of the Swedish Academy. He is reported to have said that when he telephoned the Chinese Embassy in 1987 to inquire whether Shen Congwen was still alive so as to be eligible for the Nobel Prize, he was told they had not heard of such a person.
has been prestigious in modern Chinese literary criticism, Shen Congwen has been compared unfavourably with Lu Xun and canonized writers such as Mao Dun, Ba Jin, and Lao She. Shen Congwen has been appreciated for being a stylist. However, in the vocabulary of literary criticism in China, the word "stylist" (wenti zuojia) is ambivalent as to whether it is intended as a compliment about language ability or a criticism of lack of depth, or political ambivalence.28

Under the influence of studies conducted overseas, Chinese critics' attitudes towards Shen Congwen have become more favourable since the late 1980s. However, most of the Chinese critical literature on Shen Congwen tends to be paraphrased from his autobiography and offers very little as a critical source. For instance, Shen Congwen studies such as those by Ling Yu, Wang Baosheng, and Wu Lichang and Huang Xianwen are actually readings of Shen Congwen's biographies. They reveal a common tendency with Shen Congwen studies in China, that is, to give up critical distance and examine the writer through the perspective Shen Congwen himself uses in his autobiography.

To a great extent, Shen Congwen studies have been imported from overseas, especially North America. Sinologists there have consistently countered the critical opinion of Shen Congwen held generally in mainland China. As early as the late 1950s, C. T. Hsia positioned Shen Congwen as one of the most important and accomplished modern Chinese novelists in his A History of Modern Chinese Fiction (1959). Hsia's work marks an initial attempt to reevaluate Shen Congwen's literary achievement, as well as being a comprehensive study of

(Zeng 10).

28See Su Xuelin for this meaning of "stylist" as understood by Shen Congwen's contemporaries
modern Chinese fiction in a new light. The last two decades have seen the publication of a considerable number of scholarly studies in English. Jeffrey C. Kinkley's *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen* (1987), the authorized biography of Shen Congwen, serves as an invaluable source book for studies of Shen Congwen's regionalism. Hsia's attempt to rewrite the canon of modern Chinese literature and Kinkley's monumental work in the study of Shen Congwen, together with Hua-ling Nieh's exegesis of Shen Congwen's works, all place Shen Congwen in a wider context by examining him with Western criteria. Other studies, such as David Der-wei Wang's *Fictional Realism* (1992) and Wendy Larson's study of literary autobiography by modern Chinese writers' attempt to locate Shen Congwen in relation to the Chinese literary tradition. While David Der-wei Wang compares Shen Congwen not unfavourably with Lu Xun, Wendy Larson's study of literary biography before and after the May Fourth movement sheds light on the significance and necessity of Shen Congwen's pose as an outsider in the context of the May Fourth movement's attempt to override literary authority. Larson's study is particularly helpful for an understanding of Shen Congwen in his time.

However, existing studies of Shen Congwen tend to treat his fictional West Hunan—a vehicle for cultural and political criticism and a carrier of the writer's own values—as

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I agree with Maria Ng that C. T. Hsia's *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* studies literature in light of the literary canon of the "great tradition," as defined by Matthew Arnold and F. R. Leavis (Ng 43). Yet, one should also note that Hsia introduces a much needed comparative perspective in modern Chinese literary criticism. I do not deny the limitation of the "great tradition." Although it includes many major writers, it excludes others. Hardy, who is not included in the great tradition, is a good example of the exclusion. Yet to subvert this canon instead of demonstrating its partiality would likewise exclude some major writers. The modern Chinese literary canon, on the other hand, excludes writers like Shen Congwen because of his ideological differences. However, Hsia wisely pays attention to the diversity of literary traditions and various reactions to modernity, as well as to artistic considerations. This approach greatly contributes to the maturity of Chinese literary criticism.
descriptive instead of interpretative. One of the incentives for my study lies in the desire to reveal (not to disentangle) his effort, based on his creative interpretation of the actual rural landscape, to reconstruct West Hunan as the ideal rural homeland in the face of a strong anti-rural trend in modern Chinese literature.

Mo Yan appears to catch critics’ attention for the same reason as Shen Congwen did decades ago, that is, for his style. Mo Yan dazzles critics with his textual innovations. The critical attention he receives is mostly focused on his narrative strategies, especially his overtly anti-aesthetic approach in novels published in the 1990s. Meanwhile, critics in China are reticent about the cultural and political dissidence that is embedded in his novelty. Their reluctance to spell out the cultural and political criticism in Mo Yan's writing contributes to a blind spot in the study of Mo Yan. Critics focus their attention on his fantasies, but overlook the implications and references of his fantasy world. This exploration of novelty in Mo Yan neglects the cultural and historical significance of his work as well as of the fiction of cultural exploration in mainland China.

Sinologists in North America, on the other hand, fill this gap in Mo Yan studies by attending to the voice of defiance that vibrates throughout his narratives. Michael S. Duke ("Past, Present and Future in Mo Yan’s Fiction of the 1980s") and David Der-wei Wang ("Imaginary Nostalgia") were the earliest to unveil the social and political criticisms embedded in Mo Yan's representation of the rural home. Duke's article examines Mo Yan's portrayal of the nightmarish Chinese countryside against the myth of a communist Chinese countryside, underscoring Mo Yan's bestiary as an allegory of the peasants' position in the class-structured society of Communist China. Wang, concentrating on Mo Yan's demystification of the rural
homeland in his short story "The White Dog and the Swing," reads Mo Yan's countryside as a parody of the spiritual homeland in the poetic tradition. These studies have been followed in the 1990s by Lu Tonglin's feminist reading of *Red Sorghum* and Zhang Xudong's reading of the adaptation of *Red Sorghum* for the screen. While Lu Tonglin's article emphasizes the affiliation of Mo Yan with the Cultural Revolution, Zhang's article tries to prove the opposite: that Mo Yan's rhetoric was a reaction against the mainstream of modern Chinese literature. These articles tend to focus on aspects of reality in Mo Yan's representation of the countryside (with the exception of Lu's article, which analyzes Mo Yan's misogynist imagination). My study of Mo Yan is focused on his imaginary rural homeland, with the entanglement between real and imaginary, sensory and fantastic, and depression and desire for liberation. I am interested in his effort to reconstruct the countryside despite its nightmarish associations.

My journey to the rural homeland started in western Canada in the late 1990s. It started from observations of Canadian culture and landscape in comparison with my memorized landscape of China. Since the moment I arrived in Canada, the overwhelming greenness of Vancouver has compelled my attention to what is missing in the familiar landscape of Beijing and, by extension, modern Chinese literature. The carefully preserved natural landscape of western Canada and the Canadian concern with ecological responsibility led me to reflect on the anti-rural attitude embedded in modern Chinese literature and society (contrary to the pervading spirit of over two thousand years of classical Chinese poems). I was led to search for a rural tradition—a reflection on modernity, which has been submerged by a political program to promote the mentality of modernity in the Chinese literary imagination.
My memorized landscape of the rural world was split between an idyllic picture inspired by classical Chinese poems and actual childhood impressions of the countryside—a landscape of fear bearing testimony to the brutality of politics. The peaceful and poetic vision of the countryside was gradually superseded by images of a turbulent revolutionary countryside. Socialist realistic literature highlights the countryside's functions in Chinese politics: it was the base of the Communist party before it came to power, and the place where they experimented with their communist vision. In reality, the countryside, though officially lauded, was actually condemned as a place of punishment and exile for its cultural and political dissidents from the late 1950s until the mid-1970s. None of these functions can be associated with the image of home.

In fact, the countryside presented itself as the biggest threat to the security of the urban home. People living in Chinese cities during the Cultural Revolution did not feel they were at a safe enough distance from the countryside to watch and appreciate it. The threat of being sent to the countryside to undergo re-education by the peasants loomed menacingly throughout the Cultural Revolution. Even the government did not appear to be very proud of the countryside. Except for less than ten assigned "model villages" like Dazhai in Shanxi and Four Season Green Commune in the suburb of Beijing, the countryside was sealed off from foreign tourists as beyond the border for sightseeing.³⁰

Although the countryside is no longer treated as the skeleton in the closet, because of its harsh living conditions it remains hardly a place to display. Meanwhile, in spite of the fact

³⁰See Christopher L. Salter ("Dazhai Village") for reflections on his visits to Dazhai during and immediately after the Cultural Revolution.
that the countryside no longer poses an immediate threat to urbanites since the end of the Cultural Revolution, its literary imaging has not improved simultaneously with changes in Chinese society.

Writers who have written of their experiences in the countryside have strongly confirmed this damaged impression of rural life. They value their contact with the countryside as a source of material from which to write about an otherwise unimaginable life. The countryside was their apocalypse or revelation; they returned from the inferno of the countryside as wiser and braver persons. Having experienced the worst, they would now accept whatever tests and adventures life had to present.

The love of nature and nostalgia for culture proudly displayed in Canadian landscape appear to confirm Michael Bunce's argument that the countryside ideal was completely shaped by the city. However, I am intrigued as to whether Chinese love of the countryside will have to wait until the countryside's function as a food supplier is no longer so exclusionary of other values. Indeed, the Canadian countryside with its hobby farms, country villas, and recreation areas is apparently distanced from the functional agricultural landscape of China. However, I believe that in Hardy's Wessex, Shen Congwen's West Hunan, and Mo Yan's Gaomi I have found a meeting point, which links up countryside locales as centres of existence rather than cultural satellites of the cities. My intention is not to repair a poetic vision of the idyllic countryside, but to look at these writers' reconstructions of the rural homeland in a find in a new light. I look to these writers for guidance into modern visions of the countryside ideal, which interpret the imperfect countryside in light of the ideal of specific cultural environments and historical periods. On the strength of their extensive connections with the countryside and
sensitivity to its literary images, they are the richest source for the study of literary reconstructions of the countryside.

I hope that by examining these writers within the context of rural homelands my thesis will reveal their rich involvement with the countryside as well as their efforts to reappropriate it to a modern world. The fact that overseas sinologists rediscovered Shen Congwen before critics in mainland China and Taiwan may testify to how critical sensitivity is sharpened by comparison. In an attempt to make provision for my own mental image of the countryside, which was conditioned by the discourse of the countryside in a peculiar political environment, I have embarked on this project with Hardy as a guide or a means of comparison in my reading of Shen Congwen and Mo Yan. Meanwhile, I also hope to introduce the two Chinese writers, who are little-known to readers of English, with reference to the more familiar Thomas Hardy.

Although my thesis is a thematic study of fictional rural homelands, it is mainly text based, focusing on structural elements such as perspectives and symbolism. Meanwhile I will situate the fictional rural homelands in the writers' cultural and historical context so as to aid my reading and interpretation of the construction of the fictional images of the rural homeland.
Let me enjoy the earth no less
Because the all-enacting Might
That fashioned forth its loveliness
Had other aims than my delight
---Thomas Hardy (Poems 238)

Chapter I

A Subtle Balance with Nature: Thomas Hardy's Representation of Rural Life

Thomas Hardy's rural fiction is recognized as "a natural culmination and transition" in nineteenth-century rural literature (James 74).¹ The transition that Hardy helped to facilitate elevates the countryside from an accessory to urban culture—a retreat from modern life—to a centre of existence, where people, in Raymond Williams' words, live in "the physical reality of the place" (213). Williams further notes, Hardy "achieves a fullness which is quite new, at this depth, in all country writing, the love and the work, the aches of labour and of choice, are in a single dimension" (212). Hardy's representation of the countryside in its plenitude contributes to a dynamic rural world in opposition to static pictures of the countryside in rural idylls. Moreover, he endows agrarian life with contemporary values of existence, freeing it from the confinement of the idealized past as imposed by idyllic interest in the countryside. Portraying in depth the efforts and rewards of living in the rural world, Hardy singles out the countryside as the "home" for a purposeful existence. Before entering Thomas Hardy's rural homeland I will look at Mary Russell Mitford's Our Village to

¹ This observation by Louis James voices a consensus about Hardy's contribution to nineteenth century English rural writing. W. J. Keith refers to Hardy's rural writing as "the most important comprehensive presentation in literature of the nineteenth-century countryside" and his Wessex as "a rural microcosm" ("Land" 85). Critics such as Shelagh Hunter, Merryn Williams, Raymond Williams, and P. D. Edwards, to name but a few, support this position from different perspectives.
introduce the kind of rural landscape Hardy dismantles and rebuilds into his fictional rural homeland.

The cosy corner of rural England: Mary Russell Mitford's Our Village and the idyllic countryside

In contrast to Hardy's plenitude, Victorian rural idylls centre their countryside ideal on rural simplicity. Rural writings of the early Victorian period in particular are noted for their well-developed landscapes of rural retreat, revealing the contentment of simple rural life. Shelagh Hunter observes that the idyllic countryside is a world formed of "simple subject-matter and a complex view of it" (11). This tendency to simplify rural life and idealize rural simplicity appears to be contiguous with Wordsworth's love of the humble rustics in his quest for basic human emotions. Yet Victorian writers of rural fiction abandoned Wordsworth's exploration of the mystery of nature and his search for universal wisdom embedded in rustics' immediate communion with nature. Instead they tended to search for happiness in simple rural life. As P. D. Edwards points out, the chief requirement of the Victorian rural idyll is to be "happy in general, as well as its final effect" (153). This happiness, which Alex Preminger describes as "some simple sort of happiness" (92), is attributed to if not equated with an imaginative reconstruction of simplicity or innocent tranquillity—the perceived antidote to the social and moral problems of industrial cities.

The Victorian concept of simple happiness as expressed in rural writing is closely identified with a sense of security, which is also the cornerstone of "home." George Levine

²My working definition of home in the discussion of rural idylls follows that of Douglas Porteous, as a place of "both psychic security and physical security, or protection" (383).
 contends that Victorian writers "tended to place happiness in bounded human landscapes" ("High and Low" 139). The idyllic countryside incarnates this aspiration for a secure happiness in form of a "strange compound of romance and domesticity" ("High and Low" 145). The romantic impulse to escape the turbulence of progress and an imaginary reconstruction of the stable and secure countryside are interlocked to recreate a rural retreat.

Mary Russell Mitford's (1787-1855) *Our Village* (1824-1832), which P. D. Edwards describes as an established "model" for literary representation of village life (60), held public imagination for decades since the early Victorian period for its construction of a cosy corner of rural England in a small village in times of increasing urban development. For Mitford, its comfortable size, seclusion, and complete transparency define the village as a stable refuge from modernity. Indeed, this countryside ideal is framed around happiness as the product of a secure retreat:

> Of all situations for a constant residence, that which appears to me most delightful is a little village far in the country; a small neighbourhood, not of fine mansions finely peopled, but of cottages and cottage-like houses, "messuage or tenements," as a friend of mine calls such ignoble and nondescript dwellings, with inhabitants whose faces are as familiar to us as flowers in our garden; a little world of our own, close-packed and insulated like ants in an ant-hill, or bees in a hive, or sheep in a fold, or nuns in a convent, or sailors in a ship, where we know every one, are known to every

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3 *Our Village* appeared in *Lady's Magazine* for ten years. After a decade of serial contribution to the magazine, Mitford confessed that she had exhausted her source of materials. The editor suggested that she "seek further afield, for... the public demands it" (Mitford 10). Following its serial publication, *Our Village* was published in five volumes in 1835 and 1837. A new edition appeared in 1852. Selections were also published in 1893, 1900, 1904, 1927 and 1982 (Edwards 156). As P. D. Edwards notes, Mitford's "descriptive mode of accumulating intimate details that seem to prove the author's total knowledge helped create a taste, for a while a decidedly popular taste, which appealed strongly to major writers of the next two generations and which they catered for in some of their best writing" (2). Meanwhile, as a model village, *Our Village* has been parodied as well as imitated since its publication (Edwards 60). The legacy of Mary Mitford is discernible even in major writers of rural writing of the middle and the late Victorian periods. Writers like George Eliot and Thomas Hardy, who questioned rather than emphasized the tranquillity of the countryside, still incorporated Mitford's pictorial view and pastoral interest in rural life in their early writings.
one, interested in every one, and authorized to hope that every one feels an interest in us. (Our Village 21)

A tangible sense of security emitted from this picture of the small village is indebted to its manageable size and physical enclosure: the village is small and sheltered. Represented as a landscape with such features as "pretty white cottages" (28), "the tidy, square red cottage" (22) and "the long well-stocked garden by the side of the road" (22), the village is a closely knit, ordered and exquisite world protected from the uncontrollable and chaotic outside world.

The stability of the village, supported by its physical seclusion, is also safeguarded by its imperviousness to the changes time brings. Mitford is especially appreciative of its "standing still, of remaining stationary, unchanged and unimproved in this most changeable and improving world" (132). Changeless and motionless, her village is thus safely tucked away from the uncertainty and incomprehensibility of modernity.

For Mitford the seclusion and stillness of village life have the attraction of a transparent community. She perceives the village as what Raymond Williams deems a "knowable" and "known community" (165-167). Familiarity with all the villagers contributes a social dimension to Mitford's sense of security about the countryside. This total transparency in rural life leads to her feeling of intimacy and being at ease in the rural community. However, the transparency of Three Mile Cross, the small village, is not restricted to personal knowledge of the villagers, but extends to cultural memory, that is, a memorized landscape acquired in literary or artistic works. When Mitford observes that "a

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4I use the concept of memorized landscape as derived from Simon Schama: "[o]ur entire landscape tradition is the product of shared culture, it is by the same token a tradition built from a rich deposit of myths, memories, and obsessions. The cultures which we are told to seek in other native cultures—of the primitive forest, of the river of life, of the sacred mountain—are in fact alive and well and all about us if
small neighbourhood is as good in sober waking reality as in poetry or prose" (21), she literally compares the domesticated landscape of rural life with books about "confined locality" (21). On the one hand, the village is endowed with a safety comparable to that of a book that shuts out the incomprehensible and uncontrollable world outside its boundary. On the other hand, village life becomes familiar through its stereotypes in rural pastorals.

The sense of security built up by social relationships and human habitation in *Our Village* eventually embraces the natural environment. Mitford's small village is not only distant from problems of modern cities, it also keeps the wilderness at bay. Nature is represented as "the delicious green patches, the islets of wilderness amidst cultivation" (42). It is benign and tamed. This inclination to exclude from this homelike retreat of the countryside the mysterious and uncontrollable wilderness reveals a desire to eschew both the chaos of the wilderness and problems in modern society.

Despite the fact that Mary Mitford resides in the village at the time of her writing, she reveals a largely tourist-like interest in rural scenery, centring her impression of the village on her numerous walks through its streets and lanes.\(^5\) Her charming sketches reduce the complexity of nature in rural life to an orderly picture. As John Berger notes, the panoramic view or landscape perception of nature affirms the privilege of a spectator to arrange the view and make meaning of it (*About Looking* 103-104). Mitford's comfort obviously lies in a

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\(^{5}\)"A Walk through the Country" is characteristic of Mitford's mode of perceiving the village. She wrote fourteen "Walks in the Country," which are frequently selected for anthologies.
rural retreat enclosed by an orderly and benevolent nature—nature domesticated and made familiar to the reader through poetic representations.

Mitford recommends this cosy place in the countryside as an ideal habitation to her readers, associating it with genuine happiness: "to inhabit such a scene of peace and sweetness is again to be fearless, gay, and gentle as a child" (45). "Fearlessness" obviously explains her true feeling about the countryside and the happiness she looks for in rural life. Childhood pleasure, embedded in the feeling of being secure, is used here both as a criterion for happiness and a description of the feeling of security. To validate her idyllic view of the countryside, Mitford chooses a poor country urchin as a personification of this simple happiness or childhood happiness. She argues that the boy who sings "Home! sweet Home!" on his way home from the fields understands the "full import" of "home," that is, the connection between simplicity and happiness:

And so he does; for he is one of a large, an honest, a kind, and an industrious family, where all goes well, and where the poor ploughboy is sure of finding cheerful faces and coarse comforts—all that he has learned to desire. Oh, to be as cheaply and as thoroughly contented as George Cooper! All his luxuries, a cricket-match!—all his wants satisfied in "home! sweet home!" (Our Village 102)

Enumerating for him his blessings at home, Mitford applies her understanding of the simple happiness of rural life to speak about the boy and his contentment.

Mitford's delight with simple happiness leads naturally to her association of the countryside with a childhood haven. Children's play and games are presented as an

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6The association of childhood and the countryside may be indebted to personal or cultural memories. However, owing to the Victorian idyll, the countryside is recognized as a safe place for children. A significant body of the children's pastoral, including stories with animal characters written for children appeared between the 1860s and the 1890s (Bunce 63). However the association of the countryside and the children's playground is still popular in contemporary perceptions of the countryside (Shoard 192).
important aspect of rural life. For Mitford country boys and cricketers are "too important persons in our village to be talked of merely as figures in the landscape" (31). This implies that she treats all other characters as landscape images and these two groups of people as the only ones of noticeable mobility. The cricketers and children are given the separate chapter that Mitford promises them and much more. The conspicuous presence of country boys and cricketers in Mitford's representation of village life highlights the countryside as a place for an enjoyable and wholesome existence.\(^7\) The fact that child's play and games are the only socializing opportunities in *Our Village* articulates her leisurely interest in the countryside and her perception of the countryside in light of a children's pastoral.

*Our Village* creates a homelike retreat with a feel of reality. Mitford maintains that she has depicted life in a small village in the south of England "with the closest and most resolute fidelity to the place and the people" (15). However, as Shelagh Hunter points out, her realism is "selective to the point of untruth" (Hunter 2).\(^8\) Even she herself admits that she could not help "giving a brighter aspect to her villagers than is usually met with in books" (15). Her sensitivity to their happiness, which is sharpened by her experience of "feverish London," features prominently in her sketches of happy rural simplicity.\(^9\) Her village is

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\(^7\)Edwards refers to *Our Village* as the beginning of "the consolidation of cricket into a cult" (158). However, Mitford also calls attention to the difference between cricket playing in the village and a cricket match by professional teams. She is more interested in the "real solid old-fashioned match between neighboring parishes" (*Our Village* 116) as a community event than in the organization or tactics of the match itself.

\(^8\)"Selective" does not necessarily mean that what is selected is not true. Shelagh Hunter observes that a pastoral novel will describe dancing instead of pig-killing, though both took place seasonally in nineteenth-century rural districts (92). However, by selecting pleasure instead of work in the rural life, the idyllic countryside often creates the illusion that rural life is, or is largely, free from the travail for sustenance as opposed to actual agrarian life.

\(^9\)W. J. Keith discusses Mitford's bridging of the city and the countryside with an educated middle class taste for both (*Rural Tradition* 87). Also see Edwards for discussion of her relationship with London (20,
structured with her reaction to the city. In this carefully structured retreat, she does not feel obliged to delve into the feelings of the rustics. For example, the concept of George Cooper's simple happiness is spoken of but has no individual voice.

The simple happiness and childhood naivete, which Mary Mitford identifies with rural life, are apparently imbued both with her own search for security and with a feeling of intellectual superiority. Hardy explains this notion of simple happiness understood by the Victorians: among the rural community "happiness will find her last refuge on earth, since it is among them that a perfect insight into the conditions of existence will be longest postponed" (PW 169). In other words, happiness is the fruit of ignorance or lack of self-consciousness in the eyes of Victorian intellectuals.

George Eliot of the middle Victorian period, reveals an emotional tension residing in the static rural life which is excluded from the idyllic countryside in early Victorian rural writing. Noted among Victorian writers for her inquisitiveness, Eliot questioned the validity of equating simplicity with happiness. In "The Natural History of German Life," an essay written for The Westminster Review, she refers to ideas that the country people are happy, joyous, and healthy as "prejudices difficult to dislodge from the artistic mind, which looks for its subjects in literature instead of life . . . [and] has always expressed the imagination of

10Mitford's contemporaries were the earliest to question the verifiability of her portrayal of village life. However, their narratives of village life appear to be significant only in relation with Our Village. To some extent they also use Mitford's popularity to promote themselves. For a detailed discussion see Edwards (60-72). George Eliot, on the other hand, questions the whole convention of rural writing. She tries to create her own style instead of aiming at a parody of Our Village.

11Like Mary Howitt, Mary Mitford and Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot also set her novels in the countryside of her childhood--that of the 1820s and 1830s, before the Reform Bill and the railroad had changed its landscape. Yet fond memories of her childhood home did not cause her to bask in the self-sufficiency of rural communities.
the cultivated and town-bred" (Essays 159). By bringing to attention the discrepancy between romantic conceptualization of rural life and rural reality, Eliot challenges the realistic basis of the Victorian idyll. She suggests that one needs to discard the memorized landscape of the countryside to get in touch with actual rural life.

With her emphasis on the "truth of rustic life," Eliot proposes to look closely at rustics to register their emotions:

Observe a company of haymakers. When you see them at a distance, tossing up the forkfuls of hay in the golden light, while the wagon creeps slowly with its increasing burden over the meadow, and the bright-green space, which tells of work done, gets larger and larger, you pronounce the scene "smiling," and you think the companions in labour must be as bright and cheerful as the picture to which they give animation. Approach nearer, and you will certainly find that haymaking time is a time for joking, especially if there are women among the labourers; but the coarse laugh that bursts out every now and then, and expresses the triumphant taunt, is as far as possible from your conception of idyllic merriment. (Essays 159)

Eliot acknowledges the intensity and complexity of rural people's feelings and presents herself as a chronicler of this unknown emotional life of the humble rural folk. She nonetheless retains the idea of rural people's limited intelligence. She is concerned about the limitations of people living in sequestered rural communities. Her writing about the rustics explores a contrast between the richness of their emotions and their moral rigidity and limited intelligence. Although she admires their moral integrity and their ability to endure hardships, she feels a need to channel their emotions and feelings into what she considers the right direction. For her, happiness is embedded in morality, while living close to nature does not

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12 Eliot's early novels Adam Bede and The Mill on the Floss—her only two novels about rustic people—retain many pastoral elements that she downplayed in her critical essays. Raymond Williams describes Adam Bede as "not get[ting] much further than restoring [the rustics] as a landscape" (168). By "landscape" Williams refers to a distinctly social rather than individualistic image of country people. However, Eliot's representation of the countryside does convey a restlessness absent in nostalgic depictions of peaceful rural life by Mary Mitford, Mary Howitt, and Anthony Trollope.
automatically lead people to moral living and, through it, to happiness. She argues: "To
make men moral, something more is requisite than to turn them out to grass" (Essay 159).
Her characters are "out of keeping with the earth on which they live" because they lack an
outlet from their emotional confines to reach out to the large world (The Mill on the Floss
254).\footnote{Hardy points out that Eliot's portrayal of rural life does not touch on the real substance of rural life. In his words, Eliot rarely "touches the life of the fields: her country-people [are] more like small townsfolk than rustics" (Life 98).} While ascribing their isolation to their moral rigidity, Eliot proposes duty as a cure for
the "oppressive narrowness" of rural life, a way to connect them with others. Also, although
she emphasizes the redemptive effect of suffering and tries to identify with country people in
such broad terms as "struggling erring human creatures" (Letters 3: 111), she points to the
need for an external light to lead country people out of their rigid righteousness and
emotional snares. This light is usually brought into the secluded life of the rural community
through an outsider affiliated with the city and the church. In Adam Bede (1859) the
redeeming light is embodied in Methodism and in Dinah, who amends the moral life of the
country people and teaches them how to be sympathetic with the sufferings of others. Eliot's
sympathy with rural people for their limitations therefore places her in a position of
patronage towards rustics trapped in emotional strife.\footnote{Social reformers in particular recognized the vulnerability of rustics resulting from their isolation and lack of education. Christian socialists were of the opinion that it was the duty of the upper classes to ensure the well-being of the rural folk, for rustics were incapable of doing so themselves. For this trend in nineteenth-century rural fiction see Merryn Williams for discussions of Benjamin Disraeli, Charles Kingsley, and William Howitt's representations of the countryside (18, 53-62).} She unsettles the notion of simple
happiness, yet still retains a version of rural simplicity.
Thomas Hardy: the perspective of "a comparative outsider"

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) views the countryside from a wider perspective than his predecessors and contemporaries. Like Victorian rural writers in general, he is concerned with the impact of change and mobility on rural life. At the same time, however, he counters the cultural nostalgia of urban writers and their imaginative reconstruction of the static English countryside. He writes in "The Dorsetshire Labourer" (1883):

That seclusion and immutability, which were so bad for their pockets, was an unrivalled fosterer of their personal charm in the eyes of those whose experiences had been less limited. (PW 181)

Hardy started to write with an effort to supply a different perspective—the rustic perspective—in opposition to the established narrative stance in Victorian fiction. He not only refused to simplify rural life to motionless scenery, he also challenged the notion of the simplicity of country people. He argues that the rustics "are losing their individuality, but they are widening the range of their ideas, and gaining in freedom. It is too much to expect them to remain stagnant and old fashioned for the pleasure of romantic spectators" (PW 181).

Asserting the subjectivity of the country people appeared to be one of the motivations for his first full-length novel, *The Poor Man and the Lady*. This novel, which presents a critical examination of London society and the gentry (*Life* 61), takes the perspective of an architect of rural background like Hardy himself. On July 17, 1868—a week before the manuscript was sent to the publisher, Hardy jotted down in his notes: "Perhaps I can do a volume of poems consisting of the other side of common emotions" (*Life* 59). Although he says that the meaning of this statement "is not quite clear" (*Life* 59), this note appears to summarize his position on the newly completed project as well as his future endeavours. The newly finished novel attempts to present the view of the country people, who have thus far remained an
object of narration subject to the view of urbanites, even in sympathetic and well-intended sketches of rural life.

As stated in the title of the novel, *The Poor Man and the Lady; By the Poor Man* foregrounds the rural connection through the application of a dramatized first person narrator. In his letter to the publisher dated July 25, 1868, Hardy introduces his novel as representing the perspective of "a comparative outsider" (*Selected Letters* 10). He anticipates in the same letter that the "novelty of [his] position and view in relation to a known subject, [will be] more taking among the readers of light literature than even absolute novelty of subject" (*Selected Letters* 10). The fact that Hardy advertises his position to the publisher for its novel effect on the reader reveals a consciousness of his own alienation from the reader as well as his optimism regarding the reader's interest in his rural connections.

Nevertheless, Alexander Macmillan, the publisher, rejected the manuscript. In his letter of August 10, 1868, Macmillan explains to Hardy that in spite of grains of reality in his portrayal of the working class, his representation of upper-class society is simply not acceptable:

> Indeed nothing could justify such a wholesale blackening of a class but large and intimate knowledge of it. Thackeray makes them not greatly better in many respects, but he gave many redeeming traits and characters, besides he did it all in a light chaffing way that gave no offence--and I fear did little good, and he soothed them by describing the lower class which he knew nothing of and did not care to know, as equally bad when he touched them at all. He meant fair, you "mean mischief." (qtd. in Millgate, *Thomas Hardy: A Biography* 110)

In other words, in his attempt to introduce a different perspective, Hardy had become extreme and offensive to the market he needed to attract. The publisher's reaction to Hardy's first novel was likely the first instance that contributed to Hardy's impression that he was discouraged to write about London.
The unpublished novel served as an indispensable prelude to Hardy's writing career. As Michael Millgate observes, it confronted Hardy with the necessity to "shap[e] his work to the circumstances of his time and . . . his own situation" (Thomas Hardy; his Career 24). Hardy's way to success therefore presents "a gradual repression in terms of literary expression, of the kind of emotions, opinions, and attitudes which had gone into The Poor Man and the Lady" (Thomas Hardy; his Career 24). The change of his narrative perspective appears to be strategically important. Accompanying his search for an appropriate topic, and in his willingness to write "any literary work that he should do well to go upon" (Hardy, Selected Letters 11), Hardy gave up his attempt to assert a rural perspective overtly. He dropped the country/poor man persona and abandoned first-person narrative in his subsequent major novels (even his autobiography is written in the third person). Moreover, the narrator is gradually reduced to a voice and perspective instead of a corporeal presence. Distance as a precaution and defense on Hardy's part eventually grants his vision of the countryside a semi-scientific authenticity.

Encouraged by Macmillan's assurance of his ability to write rural life (Life 58), Hardy started to explore the rural setting in Under the Greenwood Tree (1872) with an idyllic interest in the rural world. As the subtitle to Under the Greenwood Tree indicates, the novel is "A Rural Painting of the Dutch School." It represents rural life in scenes and vignettes. Hardy approaches country people in light of genre painting, or the painting of low life, which aims at expressing the satisfaction of life in the humble and domestic scenes of the rural world. His emphasis on scenic attractions and peacefulness in parochial life echoes a cultural

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15 I borrow the word "prelude" as a description of Hardy's first novel from Michael Millgate (Thomas Hardy; his Career 17).
nostalgia for the simple country life—the path paved by Mary Mitford, Mary Howitt, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot's depiction of provincial life in pre-industrial England. However, even in this much simplified version of rural life, Hardy tries to reveal an organic inner coherence in the rural parish. The inner coherence, in opposition to the organizing perspective of an outside observer, is found in music charged with religious and secular love. Participation in the choir, which the writer represents romantically and in which the characters involve themselves religiously as a "labour of love" (PW 5), is presented as a cohesive force in Mellstock, a rural community in the woods.¹⁶

However, as W. J. Keith rightly suggests, Under the Greenwood Tree can only be rated as "a parochial novel," that is, it is a novel confined to a single parish with no "geographical peculiarities of a region" (Regions 12).¹⁷ In fact a more noticeable exclusion in the novel is that of the elemental nature with which rural life is in daily contact. As a result, the landscape becomes almost exclusively social—centring on the relationships among the woodlanders.

However, Hardy never abandoned his attempt to reach a fuller vision of rural life and country people.¹⁸ He simply tried different perspectives towards that end. As Ronald Blythe

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¹⁶ As Hardy later reveals, the novel was originally titled The Mellstock Quire (PW 6).

¹⁷ Our Village would be typical of a parochial representation of the rural world, with its standardization of the village landscape. In Under the Greenwood Tree the understanding that the story takes place in the woods already contributes a kind of geographical feature to the narrative, although the woods are more useful as an enclosure than a field for activity in the novel.

¹⁸ Hardy was apparently very attached to his first novel. While he was still active as a fiction writer, Hardy dispersed a considerable portion of his first novel into other works. For instance, critics have identified that excerpts of the novel found their way into the opening of Under the Greenwood Tree (1872), and A Pair of Blue Eyes (1873) (Millgate, Thomas Hardy: his Career 19). "An Indiscretion in the Life of an Heiress" (1878) is an adaptation through a third person point of view. Hardy repeatedly expressed his attachment to his unpublished first novel after he had given up writing fiction and when his reputation was no longer vulnerable to criticism. In 1925 Hardy published a poem, "The Poor Man and
notes, Hardy defends the country people from a height instead of as one of them (62). Hardy's search for a desired perspective in facilitating a broad and full enough view of rural life and society is crystallized in his development from his first rural fiction, *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872), to his second rural novel, *Far from Madding Crowd* (1874).

**The end of the rural idyll and the beginning of the farming community**

Although *Under the Greenwood Tree* won Hardy recognition as a writer, Hardy obviously regarded it as unsatisfactorily skimpy. He admits that he would have attempted "a deeper, more essential, more transcendent handling" of rural life had the circumstances permitted (*WP* 6). This intention did not come to realization until two years later with his next rural novel, *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874). The first novel, nonetheless, paved the way for the second. Sir Leslie Stephen, the editor of the *Cornhill*, specified that he expected another story like *Under the Greenwood Tree* for his magazine (*Life* 97). Its title, the setting, and the characters—"a young woman-farmer, a shepherd, and a sergeant of cavalry" (*Life* 95)— all appear to support *Far from the Madding Crowd*’s claim to be a

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19Socially, Hardy always considered himself above country people and made much of his father's independence (he was a master mason rather than a jobbing mason) and his family's pretensions (*Life* 8). Textually, his narrative reveals a detachment from his characters. J. Hillis Miller argues very convincingly that distance is instrumental for Hardy to represent his rural world in the medium of language (*Distance* xiii). However, for Hardy detachment is also instrumental in conveying an unsentimental face of rural life in contrast to the romantic conceptualizations of rural life by urban writers.
pastoral tale, usually understood as an idyllic representation of rural life, in which the loves of shepherds and shepherdesses play a prominent role.

Hardy develops the pastoral impression by means of retaining an ironic distance from his rural characters. As W. J. Keith points out, the literary allusion of the title "implied sophisticated detachment; the rustic locale existed "out there" ("A Regional Approach" 43). Distance, as William Empson notes, constitutes the most important component of pastoral, a convention sustained by distance between the writer and his subject, and an affinity between the writer and his reader (11). *Far from the Madding Crowd* starts like a pastoral in that it is explicitly "about the countrymen but neither by nor for them" (Empson 11). The beginning of Hardy's narrative reinforces a feeling of detachment from country people with its hyperbolic description of Farmer Oak's innocent, hearty, and unsophisticated smile:

When Farmer Oak smiled, the corners of his mouth spread till they were within an unimportant distance of his ears, his eyes were reduced to chinks, and diverging wrinkles appeared round them, extending upon his countenance like the rays in a rudimentary sketch of the rising sun. (*FMC* 1)

Oak's smile as an epitome of simple happiness recalls the idyllic view of rural life. The teasing tone suggests that the narrator is distant from his characters and identified with his readers. As Michael Millgate notes, "Gabriel Oak's ineptitudes of manner are made a matter for shared amusement between sophisticated author and sophisticated reader" (*Thomas Hardy: his Career* 82).21

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20 Other critics commenting on the use of the literary allusion include Pamela Dalziel, John Short, and John Goode. I regard the title as a play with the reader's expectation of an idyllic picture of rural life.

21 Recent critics like W. J. Keith are sensitive to the pronouncedly condescending attitude toward rustic people ("A Regional Approach" 43). For Hardy's contemporaries like Henry James this description is problematic because, on the one hand, "the height of analytic omniscience" and "cleverness" demonstrated in this description appear to be borrowed from George Eliot rather than being Hardy's original contribution. On the other hand, this description is disproportionately long (29). In other words,
However, this pastoral start is succeeded by a complex and far from idyllic representation of rural life. Although critics like Merryn Williams tend to regard *Far from the Madding Crowd* as inferior to Hardy's later and "more important" works on account of its popularity with his readers (xi), as the distillation of six years of adjustment in theme and perspective after *The Poor Man and the Lady*, Far from the Madding Crowd demonstrates Hardy's renewed confidence in the value of rural experience, and a newly acquired mastery in presenting his vision of rural life to magazine readers. Hardy proved himself to be aiming much higher than Williams' "mass entertainer" or than being (in Hardy's own words) "a good hand at a serial" (*Life and Work* 102). As Roy Morrell observes, *Far from the Madding Crowd* "is more typical of Hardy than a casual reading and a simplifying memory might indicate" (123). By "typical" Morrell refers to "a suppressed and sober, but nonetheless noticeable elation" about his representation of the countryside (123). The novel not only ushers in a world of life and work but also reconstructs the countryside ideal on this objective basis in contrast to the overtly idealized countryside built on rural simplicity exemplified by rural idylls.

Hardy's use of the pastoral as a frame for his story invites his reader into a familiar world, which Hardy then undermines. As Sheila Berger observes, in reading Hardy "unlikely

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22 The six years between the two novels saw the publication of such intermediate works as *Desperate Remedies* (1871), *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872) and *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873).

23 In response to the editor's suggestion about revision, Hardy writes: "The truth is that I am willing, and indeed anxious, to give up any points which may be desirable in a story when read as a whole, for the sake of others which shall please those who read it in numbers. Perhaps I may have higher aims someday, and be a great stickler for the proper artistic balance of the completed work, but for the present circumstances lead me to wish merely to be considered a good hand at a serial" (*Life and Work* 102).
shapes will explode through what had seemed to be familiar territory" (xi). In *Far from the Madding Crowd*, the "unlikely shapes" are complex difficulties and challenges beneath the "simple" first impressions readers receive of rural life. Ronald Blythe rightly describes the novel as "a stylised actuality, the style being that of the classic pastoral, the actuality that of standard farming practice" (60). Although *Far from the Madding Crowd* frequently invites comparison with the rural idyll because of its formal resemblance, the prosaic fact of rural life and the tension of living close to nature incorporated into Hardy's world unsettle the idyllic vision of the country.\(^ {24} \)

Hardy states in his 1912 preface to the Wessex edition of the novels and poems that he has "instituted inquiries to correct tricks of memory, and striven against temptations to exaggerate in order to preserve for my own satisfaction a fairly true record of a vanishing life" (*PW* 46). Although this statement was made forty years after the publication of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, his attempt to reconstruct his rural homeland against misconceptions of rural life is incorporated in this early novel. The title of the novel may suggest that the novel is set in a mythological country. Hardy, nonetheless, investigates the essence of rural life—the survival of human beings in the face of an indifferent nature. The dynamic interaction between human beings and nature in their effort to survive also serves as the foundation of his countryside ideal.

Like Mary Mitford's narrative of a small village, Hardy's rural region is concretely constructed, with a tangible immediacy. Also like Mitford, Hardy represents his rural world

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\(^ {24} \) W. J. Keith, Shelagh Hunter, and John Bayley among others have noted the pastoral elements in this novel. The "unidyllic" nature of the novel is noted by Pamela Dalziel (18), John Goode (29), and Marjorie Garson (44). Critics such as P. D. Edwards argue both for Hardy's indebtedness to the pastoral tradition and his unidyllic treatment of rural life (3).
"on the spot and at the moment" (Mitford 15). The novel was written in his parents' cottage at Bockhampton where Hardy was "within a walking district in which the incidents are supposed to occur... among the people described at the time of describing them" (Life 99).

In a letter to Leslie Stephen, the editor, Hardy mentioned that while writing he had sketched in his note-book "a few correct outlines of smockfrocks, gaiters, sheep-crooks, rick-staddles', a sheep-washing pool, one of the old-fashioned malt-houses, and some other out-of-the-way things" (Life 97). However, emphasis on the precision of imagery and immediacy of rural life, as displayed in his depiction of sheepwashing and sheepshearing scenes, does not contribute to the cosy stability of traditional rural life as Mitford's representation of village life does.

Hardy's representation of the countryside obviously does not stop at a sense of concreteness—in his words "shadowy accessories of the old material realities" (Life 177)—or the "simply natural" (Life 185). He declares that his interest lies in "the substance of life" (Life 104). The substance of his rural world, as suggested in his narratives, resides in human efforts to survive in the face of an unpredictable nature. Hardy uses Darwin's observations about the struggle for existence in the natural world as a framework to support his perception of the harsh reality of rural life. He describes himself as "among the earliest acclamers of The Origin of Species" (Life 158), and admits that his writings "show harmony of view with Darwin." Hardy's recognition of nature's independence from human being suggests a close affinity with Darwin's theory of evolution. It is, nonetheless, a point of connection with the

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25 Hardy lists other sources of influence as "Huxley, Spencer, Comte, Hume, Mill and others" (Collected Letters 6: 259).

26 Among those who have discussed the influence of Darwin are James Krasner, John Alcorn, Gillian Beer, Perry Meisel (Repressed), George Levine (Darwin), Harvey Webster, and Peter Allan Dale.
actual experience of rural life. As Timothy Hands observes, with Hardy's memory of rural harshness "it came easily for Hardy to see life in Darwinian terms as a struggle for survival" (142). For Hardy, his understanding of the harshness of natural life is largely empirical. He retained early memories of the cruelty of nature and of humans to animals till the end of his life. For Hardy it could be said that "the doctrine [Darwin brings] into form is that which [his] listeners have for some time felt without being able to shape" (RN 204). Darwin's theory of survival by natural selection provides a forceful explanation of what Hardy wants to stress, that is, the effort and risk involved in the struggle for existence in a natural environment.

Hands further maintains that Darwin's scientific approach to nature "accorded with Hardy's temperamental disposition, the Anglo-Saxon gloominess of his natural demeanour" (141). Yet Victorian rural writings as a whole provide no evidence of "gloominess" as a national characteristic, whereas "gloominess" in Hardy's presentation of rural life is embedded in his attempt to reveal the complex difficulties of rural life overlooked by Victorian idylls.

Hardy undermines a feeling of complacency about nature in the rural idyll in his disparagement of the picturesque countryside. He challenges the tendency to make nature only relevant to human experience, insisting that there is something more in nature than meets the eye:

I don't want to see landscapes, i.e., scenic paintings of them, because I don't want to see the original realities—as optical effects, that is. I want to see the deeper reality underlying the scenic, the expression of what are sometimes called abstract imaginings. (Life 185)

27 A few days before his death, Hardy vividly recalled an incident in his childhood. When he was about five or six years old, his father hit a half-frozen bird with a stone: "the child Thomas picked up [the dead bird] and it was as light as a feather, all skin and bone, practically starved. . . . he had never forgotten how the body of the fieldfare felt in his hand: the memory had always haunted him" (Life and Work 479).

28 As Mary Mitford's constructions of rural scenery demonstrate, a picturesque view attests to an attempt to rearrange nature so as to relate it to human beings.
Hardy rejects "scenic paintings" in which "nature is played out as a Beauty" with the result of obscuring its "Mystery" (*Life* 185). He tries to do the opposite, that is, to convey the "mystery" and the sensory dimension of the land through extensive use of the opposite "optical effects." For instance, he introduces the pasture in Norcombe Hill:

> Between this half-wooded half-naked hill, and the vague still horizon that its summit indistinctly commanded, was a mysterious sheet of fathomless shade—the sounds from which suggested that what it concealed bore some reduced resemblance to features here. (*FMC* 9)

The lack of scenic attraction of this grass-coated land is in keeping with suggestions of its mystery, which invites close observation instead of a distant view.

Darwin maintains that beauty is irrelevant to nature: "the essence of beauty obviously depends on the nature of the mind, irrespective of any real quality in the admired object" (*Origin of Species* 22). Like Darwin, Hardy downplays the scenic in his landscape description to emphasize the independence of nature from the purposes of human life:

> [It] was one of the spots which suggest to a passer-by that he is in the presence of a shape approaching the indestructible as nearly as any to be found on earth . . . which may remain undisturbed on some great day of confusion, when far grander heights and dizzy granite precipices topple down. (*FMC* 8)

Noted for what Majorie Garson would describe as pure "thing-ness," this representation of the rural world emphasizes an untameable and indifferent nature in contrast to Mitford's domesticated green village. Unlike Mitford's representation of rural scenery that imparts an air of intimacy, Hardy highlights the aloofness of nature from human affairs. His construction of the rural landscape disagrees with a widespread "prepossession that the world must somehow have been made to be a comfortable place for man" (*Life* 179). The land in
Hardy's world does not exist for the purpose of human inhabitants. Its stability is embedded in its independence.

As W. J. Keith points out, in nearly all of Hardy's landscapes the reader encounters "a distinct sense of unease" ("Land" 86). This sense of unease appears to stem from an awareness of nature's otherness, which Hardy tries to express through his representation of the physical environment. The self-sufficiency of nature continues to be the focus of his representation of Egdon Heath in his next Wessex novel, *The Return of the Native* (1878):

> Those surfaces were neither so steep as to be destructible by weather, nor so flat as to be the victims of floods and deposits. With the exception of an aged highway, and a still more aged barrow presently to be referred to--themselves almost crystallized to natural products by long continuance--even the trifling irregularities were not caused by pickaxe, plough, or spade, but remained as the very finger-touches of the last geological change. (*RN* 36)

Egdon Heath, which is impervious to change, may suggest a dependable environment for human existence. Yet this view is, as Gillian Beer observes, only indicative of Egdon's own fitness to survive. Moreover, its survival owes as much to its topography as to its resistance to cultivation (252). It is against this self-sufficient presence of nature that Hardy places his human figures and their endeavour to survive.

J. Hillis Miller maintains that in Hardy's description of nature "what you have in the present as an actual physical presence you do not really have" ("Topography" 77). This impossibility of possession points to a paradox between tangible presence and mysterious nature, static appearance and dynamic existence in Hardy's depiction of nature. In his world, physical environment is animated by an at once mysterious and tangible natural force. Sheila Berger describes this force as "neither already formed nor definable; it is not a noun" (10). However, to indicate as Sheila Berger does that this force is in the process of forming
paradoxically implies that it is definable and may eventually be defined. Hardy apparently means something quite different. In his early novels, natural force is analogous to the movement of the wind—a recurrent landscape image in *Far from the Madding Crowd* (9, 274) and *The Return of the Native* (60-61, 426-27). Wind is an unpredictable force but its movement is tangible and discernible through its impact.

Hardy's world, like the nature Darwin observed, defies "Nature's holy plan." Hardy uses George the sheepdog, who is shot to death for following a linear way of thinking and taking it as his duty to chase Oak's sheep regardless of circumstances, to suggest that one cannot survive in the rural world by "follow[ing] out a train of reasoning to its logical conclusion and attempt perfectly consistent conduct in a world made up so largely of compromise" (*FMC* 42). Hardy emphasizes a dual relationship between nature and people. Physical nature is at once indispensable for human habitation, and indifferent to human existence. Living with the natural elements, as suggested by the hazard of fire, storm, and the death of sheep, is full of tension, and requires constant vigilance on the part of human beings:

"the instinctive act of humankind was to stand and listen, and learn..." (*FMC* 9). This alertness is symbolized by Oak. His miniature Ark on a small Ararat—his shepherd's hut protecting him from the elements—stands for his awareness of the otherness of nature. However, his ark, like a small boat in a large sea, is neither permanent nor completely insured against the unpredictable. While Oak is nearly suffocated in the hut, the hut has to be removed when his sheep die without insurance.

Apart from the unidyllic facts about nature, *Far from the Madding Crowd* reveals another unidyllic fact of rural life, namely that it is "a life committed completely to survival" (*John Berger Pig Earth* 196). Hardy reveals this ineluctable fact about natural life as early as
the pastoral chapters of the novel. Norcombe Hill, the pastureland, where the shepherd falls in love with the milkmaid, is described as "a featureless convexity of chalk and soil—an ordinary specimen of those smoothly-outlined protuberances of the globe . . ." (FMC 8). The quotidian landscape suggests a down-to-earth interest in rural life and is in perfect keeping with the unsentimental representation of shepherd's life and work. The pasture thus serves mainly as a place of employment for the milkmaid and shepherd. It is a stage, which the hero and heroine enter and exit for the purpose of seeking a livelihood. While Bathsheba's stay depends on the milking season, Gabriel Oak, "the pastoral king," is compelled to leave when he accidentally loses his sheep. The novel "invalidate[s] the pastoral myth" (Schwarz 20) by focusing on work instead of leisure in rural life. Oak's "pastoral tragedy," his bankruptcy, would be a fitting example of anti-pastoral representation of the countryside with a focus on its harshness (Short 36). The fact that Hardy introduces the shepherd by his radiant smile, a smile comparable to the rising sun (1), but ends the pastoral chapters with a "pastoral tragedy" may be interpreted as an arranged sabotage of the illusion of a pastoral idyll in his representation of the countryside.\(^{30}\)

\(^{29}\)Hardy frequently resorted to John Ruskin's landscape exegesis as a useful framework for the introduction of his rural landscape. Hardy's prosaic landscapes of rural life bear striking affinities with one of Ruskin's recommended scenes of travel—the countryside surrounding Fribourg in Switzerland. Ruskin recommends the country around Fribourg as the perfect landscape for the development of human intelligence and sensibility, even though it may give a feeling of weariness to travellers by lacking a distinguishing view such as the Bernese Alps and Savoy in its vicinity. Ruskin maintains: "A richer landscape, such as that of Italy, enervates or causes wantonness; a poorer contracts the conceptions and hardens the temperaments of both mind and body; and one more curiously or prominently beautiful deadens the sense of beauty" (9). Looking at a visually unremarkable landscape is stimulating and rewarding for Ruskin, because of the challenge and patience involved (75).

\(^{30}\)Michael Millgate attributes Hardy's idyllic description of Oak's appearance to his "uncertainty" in tone (Thomas Hardy: His Career 24), which is a possible explanation of the change within the pastoral chapters. However, the pastoral impressions and expectations are useful in drawing the reader to the novel as well as providing contrast to highlight Hardy's contested vision of the rural world. The word "contested" is borrowed from Paul Cloke (12) to refer to that which is excluded from stereotyped
Finally, the idyllic nature of Hardy's countryside is intensified by his rejection of romance. Although courtships of Bathsheba are interwound with all the major events of the novel and the novel ends with her marriage with Oak, the relationship between Bathsheba and Oak—the only fruitful relationship in the novel—is instrumental in revealing the prosaic reality of rural life. Their relationship is integrated with considerations of physical survival. Unlike the shepherd in classical pastoral—usually a great lover and noble man in humble disguise, who lives in and for passion only, Oak always expresses his feeling for Bathsheba along with blueprints of material security for their future, ranging from a promise to work twice as hard after marriage to a plan to obtain tenure of Boldwood's farm. The turning point in their relationship is set in the stormy night when Oak acts on his own initiative to roof her ricks. Appreciating Oak as the only help who comes to the rescue of her farm, Bathsheba "speak[s] more warmly to him [that night] than she [has] ever done" (FMC 291). Gratitude rather than passion serves as the motivation for her to attempt to repair his trust in her by confiding in him her mistake in marrying Troy. The fact that this relationship proves to be the only possible choice in the end suggests that in the rural world practical considerations of survival take priority over romance.

The fact that Oak defeats his two rivals and wins Bathsheba in the end further affirms this pragmatic view of rural love: Oak survives his rivals to be the only one available to Bathsheba.31 The stormy night that strengthens the relationship between Bathsheba and Oak perceptions and representations of the countryside.

31 John Goode maintains that "Gabriel survives only by the pure luck of others' destruction [that is, the contrived contingencies of authorial allocation]" (32). The conclusion may appear to be arbitrary, but its way is paved in the proceeding narrative. I agree with Daniel Schwarz that Hardy anticipates his ending at the beginning of his novel. There is a sense of inevitability between the outcome and the main action in Hardy's novels (18). While the removal of Troy and Boldwood appears to owe much to narrative contrivance, the narrative nonetheless moves steadily towards this outcome.
also reveals the fragility of Boldwood's and Troy's relationships with her. Boldwood's neglect of his farm on the stormy night anticipates his destruction and insanity. Troy similarly slides down from the peak when he, in self-satisfied negligence, incapacitates the farm hands on the verge of the storm. Their betrayal of the community leads to their withdrawal from it and from the competition for Bathsheba's affection. Oak's feelings for Bathsheba, on the other hand, are validated by considerations for the survival of Bathsheba's farm and of the community. Hardy's endorsement of this care-laden relationship counters the perceived pastoral ease and pleasure.

Considering the harsh environment, concerns for livelihood, and the lack of romance in Hardy's representation of rural life, Edwards appears to be justified in concluding that "Far from the Madding Crowd marks the end of the idyll as an important literary form" (3). However, the anti-pastoral view of rural life only constitutes part of Hardy's vision of the rural world.

The poetry of rural life

Hardy maintains that "there is enough poetry left [in life], after all the false romance has been abstracted" (Life 114). While the "false romance" is cleaned off with Hardy's rejection of rural idylls, the complex difficulties in rural life and the assiduous effort involved in living in the rural world are interlocked in Far from the Madding Crowd to create a vigorous poetry of life.

In his preface to Joshua James Foster's Wessex Worthies, Hardy points out as a misconception the notion that Dorset people lack "the driving power which is believed to be inherent in the folk of the northern latitudes of this island" due to Dorset's mild climate, long
winter days, and closeness to the ports of France (WP 87). Hardy highlights the "energy, determination and reliance" (WP 224) necessitated to cope with an ever-changing nature in his presentation of rural life. I. A. Richards notes the existence of a dramatic tension in Hardy’s rural fiction that "in the face of an indifferent nature, to become self-supporting is felt most poignant" (761). Hardy endows the country people's efforts to be self-supporting with a heroism which is nonetheless expressed as humility.

For Hardy the countryside is associated with a quality existence instead of an easy life. However, a quality existence in Hardy’s fictional countryside is closely related to the challenges of rural life. His positive representation of these challenges starts from a fictional landscape of the rural world. Instead of a land "flooded with sunshine" which Hardy associates with south-west England in reality, he incorporates the sternness of rural life in a sombre-looking rural landscape--landscape images or people presented in dim light or half light. The sombre-looking landscape of the rural world may be described in Louis James’ term as one of Hardy’s many "deliberately composed landscapes" (75). It is a landscape that "intensifies the expression of things" (Life 177) or suggests the sombre fact of rural life.

For Hardy such unflattering facts of existence in the countryside are also an advantage of rural life. He maintains that "men run greater risks of forming misconceptions elsewhere. They often suffer from mockery of a place too smiling for their reasons" (RN 5). An instance of such a mockery is provided in chapter nineteen of Far from the Madding Crowd, "The Sheep-Washing--The Offer." June, when "[e]very green was young, every pore

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32In his speech "Dorset in London," Hardy contrasts the mildness of Dorset weather with the rawness of London, and the sumniness of the south-west country with the fogginess of London (PW 225).

33J. B. Bullen has provided a detailed analysis of Hardy’s use of light and darkness in relation to perception, exploring the influence of Ruskin and Turner on Hardy’s visual perception (32-60).
was open and every stalk was swollen with racing currents of juice," is a time to generate hope as well as illusions. Out in the meadow, "God appears to be in the country and the devils are in the city" (163). Inside the barn, an imaginary romance serves as a counterpart for the romanticizing of nature: Oak sees himself as an adherent of Bathsheba. He invests in their partnership in sheepshearing with a touch of intimacy: "his bright lady and himself formed one group, exclusively their own, and containing no others in the world" (FMC 167). This romantic vision of their relationship, however, does not adequately represent the actual working scene. The wishfulness of the picture is exposed in a contradictory report by the narrator: Bathsheba is only supervising his work. The manner in which she moves away from Oak demonstrates that she is not willing to commit herself to Oak's vision of their relationship.

Oak's illusion of an exclusive relationship with Bathsheba, like almost all Hardy's roseate pictures of life, is followed by an inevitable disillusionment. Bathsheba shatters Oak's vision of an exclusive union by letting Boldwood into the scene. The fact that Oak snips the sheep by accident suggests the danger of disillusionment. The sombre-looking landscape of the rural world, on the other hand, confronts people with the crude reality of existence. It is valued for not being deceptive or inviting illusions.

Hardy's positive reading of the harsh rural life makes the necessity to meet the constant threat from the destructive force of nature "the basis of a hitherto unperceived beauty" (Hardy, Early Life 151) in Far from the Madding Crowd. He relates the poetry of rural life in the courage, resourcefulness, and responsibility country people demonstrate in

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34John Goode aptly points out that the wounding is Oak's "sexual revenge" on Bathsheba (17). However, in the context of the novel, sexual relation has a bearing on survival rather than being restricted to emotions.
their efforts to survive in a harsh environment. Oak equips his shepherd hut with utensils, tools, and medicines for the purpose of survival in the open, showing his preparedness and self-supporting resourcefulness. As the "opposite of romantic submissiveness" (Goode 21), Oak is shown saving the dying sheep with his surgical skill, and saving Bathsheba's farm from fire and storm.

Encompassed by the unpredictable, rural life requires people to activate all their faculties to attend to changes in nature in order to avert its destructiveness. Gabriel Oak's sensitivity to the changes in weather symbolizes this synthetic ability required in rural life:

Every voice in nature was unanimous in bespeaking change. But two distinct translations attached to these dumb expressions. Apparently there was to be a thunder-storm, and afterwards a cold continuous rain. The creeping things seemed to know all about the later rain, but little of the interpolated thunder-storm; whilst the sheep knew all about the thunder-storm and nothing of the later rain. (FMC 279)

Oak's attention to the "dumb expressions" of slugs, frogs, and lambs, makes it possible for him to detect and decipher a consensus warning about an approaching storm and consequently take action to reduce the damage it will cause. This sensitivity to the expression of changes in nature testifies to a sensibility growing from a close interaction with his physical surroundings.

Hardy attributes Oak's alertness to changes in nature to a purposefulness or a well-focused attitude toward life possessed by country people. He reveals a "deliberateness," "a quiet energy" beneath their unsophisticated appearance (FMC 11). In Hardy's fiction a distinctive characteristic of the rustics' knowledge of the world is their selection of what is useful for the purpose of survival. His analysis of this "deliberateness" in their structure of knowledge starts with the books that Oak takes with him to his shepherd's hut. Oak's portable library consists of *The Young Man's Best Companion, The Farrier's Cure Guide, The*
Veterinary Surgeon, Paradise Lost, The Pilgrim's Progress, Robinson Crusoe, Ash's Dictionary and Wallinggame's Arithmetic (FMC 78-9). Although Oak's education may look quite elementary and old-fashioned on the strength of his library, these books are selected to answer the needs of his occupation as a shepherd. For instance, skills in surgery enable him to act as a saviour to his sheep. His calculation of the loss the storm will cause helps him take decisive action to rescue the ricks. The skills he obtains from his books, therefore, build up his resources and strategies for rural life. Similarly, Oak observes nature to take in that which is useful for his survival in a natural environment. Besides picking up signs of approaching storm from sheep, frogs, slugs and spiders, he learns to tell time by the position of the sun and stars. His appreciation of the night sky for its usefulness and then as "a work of art superlatively beautiful" (FMC 13) reveals his priorities as pragmatic. However, the presence of Paradise Lost and Pilgrim's Progress also suggests a spiritual and intellectual life in the country people, which may not be obvious from their boorish appearance.

Rural people's attentiveness to their environment is ultimately attributed in Hardy's fictional world to a moral quality. Their courage to acknowledge their own insignificance, which is at the bottom of rustic wisdom, gives rise to their sense of relatedness. This cosmological wisdom of general relatedness to the universe and to their social and physical environment is presented as a privilege enjoyed by people working in the open:

To persons standing alone on a hill during a clear midnight such as this, the roll of the world eastward is almost a palpable movement. The sensation may be caused by the panoramic glide of the stars past earthly objects, which is perceptible in a few minutes of stillness, or by the better outlook upon space that a hill affords, or by the wind, or by the solitude; but whatever be its origin the impression of riding along is vivid and abiding. The poetry of motion is a phrase much in use, and to enjoy the epic form of the gratification it is necessary to stand on a hill at a small hour of the night, and, having first expanded with a sense of difference from the mass of civilized mankind, who are dreamwraapt and disregardful of all such proceedings at this time, quietly
watch your stately progress through the stars. After such a nocturnal reconnoitre it is hard to get back to earth and to believe the consciousness of such majestic speeding is derived from a tiny human frame. (*FMC 9-10*)

Significantly, this moment of sublimity is ascribed to rural life. Unlike Mary Mitford's rural people, whose view is confined to the enclosures of their garden and cottage, Oak, a representative of Hardy's country people, discovers in solitude with nature his relationship with humankind. Oak appears to be an incarnation of George Eliot's ideal of "link[ing] the small pulse of the old English town with the beating of the world's mighty heart" (*The Mill on the Floss* 256). However, Oak's broadness of mind merges into a consciousness of his limitations as an individual in relation to nature. Hardy ascribes Oak's unassuming manner as "a quiet modesty, which seemed continually to impress upon him that he had no great claim on the world's room" (*FMC* 3). Because of this cosmological wisdom, the vantage point or Wordsworthian moment in which Hardy places Oak does not give rise to a sense of superiority over his fellow countrymen. The feeling of expansion and the fitting of an individual life to the orbit of the universe that Oak experiences during his nightly attendance on his sheep present a simultaneous act of experiencing the movements of the universe and knowing his position in them. His sensation of being absorbed into a general movement of the universe ties him down in a network of connections extending from the stars above him and the earth under his feet to his immediate environment--the rural community. Modesty, therefore, testifies to this cosmological wisdom, to which light-hearted urbanites are not privy.

Activation of this sense of connection contributes to survival of the individual and the community in Hardy's world in contrast to Darwin's observation of the natural world which underscores competition in the struggle for life. Hardy argues: "there is an altruism
and coalescence between cells as well as an antagonism. Certain cells destroy certain cells, but others assist and combine" (Life 259). The sense of general relatedness with their environment, which is manifested in the country people's humility and amity, and reinforces their awareness of duty to others, is presented not as an ideal but a necessity for survival in Hardy's rural world. It serves as a guiding principle in the country people's choice of action. Oak's sense of affinity, solidified into a sense of responsibility, functions as a restraining factor in his life. In spite of his deep disappointment with Bathsheba's marriage to Troy, Oak feels obliged to superintend Bathsheba's farm, while Troy trifles with his responsibility for it. When Troy ignores Oak's warning of an upcoming storm, Oak's sense of responsibility literally compels him to take action to save the ricks:

Seven hundred and fifty pounds in the divinest form that money can wear--that of necessary food for man and beast, should the risk be run of deteriorating this bulk of corn to less than half its value, because of the instability of a woman? "Never, if I can prevent it!" said Gabriel. (FMC 279)

Hardy explores a reciprocal relationship between Oak's concern with the survival of the rural community and his own survival in Weatherbury. Hardy admits that he would like to show the human race "as one great network or tissue which quivers in every part when one point is shaken, like a spider's web if touched" (Life 177). Oak's experience affirms the rural world as a place to activate this consciousness of the "network" or affirm an altruist ideal.

Eventually, Hardy's positive reading of the lack of romance in Bathsheba and Oak's relationship restores happiness to rural life. Indeed Oak's happiness is no longer the happiness, restricted to a superficial impression of Oak, which is nowhere to be found beyond the opening lines. It is not built on romantic illusion such as Oak experiences at the sheepshearing. It is a higher level of happiness definable in light of Comte's positive social ideal, an ideal built on love in the broadest or most altruistic sense of the word. Oak's love for
Bathsheba appears to be instrumental in bringing out the altruist in him and in enhancing his sense of duty toward the whole community. Their relationship is endorsed by this kind of love. Symbolically, their affinity stands out as they, the two solitary figures, attempt to save the ricks while Weatherbury, deep in slumber, is unaware of the danger. Bathsheba's sense of affinity arises when they witness that "love, life, everything human, seemed small and trifling in such close juxtaposition with an infuriated universe" (FMC 287). Oak and Bathsheba's relationship develops from "the interstices of a mass of hard prosaic reality" (FMC 456) and, as P. D. Edwards points out, serves as "death-rattle to the Victorian idyll" (152). However, as a relationship "as strong as death" (FMC 456), their "compound feeling" integrating sexual attraction with brotherly love or friendship (FMC 334) is contiguous with what Comte refers to as "real happiness, pure and disinterested love" (Turner 46). Oak's relationship with Bathsheba, which is "good fellowship--camaraderie," is supported by Comte's "union ... as chaste as that of brother and sister," "a perfect ideal of friendship" (Turner 46). Oak's happiness has strong moral implications.

The fact that Oak is rewarded for his selflessness--a prospect in Weatherbury and marriage with Bathsheba---may present what John Goode describes as a "bourgeois fantasy" (28). Oak's reward serves as one indication that Hardy tries to reconstruct the countryside using the value system and social ideals that his readers would like to use on themselves, but

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35 Oak's happiness is quickly pinpointed by the farm workers. As Jacob Smallbury says: "I never heerd a skilful old married feller of twenty years' standing pipe "my wife" in a more used note than 'a did" (463).

36 John Goode refers to Oak's conversion of food (actual wealth representing the work and sustenance of the community) to money on the stormy night as "the entry of the middle-class readership" (28).
it is a value system never used to describe country people before Hardy. Thus, interestingly enough, Hardy presents the countryside as a source of Victorian social ideals and values.

Another noticeable example of Hardy’s interpretation of rural virtue in light of Comte's positivist ideals is his particular emphasis on Oak's moral and psychological maturity. Oak is significantly set in “the brightest period of masculine growth, for his intellect and his emotions were clearly separated” (FMC 3). His maturity, comprising rationality, self-reliance, and altruism, gives rise to the quality of his perceptions and contributes to his ability to survive in the rural world. Hardy maintains: “in making even horizontal and clear inspection we colour and mould according to the wants within us whatever our eyes bring in” (FMC 16). Clear-sighted maturity, by comparison, transcends this narcissistic stage. The fact that Oak "meditatively look[s] upon the horizon of circumstances without any special regard to his own standpoint in the midst" (FMC 338) conforms with the ideal of man’s evolution from egoistic to altruistic being proposed by positivist philosophers, such as Comte, whose work Hardy was reading at this time (Early Life 129), Spencer, Lewes, and his friend Meredith.37

However, Hardy perceives maturity (a positive or meliorist ideal) as a necessity for rural life and a virtue of country people. He is emphatic that one requires self-reliant maturity in order to meet the complexity of rural life. The fact that Oak attributes the death of his sheep to his own slip of surveillance instead of blaming chance helps him make a new start in

37Peter Dale (123) discusses the influence of positivist philosophers on Victorian intellectual discourse and Paul Turner discusses the influence of Comte on Hardy (46). Lewes' Principles of Success in Literature (1865) presents the idealization or typicality derived from artistic "vision" as being moral as well as perceptual (Dale 113). Bullen argues convincingly that Hardy's immediate source of moral perception is Ruskin. However, Hardy's approach is not purely theoretical. I will discuss later in this chapter how for Hardy, the moral quality of one's vision directly affects his survival in the rural world.
life. His ability to transcend his personal loss, as indicated by his feeling for the unborn lambs and his self-congratulation for not having married so that the incident affects no one other than himself, point to the moral strength required for living in a harsh environment.

In his letter to the editor regarding illustrations for the novel, Hardy expresses a "hope that the rustics, although quaint, may be made to appear intelligent and not boorish at all" (Life 97). This suggestion about the visual portrayal of his rural characters also describes his own depictions of rural life and rustics, which are unflattering about their appearance but assertive of their moral qualities and intelligence. Moreover, Hardy reverses caricatures of rural simplicity to a great extent by enlivening his representation of the countryside with the characters' perspectives. Hardy's narrative strategically starts with descriptions of Oak's appearance, but soon shifts to his perceptions and relation to the community and other characters' observations of him. As a result, the amused tone and ironic distance that the narrator assumes at the beginning of the novel are gradually replaced by other characters' admiration and respect for Oak's steadiness and resourcefulness. At the same time, the narrator's observations are increasingly interfused with Oak's perception and with other characters' perception of him and of each other. Oak, who is represented in the first lines of the novel as clownish, is noted for his meditation and resourcefulness from the perspective of Bathsheba later in the novel.38

Hardy specifies in an entry in his literary notes that the purpose of his fiction is "to give pleasure by gratifying the love of the uncommon in human experience mental or

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38Henry James was suspicious of Hardy's practice of telling "a story almost exclusively by reporting people's talks" (28), which for James implied an abandonment of the responsibility of a novelist as "a historian, thoroughly possessed of certain facts, and bound in some way or other to impart them" (28). The opinionated and elitist position James took in his criticism of Hardy highlighted Hardy's confrontation with the "licensed taste" for the simplicity of rustic people.
corporeal," which in his opinion can be achieved when the reader is led to believe that the characters are "true and real like himself" (Life 154). By presenting country people's perceptions in contrast to their unsophisticated manners, Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* invalidates the stereotype of rural people's intellectual limitations, and the patronizing attitude of Victorian writers towards the country people. By focusing on what he later refers to as "a better informed" class of people (*Tess* 449) and their perceptions of and relationships with the rural world, Hardy tries to prove that the country people, represented by the rural elite, deserve attention as mature individuals.

Although Hardy's melodramatic plot deflects the sharp edge of his response to the concept that rural people are the quaint remains of early stages of evolution, that edge is still there to cut into the self-esteem of urbanites:

> Ordinary men's notions of the farm labourer of the southern countries have all been blurred and confused. It has been the habit of an ignorant and unwisely philanthropic age to look upon him as an untaught, unreflective, badly paid, and badly fed animal, ground down by hard and avaricious farmers, and very little, if at all, raised by intelligence above the brutes and beasts to whom he ministers. (Cox 40-41)

This unsigned review from *Saturday Review* shows that Hardy has shattered the image of the countryside as a static childhood haven, and has resurrected country people from the remains of the early stages of human evolution--the childhood of mankind--to a living embodiment of the social ideals of a scientific age. The image Hardy builds reveals an intention for his rural characters to illuminate his countryside ideal mutually: it is a world in which organic continuity is carefully sustained by human effort, and stability is embedded in a dynamic interaction with natural force. In the next section, I will show that this blending of movements and durability in his representation of rural life also gains a concrete expression in his choice of architecture in this novel.
Continuity built on a dynamic balance with nature

As John Goode points out, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, like Hardy's other novels, affirms the structure of continuity (14). In his preface, Hardy maintains that the "indispensable conditions of existence are attachment to the soil of one particular spot by generation after generation" (*FMC* ix). This continuous attachment to a particular place in Hardy's world describes a relative stability that is adjusted to moderate changes as opposed to the stillness of the idyllic countryside. This difference between Hardy's perception of rural life and that of the urban writers is manifested in their choice of architecture as the representative landscape image of agrarian life. The idyllic vision of rural life almost always represents the countryside with thatch-roofed rustic cottages—an architectural style that remained unchanged from the Middle Ages to the late eighteenth-century and was frequently looked upon as a symbol of a changeless rural England (Ford 41). ^39 Mitford, for example, makes rustic cottages a chief landscape image to convey a sense of seclusion about village life. Hardy, however, appears to deliberately avoid cottages in *Far from the Madding Crowd*. The explanation is offered in his treatise "The Dorsetshire Labourer" (1883): "[T]he artistic merit of their old condition is scarcely a reason why they should have continued in it when other communities were marching on so vigorously towards uniformity and mental equality" (*PW* 181). ^40 Hardy refuses to honour the aesthetic or antiquarian interest in rustic cottages shown by Victorian writers and artists in his attempt to delve into the inner coherence of the

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^39 In the meantime large country houses went through numerous changes of styles, and were affected by industrialization and neoclassicism (Ford 41).

^40 Hardy's attitude to rustic cottages alternates between that of a writer rejecting a stereotyped perception of rustic people and an architect's interest in their cultural and practical value. In "The Ancient Cottages of England," an article published a year before his death, Hardy praises not only the outward appearance of rustic cottages but also their utilitarian value. He therefore proposes to preserve existing cottages and use the design for later construction (*PW* 233-35).
rural world. While his fiction affirms the "mental equality" of his country folk, especially the better informed of them, with his readers, he demonstrates the way Weatherbury defies the onslaught of time:

Weatherbury was immutable. . . in Weatherbury three or four score years were included in the mere present, and nothing less than a century set a mark on its face or tone. Five decades hardly modified the cut of a gaiter, the embroidery of a smock-frock, by the breadth of a hair. Ten generations failed to alter the turn of a single phrase. In these Wessex nooks the busy outsider's ancient times are only old; his old times are still new; his present is futurity. (FMC 166)

Hardy thus illustrates continuity in terms of tradition and Weatherbury's inattention to changes in manners and fashions. However, time does not stand still in Weatherbury, but simply takes a different pace from that of the outside world.

Significantly, Hardy places Weatherbury in a contemporary scene. He declares that *Far from the Madding Crowd* is set in "a modern Wessex of railways, the penny post, mowing and reaping machines, union workhouses, lucifer matches, labourers who could read and write, and National school children" (FMC vii).41 Time does leave its marks on the landscape of Hardy's rural world which, like a palimpsest, records the continuity of rural life through layers of history. The farmhouse, Bathsheba's residence, in particular, witnesses and reveals the vicissitudes of Weatherbury:

By daylight [it] presented itself as a hoary building, of the early stage of Classical Renaissance as regards its architecture, and of a proportion which told at a glance that, as is so frequently the case, it had once been the manorial hall upon a small estate around it, now although effaced as a distinct property, and merged in the vast tract of a non-resident landlord, which comprised several such modest demesnes.

Fluted pilasters, worked from the solid stone, decorated its front and above the roof the chimneys were panelled or columnar, some coped gables with

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41 Although industrialization and increased mobility did indeed bring Hardy's Wessex to an end, this novel celebrates the qualities needed for survival prior to such dramatic changes.
finials and like features still retaining traces of their Gothic extraction.

(\textit{FMC} 80)

The odd mixture of the architectural designs in the building traces a process of adaptation of agrarian life to different times. The adaptation of the house to the needs of the present tenant records changes in the social structure of the rural community. Designed as the residence of the landlord and converted to one for the tenant farmer, the farmhouse reveals the continuity of agrarian activities through changes in rural society. As Andrew Enstice observes, the building "suggests age and continuity" (50). In spite of the increasing mobility of rural society, as indicated by the existence of the hiring fair, and the absence of the landlord, Weatherbury retains its basic coherence as a farming community.

The Great Barn, the landmark of Hardy's rural community, is presented as a concrete celebration of continuity in rural life. As a building dating back to the fifteenth century, "through its function, the barn links past and the present" (Goode 15). The Barn's functional continuity, therefore, attests to the basic stability of Weatherbury as a rural community:

One could say about the barn, what could hardly be said of either the church or the castle, akin to it in age and style, that the purpose which had dictated its original erection was the same with that to which it was still applied. Unlike and superior to either of those two typical remnants of medievalism, the old barn embodied practices which had suffered no mutilation at the hands of time. For once medievalism and modernism had a common standpoint... The defence and salvation of the body by daily bread is still a study, a religion, and a desire. (\textit{FMC} 164-5)

Here the barn is not valued as a historic relic but for its active involvement with rural life for centuries. The narrator underscores the fact that "this picture of to-day in its frame of four hundred years ago did not produce that marked contrast between ancient and modern which

\footnote{However, for Hardy, rural life's capacity to adapt to social changes is also conditional. As shown in his later novels, drastic social and economic changes would disrupt its continuity.}
is implied by the contrast of date" (FMC 166). This functional continuity of the barn, presented in contrast to the pure medievalism of the castle and the church, speaks for the validity and timelessness of the desire to survive. Agrarian activities in their capacity to sustain such a desire are, to borrow the words of Poorgrass, "the gospel of the body, without which we perish, so to speak it" (FMC 174). As suggested by the barn, the permanence of rural life is indebted to the fact that agriculture alone attends to the need of physical survival. On the strength of its functional continuity, Hardy places the barn above the church and the castle. The original functions of the latter are restricted to the time of their design. The passage of time, which is accompanied with the "exploded fortifying art or worn-out religious creed" (FMC 165), makes both the castle and the church ill-fitted for modern times. This dynamic continuity of rural life also contrasts with the dead eternity that Thomas Gray celebrates in "Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard" from which the title of this novel is taken:

far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,
their sober wishes never learn'd to stray;

43 Hardy's exegesis of the Great Barn appears to allude to Ruskin's presentation of the church at Calais. Ruskin recommends the church for sightseeing because it gives historical dimension to the landscape: "It completely expresses that agedness in the midst of active life which binds the old and the new into harmony" (2). As indicated by his presentation of the Great Barn of Weatherbury, Hardy does not share Ruskin's enthusiasm for medieval artefacts such as church buildings or castles for their own sakes; compared with the barn, they only serve as stagnant reminders of the past. John Goode reveals another affinity between Hardy and Ruskin in relation to the structure of the Great Barn (which Hardy describes as "nobler in design, because more wealthy in material") and Ruskin's exegesis of medieval architecture. As Goode observes, Hardy opposes to Ruskin's idealization of the Middle Ages, the perceived ideal society freed from the division of labour (15).

44 Among critics who have discussed physical need or "the gospel of the body" are John Goode (15) and Anne Alexander (45).

45 Pamela Dalziel emphasizes the "ironic component" in Hardy's use of Gray (18); Keith discusses the use of Gray as a literary allusion for distancing effect ("A Regional Approach" 41). I regard Hardy's use of Gray as a framework to appeal to the reader's interest in antiquity. As he frequently does with literary allusions, Hardy replaces Gray's original meaning with his own.
Along the cool sequester'd vale of life
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way. (40)

Gray's poem posits both exemption from "ignoble strife" and the absence of worldly desires as the premises for eternity. Hardy, on the other hand, relates the continuity of rural life to the desire and effort to survive in the rural world.

Although Hardy rates the barn higher than the church, he represents the barn as a church with regard to its function in the community. Like a village church, the barn is both the landmark of Weatherbury and the centre of the rural community. As the anchorage of Weatherbury, it gathers the rustics not only in times of pleasure, such as the harvest dance, but also in times of work such as sheepshearing. It signifies the life creed of the rural community and bonds the residents of Weatherbury through participation in agrarian activities.

The affinity between the barn and the church is highlighted in the sheepshearing scene, which is presented as a seasonal celebration, and glossed with a religious solemnity:

Today the large side doors were thrown open towards the sun to admit a bountiful light to the immediate spot of the shearers' operations. . . . Here the shearers knelt, the sun slanting in upon their bleached shirts, tanned arms, and the polished shears they flourished, causing these to bristle with a thousand rays strong enough to blind a weak-eyed man . . . So the barn was natural to the shearers, and the shearers were in harmony with the barn. (FMC 165-66)

The immersion of sheepshearers in their work in the sunlight suggests a sacred alliance and balance between nature and human beings sustained by human efforts. Symbolically, the shafts of sunlight enclose the working scene with halos around the farm labourers.

46 The function of the barn in Weatherbury recalls that of the church in Under the Greenwood Tree. In the earlier novel, music serves as a cohesive force in the community and draws the parishioners from distant homes every week for the "labour of love" (PW 14-6). In Weatherbury the barn directly relates rural community to the good news of the body--the striving for physical survival. Marjorie Garson suggests that the wholesomeness of the barn would be effectively brought out in light of Lacan's sexual
Although Hardy upholds the unchanging need to survive as the foundation for Weatherbury's immutability from the fluctuations of time, he simultaneously reminds his reader of the laborious efforts involved in retaining this stability. As indicated by Oak's alertness, farmer Boldwood's ruin, and Bathsheba's potential danger of losing her lease, continuity in the rural world--living in Weatherbury from one generation to another--implies survival, which only the perceptive and responsible can attain. The "feeling almost of gratitude, and quite of pride" the narrator expresses in watching the working scene in the barn (FMC 165) reveals an understanding and respect for the immense efforts involved to retain the continuity of rural life. This reverence for rural life, implied in the words "pride" and "gratitude," permeates the pages of Far from the Madding Crowd.

The qualities required to form clear-minded perception of the rural world

However, for Hardy one needs to possess certain moral and intellectual qualities so as to perceive and appreciate the rural world as it really is and survive in this world. This symbolism (3). Her interpretation provides a useful framework for the reading of the sheepshearing scene as an episode on its own. However, this immersion represents a hard-earned balance between humans and nature. It is not a solution or conclusion. Other critics who have discussed the Great Barn are Bullen (64-65), Wotton (48-50), and Goode (16-32).

47 I agree with John Goode that social interference constitutes a significant threat to the continuity of the rural order. However, as a novel often received as a rural pastoral, Far from the Madding Crowd obviously plays on the reader's expectation of a rural retreat by emphasizing efforts required for the rural community to survive even before radical social mobility changes the rural world.

48 As indicated by Boldwood's misfortune, there appears to be no simple inheritance in Hardy's world in the sense of simply taking over from previous generations. The country people's clinging to "old habits and usage" (FMC 381) reveals a conscious effort to preserve the wisdom of past generations, which is accompanied by their attempt to pass down their own experience to later generations. An example can be found in Poorgrass' insistence on preserving his experience for his children (FMC 396), which provides a glimpse of country people's intentions for continuity and their conscious efforts to accumulate experiences for the reference of future generations.
connection between the moral and intellectual attainments of an individual and his perception of and relationship to the rural world is illustrated by his characters. As J. B. Bullen discovers, in *Far from the Madding Crowd* "[c]haracters are understood not simply as they are perceived from without, but also in terms of how they themselves perceive events and other characters" (68). Misconceptions or blindness to the intrinsic qualities of the rural world are therefore attributed to the moral or intellectual inadequacies of the perceiver.

While the sombre-looking landscape of rural life "appeals to the subtle and scarcer instinct" (*RN* 5) like Oak's, women are diagnosed as lacking such an instinct. Their "prescriptive infirmity" (*FMC* 5) appears to be supported by a "scientific" rationalization about women's intellectual inferiority to men and their different response to the outside world. Hardy uses women as a convenient metaphor for impaired vision to prove what he already proves with Oak: it takes intellectual and psychological maturity for one to be rooted

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49 F. B. Pinion notes that in none of his novels "did [Hardy] create as many leading characters who are imaginatively realized as in *Far from the Madding Crowd*" (28). The profusion of characters obviously intended to answer to the editor's interest in plot also serves to contrast and compare with Oak so as to highlight the qualities required for clear-sighted perception of the rural world.

50 Hardy wrote about a period when women had a greater upward mobility than men through marriage and the availability of public education. Both Hardy's sister Mary Hardy and his cousin Tryphena Sparks left the countryside as teachers after completing their education (Seymou-Smith 92-99). Educational and social factors which contributed to the mobility of women, leading them away from traditional roles, are suggested in *Far from the Madding Crowd* with the possible prospect for Bathsheba of becoming a governess, and Fanny's potential marriage into Troy's class. Hardy's interest apparently does not lie in the social factors giving rise to this phenomenon. In *The Woodlanders*, however, such mobility becomes the central theme.

51 Darwin's theory of evolution provides a scientific basis for the inferiority of women. Although he was cautious not to apply his theories of evolution to human beings, Darwin supported assumptions about the different qualities and natures of intelligence in men and women. Darwin maintains that "with woman the powers of intuition, of rapid reaction and perhaps of imitation, are more strongly marked than in man; but some at least, of these faculties are characteristic of the lower races, and therefore of a past and lower state of civilization" (*Descent of Man* 268). He further maintains that "the average of mental power in man must be above that of woman" (*Descent of Man* 268). This view was shared by many specialists in human behaviour at the time. For a detailed discussion of Darwin's influence on the "scientific" conceptualization of women's mental inferiority see Fiona Erskine.
in rural soil. Women, like adolescents, are not intellectually and psychologically mature enough to appreciate the sombre rural life or take root in the countryside.

Hardy, nonetheless, identifies women with nature. He differentiates men's and women's relationships with their surroundings as follows: "a field-man is a personality afield; a field woman is a portion of the field; she has somehow lost her own margin, imbibed the essence of her surrounding, and assimilated herself with it" (Tess 137-8). A woman's close relationship with nature contributes to her innocence and childishness. Her guilelessness is compared to those of small animals such as rabbits and hares (FMC 214-5). Bathsheba's love is described as "entire[ly] as a child's" (215), her pain is also described as "childish" (344). Her maid, Fanny, is analogous to a lamb "when overdriven" in her need for protection and in her connection with the farm (FMC 58).

However, the novel suggests that close contact with nature alone does not grant these women a proper understanding of nature or contribute to their rootedness in the soil. Their unconscious assimilation of the natural environment is counterpointed by their lack of understanding of the rural world and an apparently gender-based aspiration for the outside world. Their relationship with the rural world is less firm than that of men, who are more conscious of their relationship with it. R. G. Cox notes, "Hardy's heroines are characterized by a yielding to circumstance that is limited by the play of instinct . . . which shuts them from any high level of goodness . . . [but also] saves them from ever being bad" (106). In this novel, women's inability to obtain a "high level of goodness" is indicated by their lack of perceptive view--a revelation of their intellectual immaturity.

The difference between Weatherbury men's and women's attitudes and perceptions of the rural world stands out conspicuously in their different reactions to the appearance of
Sergeant Troy, an agent of the outside world. Weatherbury's male folk exhibit intuitive misgivings about Troy, seeing in him a threat to the order of rural life and to the continuity of the community. They are apparently not taught by experience to react in this way, for there is no indication that Oak or any of the Weatherbury male folk has travelled extensively enough outside the vicinity of Weatherbury to have any experience of a different life. Their rejection of Troy is grounded in their appreciation for and understanding of the life they live.

In contrast to the men, all the female characters in the novel, including Bathsheba, her woman companion Liddy, and her maids Fanny and Maryann, are fascinated by Troy. The chief attraction he holds for Weatherbury women is his difference from the rural community and his association with a different world. The country maids, therefore, are as much seduced by a dilettante as by their misconceptions of the outside world—for instance Liddy's associating Troy with an exotic world outside Weatherbury or Fanny's ennobling life in the upper class. They all welcome the disturbance Troy brings into their uneventful life in Weatherbury. Even Bathsheba, who is described as having "too much understanding to be entirely governed by her womanliness" (FMC 214), is in perfect accordance with other Weatherbury women in her reaction to Troy: she cannot help feeling excited upon meeting him in the dark woods: "His sudden appearance was to darkness what the sound of a trumpet is to silence. Gloom, the genius loci at all times hitherto, was now totally overthrown, less by the lantern-light than by what the lantern lighted" (FMC 184). Bathsheba's sexual thrill is presented as a childlike response to novel optical effects. Like the newborn calf who is not used to light (FMC 15), she is weak-sighted. She is not only attracted to the light and colour of the outside world but also finds them irresistible: "she felt powerless to withstand or deny him" (213).
J. B. Bullen aptly compares the impaired vision, such as Bathsheba demonstrates, with Ruskin's "false taste" in the sense of "falseness or inaccuracy in conclusion" (76). False taste, manifested in self-preoccupation and subjectivity, interferes with Bathsheba's perception of the world (Bullen 76-77). Hardy displays Bathsheba's self-centeredness from the moment of her first appearance: she looks at herself in a hand mirror in imagined roles while riding on top of a wagon. Compared with Oak, who is able to minimize the self in order to arrive at a clear-sighted perception of the world around him, Bathsheba's view of the world is often clouded by her subjectivity, which Hardy illustrates with her polarized impressions of the woods. When she runs away from Troy upon discovering his relation with Fanny, her disillusionment with human society leads her to the woods. In her need to seek comfort from the world of nature, Bathsheba takes shelter in "a tangled couch of fronds and stems" (FMC 346). However, when she decides to return home to Troy the next morning, the nurturing image of the woods is replaced by that of a malignant nature, represented by the swamp where "the fungi grew in all manner of positions from rotting leaves and tree stumps" (FMC 348). The fact that Liddy easily crosses over a creek that is deadly in Bathsheba's imagination simply surprises Bathsheba, instead of making her reflect on her previous impressions of the woods. This demonstrates that she lacks the synthetic power required by a reliable observer of the world.

Marjorie Garson argues that Bathsheba perceives the danger which does not affect Liddy, because she cannot "cross over" her newly gained experience in the woods. The fact that Liddy "crosses over" the little creek proves the triumph of ignorance over insight (43). However, Bathsheba's experiences in the woods can hardly be rated as a source of insight. In contrast to Garson's conclusion that repression or not seeing is the way to a happy ending, Hardy suggests that Bathsheba can come closer to happiness in sober perceptiveness.
With Bathsheba's impressions, Hardy reveals that self-centredness obscures people's vision and leads to blind repetitions of their mistakes. Bathsheba, for example, returns to the spot where she was invited to Troy's sword show months before as a sanctuary from the trouble of the human world. While the withering of the once exuberant ferns symbolizes the death of the romantic feeling between Bathsheba and Troy, her return to the spot suggests a subconscious attempt to replace romantic love with romanticism about nature. Her romanticism about nature eventually recharges her endeavour to resume her romanticism for Troy. After a rest in the woods, she feels strong enough to go home to reassume the role of Troy's dutiful wife. She would likely have perpetuated her romanticism by oscillating from one romance to another had Troy not left Weatherbury and put an end to such behaviour.

For Hardy the false taste women reveal is an attribute of childishness and intellectual immaturity, in contrast with Oak's fuller wisdom. Women lack Oak's multi-dimensional communion with the rural world including its "speaking silence," which enables him to plant himself in the rural soil, as his name suggests. Bathsheba, as indicated by her courage in managing the farm on her own, is not a conventional Victorian woman. Yet she is not free from this childishness, or the womanly limitations of immature vision.

Indeed, Bathsheba's perception of Troy appears to be more sophisticated than that of her servants. Her attraction to Troy does not present an overt aspiration for social ascendance, as Fanny's does, but is expressed through cultural aspirations. When Troy asks her whether she reads French, she says "No, I began, but when I got to the verbs, father died" (FMC 198). This reaction to her interrupted French lessons offers a fitting example of what Peter Casagrande may describe as the persistence of her "troubled childhood" ("A New View" 63). Her admiration of Troy's cultural accomplishment as represented by his fluency
in French, appears to be an attempt to resume an interrupted childhood dream. Her anxious attempt to live up to Troy's culture by securing her hold on him through marriage therefore falls in with an attempt to recapture her childhood dreams and aspirations.

Bathsheba's fascination with a different world is suggested by her desire to see Troy's sword drill. As Troy's sword show becomes increasingly seductive and Bathsheba finds herself "within half an inch of being pierced alive two hundred and ninety-five times" (FMC 213), she, as the target of the game, demonstrates her courage as well as her excitement over the challenge. Her relation to Troy, as suggested by her role in the sword show, reveals as much a fascination with Troy's sexuality as with his culture: "Bathsheba loved Troy in the way that only self-reliant women love when they abandon their self-reliance" (FMC 214). To a considerable extent, she is captured by a childish imagination of a different culture in her relationship with Troy. Her fascination, which starts from "fairy transformation" of their images in the dim light (FMC 185), indicates misconception or a lack of perceptive viewpoint.

Hardy further links women with children through the contiguity between women's aspirations for the outside world and young Cain Ball's impression of Bath, the coastal city. Ball, the "illustrious traveller," is dazed by sight and colour into a reverence for the city. Unable to detect the impiousness and corruption in the priest's display of wealth, he wonders at the "'holy gold rings on [the priest's] fingers [which] gleam and twinkle in yer eyes'" (FMC 254). As a result, Ball is simply overwhelmed by the ostentation of the city. Like Ball, Hardy's women characters are superficial observers. They are simply enchanted by Troy's flashing appearance into associating the outside world with a more cheerful life than theirs and so remain blind to his moral defects.
Women's "adventurous spirit" (*FMC* 210) is ultimately attributed to their inability to understand and appreciate their own world.\(^{53}\) *The Return of the Native* develops this perception quite forcefully. Hardy describes Eustacia as "dwell[ing] on a heath without studying its meanings," and compares her relationship with her environment to "wedding a foreigner without learning his tongue. The subtle beauties of the heath were lost to [her]" (*RN* 81). In spite of her connection with the heath ("she caught its vapours" [81]), her inability to understand it results in her resisting the heath as she would a prison. Eustacia Vye prays to "deliver my heart from this fearful gloom and loneliness: send me great love from somewhere!" (*RN* 80). She seeks refuge from the heath in an imaginary love as well as in visions of Paris.\(^{54}\) Eustacia's imperviousness to the charm of the rural world accords with Bathsheba's desire to have a firm hold on Troy's world.

The childish desire such as that of Bathsheba's to override her connection with the rural world recurs as a motif as Hardy explores the predicament of human existence in his novels of "character and environment." Hardy presents Bathsheba and her maid-servants' admiration for the outside world as attempts to alienate themselves from their roots. Bathsheba's fruitless adventure into Troy's world presents one instance of this misplaced priority in life; Fanny Robin, the lost lamb unable to return to its own herd, serves as another; Eustacia's perception of Paris in Hardy's next rural fiction provides a third. In her desperate

\(^{53}\) A very different approach to women's spirit of adventure can be found in D. H. Lawrence. Lawrence, whose *The Rainbow* was partly inspired by Hardy, values women's spirit of adventure as a complement to man's attachment to the land and as a source of renewal and rejuvenation. See *The Rainbow* (10-13).

\(^{54}\) Eustacia's hope of escape is built either on destruction or on illusion. While love and Paris provide food for illusion, her desire for destruction and disturbance is manifest in her "high gods," such as William the Conqueror, Strafford, and Napoleon Bonaparte whom she has learned about in her Ladies' history class.
attempt to escape the heath, Eustacia conjures up a confusing picture of Paris, in which a clerk's wife basks in the glamour of the royal palace. As irony would have it, Eustacia, the rebellious Queen of Night, aspires to the life of the petit bourgeois with a vehement enthusiasm--an energy belonging to Egdon. Hardy illustrates the destructiveness of such misdirected energy with Bathsheba's troubled experience with Oak, and with the deaths of Fanny and Eustacia. Failure to locate her community, which is symbolized by her missing the designated church for her wedding, results in Fanny's death. Eustacia's tragedy is similarly attributed to her attempt to escape reality. The experience of Hardy's female characters thus conflicts with notions of "rural simplicity." As indicated by this aspiration for the outside embodied in Bathsheba, Fanny, Liddy, Eustacia, and Ball, children and the childish are least sensitive to the existence of simple happiness (if there is any).

However, in Hardy's world, all choices, including sexual choice, affect the survival of the individual and of the community. Hardy reveals a potential destructiveness in her childish indulgence, even her childlike love: "Her culpability lay in her making no attempt to control feeling by subtle and careful inquiry into consequence. She could show others the steep and thorny way, but `reck'd not her own rede'" (FMC 215). Bathsheba's disregard of the consequences of her sexual choice has a serious effect on the survival of the rural community as well as on her own. Hardy appears to echo Darwin that sexual selection is indispensable for the survival of the species. Yet Hardy contradicts Darwin, who deems that

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55 Hardy maintains that a lonely life on Egdon Heath is dignifying for Eustacia, whereas "a narrow life in Budmouth might have completely demeaned her" (RN 79).

56 Hardy's sympathy towards women is quite ambivalent. John Goode raises a point about the patriarchal position Oak takes here to blame Bathsheba instead of Troy and the workers for the predictable damage caused by the storm (27-28).
the survival of the species depends on the male. He gives Bathsheba the initiative in sexual
selection, and shows in her choice--her marriage with Troy--a threat to the survival of her
farm and of the rural community.

Hardy shows with the vicissitudes of Bathsheba that one has to outgrow immaturity
before learning to appreciate the rural world. Yet because of impaired vision, women learn
the hard way, that is, through experience. While Bathsheba's acceptance of her relationship
with the rural world indicates her maturity, her development is metaphorically indicated by
the reduced radiance in her appearance:

To the eyes of the middle-aged, Bathsheba was perhaps additionally charming
just now. Her exuberance of spirits was pruned down; the original phantom of
delight had shown herself to be not too bright for human nature's daily food,
and she had been able to enter this second poetic phase without losing much
of the first in the process. (FMC 382)

Bathsheba's two-phased development towards maturity alludes to Wordsworth's "She Was a
Phantom of Delight" (1804), 57

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57 She was a Phantom of delight
When first she gleamed upon my sight;
A lovely Apparition, sent
To be a moment's ornament
Her eyes as stars of Twilight fair;
But all things else about her drawn;
From May-time and the cheerful Dawn;
A dancing Shape, an Image gay
to haunt, to startle, and way-lay.

I saw her upon nearer view,
A Spirit, yet a Woman too!
Her household motions light and free,
And steps of virgin-liberty;
a countenance in which did meet
Sweet records, promises as sweet;
A Creature not too bright or good
For human nature's daily food;
For transient sorrows, simple wiles,
which reveals different facets of a woman as viewed from different perspectives. Hardy takes Wordsworth's metaphor of the three phases in perception to indicate actual changes in Bathsheba, and the readjustment of her vision to the necessity for physical survival. The visible change in her appearance, which registers her turbulent relationships with Troy and Boldwood, also points to her acceptance of her connection with the earth, symbolized by her acceptance of Oak—a relationship that is rooted in their common interest in the farm. Significantly, her acceptance of Oak and a life rooted in the soil comes when she discards her childhood dream of the outside world. Her development further invalidates the association of the countryside world with a children's paradise in order to elevate the countryside to the status of the adult world. Her newly acquired appreciation of the land reinforces Hardy's argument that it takes an adult understanding to appreciate the value of rural life.

58 Peter Casagrande maintains that Hardy misreads Wordsworth's poem in his interpretation of the development of Bathsheba ("A New View" 59). I would argue Wordsworth's poem provides just another instance in which Hardy incorporates familiar allusions to introduce his vision of rural life.

59 Many critics question the "happy ending" of the novel based on Bathsheba, who apparently does not experience the same amount of happiness as Oak does. For her, the ending may be the best possible choice she makes for her survival. Critics like John Goode have pinpointed Hardy's adoption of patriarchal values. However, it is important that Hardy includes Bathsheba's reserve, instead of simply melting her into Oak's happiness. As suggested in the narrative, she is still recovering from her troubled experience of the past. In the meantime, Oak's taking over the management of the farm leaves her, an untraditional woman, only a traditional womanly role.
However, Bathsheba's silent acceptance of her connection with the rural world and her entrusting of her future and property to Gabriel Oak's hands serve as important indicators of her acceptance of survival as the priority of her life. The fact that "she never laughed readily now" (463) points to the painful experience of correcting and adjusting her vision to rural reality and the cost she pays to outgrow her romance and childishness in order to survive in the rural world. However, there is no other alternative to survival but death in Hardy's world. The novel concludes meaningfully with the wisdom of Poorgrass, the rural philosopher: "it might have been worse, and I feel my thanks accordingly" (FMC 464). From Poorgrass' perspective Bathsheba finally makes the wisest possible choice for her own survival and for the survival of the community.\(^{60}\)

**Qualities required to survive in the rural world**

Troy, whose importance is generally acknowledged in relation to the melodramatic plot of the "love triangle," provides another important perspective in revealing the moral requirements for rural life. Unlike Bathsheba, who is able to learn to appreciate rural life, Troy is beyond rectification in his relationship with the countryside because of his moral defects and lack of intention to live a purposeful life. His exclusion from Weatherbury reinstates the rural world as a centre of existence, which requires moral qualities in those who belong.

\(^{60}\)Bathsheba's reticence at the end of the novel and her subdued expression conform with Hardy's intention to stress the stern reality of living in the rural world, and his persistent resistance to romanticizing rural life. Shirley A. Stave's feminist reading of Bathsheba's last appearance in the novel, which insists on the Pagan triumph over Christian order, appears to interpret the scene out of context. In spite of Hardy's frequent attempts to reduce the male and female dichotomy as indicated by Bathsheba's independence and occupational choice, his perception of the order of the rural world is basically male-centred. For discussion of Oak as a male ideal in light of Christian ethics, see Annette Federico (55-75).
Described in terms of synecdoche—the red coat, "a bright scarlet spot" (FMC 193), "a dim spot of artificial red," a man "brilliant in brass and scarlet" (FMC 184)—Troy, the intruder, defies the spirit of the farming community of Weatherbury with his disoriented energy:

Troy was full of activity, but his activities were less of a locomotive than a vegetative nature; and never being based upon any original choice of foundation or direction, they were exercised on whatever object chance might place in their way. Hence, whilst he sometimes reached the brilliant in speech because that was spontaneous, he fell below the commonplace in action, from inability to guide incipient effort. He had a quick comprehension and considerable force of character; but, being without the power to combine them, the comprehension became engaged with trivialities whilst waiting for the will to direct it, and the force wasted itself in useless grooves through unheeding the comprehension. (FMC 192)

Troy's disoriented energy makes him a wasted talent in the eyes of the rustics who are noted for deliberateness in their attitude toward life. His difference from Weatherbury folk reveals his divergence from the essence of life and blindness to his environment.

Troy's blindness is manifested in many "species of elusion" (FMC 364) from reality and responsibility. In contrast to Oak, who expresses his love for Bathsheba by assiduous efforts to ensure her well-being, Troy tries to elude "the primary grief" over Fanny's death by planting flowers around her grave (FMC 364). As Hardy points out, "in the futility of these romantic doings dictated by a remorseful reaction from previous indifference, there was [some] element of absurdity" (FMC 358). Troy refuses to admit the absurdity of his action and his blindness to a place that values more substantial relationships, but instead blames Providence for foiling his plan. He interprets the fact that the flowers he plants by Fanny's grave are washed away by rain pouring down from a gargoyle of the church tower as the malice of Providence: "his intention had been known and circumvented" (FMC 364). What
he considers to be the malice of Providence ironically serves as an excuse for abandoning his romantic gesture and dissolving his sense of guilt for Fanny's death.

However, Hardy insists that there is not a "malignant and fiendish god . . . [but] an indifferent and unconscious force at the back of things 'that neither good nor evil knows'' (Life 337). He therefore reveals a pathetic fallacy embedded in the concept of an evil Providence: "Providence is nothing if not coquettish" (RN 140). Different interpretations of natural force are used in Hardy's novel to reveal the observers' attitudes to reality. Reactions to crisis in particular are applied to test people's readiness to be self-supporting, which in turn bears upon their ability to survive in the rural world. While Oak rises from the crisis of his life by virtue of his courage to face his own responsibility for the death of his sheep, Troy's self-pitying assumption that he is "accused" and will be "accused" forever by an unsympathetic Providence (FMC 364) reveals his self-abandonment, and thus confirms his ineligibility to live in the rural world.

Self-destructiveness residing in the pathetic fallacy about the will of Providence is further illustrated in Hardy's next novel with Eustacia's relationship with Egdon Heath. The

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61 Hardy often uses landscapes symbolically to express the psychological activity of his characters as well as to highlight the hidden dangers in their lives. For instance, he quite effectively brings to light Fanny Robin's bleak prospects after leaving Weatherbury—the community where everyone knows her and where her disappearance is immediately noticed—with a gloomy view outside Troy's barracks: "For dreariness nothing could surpass a prospect in the outskirts of a certain town and military station, many miles north of Weatherbury, a later hour on this same snowy evening—if that may be called a prospect of which the chief constituent was darkness"(FMC 95). The focus "outside" Troy's station and away from Weatherbury forcefully conveys Fanny's isolation and helplessness between communities. Her throwing snowballs against Troy's window from the bank of an icy river outside the barracks further symbolizes her desperate attempt to gain access to Troy's society. However, Hardy reminds the reader even in this darkest scene of the novel that the "gurgle and cluck" from the river "a sad man would have called moans, and a happy man laughter" (FMC 97). In other words, people subjectively interpret situations in nature that contain in themselves no human meaning.

62 Far from the Madding Crowd and The Return of the Native are very different indeed in their focuses on rural life and on people's relationship with the rural world. Critics such as John Goode (38), Perry
heath is thus described as having human attributes that appear to be sympathetic to Eustacia's hostility to Egdon:

The place became full of a watchful intentness now; for when other things sank brooding to sleep the heath appeared slowly to awake and listen. Every night its Titanic form seemed to await something; but it had waited thus, unmoved, during so many centuries through the crises of so many things, that it could only be imagined to await one last crisis—the final overthrow. (RN 4)

This perception of the heath as an intimidating Titanic figure conforms with Troy's perception of a dark Providence. The heath thus described becomes evidence of nature's hostility towards human existence. However, as John Goode points out, the picture of the heath is "a constructed view . . . functioning as a meaningful vision rather than an impersonal image" (44). It is not endowed with objectivity. As Merryn Williams notes, there is a great discrepancy between this abstraction of the heath and the way Hardy presents it in the whole novel (136). This passage appears to either articulate the mind of Eustacia or to introduce the heath with a prior knowledge of what is going to happen to Eustacia. Hardy reveals that he designed *The Return of the Native* as a tragedy which arises "by reason of the characters taking no trouble to ward off the disastrous event produced by the said passions, prejudices, and ambitions" (*Life* 120). This design appears to be fully realized in the finished novel. This introduction of the heath sets the scene for Eustacia's death, foreshadowing a tragedy that arises out of her prejudice against and lack of communication with the heath.

Meisel (68), Peter Casagrande (1982, 106-114) and Anne Alexander (53) among others, have pinpointed rationalism as the characteristic of the former, while suggesting the irrational as the focus of the latter. However, *The Return of the Native* to a great extent continues what is suggested in *Far from the Madding Crowd*—the role of perception in survival in the rural world. The two novels complete each other in revealing this connection. While the earlier novel emphasizes human efforts to survive in the rural world, the later novel focuses mainly on the role of sensory communion with the heath.
Presented in contrast with this dramatic rendition of the heath, which in some ways overlaps with Eustacia's wish for its destruction, is Thomasin's perception of the heath:

To [Thomasin] there were not, as to Eustacia, demons in the air, and malice in every bush and bough. The drops which lashed her face were not scorpions, but prosy rain. Egdon in the mass was no monster whatever, but impersonal open ground! Her fears of the place were rational, her dislikes of its worst moods reasonable. At this time it was in her view a windy, wet place, in which a person might experience much discomfort, lose the path without care, and possibly catch cold. (RN 433)

Thomasin's rational perception of the heath points to her intention to continue living on it. Her survival on the heath, in contrast to Eustacia's death, appears to be the natural outcome of her pragmatic approach to her environment. Moreover, Thomasin's survival parallels that of the rustics, who, like the choir in Greek tragedy, remain on the stage throughout Eustacia's tragedy. *The Return of the Native* concludes with the observation: "The instincts of merry England lingered on here with exceptional vitality on Egdon" (RN 459). This observation, validated by Thomasin's experience on the heath, undermines Eustacia's tragic perception of the heath (and Clym's perception of his role as a martyr).

For Hardy, a pathetic fallacy about the unknown natural force is embedded in blindness to the actual spirit of place. Troy is presented as morally blind to the pursuit of rural life: he never recognizes it as real life or as possessing any sign of animation at all. For him, real life is show and display. Therefore, he is intolerant of "the generally sleepy air of the whole prospect" of the farmhouse but ignores the adaptation of the building to farm life as indicated by the "animated and contrasting style of the reverse facade" (80). The farmhouse, which to Oak represents "a nice old house," is therefore rated by Troy as "a rambling, gloomy house" (FMC 271). His hostility points to his role as a destroyer who "has no respect for the work of builders who went before [him], but pull[s] down and alter[s] as
[he thinks] fit" (FMC 271). Unlike Farfrae in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, who challenges the work ethic of the community but improves its prospects by introducing new farming methods and tools, Troy is completely unconcerned with farming. His idea of giving the farmhouse a modern facelift is intended to make it fashionable and more "cheerful" (271), altering its function and cutting its connections with rural life.

Given Troy's position of responsibility for Bathsheba's farm, his chaotic energy is not only self-destructive but also endangers the stability of rural life. In the Great Barn, the functional church of Weatherbury and the heart of agrarian life, he gets the farm employees intoxicated with wine, rendering them oblivious to the impending storm. When Oak warns him about the approaching storm, he sends out a message that "[it] will not rain, and he cannot stop [dancing] to talk to you about such fidgets" (FMC 276). Referring to farming as "fidgets," Troy disparages rural life as a meaningful existence. As a very "spirited" farmer, Troy upsets the subtle balance between the rural community and nature so that, as the rustics say, "nothing has prospered in Weatherbury since he came here" (FMC 426). His ignorant defiance threatens the continuity of the community and almost costs Bathsheba her lease of the farm. His efforts to animate it with games and convert the countryside into an entertainment resource recalls the association of the countryside with recreations and games as found in *Our Village*. However, for Hardy this leisure interest in the countryside, imbued with moral blindness, is threatening to a society engaged in agrarian activities.

Hardy further reveals Troy's disoriented energy in regard of his journey. While Oak symbolizes the solidity and longevity which Hardy admires in a life rooted in the soil, Troy leaves and returns to Weatherbury to escape the struggle for existence. Troy's travel is presented as an example of escapism from which he has nothing to gain. His
disillusionment with the outside world supports the universality of the struggle for existence.\(^{63}\) there is no retreat from the crude fact of existence anywhere in the world. Even Troy's returning to Weatherbury is obviously prompted by illusions of escape. Hardy's hostility to Troy's return provides an important insight into Hardy's resistance to the illusion of "homecoming."

Hardy refuses to privilege outsider perspectives, in contrast to Mary Mitford whose narratives articulate her experience of "feverish London." For Hardy, distaste of the outside world, like Troy's, will not contribute to a fuller understanding or enhance his ability to survive in the rural world.\(^{64}\) Troy's association of Weatherbury with "a home and its

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\(^{63}\)As Simon Gatrell observes, episodes of travel are rarely of central importance to Hardy's novels in terms of satisfying the reader's curiosity about foreign cultures (179). Declaring himself not interested in "manners" (Life 104), Hardy takes pride in being essential and thus universal in his interest. As suggested by Oak's midnight meditation on the human race from his station on Norcombe Hill, solitude in nature provides a vantage point in studying human beings.

\(^{64}\)Interestingly enough, when Troy leaves Weatherbury for the outside world, he explicitly intends to "seek a home" (FMC 369). By home he appears to refer to a place safe from travail and memories represented by the "humdrum tediousness of a farmer's life, and gloomy images of [Fanny who] lay in the churchyard" (FMC 369). Significantly, Troy embarks on a journey when he is no longer attracted to the "vicissitudes of his life, [and] its meteor-like uncertainty" (364). In other words, he embarks on a journey in search of retirement.

With Troy's departure from and return to Weatherbury Hardy illustrates that travel is deceptive, that it continuously stimulates false expectations of exemption from the struggle for existence. For instance, the outside world, epitomized by a dynamic and colourful ocean view, enhances Troy's hope of escape from a prosaic life on the farm: "A wide and novel prospect burst upon him with an effect almost like that of the Pacific upon Balboa's gaze..." (FMC 369). However, it proves to be simply another example of what Hardy considers a landscape "too smiling for its reason" (RN 5). Troy is nearly drowned by deadly currents hidden beneath the alluring surface of the ocean, the moment he exposes himself to it in order to embrace the new phase of his life. Troy's sense of betrayal, arising as a reaction to his high expectations of a different environment, sets him on the old track of escape: "Far in the distance Budmouth lay upon the sea, as it went quietly regarding his efforts, and beside the town the harbour showed its position by a dim network of ropes and spars" (FMC 370). Troy's perception of the harbour as the edge of an unsympathetic universe, which waits to prey on him, once again provides an excuse for him to embark on an escape trip. Even the brilliance of Budmouth's light, that would have made the city look more cheerful than Weatherbury, is associated by Troy with a "flaming sword" (FMC 371-2) and sharpens his sense of rejection by the world at large. Troy's highly sentimental interpretation of the world, centring on its supposed intentions towards himself, compels him to be constantly on the run. His return to Weatherbury would have been followed by other journeys had he survived Boldwood's shot.
comforts" (FMC 390) or an asylum from want is only reactionary to his disappointment with his precarious living in America as a travelling instructor of gymnastics, sword exercise, fencing, and pugilism (FMC 390). His anticipation of retirement and leisure in the countryside, which bears no relation to the realities of Weatherbury—whose very name describes the need to survive elements not of choice but of necessity—articulates Troy's essentially outsider status. His nostalgia for Weatherbury as a rural retreat, a safe haven from want, is not completely different from his previous interest in the countryside but relates to it as another distortion of the rural reality. The fact that he is killed the moment he returns to the farm reveals as much a communal wish for his exclusion as Hardy's wish to protect the countryside from distortions and misconceptions. Troy's removal from Weatherbury therefore expresses not so much the poetic justice of punishing his betrayal of love as Hardy's warning against disregarding the reality of rural life.

Troy's inability to adapt to Weatherbury and his subsequent exclusion from it affirm from a negative angle the moral quality of rural life. However, survival in the rural world requires more than moral courage to face the crude realities of rural life. In The Return of the Native, Clym's return to Egdon Heath from Paris reveals that even a native is subject to the complicated process of adapting himself to actual rural life. Clym Yeobright presents a polar opposition to Troy in his love of the rustics and concern for them. Unlike Troy, who lacks the moral stamina to shoulder his responsibility for the rural community, Clym deems it a moral imperative for him to elevate the rustics in the eyes of urbanites:

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65Troy's death is an instance of Hardy's dramatic reliance on chance in his storytelling. He may not admit Troy's fatalism into a moral universe where survival depends on intelligence and attention but he does bring Troy home at the exact point when Boldwood thinks he has won Bathsheba.
Yeobright loved his kind. He had a conviction that the want of most men was knowledge of a sort which brings wisdom rather than affluence. He wished to raise the class at the expense of individuals rather than individuals at the expense of the class. What was more, he was ready at once to be the first unit sacrificed. \((RN\ 203)\)

Clym apparently loves "his kind" from above, which Hardy shows is not enough for him to relate to and survive in the rural world. Hardy forces Clym to reenter life on the heath before speaking about rustics as "his kind." Clym admits that he used to despise the rustics before he left Egdon for Paris. He learns to love them from a distance following the fashion in Paris:

"Much of this development he may have owed to his studious life in Paris, where he had become acquainted with ethical systems popular at the time" \((RN\ 203)\). Clym returns to Egdon as a mediator between the heath and the outside world. He brings with him the views of the outside world and takes it upon himself to remould the rustics in accordance with the ideas he has acquired in Paris.  

By assuming the role of Christ, Clym distances himself from the earthy life of the rustics. His taking on too much responsibility depreciates rural life instead of facilitating his interaction with it.  

Hardy juxtaposes Clym's romantic perception of the heath as "the most

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\[66\] Hardy wrote to a friend on April 22, 1912 concerning the Wessex Edition: "... finishing the proofs for the Native. ... I got to like the character Clym before I had done with him. I think he is the nicest of all my heroes, and not a bit like me" \((Life\ and\ Work\ 520)\). There are affinities between Clym's and Hardy's efforts to elevate the countryside in the eyes of urbanites. However, Hardy differs significantly in that he justifies the countryside as it is, finding already present in rural life social ideals and moral values proposed by social reformers. Clym, on the other hand, tries to improve the countryside in light of these teachings. As a result, Clym would change the existing rural order if his plan were put in practice.

\[67\] Deborah L. Collins discusses Clym's "guilt and over-identification with responsibility" and his blindness (110-114). She argues that his tragedy arises from the fact that "he cannot receive remission for sin he did not commit" (111). His sense of guilt for the misery in the countryside is not unfounded. She is right that Clym's loss of sight, which attests to his failed attempt to see the lofty truth, reveals to him the soothingness of monotonous work (114). However, Clym's communication with the heath is initially blocked by his ambition to change the countryside, whereas blindness blocks his vision so as to facilitate his direct communion with the earth.
exhilarating, and strengthening and soothing" \((RN\ 220)\) with his dread of daily life on Egdon in order to dramatize his ambivalence about participating in the struggle for survival:

"There was something in its oppressive horizontality which too much reminded him of the arena of life; it gave him a sense of bare equality with, and no superiority to, a single living thing under the sun" \((RN\ 245)\). The feeling of suffocation that Clym has about life itself reminds one of Troy's disgust with farm life and Eustacia's dislike of the heath, although, unlike Troy and Eustacia, Clym loves his rural world and tries to relate to it.

Symbolically, Hardy deprives Clym of his sight, and the possibility of a distanced view in order to bring him closer to the heath and facilitate his integration with Egdon through sensual connections:

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Blindness restrains his vision of a static heath but increases his sense of affinity with an animated heath through close contact with his human and insect neighbours. Clym's revitalized sensory perception of the heath symbolizes his new bond with Egdon: he is entering the life of the heath from the grassroots like a newborn child. However, as indicated by the importance of perception in Oak's adaptation to Weatherbury, Clym's immersion in the heath is only the beginning of a long and complicated process of adapting himself to an organic interaction with elemental nature.

In his preface to \textit{Far from the Madding Crowd} Hardy advises his reader not to "solidify [Wessex] into a utilitarian region which people can go to, take a house in and write to the papers from" \((FMC\ viii)\). Hardy apparently intends this piece of advice to be the
guiding principle for readers in locating his countryside and relating themselves to it. The fact that his Wessex is a "partly real, and partly dream-country" (FMC viii) suggests that it is not accessible to all. Unlike Mary Mitford, who recommends her small village as "a constant residence" in all situations (Mitford 21), Hardy cautions his reader against equating Wessex with any definite locality. His rural world is noted for an organic interaction between human beings and nature. The cohesive force of the rural community is farming--people's vigorous attempts to survive in the face of the elements. It is important that one adapts to the rural world in order to live there. Troy, a native of Weatherbury, is excluded from the community because he is completely detached from the struggle for existence in the rural world. Meanwhile Oak and Bathsheba, who both move to Weatherbury from other parts of the region, successfully integrate themselves with Weatherbury on the strength of their involvement with farming and their sense of connection with the farming community. The frustrated return of the native makes it quite explicit that one is not born into this communion with nature but adapts to it through assiduous effort. There is no homecoming but an entry or reentry into the struggle for existence in the rural world.

With an emphasis on the requirement for determination, resourcefulness, and responsibility in rural life, Hardy does not present the countryside as a nurturing shelter, nor does he idealize nature. However, human efforts to survive in the rural world transform the defects of nature--its irrationality and threat to human existence--into a poetry "by the spiritual eye" (Life 114). The beauty and poetry of rural life are manifested in the moral quality and resourcefulness that the country people demonstrate in their daily struggle for survival in a harsh environment. As Merryn Williams notes, "nature provides [Hardy's country people] with a permanent source of strength" (57).
Moreover, the countryside is not only "a world interesting in itself" (Keith, "The Land" 79), but a world where altruism is a necessity for existence. Instead of competition among peers, rural life, which is constantly threatened by the capriciousness of natural elements, requires and is sustained by amity and a sense of kinship among the country people. The struggle for existence in a harsh environment provides the material basis for such amity—the evolutionary ideal according to positivist philosophers such as Comte.

Hardy's reconstruction of rural life in light of serious engagement with survival both challenges the stereotype of the idyll and creates a new desirability for rural life. In this respect, Hardy is comparable and contrastable with the two Chinese writers discussed in the next two chapters. Like Hardy, they also reconstruct the rural world as an inhabited place, imbued with cultural values and contemporary social ideals.
The virtue of water is to embrace and include. It never refuses anything, even the most bizarre material that comes in its way, nor is it affected by anything. Water may appear to be extremely fragile and submit easily. In reality there is a tenacity in its softness. When it flows in a trickle, it is capable of penetrating a rock. It is thus indomitable. I learned from water to join the joys and sorrows of ordinary people's lives to a dream of sailing across the sea. (Shen Congwen, "The Material for a Fairy Tale," 140)\footnote{1}

**Chapter II  Shen Congwen’s West Hunan: The Exotic Rural Homeland**

Shen Congwen's (Shen Ts'ung-wen, 1902-1988) name is so intertwined with the maturity of rural fiction in twentieth century Chinese literature that few critics can talk about one without reference to the other.\footnote{2} Jeffrey C. Kinkley maintains that Shen's contribution to Chinese literature is "diverse and pervasive" (\textit{Odyssey} 3). Diversity and pervasiveness appropriately describe his total output of rural fiction: he assembles an assortment of rural scenes and stories to form a multi-sensory rural world, whose solid foundation and inner coherence culminate in the construction of a rural homeland in Chinese rural fiction. With an amply developed landscape of the fictional rural homeland, he asserts the countryside as the best possible place for a healthy life in spite of the May Fourth program of modernity—the reinforcement of the idea of progress.

Perhaps, as Kinkley observes, it would be exaggerating to credit Shen Congwen with twentieth-century China's "first literary involvement in 'rural subject matter,' 'lyric rural romanticism' and 'cultural holism'" ("Legacy" 71). Shen is, nonetheless, the first modern

\footnote{1}Roman letters after citations indicate corresponding numbers in the Appendix I (216-64), which supplies the original Chinese texts for all my translations.

\footnote{2}Critics who have acknowledged Shen Congwen as the most important rural fictional writer in twentieth-century China include C. T. Hsia (206-208), Jeffrey C. Kinkley (\textit{Odyssey} 1), Hua-ling Nieh (9-10), David Der-wei Wang ("Imaginary Nostalgia" 107-117), Wang Runhua (157-58), and Sima Changfeng (160).
Chinese writer who blends these elements into the physical reality of rural life to construct a desirable and authentic rural world out of a real region. His multidimensional fictional homeland, substantiating the countryside ideal in modern Chinese literature, is comparable to Hardy's contribution to English rural fiction. Like Hardy's reconstruction of the rural world, Shen Congwen's fictional West Hunan constitutes the centre of life, where the meaning of existence is infused with everyday rural life, and traditional values merge with current social ideals.

This similarity, however, is expressed differently. Shen Congwen's fictional narrative of West Hunan and Hardy's Wessex respond to different cultural environments and literary traditions. The backdrop of the May Fourth movement in particular provides a striking contrast to Hardy's world. I will therefore start with a survey of the writing of the countryside and its intervening issues in the May Fourth period, to which Shen Congwen had to respond.

**The ambivalence of homecoming in the May Fourth period**

Shen Congwen wrote in a cultural climate which was far less appreciative of the traditional countryside than Hardy's. Victorian rural idylls may not contribute much to illuminating the actual conditions in the English countryside, but they articulate the love for--as well as frequent romantic misconceptions of--rural life. Hardy's novels, as the peak of Victorian rural fiction, are prepared for and supported by numerous minor climaxes in rural fiction such as those of Anthony Trollope and George Eliot. Meanwhile, the significant presence of urbanization and industrialization in Victorian England that stimulated attempts to preserve and recapture the traditional countryside in literary representation also contributed to
a popular taste for rural writing. Hardy’s rural fiction might not have been pleasant reading for all his readers because of its challenge of the established cozy image of the English countryside. However, the unease about the anti-pastoral elements in his novels was counterpoised by interest in a disappearing world and way of life. Therefore, despite its dark mood, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* became a best-seller upon publication. As a review article in *The Speaker* points out, for Victorian readers the attraction of this novel lies in that "it deals with the old country, the old scenes, and, we might almost say, the old people. The Wessex peasantry are once more brought upon the stage" (Lerner 59). Regardless of whether Hardy would endorse their notion of "peasantry," nostalgia for the "old country" contributed to *Tess*’s popularity and thus mollified the reception of his unidyllic rural fiction—although *Jude the Obscure* definitely reached the limit of public tolerance for "unpleasantness."

Such an antiquarian interest in the "old country" and "peasantry" was neither expected nor encouraged in the modern Chinese fiction of Shen Congwen’s time. Unlike middle class reader-friendly or readerly Victorian rural fiction, Chinese fiction of the May Fourth period openly defied such taste. While Victorian rural writing sanctions the "old

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3The formation of the industrial middle class and the popularity of fiction were reciprocal in Victorian England. Rural fiction was of particular interest for the bourgeois middle class as portraying a simpler life. The fact that Mitford’s *Our Village* and Hardy’s *Far from the Madding Crowd* first appeared in popular serial publications more than forty years apart may well provide a glimpse of the durability of the "rural" taste. See Bunce for further discussion (32-33). Also see Pamela Dalziel for discussion of the popularization of Hardy’s fiction through illustration (1-32).

4The reception of *Tess* was mainly but not exclusively favorable. A review article in *The Saturday Review* of Jan 16, 1892—a year after the publication of the novel—reveals a typical negative reception of the novel. It describes the novel as "an unpleasant story [told] in a very unpleasant way" (Lerner, 68), with regard to Hardy’s moral stance and Tess’s relationship with Alec.

5A glimpse of Lu Xun’s disregard of popular taste can be found in his defence for "hard translation." He insists that "instead of translating in order to give people 'pleasure', I often try to make them uncomfortable,
country," modern Chinese fiction articulates a strong desire to be liberated from the old 
country and traditional bondage so as to facilitate change. Therefore, although writing of the 
countryside constitutes only a small portion of May Fourth literary output, it nonetheless 
touches a sensitive pulse in May Fourth ideology. Writings of rural theme remained largely 
under the influence of Lu Xun and his brother Zhou Zuoren and relatively unaffected by the 
growing diversity of modern Chinese literature after 1921 (Yan 22-76). I will therefore use Lu 
Xun's fictional representation of the rural homeland as well as his critiques of rural writing to 
illustrate the rural tradition in the May Fourth period. Shen Congwen's contribution to modern 
Chinese rural fiction will show up clearly in this context.

Lu Xun (1892-1936), the standard bearer of May Fourth literature, declares in his 
preface to Outcry (1922) that the mission of his writing is to wake up the masses from their 
"slumber" so as to save them from dying of suffocation in an "iron house" (Selected Works 
1:37). The "iron house" metaphor, which compares Chinese culture and society to a stifling
enclosure (Leo Ou-fan Lee 86), frequently takes the form of a rural community or a small
town in his fiction. Lu Xun's critical examinations of these places constitute an important part
in his iconoclastic re-evaluation of traditional Chinese culture. "A Madman's Diary" (1917),
his first short story written in vernacular Mandarin, relates family relationships, Chinese
history, and Confucian ethics to cannibalism. Lu Zhen, a fictional rural town modelled after Lu
Xun's hometown of Shaoxing, epitomizes what he perceives as the spiritual deformities of
China, such as superstition, lack of sympathy ("The New Year's Sacrifice," "Kong Yiji") and
self-deceptive optimism ("Ah Q"). Lu Zhen, as a representative of the rural hometown, is
charged with a May Fourth modernist anxiety over the lack of change and mobility.

While May Fourth writers condemned traditional Chinese culture, much unconscious
attachment continued. Most Chinese writers of the May Fourth period are from the rural areas
and small towns. Compared with Victorian writers of rural fiction, they are notable for their
extensive connections with their home region through family and social ties.  

Chinese literature of the early twentieth century features ambivalent attitudes to the country and
appreciation of the city as uninhibited by traditional rural culture. Poets living in foreign concessions in
Shanghai in particular explored this liberty from within the city. The concession area of Shanghai is
represented as an escape from the gloomy presence of the countryside as a sunny, dynamic, and exotic
landscape to a youthful and pro-western generation of Chinese intellectuals. Xu Chi expresses this ecstasy
over a new urban life in his poem "A Twenty-Year Old": "I am coming, at twenty years old, young, bright,
healthy and energetic. I am coming from a boulevard of firs, a tennis bat in hand, singing" (42). In the
poem, the city is associated with a field of youthfulness and hope, waiting for the poet to explore. Ai Qing,
who is known for lyrics of his hometown, does not conceal the delight the city brings to a country youth in his
poem: "ever since I saw a picture of urban scenery, I have grown out of my love for the ugly countryside" (103).e The urban landscape, which is noted for its neatness and novelty, symbolizes a brave new world and
a better culture in comparison with the traditional Chinese countryside.

The city retained a revolutionary association in China in the early 1900s. However, writers of urban
themes usually gathered in Shanghai, while writers in Beijing were more restricted by traditional cultural
values. In the 1930s, with the rise of left-wing literature, the city began to be looked upon as a political agent of
the communist party and political activities (Mao Dun, Rainbow; Ye Shentao, The Schoolmaster Ni
Huanzhi).
connection with the countryside, nonetheless, did not contribute to a confidence in the traditional Chinese countryside. What Ellen Widmer describes as "the urbanized intellectuals" in Chinese literature of the 1920s mainly indicate writers' efforts to distance themselves from the traditional cultural heritage. Their aspiration for change, nonetheless, led to an insecure cultural identity. As Leo Ou-fan Lee points out, "after having swept away tradition, they have left a cultural vacuum which they attempted to fill up with Western panaceas--science, democracy, anarchism, socialism, romanticism" (The Romantic Generation 296). Lu Xun appears to be the only May Fourth intellectual to confront this feeling of cultural emptiness and acknowledge the predicament of a spiritual exile. In a speech given at the Beijing Women's Normal University in 1923, he admitted that "the most painful thing in life is to wake up from a dream and find no way out" ("What Happens after Nora Leaves Home" 87). Using Nora from Ibsen's The Doll's House as an analogy, he addressed the predicament of Chinese intellectuals after their estrangement from traditional Chinese culture: "since Nora has awakened it is hard for her to return to the dream world" (87). Lu Xun's interpretation of Nora's dilemma after leaving home describes his relationship with his cultural homeland: he is in voluntary exile from his cultural home, to which he still feels attached.

The tension between the "home" and the journey that Lu Xun discovers in The Doll's

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8As Mu Gong has aptly observed, "on the surface Chinese cities appear to be different from the countryside. However, because there were no fully developed cities, the city (with a few exceptions such as Shanghai and Guangzhou) has not formed its special and independent culture. Its culture is a mere variation of the rural culture" (qtd. in Ding 24). By "culture" Mu Gong obviously refers to the value system including moral and social relations. In this sense the influence of tradition appears to be quite persistent in both the city and the countryside in the May Fourth period. Writers in Beijing revealed close ties with the traditional countryside, both in their concern about and attachment to it, as compared with writers who lived in foreign concessions in Shanghai.
House resides not in Ibsen's Nora, but in the traditional scholar-official conception of "home" and its associations of family, relatives, nature, and personal experiences; and in the concept of the "state,"

associated with the city, the court, and political ambition. Seeing himself and intellectuals as morally responsible for the state, Lu Xun reveals his conflicting feelings about "home" and the state—that is, between cultural or emotional attachment and political ambition, in this symbol-loaded description of a snow-covered backyard garden in his hometown:

[T]o the eyes accustomed to the North, the sight was sufficiently striking: several old plum trees were in full bloom to rival the snow, as if entirely oblivious of winter; while among the thick dark green foliage of camellia beside the crumbling pavilion a dozen crimson blossoms blazed bright as flame in the snow, indignant and arrogant, as if despising the wanderer's wanderlust. At this I suddenly remembered the moistness of the heaped snow here, clinging, glistening and shining, quite unlike the dry northern snow which when a high wind blows, will fly up and fill the sky like mist. ("In the Tavern" 190)

This sensitivity to the beauty of a dilapidated backyard in dim light cannot belong to a tourist. The yearning for the soothing touch of the snow of his hometown reveals a strong emotional attachment to his familiar world. However, the surfacing of his ecstasy at rediscovering "home" is interrupted by attempts to drag himself away from the nurturing and pacifying atmosphere of his southern hometown: "the north was certainly not my home, yet when I

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9 As indicated in his short story, "The New Year's Sacrifice," Lu Xun places intellectuals in a position of moral responsibility for the masses. In the story the first person narrator is presented as directly responsible for the death of Xianglin's Wife. Because he is a "scholar who's travelled and seen the world" (171), she goes to him at the last moment of her life to seek the truth of human existence. She hopes that he can tell her that there is no hell and thus free her from fear of it. Lu Xun rates the first person narrator's ambiguous responses such as "There may be" and "I am not sure" as the last straw that kills her (170-172).

10 This struggle between his attachment to his cultural home and his determination to distract himself from it comes to the surface again in "Snow," a prose poem published ten months after "In the Tavern." In "Snow" his determination to confront his sense of alienation towards the north--the centre of the May Fourth cultural reform movement--is endowed with a near-heroic courage (328-29).
came south I could only count as a stranger. The powdery dry snow which whirled through the air up there and the clinging soft snow here were equally alien to me" ("In the Tavern" 190). This effort to counteract his nostalgia suggests a conscious effort to remind himself of his mission as an intellectual. Like the ancient scholar-official Wei Zhuang, who advises people "think not of home returning" until old age (197), Lu Xun is obliged to continue his journey to fulfil his political mission. The south, symbolized by the dilapidated garden, on the other hand, cannot support his political ambition.11

Significantly, Lu Xun does locate his ideal homeland in the countryside--but only in his childhood memories of it. As indicated by "Village Opera" (1922) his ideal rural homeland is aloof from the confines of the "iron house" and at the same time has the comfort of family connections. His childhood countryside is valued as a refuge from Confucian education, as he can avoid "reading the Book of Songs" (158). Viewed from a child's perspective, the freedom associated with the countryside takes the form of a variety of uninhibited play, such as dreaming or racing with the wind in a boat, fishing in the river, and watching operatic plays in the open.12 Playing symbolizes freedom of movement and thought. It also facilitates his interaction with the natural and social environments of the village. From the numerous

11Lin Yü-sheng observes that in Lun Xun the Chinese tradition's "integrated order had broken down, but some of its elements had not necessarily lost their identity and the power of influence" (Crisis 150). The dilapidated garden obviously symbolizes the appeal of some components in traditional culture, despite Lu Xun's rejection of traditional culture as a complete system. His perception of the garden betrays his education in the scholar-official tradition. For the ambivalent attitude towards the city and the countryside in the elite tradition see Tuan (Topophilia 102-106) and Tao Dongfeng (148-49).

12By uninhibited play I mean the opposite of organized games with set rules, such as the cricket match in Mitford's representation of village life. The emphasis of uninhibited play falls on the spontaneity of the activities, symbolizing a freedom from the confines of the classroom and of the adult world.
playmates of his own age group to adults who respect his desire to see the opera performance, everyone in the village appears to understand the importance of child's play. Even the physical environment appears to join in his playfulness: "distant grey hills, undulating like the backs of some leaping iron beasts, seemed to be racing past the stern of our boat" (161).

Owain Jones, though not in reference to China, describes childhood as "a small figure [with] a big shadow" and an "enormous philosophical edifice" (158, 176). We may apply such images to Chinese cultural traditions as well. Over Lu Xun's reconstruction of the imaginative freedom of childhood looms the big shadow cast over children's sensitivity in the Chinese literary imagination, a shadow that culminates in the Ming Dynasty philosopher Li Zhi's theory of the "childlike heart." For Li Zhi the "childlike heart" (tongxin) --an absence of preconceptions--is a double-edged phrase. On the one hand, it is the ideal state for artistic perception and expression; on the other, it is a challenge to tenets and dogmas. While the child's resistance to the "Book of Songs" finds its cultural support in Li Zhi's philosophical disparagement of dogmatic Confucianism, the figure of the child, linked with the political "shadow" of cultural reform, merges these two aspects.

As Qian Liqun aptly describes it, the May Fourth period involves a "child craze" (ertong re 147). The attention intellectuals gave to folklore and children's literature was in keeping with their efforts to restructure and revitalize Chinese culture. "Childhood" develops into a political construct during the May Fourth period. The "childlike heart," with its implied defiance of a moralistic or utilitarian literary representation, is magnified by the May Fourth

\[13\] Li Zhi equates the "childlike heart" with "the beginning of heart." He further maintains that "great literary works in the world are unexceptionally produced by those who retain the childlike heart. So long as one has the childlike heart, he will not be bound by doctrines" (368).
intellectuals into a counterdiscourse to established culture. Zhou Zuoren, for example, compares children to little "barbarians" (xiao yemen) emphasizing that "they live in their own small world and can depend only on themselves for survival. They fight like barbarians to defend their own rights and defeat all others in their world" (qtd. in Qian Liqun 158). The child's perspective and thus literature, like folk literature, was valued as a product of historical and psychological early stages of humanity, and elevated as an alternative to the old world order. Lu Xun's ideal rural homeland incorporates this freedom associated with children and contrasts significantly with the stagnant adult world in his rural fiction.

However, the rural homeland's reliance on the "child-like heart" also reduces its objective basis. Childhood sensitivity is so closely identified with nature that physical nature is only significant as a projection of the child's mind. Although May Fourth intellectuals are preoccupied with "nature" as a dialectical opposite to Confucian ethics (and indeed all cultural constructs), nature for Lu Xun is pure and emancipating only when it is associated with childhood. In Lu Xun's "My Old Home," for instance, nature varies drastically from a source

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14 Another "craze" of the May Fourth period was folklore. The Folk Song Society, established in 1921 at Peking University, involved many important members of the May Fourth cultural movement. The attention paid to folk songs revealed a three-fold interest associated with ethnological studies. Cai Yuanpei, the president of Peking University, emphasized the importance of studying local customs to the building of a powerful country. He tried to promote the exploration of local customs and cultures through folksongs, as exemplified in The Book of Songs of two thousand years ago. Liu Bannong, the editor-in-chief of the collection of folksongs, aimed at elevating modern vernacular Chinese to a poetic language in place of the obsolete diction of classical poetry. Zhou Zuoren saw in the folksong a possibility of breaking the confines of the gentrified literary tradition. While Yanagida Kunio, the Japanese ethnologist, appeared to serve as an immediate influence for Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren's theoretical interest in ethnological studies of folklore (Yoshio 248-256), folklore served an equally important role in the notion of cultural reform and reconstruction. However, folklore studies were more restricted to academies than children's literature.

15 Lin Yū-sheng points out in his "Characteristics of Lu Xun's Thought [A Supplement]," that Lu Xun is indebted to the notion of universal kinship for his socio-political outlook and his conviction of a
of strength to a source of oppression when applied to childhood and to adulthood respectively. Therefore, the physical environment is painted with a radiating energy in conjunction with young Runtu:

At this point a strange picture suddenly flashed into my mind: a golden moon suspended in a deep blue sky and beneath it the seashore, planted as far as the eye could see with jade-green watermelons, while in their midst a boy of eleven or twelve, wearing a silver necklet and grasping a steel pitchfork in his hand, was thrusting with all his might at a zha which dodged below and escaped through his legs. (91-92)

The picture of rural life is animated by Runtu's agility, an agility that resides in freedom from both the adult world such as the narrator's world of confusion, and Runtu's father's care-ridden life.

Back in the adult world, however, nature joins forces with society to become a source of repression. When the narrator meets a ragged Runtu thirty years after their first meeting, he sees the effect harsh natural forces--besides economic and social factors--have had on his appearance: "His round face, crimson before, had become sallow and acquired deep lines and wrinkles, his eyes too had become like his father's, with rims swollen and red, a feature common to most of the peasants who work by the sea and are exposed all day to the wind from the ocean" (96-97). Runtu is no longer a child of nature. In addition to being exposed to "the wind from the ocean," he is also exposed to an adult world and transformed by it inside and out. Besides betraying his conformist attitude towards class division, Runtu shows that he

"transcendental reality" ("A Supplement" 268). In fact, the notion of universal kinship in traditional Chinese ontology and ecological belief is also attributable to a humanistic perception of nature. May Fourth intellectuals such as Chen Duxiu raised "animal nature" (shuoxin) as a political agenda in the culture reform movement. However, the emphasis on "animal nature" instead of "nature" suggests a monist identification of physical nature with human nature. The Chinese concept of nature is little affected by the introduction of Darwin's theory of evolution. Evolution in China was understood mainly in terms of social history and
has lost his agility and naturalness when he unconsciously greets the narrator as "Master." In place of his former naturalness is a rigid, care-worn social being, indistinguishable from the insensible masses, trapped in the "iron house."

The notion that nature provides an escape from cultural confines only in relation to childhood is further elaborated in Lu Xun's reminiscence "From Hundred-Plant Garden to Three-Flavour Study" (1926). He indicates that from an adult perspective "there were only weeds growing [in the garden]" (389). He then juxtaposes this view of the garden with the point that "in my childhood it was my paradise" (389). By bringing out what is missing in the adult's view of the world, he emphasizes the richer world of imagination the child inhabits. For Lu Xun, the child's sensitivity to signs of life in the garden (insects in the grass, birds in the trees, and berries) signifies that nature loses its meaning to adults and can therefore be dismissed from their life.

Thus, instead of an escape into the natural world, Lu Xun's rural homeland retreats into a cultural construct of childhood, where children and illiterate peasants are identified with an essentialist "nature" or "naturalness" to the extent that they even substitute for physical nature itself. The childhood rural home, the well-constructed world of a child's pastoral, remains a questionable possibility. It is undermined by the very idea of childhood memory--the foundation of the rural homeland. As Owain Jones points out, there is an uncertainty whether childhood is "retrievable through memory or whether the illusion that it is irretrievable in fact makes it even more inaccessible and invisible" (176). This paradoxical structure of memories of childhood--that is, the childhood experience constructed from an
adult point of view but assumed as the child's—gives a dreamlike framework to the story.

"Village Opera" provides the first attempt at reconstructing a rural homeland in modern Chinese literature. It has been looked upon as a major source of influence for the writing of the rural homeland or "native soil literature" (xiangtu wenxue) in modern Chinese literature (Ding 40; Li Yukun "Lu Xun—the Founder of Native Soil Literature"). In fact this short story incorporates many motifs and hesitations, which can be further developed. However, until Shen Congwen develops a solid landscape of fictional West Hunan that meets a modernist desire for renewal and justifies nostalgic attachment, the rural homeland remained either a fragmented landscape or a politically ambivalent sentiment in modern Chinese literature.

Lu Xun's interest in the rural homeland was continued by a group of young provincials, who came to Beijing to pursue a western style education. Lu Xun introduced them as "native soil writers." He explains that "whoever in Beijing writes what is in his heart,  

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16 "Native soil novel" refers to the fictional narratives of the writer's native rural region. Another commonly used term is "nativist novel." See Lu Xun's definition on the next page below. For the evolution of the concept of "native soil literature" see Rosemary Haddon. My use of the term is restricted to the writers of the 1920s, the group of writers to whom Lu Xun referred as "native soil writers."

17 See Hua-ling Nich for a succinct description of the differences between Lu Xun and Shen Congwen (9-10). Kinkley is right that as writers Shen Congwen and Lu Xun are "of comparable merit" (Odyssey 285) and that the complementary attempt to position Shen Congwen as second only to Lu Xun in modern Chinese literature still testifies to the confinement of a dominant political hierarchy in modern Chinese literary criticism (Odyssey 1). While it is almost impossible to rank writers with different temperaments and of different thematic interests without reducing the complexity of the writers, the very attempt to rank them implies the residual notion of canon. With writers as different as Lu Xun and Shen Congwen the question is whether there can be a single criterion that accommodates both of them. With regard to the reconstruction of the rural homeland, Shen Congwen made a breakthrough in modern Chinese literature, developing many motifs that are only latent in Lu Xun's rural idylls. Yet the intense complexity of Lu Xun's vision of China, resulting from the tension between his education in both traditional Chinese culture and his contact with Western learning in the context of the May Fourth movement singles him out as irreplaceable. This complex vision has not been surpassed by any other modern Chinese writer.
no matter whether this writer describes himself as objective or subjective he is a native soil writer" (Daxi 4: 9). While most of these writers like Lu Xun mainly express their concern over the rural hometown, some writers such as Jian Xian'ai and Xu Qinwne express a nostalgic attachment to their home regions. That nostalgia for the old home is involuntary, and perhaps irrational, is articulated by Jian Xian'ai:

I . . . came from far-off Guizhou, and in the midst of this sand and dust and feeling very confused, I have passed almost seven years. This cannot be said to be a short time, but how I have spent this time is beyond my recall. Day after day passes quickly and the images of childhood become indistinct like the morning mist which spirals away and vanishes until all that is left to me is a feeling of emptiness and aloneness . . . . I have decided to print this collection of short stories . . . as a means of remembering the lovely years of my childhood from which I have been separated. (Daxi 4: 8/ trans. Haddon 8)g

Jian Xian'ai articulates a modernist sensibility of displacement. This open admission of his attachment to the countryside and his retreat to memories of the childhood home expresses his desire for, in Keith Halfacree's words, an "ontological security" (83) embedded in childhood memories of his rural homeland.

The countryside that Jian Xian'ai identifies with is thus identical with his family. The decline of the family makes the countryside no longer a useful reference of his identity. His short story "The Night he Arrived Home" (1926) exemplifies a native soil writer's attachment to his old home, and a sense of insecurity due to the shattered vision of home. This short story highlights the decline of his family by a host of facts: the narrator is single, his parents are dead, the servants are gone and part of the family house is rented out to tenants. Consequently the feeling of loss that is "as if one cannot find his way home after a prolonged search in perplexity" (238)h is put in the narrative limelight. What he has in mind apparently is a contrastive picture of the past and present. Yet he only articulates the emotion arising from
such comparison. As Lu Xun notes, in Jian Xian'ai's fictional narrative of the rural region
"what emerges is a feeling of nostalgia, rather than an exoticism that might either open up
readers' minds or expose them to the writer's experience" (Daxi 4: 9/ trans. David Wang
"Imaginary Nostalgia" 108). In the Chinese context, where each region has its distinct
topographical features, "exoticism" becomes an extended reference to regional colour or
physical environment. In other words, Jian Xian'ai's construction of the old "home" is only
invested with abundant sentiment.

The feeling of loss is sounded again by Xu Qinwen in his short story "My Father's
Garden" (1923). The garden serves as symbol of the family's vicissitudes. After some attempts
to retrieve his memories of the garden of a certain summer, the narrator concludes that his
childhood happiness is gone with the garden: "Suppose that we can replant flowers in father's
garden, we cannot possibly restore the happiness of the past. Since Sister Fang has died, I will
never be able to see father's garden as it was then" (267). The garden, which serves as a frame
for childhood memory, merely reminds him of the irretrievability of the past. However, the
fact that in native soil literature there is not a tangibly landscape of the rural homeland is owes
as much to the decline of the agrarian economy as to the writers' hesitation to assert the value
of rural culture.

Although Lu Xun is sympathetic to Xu's nostalgia, he points to the futility of the
writer's effort to reconstruct the past:

Before a writer sets out to write native soil literature, he finds himself already
exiled from his home, driven by life to a strange place. What can he do but
recall his father's garden, a garden which does not exist any more? It is more
comfortable and self-consoling to recall things at home which do not exist any
more than things which still exist yet are inaccessible. (Daxi 4: 9/trans. David
Lu Xun tries to channel Xu's connections with the countryside into a more "useful" direction, maintaining that "futile melancholy ought to be discarded. . . . If spread, this sobriety and humour will be a danger for the writer" (10). Meanwhile he suggests that Xu should write more stories like "Stone Quarry" (1926), a haunting story about the predicament of rock-gatherers who are forced by the need for survival to continue their occupation, knowing the risks they take with their health and lives.

As Ding Fan observes, Lu Xun's description of native soil literature starts with himself (53) as does his critical reflection on nostalgia. As an intellectual leader of the May Fourth cultural reform movement, Lu Xun apologizes for his inability to dissociate himself from the past, a past that is embedded in his personal and cultural memories. He writes in the preface to *Morning Flower Picked up at Dusk*, a collection of his reminiscences:

> For some time I frequently recalled the fruits and vegetables that I had in my childhood while in my hometown, such as water caltrop, beans, wild rice stem, and muskmelon. They had been so extremely delicious that they made me homesick. Later after living away from home for many years, when I eventually had the fortune to have them again, they tasted just so. They retained their original flavour only in my memory. Perhaps they will remain deceptive for the rest of my life and lure me from time to time to look back to the past. (2)

This apology for the act of memorizing the past negates the significance of the thing memorized. In this light, introspective interest in an idealized country past can be illusory.

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18 This apology appears to imply that activation of the past through memory is politically ambivalent in light of the May Fourth program of promoting the mentality of modernity and emancipation from traditional bondage. However, Lu Xun in the meanwhile makes it very explicit in his reminiscences such as "Father's Illness" and "Mr. Fujino" that past experiences and memories of them contribute to the formation of his world outlook.
In fact a very small portion of native soil literature of the 1920s can be related to constructive nostalgia like "Village Opera," which is also Lu Xun's only short story completely devoted to the vision of children's pastoral. In spite of their connections with the rural world, writers of native soil literature hesitate to endow their connection with the countryside with any cultural and social significance, or represent the countryside as a land desirable for habitation.

Zhou Zuoren, another influential literary critic of the May Fourth period, provides an alternative perspective on rural writing, trying to introduce an aesthetic and landscape interest in rural writing (A Garden of One's Own). His own contribution lies mainly in prose essays. In the 1920s, he published a series of essays to develop the scenic and ethnological landscape of his hometown in East Zhejiang province from specific landscape images and local customs. "The Herbs of my Hometown" (1927), "Black Top Ferry Boat" (1926), "On Wine" (1926) and "Water Caltrop" (1926) are a few examples. These sketches of rural life, which are free from the socio-political considerations of current rural life, focus on the writer's cultural appreciation of traditional rural life. Unlike Victorian rural fiction that is intended to capture and preserve a disappearing world, Zhou Zuoren's sketches of his home region are limited to aspects of "regional flavour." Panoramic pictures of the rural region or comprehensive representations of its life are beyond the moderate scale of his rural writing.

Zhou Zuoren's aesthetic and ethnological interests in rural culture are echoed in the works of his admirers, a group of university students, including Bing Xin, Yu Pingbo, and Fei Ming, known in the 1930s as members of the Peking School of writers and intellectuals. 19

19"Peking School" (jingpai) refers to writers who contributed to major literary journals in Beijing in the 1930s. It differs from writers of "Beijing flavour" (jingwei). Most writers of "the Peking School" were affiliated with universities. They did not necessarily reside in Beijing, nor did their writing focus on this city.
Simple country life and the pleasures of childhood constitute recurrent themes in the prose of Bing Xin and Yu Pingbo, and in the short stories of Fei Ming. These writers' self-declared interest in the primitive, the simple, the commonplace, and the artless perspective of children provides them with an outlet for their training in the classics. This training evokes the "childlike heart" as an ideal condition for artistic recreation, and "plainness" (chongdan) as an indicator of sophisticated taste and cultural accomplishment. The Peking School of writers promoted these qualities. Xu Daoming, in his study of the Peking School of writers, aptly describes their writing as a "preference of lavas to colourful butterflies" (50). Although they frequently articulate their keen sensibility to beauty in descriptions of peasants and people living on modest means, their interest in the primitive and artless reveals a nearly metaphysical sensitivity to beauty and love in daily life. They provide a cultural and aesthetic approach to a premodern way of life, although they are not necessarily writing about rural life.

The cultural appreciation of simple country life that Zhou Zuoren started culminates in Fei Ming's lyrical portrayal of rural life. Fei Ming's rural fiction focuses both on the writer's artistic and humanistic sensitivity to country people and on the characters' sensitivity to love. He likes to depict rural folks' adherence to love and kindness in their endurance of the harsh conditions of the countryside. Their worldly naiveté is credited for enabling them to savour the pleasures of life such as love and friendship.

Rural folk in Fei Ming's fictional world are endowed with a subtle sensitivity to life instead of the robustness that is usually associated with a physical life. A great majority of his rural

The latter term refers to writers who were natives of Beijing and known especially for their writing on old communities in Beijing. See Xu Daoming for a comprehensive discussion of the Peking School and its contribution to modern Chinese literature.
characters are children, elderly people or people of delicate health. Their precarious life is endowed with a touch of genuine caring and delicate beauty. For instance, in "Peach Orchard" (1927), the young heroine, a farmer's daughter, in the midst of her illness, embraces the world with love, trying to heal all breaches among people in her life: she forgives the person who owes money to her father, and prays that her deceased mother forgives her father in her memory. The father is also endowed with a childlike sincerity and superstition: because the daughter mentions in passing that it would be nice to have a peach in winter, he exchanges his irreplaceable wine bottle for a glass peach, believing it will cure her illness. However, the glass peach is accidentally knocked down by a child. The story ends: "the child's little heart is broken silently, he and Old Wang looked each other in the eye" (132). Such pathetic efforts at happiness not only contrast with the unpredictability of life but also provide a touching warmth embedded in their naivete. Fei Ming highlights the spirituality in his characters' moderate and unambitious mode of life. However, his idyllic vision of rural life lacks the vitality of an earthy life.

However, from Lu Xun's perspective, the cultural and aesthetic appreciations of the rural world expressed by Zhou Zuoren and his disciples present a dubious retreat to the past. He pinpoints the sentiments that Zhou Zuoren promotes in essay writing as "bric-à-brac," taking

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20. Fei Ming's later work, such as The Bridge, is engaged in developing a preconceived vision of idyllic rural life. He shifts from the simple country folk to a group of young intellectuals who strive to locate pastoral visions provided in classical poems in the rural landscape pastoral visions provided in classical poems.

21. Essay writing, to which Peking School writers made a considerable contribution, is recognized as a chief achievement of May Fourth literature. Lu Xun also acknowledges that "short prose compositions were almost more successful than novels, plays or poetry" ("The Crisis of the Essay," 342).
issue with them for "encourag[ing] those features held in common with the old essays--tolerance, elegance, preciosity--to provide bric-a-brac for discriminating scholars" ("The Crisis of the Essay," 342). In the same light, Lu Xun criticizes Fei Ming that "from the perspective of an impatient reader, he is simply pretentious and self-pitying" (Daxi 4: 6-7). Thus, nostalgia--either personal or aesthetic--is not encouraged in the cultural climate of the May Fourth period.

The survival of the rural homeland as a positive image in modern Chinese literature was quite doubtful before Shen Congwen. Furthermore, unlike Hardy, Shen Congwen did not have a well developed landscape of the countryside to write against. To establish his rural homeland he had to construct a solid image as well as locate it properly in this environment.

Shen Congwen's arrival on the Chinese literary scene was as quiet and inconspicuous as his migration from a border town to Beijing. His early writing vibrates between and overlaps with native soil literature and the Peking School before he departs from them to construct his own vision of the rural homeland. Like many provincial intellectuals, he fled his rural homeland with hopes of starting a new life in Beijing. His determination to bid farewell to both rural West Hunan and his military life is manifested in his change of name to "Congwen," meaning "to pursue a literary career." Looking upon Beijing as the cultural home that would nurse him into full-fledged membership in the intelligentsia, he identified himself as a student upon his arrival in the city. It was not until he was rejected by the universities and left jobless and penniless that he perceived himself as displaced in the city.

The insecurity of his prospects and his self-consciousness about his impoverishment, along with physical discomforts such as the unfamiliar chill of the north wind, made the
hostility of Beijing quite tangible. Shen Congwen's first attempts at creative writing complain of the treatment he received in the city. He is indignant over the city's refusal to recognize him as one of its own. Being an outsider obviously gives him no pride at this stage of his life. However, this setback in Beijing does not make him look homeward to West Hunan for consolation, or seek to identify with it as Jian Xian'ai does in his fictional narrative of his old home. Shen Congwen's encounter with the city appears only to intensify the conflict between his intention to enter the privileged enclosure and his frustration at not being able to do so.

It was the writers of the Peking School who led him out of this predicament. Cultural appreciation of the unsophisticated rural way of life appears to have offered him a literary approach to his rural connections. He confesses to having a great admiration for Zhou Zuoren's interest in daily life scenes: "he takes a stroll along a small pond by the road, feels the joy and anxiety of life in children's shouting and crying. He senses the serenity and movements of the living world with a peaceful mind and is perceptive of a beauty often overlooked by ordinary eyes" ("On Fei Ming" 96). Shen Congwen's rural fiction is also indebted to Fei Ming. What Shen Congwen notes in Fei Ming's representation of the countryside appears to be what he aims to achieve in his own writing:

In almost every one of his stories, we encounter peasants we are familiar with in the village where we grew up. We can approach the jingling giggle of country girls, the small creek, or a sunflower growing in a lonely corner of the vegetable garden in his writing. We can inhale from his books the country breath that mixes the fragrance of hay with a whiff of manure. His writing is filled with the serenity of the countryside. ("On Fei Ming" 97)

The unperturbed countryside and the narrator's sensitivity towards the poetry of the

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uneventful rural life are both present in Shen Congwen's early sketches of country life, such as "Festival Fruit Congee" (1925) and "Roses and Little Sister Nine" (1925).

These two stories also overlap with native soil literature. They are either set in the family courtyard or the family house. Family connections are the core of the picture. Rosemary Haddon observes in her "Survey of Native Soil Literature in Mainland China and Taiwan," that Shen Congwen's early writings of rural life are his "most nativist works" (92). By "nativist" she explains that they were "based on his rural childhood memories" (92).

However, Shen Congwen differs from other provincial writers of his time not only in his "romantic[izing] the peasant" (Haddon 13) but also in his intention to reconstruct the rural homeland as a tangible presence.

"Festival Fruit Congee" recreates a childhood rural home through images of warmth, smell, and taste. The congee, cooked with eight ingredients including millet, lentils, dates, chestnuts, and peanuts (WJ 1:23), starts a season of festival, leisure and family reunion in the countryside. While the sweet congee symbolizes the joy related to the harvest, the celebrating of rural life permeates the house like the fragrance of the food. As the narrator remarks, "just watching the hissing, the simmering and smelling the sweetness is enough to make people's mouths water in anticipation" (WJ 1: 23). The fruit congee as a food charged with the festival atmosphere is used to activate a personal as well as cultural memory of childhood.

Significantly, the story is told from the viewpoint of a child, Ba'er. Ba'er's anticipation and imagination of the process of cooking, which represents a child's sensory immersion in the festival atmosphere, emphasizes the tangible joy of rural life.

Ba'er's parents' conversation at the dinner table, which is centred on their dog, further
demonstrates the peacefulness and self-sufficiency of their life. The peasant's house, which presents a haven sealed off from social disturbance as well as the elements, manifests a stability that is attributed to the regularity of rural life. As Haddon observes, the "ease, rusticity and loftiness" associated with rural life in this sketch have their roots in traditional Chinese poetry (92). The manifestation of peace in the specific and detailed depiction of the festival fruit congee supplies tangibility to the concept of a self-sufficient rural life. The loosely linked details appear to underscore a process of observation as well as the narrator's appreciation of the pleasures of a simple life.

"Roses and Little Sister Nine," written in the same year as "Festival Fruit Congee," fills memories of the childhood home with colour and fragrance. The story relives memories of planting rose bushes in the family courtyard in the fall—a big event for the whole family from the mother to the children—to caring for the rose bushes in summer. Shen Congwen traces the excitement each rose bud brings to the family in the spring: Brother Six and Sister Nine compete with each other to find the buds. The mother looks upon the roses planted by her children as part of her family. She never touches them, nor does she allow others to touch them. When the roses drop, she preserves them and sends dried rose petals to her children living away from home so that they can remember the lovely times they have had. This sensitivity to memory suggests the durability of the aesthetic appreciation of the countryside.

These early sketches of rural life, which interfuse the sensitivity of a child with the narrator's ability to invest everyday experiences with meaning, recall Fei Ming's rural fiction and Zhou Zuoren's attempt to develop landscapes of a home region. However, as Kinkley notes, Shen Congwen did not possess the "erudition" of the scholarly writers of the Peking
school or their ability to develop symbolism in the early stages of his writing (*Odyssey* 123). Unlike Zhou Zuoren and Fei Ming, his structuring of rural scenes is very much restricted to the family and household and is isolated from the regional or rural scene at large. Instead of the "extended local colour mood pieces," that Haddon credits to these early sketches in light of his later writings (92), locale in Shen Congwen's homelike oasis is largely generalized. There appears to be little difference between "Roses and Little Sister Nine" and Xu Qinwen's "Father's Garden" in terms of their structure of family enclosures and their isolation from the topography of any region. Both can be located in the gentle and prosperous countryside of the Jiangsu or Zhejiang.

Indeed there is a definite "leap" from the enclosure of the family compound to his vigorous fictional West Hunan with its distinct topographical features. Both the family compound and the extended rural homeland are presented to the reader simultaneously but are unrelated to each other in this first collection of short stories. Other stories in the same collection *Ducks* (1926), such as "Rain," "Things Gone by," "Night Fishing," "Daigou," "On Board a Boat," "Occupation," and "Huaihua Town," for example, are focused on a wider life experience in West Hunan. They are successful in capturing the Miao tribe, military life, and rough natural elements, but they still lack a channel to connect life in the family enclosure with life in the open fields to fashion a complete rural homeland. Shen Congwen soon provides this channel by incorporating the special location and topography of his home region.
West Hunan: the unfamiliar but recognizable rural homeland

As with Hardy, the positioning of the rural world has a great bearing on Shen Congwen's fictional rural homeland. Whereas Hardy provides a topographical map to his fictional Wessex, Shen Congwen gains the confidence needed to establish his own rural homeland by placing it outside the site of mainstream Chinese culture. Both Hardy and Shen Congwen base their fictional rural homelands on life in specific rural regions. Shen Congwen, nonetheless, makes use of general concepts of West Hunan's backwardness to his advantage.

On the strength of his diligent studies of the area and of Shen Congwen's fictional West Hunan, Kinkley maintains that "Shen Congwen's literary West Hunan is bound to people and places that really exist" in contrast to an imaginary place such as Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha Country (Odyssey 5). However, as Shen Congwen explains, the real West Hunan is no less distant and inaccessible than an imaginary locale:

This place truly exists but it is very far away. Although you can locate the small dot on the map, it remains largely outside the imagination of your northerner. I say it is distant precisely because it lies beyond many northerners' (and not only northerners') imaginations. (WJ 1:42)\[
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While "northerners" refers to his readers in Beijing, their "imagination" apparently alludes to general conceptualizations of the countryside as well as of West Hunan.

The sense of distance about West Hunan is spatial, temporal, and cultural. West Hunan, which is screened by mountains to the north and east, includes the area west of Snowy

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23 Neither Hardy's Wessex nor Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha is completely imaginary. While Hardy's Wessex is based on Dorsetshire, Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha is based on the state of Mississippi in a particular historical period. They are as real as Shen Congwen's West Hunan. However, by giving his fictional rural homeland the real name of a region, Shen Congwen obviously intends to draw meaning from the reputation of the real place.
Peaks (Xuefengshan) in Hunan province. As a topographically secluded world, it was inaccessible to modern transportation in Shen Congwen's time. Its isolation from the more developed eastern part of China in turn contributed to its backwardness. Moreover, for centuries the wooded areas of West Hunan have been the habitation of the Miao tribes, who still retain their primitive mode of life. West Hunan was therefore a cultural frontier on the margin of Han culture, where the mainstream Han culture diluted into the culture of ethnic minorities.

It was fortunate for Shen Congwen that he wrote in a period obsessed with exoticism. In the May Fourth period distant countries, different cultures, and alternative forms of literatures were all valued as possible resources for reconstructing or even replacing existing Chinese culture. Foreign literature enjoyed the highest prestige. Zhou Zuoren argues: "What China is in need of is a sort of new freedom and new discipline with which to build a new Chinese civilization" (*A Book of Rainy Days* 138-39). Lu Xun advises the young reader "to read little or even not to read Chinese books at all, but read more foreign books" ("This is what I mean" 152). Children's literature and folklore were also placed above classical Chinese literature as expressions of an energetic early stage of humankind. The unprecedented interest in Western culture, folklore and children's literature among May Fourth intellectuals was a manifestation of this search for a counter cultural discourse in culture and the general aspiration for the outside world.

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24 Leo Ou-fan Lee quotes Liang Shiqiu as saying that the May Fourth New Culture movement was "fundamentally under foreign influence" (*The Romantic Generation* 294). The interest in western culture shown by the May Fourth intellectuals was similarly fuelled by the desire for a counterculture.

25 The exoticism attached to West Hunan adds to Shen Congwen's appeal as a writer. His resultant popularity
Shen Congwen uses West Hunan's marginal position to his advantage in the midst of this distrust of traditional Chinese. His construction of the distant and mysterious West Hunan, his fictional rural homeland, nonetheless, presents an unfamiliar but recognizable rural world. On the one hand, Shen Congwen introduces an exotic life associated with ethnic minorities as well as a more vigorous life in place of the generalized and genteel countryside often found in rural idylls of classical poetry. On the other hand, the life he describes is recognizable. His reconstruction of the rural homeland is theoretically supported by Chinese cultural conceptions of the monism that links nature and human beings, as exemplified in popular conceptions of water.

Shen Congwen writes in "The Relation of my Writing to Water" that "most of my stories are set along the river. Of all my stories, the ones I am most satisfied with frequently take place on board of boats" (325). Rivers, which are associated with open spaces, are the backdrop of his West Hunan. They are the blood vessels, the most prominent landscape image and symbol of his fictional West Hunan. With the presence of rivers, Shen Congwen appears to be the first modern Chinese writer to extend his reconstruction of the rural home world from the family circle to an entire region.

The word that Shen Congwen frequently uses for river is "water" (shui). Water, in its Chinese equivalent, encompasses water, river, stream, sea, and flood. It is a substance, a natural element, and a cosmological force. In an agrarian culture like China, water is directly associated with life and valued as a source of sustenance. The philosophy of Lao Tzu, based

owes both to his writing and to his unusual cultural background. The interest in his personal background continues in the form of numerous and often repetitive accounts of his life experience in Shen Congwen studies in China.
on a monist ecology of universal kinship, maintains that "water benefits a pyramid of living things," including plants, animals and human beings (Allan 20). Because of its indispensable importance to life, Guan Zhong (?-645 B.C.) singles out water as the origin and essence of the universe (Word Source Dictionary 1889). Contrary to the rationalist or metaphysical western world view, classical Chinese philosophy often explains the world by analogy to natural phenomena. Water, as Sarah Allan observes, becomes the "root metaphor for Chinese philosophy" (10-18). The Yin Yang and Five Phases school (250 B.C.) established this dialectical Chinese cosmology, taking water as one of five basic elements whose presence and variation constitute the phenomenal world. Thus, when Shen Congwen highlights the presence of water in his construction of the rural homeland, his construct is supported both by the physical presence of water and a long and rich tradition of the cosmological and philosophical attributes of water.

In Shen Congwen's fictional rural homeland, rivers and tributaries stand out as landscape images as well as bridges to the interior of the rural world. He leads the reader on a journey to West Hunan by following a river:

The highway running east from Sichuan to Hunan comes, just west of the border, to Chatong, a small town in the hills. Nearby a stream flows past a small pagoda, at the foot of which lives a solitary household: an old man, a girl and a dog.

The stream winds down three li or so through the rocks to join the big river at Chatong, and once you cross the water it is only one li over the hills to the town. . . . The water level fluctuates considerably, and while there is no money to build a bridge a ferry has been provided, a barge which holds about twenty men and horses. (Border Town 3)

This waterway reveals the topography of West Hunan as well as leads to the presence of

26 The others are fire, metal, wood, and earth.
human beings in Shen Congwen's rural homeland. While the serenity of the first scene gives
West Hunan the aesthetic appeal of a natural retreat, the second relates the stream to human
activity and livelihood. Thus what Hua-ling Nieh refers to as Shen Congwen's "delightful
sketches" (88) are never completely static. There is a visible dynamic dimension to the scenic
portrayal of his rural homeland. Each picture appears to centre on the relationship of the
locals to their environment.

A major attraction of West Hunan, as Shen Congwen sees it, lies in the transparent
clearness of its streams and rivers: "If you sail upstream, you can see clear to the bottom of
pools thirty to fifty feet deep, so transparent is the water. In sunlight, even the white pebbles
on the river bed and the veins on the carnelian pebbles stand out distinctly. The fish darting to
and fro seem flying in air" (Border Town 10). The crystal clear river does not stand for a no-
man's land but signifies the undisturbed reign of nature in the region, and the peaceful
coexistence of human beings and nature. The landscape reveals a way of life and suggests a
meticulous integration of human presence in nature:

The mountains on either side, covered with the tapering bamboos from which
paper is made, are a deep vivid emerald the whole year round. Most
homesteads near the water are set among peach and apricot trees so that in
spring wherever there is blossom you can count on finding people, and
wherever people are you can count on a drink. In summer the girls' purple
tunics hung up to dry in the sun serve as flags to mark the whereabouts of men,
while all through the middle reaches of the river in autumn and winter your
eyes are caught by the cottages perched on crags overhanging the water. With
the brown mud walls, black tiles and perfect setting, they harmonize so
completely with the surroundings that your heart leaps up in delight. (Border
Town 10-11)

This exuberance of plants along the river testifies to West Hunan as a nurturing environment
for living. The nourishing nature of water is affirmed by the healthy and good looking (as
Shen Congwen likes to emphasize) West Hunan men and women. Its role as a nurturing haven is manifested in its abundance of natural products as well as its hospitality. In West Hunan, the open fields and the woods provide beds for travellers ("The Lovers"); orchards and residents are generous with fruit and drinks (The Border Town 9). West Hunanese who refuse to sell fruit from their orchards, yet are willing to give them freely to travellers are wealthier than urbanites in their own way; their richness is embedded in the land upon which they live.

The generosity and hospitality of West Hunan is best read in conjunction with Shen Congwen's representation of the city. His representation of Beijing, the cultural and political centre of China, focuses on its barrenness and its cold winter, symbolized by its windiness. Wind, which is associated with the dryness of the northern city, is used by Shen Congwen as an indicator of the hostility of urban culture. In the autobiographical sketches of his early stay in Beijing, wind sharpens his sensitivity to poverty; reveals his poverty to passers-by; cuts him to the quick under his thin winter clothes and makes him sleepless at night. Wind crystallizes the indifference of the city to a stranger. This contrastive view of the north and south appears to echo Lu Xun's discrimination between the snow of the south and the north. Both Lu Xun and Shen Congwen are sensitive to the nurturing, moist air of their rural homelands. However, Shen Congwen elaborates on such features to find cultural and philosophical support for his personal attachment to his hometown.

As an inhabited landscape, West Hunan is characterized by cottages nestled up against the river and half hidden in the woods. The modest presence of human inhabitants along the river indicates their reliance on the river for sustenance as well as their daily interactions with nature. Water as a sustaining element permeates the entire environment. Its
transpiration is felt in the moist green of the surrounding mountains, the vivid verdure of the bamboo woods, and the azure fabric of the Miao housewives' attire. Even the names of some of Shen Congwen's heroines, such as Cuicui, reflect the greenness of the environment: "Because their home was among bamboos and hills of a glorious emerald green, the old boatman gave the poor mite the name of Cuicui [Emerald]" (*Border Town 7*). This intimacy between people and their environment reveals that the country people, like water, connect with a wide cosmos rather than block it from their lives. In other words the countryside is not a suffocating enclosure but a centre for dynamic interactions with nature.

Shen Congwen introduces a vigorous vision of rural life and takes issue with what he calls "feminine flatness" (nü xing de pingdan ["From Bing Xin to Fei Ming" 231]) in Fei Ming's delicate pictures of rural life. By "feminine flatness" he refers to Fei Ming's tendency to explore meaning in trifles of daily life. By contrasting West Hunan with domesticated rural scenes in the lyrical prose of Zhou Zuoren, Shen Congwen further indicates that he has walked out of the shadow of the Peking school:

> Some people think the sound of sweeping oars beautiful. Others find beauty in the sound of the wind and the rain. Nor is there any dearth of simpletons who find it in a baby's cries at night or the sound of reeds as they whisper their dreams into the breeze. All these are poetry. But the songs of the White-faced Miao girls are even more poetic, more apt to lead you to intoxicated rapture and to dream. Men who have heard their songs think nothing of shedding blood for these girls, such is their magic, handed down through history. ("Meijin, Baozi and the White Kid" 28)

This amorous aura in Shen Congwen's rural fiction testifies to the fluidity of West Hunan folk's sensitivity. A significant portion of his rural writing centres on the relationships between men and women. The love theme runs through the legends and the courtship of the Miao, the
baffling experiences of adolescent love, the rejuvenation middle-aged people feel when in love, the brisk relationship between merchants and innkeepers, and even relationships between sailors and prostitutes. Shen Congwen portrays passionate love as an intensified form of life and as an indication of the mental and physical fitness of the West Hunan rural folk. This passionate and sanguine attitude towards life is presented as a regional characteristic. Despite different dispositions and social status, residents of West Hunan are uniform in their ardour in love.

The Miao, who customarily express their love in songs, are chosen to articulate the philosophy of life of West Hunan people: "Neither money nor good looks is sufficient to secure you a bride . . . those who could not sing well of their love were incapable of passion, or even of leading good lives" ("Zhulong" 139). These songs are performed during courtship to celebrate and solemnize passion on a communal level. The identification of love with life relates eroticism with a deep respect for life.

Shen Congwen's West Hunan stories, especially those intended to pass for Miao legends or folk tales, such as "Meijin, Baozi and the White Kid" (1929), are representative of this devotion to love. In his writing about the Miao, love is celebrated with ritual and even pledged with life. In this story, a young Miao woman named Meijin (Bewitching Gold) and a young man named Baozi (Leopard) fall in love with each other while exchanging songs. They agree to have their first rendezvous in a cave that evening. However, Baozi needs to bring a

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27 Most of his legends are literary mythologies authored by Shen Congwen himself. Only "Ah Jin" is found to be a popular folk tale without an author. Shen Congwen appears to have deliberately conflated his stories with folk tales. So when Kinkley asked Shen Congwen to verify the source of his stories, the writer demurely replied that his memory failed him (Odyssey 332).
white kid with him as a pledge of his love for Meijin, in keeping with the Miao custom. Yet, he spends too much time looking for a perfect white kid and is late for their rendezvous. Suspicious of the reason behind his delay, Meijin takes her life out of despair. Baozi appears with the kid just as Meijin expires. Realizing the irretrievable loss of Meijin, Baozi ends his life with Meijin's knife to show his loyalty.

The suicide of the couple as a result of bad timing recalls Shakespeare's tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*. Yet the story is told in a pedestrian tone with different versions of Meijin's death as if with an intention to lessen its tragic tension and smooth it into their everyday lives. The story, which is said to be one of fifty-odd similar stories of the Miao tribe, represents Meijin and Baozi's interfusion of love and death in a local version. The Miao people, whom Shen Congwen refers to as the most ancient living culture in China, are represented as both primitive and chivalrous in their disregard of worldly things. With an embellishment characteristic of oral literature, the narrator brings to light the people who are involved with the spreading of the story. The popularity of the story and the pride with which the Miao tell it indicate that the couple's devotion to love represents their ideal. When the narrator complains of the discrepancy between today's Miao women and Meijin, he implies that before their "good customs died" they all took Meijin as their role model.

While the primitive tribes celebrate love with rituals and spectacles, most of Shen Congwen's romantic lovers express their love unceremoniously. The majority of them are ordinary men and women living a hard life along the river. In Shen Congwen's words, they live with their "hands and feet on the earth like animals." In modern society, they are social inferiors in contrast to the leisured class and urban intellectuals. However, like plants and
animals they are inextricably bound to the spirit of place. Michael Serres points out, in "The Natural Contract," that modern man is only aware of the flickering of time but not the weather and seasons which also reside in time (1). Shen Congwen's West Hunan, on the contrary, follows the cycle of life in nature represented by the rhythmic changes of seasons.

Owing to the influence of the monist cosmology of Taoism, there is a frequent evocation in pre-modern Chinese literature, especially in popular literature such as drama, of the analogy of sensual desire in human beings and the life cycle of plants and animals. The idea that human beings and the universe are governed by the same principles creates a bond of kinship between human beings and plants. The idea that human beings are a part of the universal organism and are born with a channel of communication with nature is articulated in the concept of "lamentation for the passing of the spring" (shangchun). For example, in Bai Pu's play Over the Wall and On the Horse, the heroine legitimates her desire for love with the maxim "human beings and willow trees are analogous in nature" (54). Shen Congwen similarly sees sensual desire as universal, residing in people in general regardless of their social status and education. Unlike classical drama, which mostly features the conflict between people's natural desire and their yearning for social ascendance, Shen Congwen's rural fiction highlights the wholesomeness of rural life. The country folk liken themselves to plants and act accordingly. In "Picking Ferns" (1928), for example, the protagonist Wu Ming searches for an

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28 Shen Congwen writes: "If we look at the devotion of a soft and yielding female as a net, then none of the world's sinners can boast that it was easy to escape after falling into such a net. The Musty Rice Immortal who had mastered the supernatural arts and could ride the clouds, harness the wind, and sail through the air as he pleased had only to catch a glimpse of a bare ankle to lose his magic powers. How much less could it be said of us ordinary mortals, successors to a potent heritage of sexual desire, that any one kind of person could be free from such entanglement?" ("The Company Commander" 167-68)
outlet to express his love for Ah Hei. He feels encouraged when he notices that "Peach and plum trees were in full blossom, cuckoos and thrushes sang charmingly, the sun shone warmly, the grass that covered the earth grew so soft" (185). He regards these as encouraging signs from nature. He grows bold because his desire appears to be in perfect keeping with the season and with his environment. Shen Congwen underscores Wu Ming’s sensual responsiveness to nature as a natural and healthy harmony with nature.

Moreover, this youthful and sensual response to nature extends from courtship—a specific stage of one's life—to a general approach to life. "The Lovers" (1929) highlights the natural or biological ethics represented by West Hunan folk in opposition to socially accepted morality. The story confronts the villagers' association of corporeal relationship with sin and illicitness with a newly-wed couple's poised approach to their relationship. It happens when the couple from a mountainous area (suggesting the wild part of West Hunan) pass by the woods outside a village on their way to visit their parents. They make love in the woods while taking a break there. Villagers from a nearby village mistake them for a pair of elopers and taunt them with questions, trying to shame them. They try to explain that the fecundity of plants and animals in the spring field awoke in them a sensuous desire and induced them to make love:

> When they arrived here, the fine weather persuaded them to rest on a haystack of freshly mown rice straw, to view the wonderful scenery and all the mountain wildflowers. The sweet fragrances in the breeze, the hypnotic chatter of the birds reminded them of what young people were here for. And then they were caught. ("The Lovers" 62)

What they did appears to them to be a natural response to the season. They are baffled by the
villagers' reaction. The narrative contrasts the couple's involuntary responsiveness to nature with the self-righteousness and rigidity of the villagers. The village is located halfway between the city and remote rural areas, and half-way between culture and nature. It resembles Lu Xun's stuffy enclosure of the rural town, where people are trapped in a rigid moral and ethical system. The young couple, on the other hand, align themselves with a larger and deeper world of living things, including plants and animals. Their love, which is associated with blooming in spring, is regulated by the rhythm of nature instead of by an artificial controlling system.

In "After the Rain" (1928), illiteracy, which indicates low social status and an imperviousness towards worldly success, prevents the rural youth Si Gou from appreciating books. However, his perception of the animated world is sharpened rather than deterred by his ignorance of the system of abstraction. He is able to "hear poetry in the chirping of insects, big or small, and in the flickering wings of dragonflies" (141). Water, a yin element in Chinese cosmology, is associated with low position, modesty, and humbleness and earthly life. Living close to the earth enables the rural people to retain their sensitivity to the movement of life.

This involuntary surfacing of sensual desire appears to evoke a traditional Chinese understanding of naturalness, that is, wu wei--"doing nothing intentionally"--or, as Sarah Allan paraphrases it, "be[ing] so of itself" (115-16). It is the opposite of worldly ambitions. Wu wei allows life its own course, which, like water, is self-regulating. Wu wei, in Shen Congwen's world is a way to engage in life, but a different way from Hardy's active involvement.

Shen Congwen uses wu wei as a defence for his rural characters. The root image of wu wei or ziran in Chinese culture is derived from water. Gaozi says: "Nature is like a bubbling spring" (qtd. in Allan 42). Lao Tzu maintains that "the goodness about water is that
it benefits ten thousands of living things without intending to" (Waley 151). He then uses the downward movement of water to illustrate an innate universal order—that of the Tao, which is predetermined and self-regulated. The downward movement of water, leading it back to the earth from which it is generated, constitutes a return movement to the roots—the basic order of the universe. Shen Congwen's amorous ruralists are untouched by debauchery because their affectionate life obeys the fundamental order, the Tao. In Shen Congwen's world, sexual relationships incorporate both the dynamics of life and a return to the essence of life. Sexuality is a way to be immersed in the basic order governing each organism and the entire universe. Therefore, in spite of the bizarre behaviour of some of his characters, such as a military leader who has seventeen wives and an apprentice who sleeps with a dead girl and is willing to die for it, Shen Congwen refers to his countryside as a pure and healthy country.

Life struggling to follow its course

Shen Congwen's West Hunan, as David Der-we Wang describes it, is a multilayered landscape. Water as a central landscape image of his rural homeland is a multifaceted presence. Shen Congwen suggests that one "should look at West Hunan more carefully. It will not do to draw conclusions too soon" (WJ 9: 340). To observe West Hunan carefully is to observe it in depth.

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39 Shen Congwen's student Wang Zengqi and his wife Zhang Zhaohe reveal that he read Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu. Although Shen Congwen rarely quotes Lao Tzu in his fiction, his use of the water symbol and his emphasis on the naturalness of his rural lovers clearly evoke the ethics of ziran.

30 I use Wang's description differently from his original meaning. His focus is genre and Shen Congwen's anti-pastoral visions. I use this phrase as a description of Shen's multi-faceted treatment of water in his rural fiction.
Shen Congwen's West Hunan is a rugged land characterized by impenetrable mountains and swift waters. Even the Jiangnan-like prosperity and serenity a visitor perceives as an initial impression of West Hunan is undercut on a deeper level by underwater currents. The true West Hunan in Shen Congwen's fiction involves human adaptation to an unpredictable natural force. The smooth water surface in Jiangsu and Zhejiang is associated with a stable agrarian settlement and often pictured with women collecting lotus seeds in small boats or washing clothes by a little creek. Shen Congwen's waters in West Hunan, however, are untamed and contain uncertain currents. Strictly speaking, few of his characters are peasants, and yet, many are closely affiliated with farming life. According to Shen Congwen, farmers can be easily transformed into soldiers, fishermen or sailors in West Hunan (WJ 7:11). The mobility and risk involved in their daily lives make them energetic, rough, and less confined by established moral codes. Unlike peasants who make continuous efforts to tame nature or cultivate the wilderness through generations of stable settlement, the West Hunanese, as Shen Congwen sees them, live according to nature's innate principles.

Water, the long-standing source of life, leads to the limit of individual lives as well. Instead of being a mere metaphor for human nature, water is fundamentally the physical presence of a natural element, whose relationship with human beings is not always harmonious, nor is its embrace always comforting. Shen Congwen reminds the reader that water is the agent of an unpredictable nature, warning against the romantic tendency to overemphasize the harmonizing effect of water as represented by a tourist impression of its visual beauty. Although the river is a generous provider of people's livelihood, it does not provide intentionally, as Lao Tzu notes, water benefits "without intending to" (Waley, 151).
The river can swallow people's lives and destroy human endeavours without any warning. Water has the power to cast off the shackles of human intervention and break the dam that regulates its movement for the benefit of the human community. In times of flood, when houses are washed away, "people would gaze at them helplessly from the city wall. The victims said nothing. They had no complaints, and indeed they greeted all natural disasters in the same quiet undemonstrative way" (Border Town 195). The capriciousness of water demonstrates the independence and indifference of nature to human affairs. The river in West Hunan is thus dually represented as the cradle and the grave of life. The fact that the living and the dead occupy the same space makes the meaning of life complete for those who live on the water.

*Border Town*, Shen Congwen's representative work of rural lyricism, reveals as much a purifying influence of living close to nature as the indifference of nature to human efforts. On the one hand, the river is Cuicui's cradle: she grows up on her grandfather's ferry boat and is named after the surrounding bamboo bushes. Her sensitivity to love is also related to the ferry, which carries the love of her grandfather and of her lover. However, a storm, which coincides with the death of her grandfather, reveals all that is buried under the peaceful surface of the river. The river is the grave of her mother, a bridge for her lover to go to a distant place. In the face of the unknown, she waits for the person who "may never come back. Or he may come back tomorrow" (*Border Town* 101). Moreover, at the same time she appears to have taken her grandfather's view of the world to heart: "What must be, must be" (92).

The wisdom of Shen Congwen's country folk, like Hardy's, is grounded in an
awareness of their limitations as human beings. However, while Hardy emphasizes courage and strategies involved in conscious effort to avert the dangers of nature, Shen Congwen stresses the country folk's perseverance in living fully within those constraints. Shen's West Hunan lovers are therefore different from Shakespeare's romantic Juliet, who emphasizes the boundless nature of love: "My bounty is as boundless as the sea,/My love as deep,/the more I give to thee,/The more I have,/for both are infinite" (II iii. 753). Shen Congwen, on the other hand, emphasizes the shortness of life, and the capricious powers, both social and natural, that reign over it. The intensity of his characters' passion implies a sense of urgency that stems from an awareness of finite nature and the vulnerability and brevity of human life. Shen Congwen appears to imply that West Hunanese people's indulgence in their own sensual inclinations is a response to their understanding of the capriciousness of nature.

Shen Congwen is fond of writing about relationships that are precarious in nature, such as love affairs between soldiers and women of their encampment, or sailors and prostitutes whose relationships are confronted with the instability of their life. He shows a keen interest in the passionate love exhibited by these lovers, which reveals an awareness of the shortness of the time allocated to them. With the understanding that each meeting between them could be the last, the lovers are unabashedly given to passion.

Moreover, the peculiarity of the men and women entangled in their emotions is accepted and understood by people around them. Those who are not directly involved with the relationships do their utmost to help the lovers with whatever support they can offer. In "The Company Commander" (1927), the company changes its time of roll call from after supper to late evening to allow the company commander to spend his evenings in the
residence of a young widow. When he moves out of the army camp to join his lover, his messenger makes a point not to disturb him in the morning, but waits until noon to deliver his orders or report to him.

In "The Staff Officer" (1929), an elderly army officer does everything in his power to ensure that his young messenger does not rush through the last meeting with his lover. He not only runs errands on behalf of the young man but also goes to their rendezvous place three times to inform the messenger of the deferred departure of the army. The fact that military manoeuvres are deprived of any solemnity for the West Hunanese speaks for their focus on life, which in the May Fourth literature is submerged under many other considerations and political programs.

Shen Congwen's rural fiction tests the strength of love as a vital assertion of life against various existential predicaments. Love is therefore fused into and strengthened by the struggle for survival. Shen Congwen starts his search from the dregs of the society. He uses prostitutes to illustrate that "there is a curious purity in the habits of the frontier people" (Chinese Earth 199). In contrast to the moral dubiousness of their mode of existence, they are chosen to express the passionate nature of West Hunan folk:

Whereas most of the women's income comes from merchants, it is usually the boatmen who win their hearts. Two lovers at parting bite their lips and swear to go steady during their separation. For six to seven weeks maybe, the man on his boat and the girl on the water-front wait for the long days to go by, the hearts of each with the loved one far away. (Border Town 14-15)

Shen Congwen apparently redefines the concept of "purity" to mean genuine emotions in sexual relationships. In an attempt to support this concept, Shen Congwen reduces all sexual relationships between man and woman to "the flesh trade," regardless of whether it is "short-
term engagements, long-term 'marriage,' or a temporary retirement" (*Border Town* 15). Thus it is done in keeping with a cynicism toward family fostered by the May Fourth iconoclastic approach to the traditional Chinese sanctity of family relationships. Shen Congwen, however, sees prostitution as a predicament of human existence instead of a social phenomenon as his contemporaries lend to do. He refers to it using the western idiom of the "oldest profession," which by implication is not generated by a single government or limited to any historic period. Meanwhile, he also reiterates a patriarchal perception of the gender difference between man and woman as part of cosmological wisdom. While men brave the elements in the open, women, on the other hand, are to be protected from the elements in the house. Shen Congwen suggests that in the masculine world of West Hunan, women's place is ancillary: "they are made to be pretty and have sympathy for men" (*WJ* 11:300). He presents women's dependence on men, which refers indiscriminately to marriage or prostitution, as neither moral nor immoral but simply as an existential necessity.

Rather than condemning prostitution or searching for possible solutions to relieve his lovers from their predicament, Shen Congwen focuses on individuals who struggle to live with it and maintain their dignity in this adverse situation. In his West Hunan stories, prostitutes are not much different from domestically bound women. Like their more restrained counterparts, prostitutes create a family atmosphere for those who work in the open except that the house that protects them from the elements does not have the stability of a home:

> And though their lives were so different from ours, yet, they were so perfectly immersed in their loves and their hates, so soaked with desire and chilled by neglect, that they forgot everything else. Perhaps their only difference from us was that they were more innocent and more foolish... And since they believed that friendship was worth more than money, and they were perfectly
capable of abiding by their promises, it happened that they were often more virtuous than the city dwellers. (*Chinese Earth* 200)

With the use of "ours," Shen Congwen speaks on behalf of urbanized intellectuals, whose self-reproach is set off against the integrity of West Hunanese. The rural folk, who are capable of genuine emotion, are respected and compared favourably with urbanites in Shen Congwen's fiction despite their humble status and sometimes morally dubious mode of existence. The author appears to especially admire their ability to completely envelop themselves in their love. In spite of their straitened conditions they can remain oblivious of any worldly considerations.

"Baizi" (1928), depicting a meeting between a sailor and a prostitute, reveals the unconditional appreciation of love by people who are inferiors on the social ladder. The story starts with the sailor Baizi leaving the wharf on a rainy evening to visit his lover. The woman, who remains nameless in the story, is also looking forward to seeing Baizi. She welcomes him as she would a lover or husband coming back from a long trip. Although Baizi has to pay for the meeting, the sincere concern and intimacy they show towards each other appear to be irrelevant to the trade. Shen Congwen shows that they treat each other as life companions, and even demand loyalty from each other:

--Tell me--anybody here yesterday?
--[No way]! I've been waiting a long time for you. I counted the days, I knew that corpse of yours would be coming . . .
--H'mm . . . You'd be quite happy if I were drowned in Blue Wave Rapids . . ."
--Yes, yes, of course I would be happy, she answered, slightly offended (trans. Jin 20)

The language they use is unrefined, yet their roughness is mixed with genuine concern for each other. Moreover, although they are both concerned about the various impediments to
their love, neither of them questions the worthiness of their relationship.

The meeting costs Baizi a whole month's hard-earned wages, but calculation is foreign to the residents of West Hunan. When Baizi returns to his boat in the darkness with an empty wallet, he feels no regret but is happy that he has spent his hard earned money on the woman whose life is integrated with his:

What she had given him compensated for a month's toil, compensated for all his sufferings on the junk, the sun, the winds, the rains, his losses in gambling, everything. He enjoyed his happiness in advance. In another month he would return. And now he would work more cheerfully, eat more cheerfully, and sleep more cheerfully, for he had fulfilled his desires. (21).

The meeting sews a silver lining into their struggle for survival. Although they are unable to change their fate, they refuse to be dragged into despair. As Kinkley notes, for Shen Congwen this "obliviousness to the material world bespeak[s] elemental vigour in the zest of his country people" (Odyssey 135). This vigour--like running water--is purifying, and their identification of love with the essence of their life is represented as a virtue unique to West Hunan.

Shen Congwen's concept of purity, synonymous with physical and mental health, differs drastically from the concept of purity in popular Chinese literature and even in May Fourth writers. In classical Chinese drama, where love comedies make up one third of the total output, purity is closely related to ritual--the endorsement of parents. Their consent is required to sanction even relationships between prostitutes and impoverished scholars. This endorsement may be carried out very unceremoniously; however it cannot be omitted. In case the parents change their minds and try to separate the lovers, the lovers frequently cite the ritual to legitimate their relationship. In spite of occasional assertions that their relationship is endorsed by nature, lovers in classical Chinese drama rely on familial legitimation to assert
their rights.

Modern Chinese literature, on the other hand, targets parental interference from the outset as the greatest obstacle lovers face in their quest for personal happiness. Although Shen Congwen's contemporaries and predecessors both questioned parental authority, at the same time they acquiesced in conventional standards of chastity. Romances by Guo Moruo, for example, tend to spiritualize relationships between men and women but also deprive them of sensuality.

Instead of discussing the rights of love, Shen Congwen emphasizes the strength of unconscious and spontaneous desires. He maintains that water has greatly contributed to the fluidity of his feelings (*WJ* 9: 109). The perspective he takes in discovering the virtue of his rural folk suggests his flexibility and a disparagement of social status or social roles. In his fictional West Hunan, rural folk dignify themselves by contravening standards of morality based on what people do as opposed to how they feel. Shen Congwen maintains that in West Hunan all walks of life, even prostitution, are looked upon as "proper and even respectable" (*Chinese Earth* 200): This defiance of social conventions appears to be analogous to the character of water that ignores divisions. There is a nobility in his rural people's disinterest in moral criticism. Similarly, Lao Tzu attributes a greatness to the downward movement and all-embracing nature of water: "The reason why the great rivers and seas/Are able to be the kings of the various streams /Is because they are adept at dwelling in low places" (trans. Lau 154).

For Shen Congwen, rural people's indifference to socially based moral judgement is a source of both physical and psychological strength.

However, in spite of the increasing complexity this representation of West Hunan
reveals, Shen Congwen's narrative remains focused on lovers and the assertion of their feelings. "Xiaoxiao" (1934) presents a noticeable attempt to reveal the strength of the unconscious when pressured by adverse forces as presented by the clan system and abnormal marital customs.

"Xiaoxiao" tells the story of a child bride. To marry a teenage girl to a younger boy has been common in rural areas of China since time immemorial. The custom could be attributed to a practical consideration of rural culture, whereby the daughter-in-law could help with the household chores. Xiaoxiao is married at twelve years old to a boy of two. The husband—as yet unweaned--refers to his wife as "Elder Sister," and the wife calls the husband "Younger Brother." Although the girl is more of a nanny than a wife to the boy, the husband and wife get on well as playmates. Four years pass, and Xiaoxiao grows into a young woman, and catches the attention of Spotty Dog, a labourer hired by her parents-in-law. Spotty Dog then seduces Xiaoxiao. She has no preconception of the nature of her relationship with Spotty Dog until she finds herself pregnant. Expecting a stormy reaction from her parents-in-law, she proposes to Spotty Dog that they escape to the city. The young man is not ready to take the responsibility and leaves her to face her punishment on her own.

Meanwhile, the family clan has a set rule for the punishment of adultery, which stipulates that the adulteress be either drowned or sold. The family asks the opinion of Xiaoxiao's uncle, her only remaining relative. Since her uncle is opposed to the idea of executing her, they choose the alternative. However, as no suitable buyer turns up, she is then allowed to stay in the family. Months later Xiaoxiao gives birth to a baby boy, which makes the parents-in-law reverse their original plan to sell her. Both Xiaoxiao and her son are taken
good care of and are accepted as legitimate members of the family. When her husband is of age, they are formally married to each other and have a child of their own. The story ends with the marriage of Xiaoxiao's first born, who at twelve is married to a girl six years older than he is. The story of Xiaoxiao then continues into the next generation.

"Xiaoxiao" is perhaps the most controversial of all Shen Congwen's fiction. Critical debate is centred on Shen Congwen's liberal attitude towards abnormal marriage customs. For instance critics like Rosemary Haddon and Xie Fei both read the novel in light of Shen Congwen's social and cultural criticism of traditional Chinese society (Haddon 104). Zhao Yuan, whose view comes closer to that of Shen Congwen, emphasizes the strength of the unconscious (162). In the following pages, I will compare Xie Fei's film adaptation of the novella with Shen Congwen writing to reveal the different perspective Shen Congwen has on the far from perfect Chinese countryside.

Xie Fei's film reinterprets Xiaoxiao's story in the style of the May Fourth exploration of the dark side of Chinese culture. Focusing on the inhumanity embodied in Xiaoxiao's marriage, Xie Fei tries to stir up a consciousness of protest in Xiaoxiao as well as in the audience. Instead of being completely unconscious of her own growth, as in Shen Congwen's story, in the film she is deeply troubled by unrequited desire in her relationship with the child husband. The film also highlights the destruction Xiaoxiao might have brought upon herself because of her relationship with Spotty Dog.

The possibility of drowning as punishment for Xiaoxiao's adultery is mentioned only briefly in Shen Congwen's novella; however, in the film the threat to Xiaoxiao is brought into the limelight through the execution of a young widow. When the family clan find that the
young widow has a secret lover, they condemn her for being disloyal to her dead husband. She is stripped naked and dumped into a pond with a millstone fastened around her neck. This scene, which visualizes the horror of patriarchal oppression, lasts more than two minutes. The stone that weighs the young woman down to the bottom of the pond is also intended to weigh on the reader's mind. Xie Fei makes it explicit that Xiaoxiao escapes a similar punishment quite accidentally.

The concluding scene of the film takes the viewpoint of the "younger brother," an urbanized intellectual by now, who sees the wedding ceremony of Xiaoxiao's son from afar. The critical distance the "younger brother" holds from the wedding scene emphasizes his freedom from this brutal marital custom, which contrasts with Xiaoxiao's unawareness of her contribution to its enactment both as a victim and a victimizer. Unlike Xiaoxiao, he refuses to commit himself to the continuation of the custom. The film adaptation reveals an urge to critically reevaluate the customs of traditional Chinese countryside. It is as if Shen Congwen's story were retold by Lu Xun's narrator. The "younger brother" of the Lu Xun persona, who is eager to expose the evils embedded in rural culture, is desperate to arouse an awareness of them in the reader. Xiaoxiao, who fails to understand the cause of her suffering, embodies the tragedy of the "slumbering masses."

Shen Congwen's positive reading of the country folk's tenacity in adverse circumstances is different from this typical approach of his contemporaries. The fact that "rules" do not apply in Shen Congwen's countryside as they do in the city where "there are rules even for beggars" ("Xiaoxiao" 114) is presented as an attraction of the countryside. In the city, hostility towards humanity appears to be so completely impersonal that it is
impossible to trace the source of inhumanity to anything but the "rules." In West Hunan, on the other hand, there is always hope of getting around the constraints imposed by tradition. Indeed, the rural people are not yet indoctrinated to act according to fixed rules.

Xiaoxiao's uncle's reluctance to follow the "rules" suggests that the rural people rely on their own judgement instead of letting institutionalized rules and regulations be their guide. This is their strength rather than weakness. The villagers reveal the same flexibility. Their slow reaction to the embarrassment Xiaoxiao has brought to the village is in keeping with the child husband's and Xiaoxiao's bewilderment over the source and justice of the "rules." After the parents-in-law explain Xiaoxiao's situation to them, they do not begrudge her staying. In fact, Shen Congwen does not really make light of the threat to Xiaoxiao's life posed by the old "rules." He simply emphasizes that with rural people it is possible to get around or disregard the rules. Like water that defines its own course, the rural folk are guided by their own sense of appropriateness and justice.

Shen Congwen's concentration on the strength of the unconscious as symbolized by Xiaoxiao's growth is also in contrast to Xie Fei, who can not refrain from expressing his disappointment with Xiaoxiao's unconscious participation in perpetuating her tragedy. As an orphan, Xiaoxiao did not have a mother or a guardian to act as her role model and initiate her into the adult world. Her marriage, which is supposed to announce her formal entrance into adulthood, does not really lead her out of the world of children, for the implications of marriage are totally lost on her: "For her, marriage was simply moving from one house to another. So on her wedding day, she was all smiles, neither abashed, nor afraid. She was an ignoramus, this new bride" ("Xiaoxiao" 102). While marriage does not serve as a catalyst to
expedite her development from adolescence to adulthood, Xiaoxiao finishes her growth inconspicuously in the course of time. Xiaoxiao is compared to a small tree that experiences severe trimming and cutting during her course of growth. However, "she flourished like a castor-oil plant, growing unnoticed in the wind and rain in a corner of a yard" (104). Her relationship with Spotty Dog represents part of the natural process of her maturity, which until her pregnancy she herself had not even noticed. So far as Xiaoxiao is concerned, she only does what comes naturally; she has no intention of defying custom or her parents-in-law, although what she does puts her in conflict with both. Yet, like water, whose strength lies in its involuntary movement, Xiaoxiao's strength lies in her unconsciousness, in the way that she makes no effort to conform to any role model, moral standard, or political agenda.

As Michael Duke aptly points out, "Xiaoxiao" "represents the outer limits for depiction of rural China as a world where innocence and spontaneity can be rewarded with good humour and natural justice" ("Past, Present and Future" 46). Shen Congwen does not deny the existence of the unpleasant aspects of traditional Chinese culture. He is nonetheless appreciative of his characters humanistic instincts which make it possible to bypass institutionalized authorities. As indicated in the treatment of Xiaoxiao, the villagers can compromise established conventions in a way that accommodates their particular conditions—which constitutes a weakness to the May Fourth intellectuals but a virtue in Shen Congwen's mind. It appears that Shen Congwen had been waiting for this moment when his reputation as a rural lyricist was well enough established to lead the reader one layer deeper into his landscape of the rural homeland. If one looks closely at Shen Congwen's representation of the countryside, even in overtly idyllic visions such as that presented in Border Town, unpleasant
facts such as the predicament of sailors and prostitutes loom in his rural landscape. If his rural
romance challenges conceptualizations of West Hunan, his mature fiction addresses the
injustice inflicted on the countryside and West Hunan. In Kinkley's words, Shen Congwen
attempts "a cultural and political apology for West Hunan" (Odyssey 5). I would maintain that
this apology extends to the Chinese countryside at large. Shen Congwen incorporates all these
concerns in his multi-layered landscape of the rural world, but locates them in different layers
for different readers. As Shen Congwen maintains, "you may appreciate the freshness of my
story, but you are oblivious of the enthusiasm behind the story. You may enjoy the naturalness
of my language, but you similarly neglect the sorrow behind it" (WJ 11: 44). In spite of his
disparagement of picturesque and superficial tourists, he shows them the scenic attraction of
West Hunan with the understanding that it is only a glance at the rural world on a very
superficial level. The underlying struggle is visible all the time underneath the serenity and
transparency of the rural world.  

The vigorous and healthy relationship between men and women in West Hunan

Shen Congwen's endorsement of country virtues against social and political pressure inflicted on the
countryside constitutes the chief motif of his narrative of his birthplace, Fenghuang, originally a garrison set
up in the eighteenth century by the imperial court in Beijing to keep the rebellious Miao tribes under control.
While the tension between the vigilance of the central government over its frontier is still visible in the layout of the garrison town, the military, who had been stationed in the frontier on behalf of the court, were already assimilated into the region. This lonely border town with its round city wall of big, solid, round-hewn stones, is encircled by over five hundred Miao villages with garrisons between them. Dozens of granaries store tens of thousands of bushels of government grain each year. There are also approximately five hundred forts and two hundred barracks. The forts, built of big stones, stand on the tops of the winding mountain ranges, while the barracks are excellently disposed by the post roads, spaced out evenly, a considerable distance apart, in three neighbouring counties covering a radius of hundreds of li. ("Fenghuang" 105)
The layout of Fenghuang reveals a tension between the central government and the frontier. Its design speaks of an attempt to reign over ethnic minorities, which ushered in massive killing in West Hunan. For Shen Congwen it indicates a cruelty rooted in an ambition to dominate West Hunan.
stands out in contrast with Shen Congwen's emphasis on the immoral and unhealthy relationships of city life. Shen Congwen's representation of urbanites no doubt takes on a narrow perspective and is limited to the upper class and intellectuals only. He refers to his representation of urbanites as "holding a mirror to the people who are social superiors" ("Gentlemen's Wives" 50). As the mirror image suggests, his approach to the city is critical and detached. As C. T. Tsia points out Shen Congwen's stories about the city have the intrusions of "conscious didacticism" (206). In fact his writings of urbanites are often moralistic. Urbanites in his stories are represented by two groups of people only: the leisured class, who are spared the struggle for survival by their wealth, and intellectuals, who are engaged in the study of abstract matters. Both groups represent some problems, rather than existing as individuals.

However, Shen Congwen, as he does their rural counterparts, also approaches city people through sexual relationships. In his depiction of rural people, love as a manifestation of the dynamics of life is interlocked with the meaning and struggle of existence. However, his urban stories such as "Gentlemen's Wives" delve into the stasis and morbidity of sexual relationships in wealthy families, where love becomes a pastime and decoration. The story unveils layers of immorality in a respectable bourgeois family. On a visible level, the fact that a rich paralyzed old man has three wives directs one's attention to the sickness and abnormality

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32 A comparison with Lao She's rich and endearing topography of Beijing demonstrates that Shen Congwen's city writing is important mainly as a contrast to his fictional West Hunan.

As indicated by the fact that "Eight Steeds" was modelled after his close friends and colleagues, his contact with the social environment in the city was very limited. See Kinkley (Odyssey 349) for the prototype of his characters. A comparison with Lao She's rich and endearing topography of Beijing demonstrates that Shen Congwen's city writing is important mainly as a contrast to his rural fiction.
of the family. On a less visible level is his son's secret liaison with his youngest wife. In the end, the son seduces another gentleman's wife simply to conceal this secret in his own family. Shen Congwen tries to show with this exposure of relationship that the relationships between men and women are deprived of their dignity when they become a game of squandering time and money. Relationships thus become decadent regardless of the legitimization of marriage. Moreover, Shen Congwen emphasizes that "from north to south, rich gentlemen are all like this" ("Gentlemen's Wives" 51). In other words, this picture does not present an isolated case but is representative of unwholesome relationships in all upper-class families.

In addition to incestuous relationships in rich families, Shen Congwen explores what he terms a "disease of civilization" prevalent among intellectuals, namely repression of sensual desires. "Eight Steeds" (1935) reveals the connection between repression and perversity in a group of people who are extremely concerned with respectability. The image of "steeds"—referring to the story's eight characters, seven university professors and a well known writer— alludes to the eight superior steeds of King Mu of the Zhou Dynasty. According to the legend, the first could run without touching the ground, the second could fly higher than a bird, the third had the ability to cover a distance of ten thousand li in one night, the fourth could race against the sun, the fifth possessed bright, dazzling fur, the sixth was faster than light, the seventh could fly over clouds, and the eighth was born with wings. The fact that these horses are not fully supernatural but are ultimately earth-bound, despite their powers, suggests an analogous conflict in the characters' desire to rise above their connection with the sensual world; they are not able to completely transcend this connection except by blocking proper channels of communication with it. Their fear of desire is symbolized by their fear of the sea,
which represents a turbulent sensual life, as well as of their emotions. The association of the
sea with death reveals their fear of water and of life as a *yin* element that will quench the fire
of *yang*, their worldly ambitions. This fear also arises from their doubts as to their ability to
control themselves. Thus fear gives rise to self-imposed confinement. The turbulence and
chaos derived from the characters' lack of outlet contrast with life in West Hunan, which
moves in a naturally regulated orbit.

Descriptions of the eight urban characters become case studies of sexual perversity.

Mr. A's efforts to maintain his ostensible respectability as a scholar and parent drive him to
find an outlet in drugs and pornography; Mr. B spends his leisure time dreaming of women to
compensate for the absence of a real partner; Mr. C presents himself as indifferent to sex so as
to disguise his incestuous interest in his niece; Mr. D becomes a misogynist, who lives only to
torture the woman he loves; Mr. E divorces his wife in order to relieve himself of his
responsibility for his family; Mr. G is cold and incapable of love. Mr. Dash, the narrator,
hopes that he is immune to love.

The cause of their common disease, according to Mr. Dash, who is clearly a voice
for Shen Congwen, is above all attributable to their warped concern for their social status and
respectability.\(^{33}\) Shen Congwen's probing of this disease of civilization appears to echo Zhou

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\(^{33}\)"Eight Steeds" was written when Shen Congwen taught creative writing in Qingdao University. Kinkley argues very convincingly that Shen Congwen started to read Chinese translations of Freud in that period (*Odyssey* 350, 214-16, 349-50). For detailed discussions of Freudian sexual symbolism in this story see Tang Zhengxu (369-372) and Cheng Maorong (213-21). However, Shen Congwen's first contacts with sexual psychology date back to the 1920s, when he read Zhou Zuoren's translation of Ellis (Kinkley *Odyssey* 112). Civilization and repression are focal concerns of Zhou Zuoren's criticism of Chinese culture. My discussion focuses on Shen Congwen's interest in the self-regulating functions of sexual desire, a consistent thematic concern in his rural fiction.
Zuoren's popularization of Havelock Ellis' sexual psychology through his translation and treatises. Zhou Zuoren cites Ellis and Freud in his denunciation of Chinese culture and civilization, by which he actually means neo-Confucian ethics. According to Zhou Zuoren, intellect does not enable human beings to defy their biological nature. However, "they attempt to restrain sensual desires, thus creating civilization; then they further indulge their sensual desire and rationalize their behaviour, a trick that animals cannot accomplish" (Night Reading 228-9).

Shen Congwen's portrayal of urban intellectuals confirms this view. Moreover, his diagnosis of civilization as a disease also betrays a rooted suspicion of social ambition in traditional Chinese culture, as in the Taoist disregard for social values and status.

What makes the story more than a case study of perverse psychology is Shen Congwen's consistent use of water both as a physical presence and as a symbol for life to organize his writing and characters. Sexual relationships are constricted at upper levels of society just as water when uplifted from the earth is forced to divert from its natural course of downward movement. Desire is therefore blocked in people who are preoccupied with the Yang element or diverted into such manifestations as worldly ambition. Shen Congwen posits that urban intellectuals block their direct communication with nature through their engagement with the abstract. Their attempts to take refuge in "history" or "formulas" (357) disorient them from the essence of life, and result in the sterility of urban culture. In his metaphors, the connection between repression and pornography does not relate to clean or unclean but to normal and perverse. So although Shen Congwen's writing of the city may have its own merits, it is best read in conjunction with his rural fiction to make the virtues of the countryside stand out.
The storyteller's story

Shen Congwen's characters are people of few words. Like water, they pursue their course of life through quiet moments as well as torrents. Their reticence suggests the attainment of an understanding of life that cannot be fully defined or expressed in words. In the meantime, Shen Congwen cannot resist the urge to theorize a "countryman's" knowledge and perspective to assert his advantage as an observer and writer. He does this through self-portrayal, referring to himself as a "countryman" and "little soldier"—which reveals the mixture of a character in the story with the writer. In contrast to Walter Benjamin's "storyteller," who brings back stories to his community from faraway places, Shen Congwen is part of his story world instead of belonging to the community of readers. While he draws his material from the countryside from the outset of his writing, it was not until his fictional West Hunan was well established in the early 1930s that he started to zero in on the "countryman" in his fictionalized autobiography.

Unlike Thomas Hardy, who abandoned his narrative stance of the "comparative outsider" in order to gain authority as well as acceptance, Shen Congwen's "outsidedness"

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34 This notion appears to be supported in Lao Tzu's definition of Tao, the Way of the universe: "Tao that can be spoken of/Is not the Everlasting Tao./Name that can be named/Is not the Everlasting name" (trans. Lau 360). The closeness of the West Hunan life to Tao, therefore, can be described with words that Lao Tzu associates with Tao, e.g. "great" and "return" [the source] (trans. Lau 142). Shen Congwen's narrative of the rural home leaves enough room for the reader to imagine the insight into life that rural people have acquired by living close to water. Shen Congwen's images of quietness contrast with Lu Xun's vigorous attempt at breaking the silence of the Chinese. Lu Xun's vehement rejection also shows an ingrained appreciation of silence and the unconscious in traditional Chinese aesthetics, which the May Fourth intellectuals were courageous enough to challenge. Shen Congwen, nonetheless, injects rich connotations of speechlessness and silence in traditional Chinese aesthetics into his presentation of the rural home.
makes use of what Wendy Larson describes as the "negative authority" of literacy or the prevailing tendency to problematize established "literary authority" (1-2, 65). However, in Shen Congwen's work this rebellion against literary authority is not simply based on an ideology or wish for emancipation but is supported by his connection with a wider phenomenological world. These sensory connections are a great advantage for him as a writer, because they provide him with an inexhaustible source of material to support his authority in the midst of a sceptical literary milieu.

The word "countryman" is rich in potential and not merely descriptive. As Kinkley observes:

The question with Shen Congwen's narratorial autobiographies is less one of distinguishing fact from fiction than events from fancy, or Shen Congwen the many-sided person from his literary poses. Shen has muddled up these distinctions by studding all his subjective pieces, irrespective of genre, with hints that the writing is autobiographical. (Odyssey 97)

Shen Congwen's literary pose as a countryman is accomplished to a great extent by the elucidation of his education through reference to nature. "My Education" is classified as fiction but best read as a fictionalized autobiography. It illustrates, as well as justifies, the formation of a countryman's perspective in light of the dichotomy of institutional education and intuition that attracted considerable attention in the May Fourth period.

"My Education" explores a tension between institutionalized and empirical education

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35 Wendy Larson traces the trend up to the late nineteenth century's abolition of the civil exam system. However, there is some difference between the nineteenth century and the May Fourth intellectuals' negation of literary authority. The nineteenth century Chinese writers' disparagement of literacy is closely related to their disillusionment with the political system as well as a reflection of the insecurity of their prospects. The rejection of literary authority in the May Fourth period, however, was conflated with nationalism to become a political program.
symbolized by the "small book" and "big book" respectively, aligning the countryman's education firmly with the "big book." For Shen Congwen, the "big book" contains an entire phenomenological world unbounded by the framework of the "small book" or any established cultural perspective. He endows the act of playing truant from a traditional grammar school with the status of refusal to be moulded by a rigid educational system. He writes in "In the Old-Fashioned Private School":

If someone does not play truant in the old-fashioned private school ... he must be sick and unable to play; only then would he submit himself to the torture of the teacher. If he is not sick, he must be a fool. Even if he was not born a simpleton, his father and teacher must have put false ideas into his mind. Consequently he starts to aspire towards sagehood at the age when he ought to play. Thus even if he is healthy, his mind is poisoned (with ideas of sagehood). [On the other hand] if this child remains untamed, manages to escape all restraints and reach the outside world, he'll have the most healthy disposition. (Wenji 1:164)bb

This apology for skipping school appears to echo Lu Xun's polemical antithesis of play and traditional education in "From Hundred-Plant Garden to Three-Flavour Study." Lu Xun relates the old-fashioned Chinese school, through a child's point of view, to pain and punishment, while Shen Congwen relates it to a repressive net of family and social expectations. Like Lu Xun, Shen Congwen takes a sensory interaction with nature and endows it with the motif of escape into a world of activity and play. However, the lengthy

36 Lu Xun writes in "From Hundred-Plant Garden to Three-Flavour Study" that "I don't know why my family decided to send me to school, or why they chose the school reputed to be the strictest in the town. Perhaps it was because I had spoiled the mud wall by uprooting milkwort, perhaps because I had thrown bricks into the Liangs' courtyard next door, perhaps because I had climbed the well hoping to jump off it" (392). In the Chinese original, there is no indication whether "I" as an adult has seen the point of his parent sending him to this private school, because in Chinese a verb does not indicate tense by itself unless with an additional adverb. Translators Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang use the present tense for "I don't know" which means that as an adult, "I" still thinks it is pointless to go to an old-style grammar school. This translation quite forcefully conveys Lu Xun's scepticism about traditional education.
elaboration on a defiant spirit of nonconformism in Shen Congwen's childhood recollection is obviously attached to this child's experience by an adult anxious to make use of it to illustrate his point. It exceeds nostalgia for the years of innocence.

"My Education" downplays the importance of the "small book," or institutionalized education, to the advantage of a natural education. Shen Congwen implies that the reading of the small book contributes no more than the acquisition of literacy. The fact that he learned to read in a playful manner from his mother (at four years old, he was rewarded with a piece of candy for each word he remembered), and the negligible schooling he received in the classics suggest that he easily acquired literacy without going to any formal school. School is associated with the most repressive and useless experiences of his childhood.

Instead, he upholds the acquisition of living knowledge and the development of his sensitivity to life as the distinctive component in his education from the countryside in his autobiography The Autobiography of Shen Congwen. What he refers to as learning "directly from life" (Recollections 19) helps him escape into a new, fresher world of nature, and make full use of his senses. The life he experienced, the place he lived, the people he met and the smells he smelled are rated as his "solid education in life:"

Though at that time unable to put into words the smell of a dead snake, of rotten grass, the butcher's body, or the kiln where bowls were burnt after rain, I could easily recognize each. The cry of bats, the sigh of an ox when a butcher cut its throat, the hiss of a big yellow-threaded snake hiding in a hole in the fields, the faint plopping of fish jumping in the river at night, all sounded quite distinctive and I remembered them clearly. (Recollections of West Hunan 29)

This multi-sensory rural homeland is related but not restricted to a child's sensibility. A countryman's sensitivity is nourished by the vigorous landscape of rural life. There is also an implication that the energy embedded in this world forces itself on his sensitivity. As indicated
in his descriptions of the scenic beauty along the river in *Border Town*, it is attractive even to outsiders such as travellers. Moreover, his escape from the classroom does not end in an enclosure such as a garden or a village but leads to the wide world of the river.

The "countryman" therefore is nourished by his sensual and dynamic connection with the natural environment. The fact that "My Education" ends with Shen Congwen's leaving West Hunan for Beijing implies that Shen Congwen's education was accomplished before he left Hunan: he had formed his world view and value system in his home region. The memorized landscape of his rural home is the locus of his perspective and a secure point of departure from which he looks at the world. Meanwhile his autobiography indicates that he continued his self education in Beijing, meaning that his view is never confined by the small book but remained in contact with a wider and livelier outside world.

Shen Congwen's voe of the "countryman" as a perspective is also enriched and supported by his construction of the rural homeland. Kinkley is right to assume that Shen

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37 Shen Congwen is remarkably selective with the materials included in this self-portrait and his theorizing of the formation of a "countryman." Experiences in Beijing are excluded from the portrayal unless as evidence of his exclusion from the urban scene. In contrast to his exaltation of the ethnic and less refined aspects of his culture, Shen Congwen is reticent to speak of the influence of, or even his contact with, the intelligentsia. His failure to gain admission to the university is used as evidence of his isolation from academic and literary circles in Beijing. He omits all his affiliations with academics from his autobiography (It was not until the 1980s that he cited a comic account of a lecture by Gu Hongming, a monarchist).

Studies of his experience in Beijing also tend to focus on his frustration before he became an established writer. However, the initial setback in his academic career did not keep Shen Congwen from the world of the elite or his dream of becoming one of them. He took advantage of the open campus policy of Peking University in the 1920s to audit classes in the university. The environment at Peking University, where many influential men of letters including Zhou Zuoren, Li Dazhao, and Liu Bannong, taught in that period, could serve as a stimulus for his writing of the countryside. His ethnological interest in West Hunan reveals the influence of a widespread interest in the study and collection of folk songs on the campus of Peking University. Because of the existence of literary patronage in the May Fourth period, it was normal for Shen Congwen to resort to the help of established writers like Yu Dafu and to try to establish himself as a writer of new fiction through the influence of established literary figures like Xu Zhimo.
Congwen's "leap" from apprenticeship to maturity is related to an increased self-confidence (Odyssey 123). This confidence comes from a solidly developed landscape of the rural homeland, and from his edifying interpretation of rural connections. In her survey of native soil literature, Rosemary Haddon notes that native soil writers generally did not achieve the same level of education as May Fourth writers (Haddon 2). The discrepancy in formal education appears to be one factor that contributes to the relatively unsophisticated expression and narrow scope of their subject matter. However, native soil writers did not make conscious use of this difference as Shen Congwen did.

It is on the strength of a substantially constructed rural homeland that Shen Congwen is able to feel a condescending pity for urbanites:

People in the city are always in a hurry and feverish. Your eyes and ears are strained with noise, light and colours. Although you may appear to be uncommonly sensitive to everything, lack of sleep, and malnutrition, make you insensitive to anything but sexual consciousness and personal gain. These are not your faults but your misfortune. (1982: 11: 44)

By comparison, a countryman like Shen Congwen is fortunate to have the support of the earth. A countryman of course does not exist without the countryside. Shen Congwen therefore develops his countryside first and then the countryman. It was at the peak of his career, when he had accomplished a strong reconstruction of the fictional rural homeland that Shen Congwen was able to say: "As a countryman I bring my own ruler and scale wherever I go. ... I never use the standards derived from the stuff you call 'society.' I hate general standards" (WJ 10: 266). The confidence revealed in this outline of his "countryman" as a perspective and as a position from which to approach the world is again built on his construction of the rural homeland.
The construct of "countryman" indicates a modernistic reevaluation of traditional roots. It is rich in cultural implications, and is validated by an unflagging interest in human existence. As indicated in his introduction to Xiao Qian's works, "countryman" is the highest compliment to a writer he can think of regardless of whether or not the writer is actually from the countryside. The fact that he invites more "countrymen" to enliven modern Chinese literature endorses Chinese writers' attachment to the countryside as well as encouraging their exploration of it as a rich source of literary imagination.

As Kinkley notes, the "beautiful, healthy, natural, and not contrary to human nature" pattern of life incorporated in Shen Congwen's rural homeland is "selectively remembered, though not created from fantasy" (Odyssey 184). In Shen Congwen's rural world facts and fiction are constantly entangled. Based on my reading of his rural fiction, I would maintain that his rural homeland is formed from a modernist interpretation of actual rural life. Like water, his fictional West Hunan blurs the dichotomy between tradition and modernity, and between the familiar and the exotic. It interlocks the attempt to justify the rural world in light of May Fourth modernity with an exploration of the Chinese cultural tradition. For instance, the rural homeland is strengthened by reconciling the dynamics of natural life with a May Fourth search for vitality. It therefore both reappropriates the countryside with the May Fourth movement's preoccupation with power and renewal and challenges the May Fourth dichotomizing of tradition and modernity.

Shen Congwen indicates that West Hunan is where Tao Yuanming (365-427) sets his

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38 See Shen Congwen "Preface to Under the Eaves of Others (34). Significantly, Xiao Qian was a native of Beijing instead of the rural areas.
rural utopia of Peach Blossom Spring. Yet he mocks those who come to West Hunan to search for Tao Yuanming's idyllic rural life. In fact anyone who looks for an idyllic countryside in West Hunan might be surprised to find something so destructive of the idyllic imagination. Unlike Tao Yuanming, who dodges the court in order to live a real life, Shen Congwen makes it quite explicit that his distant rural homeland incorporates the social ideal of his time. However, like water that flows without intending to, West Hunan proceeds in its daily life as it has done from time immemorial. West Hunan as a substantially developed spiritual homeland accommodates Chinese intellectuals in their voluntary exile from their cultural homeland. Like Hardy's Wessex, it is a self-sufficient centre of life whose currency is embedded in its timelessness, and whose spirituality is in its concreteness.
Mo Yan, née Guan Moye, was born in 1956 on a *kang*\(^1\) covered with dry sand in a thatched house with bare black walls, in a desolate village in Northeast County of Gaomi, Shandong province. He sounded hoarse at birth, could not speak until two years old and could not walk until three. At four or five he had an enormous appetite, and often fought with his elder sister over a piece of sweet potato. ("Biographical Note of the Writer." *The Crystal Carrot*, inside front cover)

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**Chapter III  Reconstructing the Rural Homeland through the Lens of Prosperity:**

**Mo Yan and his World of Red Sorghum**

Mo Yan (b. 1956) rose to prominence as a writer of the countryside during a new surge of rural writing, which overlapped with and was supported by the cultural exploration movement in the mid-1980s. Cultural exploration provided a favourable environment for Mo Yan's fictional rural homeland. The fact that most of the writers of cultural exploration set their writing in rural areas indicates a consensual recognition of the countryside as a rich resource for creativity. However, Mo Yan was the only one among the writers of cultural exploration to openly identify himself with the countryside and to look at it from inside. His fictional narratives of the countryside are frequently preceded or concluded by biographical notes that highlight his connection with the countryside—a connection that centres on his fictional Northeast Country of Gaomi, his rural Shandong birthplace.

By accentuating his native connection with the countryside, Mo Yan's fictional rural homeland creates a fuller world in which the past and the present are connected both through the narrator's sensory connections and his sensitivity towards the spirit of the place. This all-

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\(^1\) *A kang* is a heatable brick bed commonly found in rural areas in north China.
inclusive structure of the rural homeland challenges static, single-sided views of the countryside—extremes, which see it as either the reservoir of fossilized traditional virtues or roots of crisis in Chinese society.

Mo Yan's autobiographical narrator moves freely between two opposed but related perceptions of his reconstructed countryside: the hearty and dynamic, harmonious original rural homeland of his grandparents is synthesized with the actual poverty-stricken land of his childhood set in the present. These two facets of his fictional countryside are combined to create a self-sufficient world from which he derives his creativity and vision. Like Hardy's Wessex and Shen Congwen's West Hunan, Mo Yan's Gaomi is noted for its vitality and its contemporaneity. Mo Yan's reconstruction addresses the concerns of his time by searching for a sustainable value system while it successfully breaks out of the enforced paradigm of socialist realism. This will be taken up later. First I will discuss the literary milieu of the early 1980s, when Mo Yan wrote.

### A desire for nourishment and emancipation: a renewed interest in the countryside in the 1980s

The early 1980s has been referred to by Chinese writers as a new spring of modern Chinese literature. The period may be compared to an early spring, when hope for a new Chinese literature in the post-Mao era began to sprout on the barren soil left by the long and withering winter of the Cultural Revolution. The five decades between the May Fourth period and the Cultural Revolution witnessed an accelerated enforcement of the social-realistic

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2See Mao Dun ("Opening Address" 4) and Ba Jin (158).
paradigm. From the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s socialist realism became the officially-endorsed working formula with which literary works were critiqued and reproduced. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) six operatic plays and two ballet dramas constituted the dominant voice of artistic and literary expression in China. They were promoted to the status of model works for creating a desired image of the working people, and comprising correct political content and expected artistic expression—the criteria Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-tung) set up for artistic and literary creation in the Yan'an Forum for Arts and Writers in 1942 (Benten 458-84). Artistic creation was thus reduced to reproduction of these model works.

As Leo Ou-fan Lee argues, in spite of the fact that literary works produced with the guiding principles of social-realism hardly merit study as artistic expressions, they represent a dominant literary discourse whose role cannot be underestimated ("Postscript" 302). Indeed writers in post-Cultural Revolution China were as concerned about the influence of tradition as the May Fourth generation of Chinese writers except that the tradition in question was no longer a rich cultural heritage but the shackles of socialist realism. For Chinese writers in the 1980s it was a concern about their creativity, restricted by socialist realism in terms of literary language and imagination. They were struggling to free themselves from the influence of socialist-realistic aesthetics, represented by the revolutionary model works. While the formulary language and imagination of the mid-1960s to the late 1970s continued well into the 1980s in the guise of reform literature, every important literary trend in post-Cultural Revolution China from "wound (scar) literature" to works devoted to discussion of

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3 See Leo Ou-fan Lee ("Postscript" 302).
4 The term "wound literature" or "scar literature" (shangheng wenxue) is derived from Lu Xinhua's short
humanism was at the same time attempting to break the confines of socialist realism.  

The urgent need Chinese writers felt for "emancipation of thought" and the exploration of new modes of expression at the time spoke for a general realization of the impoverished state of language and imagination in post-Cultural Revolution Chinese literature. As Widmer notes, in contrast to the May Fourth generation of Chinese writers who "sought to make a decisive break with premodern writing, contemporary literature has long since freed itself from the "anxiety" of this influence and can treat it more matter-of-factly, as a rich, nearly untapped reservoir of artistic ideas" (xi). Han Shaogong, who first used the term "cultural exploration" (wenhua xungen), proposed to enrich literary expression by resuming a literary tradition that had been discontinued since the May Fourth movement. He maintains: "literature has roots. The roots should be deeply planted in the soil of the traditional culture of the nation. If the roots are not deep the leaves will not flourish" (53). Han's proposal provides a theoretic premise for cultural exploration as a growing literary trend. While traditional cultural heritage was looked upon as a remedy for the sterility of Chinese fiction, the fiction of cultural exploration creatively excavates a wide spectrum of cultural traditions.
ranging from the unorthodox, the popular, and the politically problematic (such as Confucianism and Taoism), to other forms of cultural heritage which had been banished except in backward rural areas. For example, Han Shaogong redisCOVERs the ancient southern Chu culture, which had enjoyed a prestige comparable to that of the northern Zhou culture, but had been consigned to oblivion by moderns. Li Hangyu traces the influence of the once flourishing ancient Yue in present-day rural Zhejiang. Cultural exploration also extends beyond literary traditions by bridging the gap between literary tradition and popular culture, and between culture and life. Writers like Lu Wenfu explore cultural implications in such everyday life experiences as attitudes towards food—an important part of Chinese culture—which never entered into modern Chinese literature before the 1980s. The diversity embedded in the fiction of cultural exploration significantly exceeds stereotyped expressions and a dogmatic approach to literary representation.

As Leo Ou-fan Lee observes, the fiction of cultural exploration is the "first glimmerings of a new literary movement" ("Introduction" xiii). In addition to its diversity, the fiction of cultural exploration also reaches out to "a larger reality that lay beyond the confines of politics and ideology" (Lee "Introduction" xiii). Li Qingxi maintains that fiction of cultural exploration seeks to "return to the thing itself" (huīdào shìwù de běnhéng 161). For many writers the "larger reality" or "thing itself" is the basis of human existence, for which the crude living conditions of the countryside again provide rich soil for exploration.

Most Chinese writers who started to publish in the 1980s were previously zhìqìng translation is "cultural exploration."
who had undergone the experience of rustication during the Cultural Revolution. Their transformation from naive followers of the Cultural Revolution to clear-minded observers and critics of Chinese politics was initiated by contact with the poverty-stricken countryside. The experience Shi Tiesheng records is quite representative of his generation of writers.

In Beijing we had been told that socialism was like paradise, but as soon as we arrived in the countryside, we saw beggars. Throughout school we were told that only lazy people would become beggars. In the beginning we really thought the beggars were lazy people. But one year later, as it became very clear that this was not the case, I began to have doubts about the truthfulness of the propaganda. I also began to question the superiority of the commune system. (Leung xxx)

Like Shi Tiesheng, many writers of the 1980s went to the countryside—the periphery of society—from various urban centres, only to find that poverty in the countryside was shocking. It forced their attention to existential issues which had escaped their notice while living in the city during the turmoil of Cultural Revolution.

The poverty-stricken countryside evokes reflections on the basic material components of humanism in the fiction of cultural exploration. However, unlike Victorian writers of rural fiction, who present themselves as urbanites looking for social ideals and aesthetic values in rural life, Chinese writers of rural life in the 1980s, because of their experience of imposed rustication, were familiar with the harshness of rural life. At the same time, they differed from Chinese writers of the 1920s in that they did not identify themselves with the countryside. Although intellectuals were forced to go through "re-education" in the

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8"Rustication" was a process by which the government sent intellectuals to the countryside for re-education or ideological reform by the peasantry. Zhiqing—"educated youth"—were middle school students sent down to settle in the countryside.

9For further discussion on the cultural approach of the fiction of cultural exploration see Leo Ou-fan Lee ("Introduction" viii) and Li Qingxi (325).
countryside, they retained their distinctive way of thinking. It was this unique experience that allowed them to be sensitive and observant of conditions in the countryside.

Most writers of cultural reflection position themselves as close observers but not as natives of the countryside. For instance, Shi Tiesheng maintains: "my writing cannot be said to be of rural theme but is of the relationship between zhiqing and peasants. Because I am not familiar with peasants, I rarely write a peasant story" (Shi 213). His writing similarly draws a line between observation of rural life and active participation in it.

Zhu Xiaoping, who writes of the peasants and their predicament, also presents himself as a detached observer. In his *Chronicle of Mulberry Tree Village* (1985), an autobiographical narrator records and reflects sympathetically the poverty and the struggle for bare existence of a closed rural community during the Cultural Revolution. Although he is sent down to the countryside to live with the peasants, he remains aloof from their struggles and sufferings. For example, because his father is a high ranking official and has important connections, the narrator can openly defy the authority of the local officials. The peasants, on the other hand, live in fear of them. The narrator makes no claim that he understands the peasants' mentality or morality. He admits that, Li Jindou, the production brigade leader, puzzles him. He is touched by Li's paternalistic protection for the village, but perplexed when he discovers Li has used him for help when they confront the government officials to demand a lower estimate of annual production and a lower tax for the village. In another instance, the village accountant is forced to go begging after being injured while risking his life

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10 A production brigade leader is equivalent to the position of village head under the commune system in the 1960s and 1970s.
to save public property from a collapsing house. The narrator is shocked by Li Jindou's indifference towards the man. The narrator concludes that "this flesh and blood Li Jindou had nothing in common with those imaginary peasants" portrayed in books and magazines (57). The narrator relates Li Jindou's enigmatic complexity to the necessity to eke out a living in the poverty-stricken countryside. Despite his sympathy for the peasants' predicament, he regards Li's resourcefulness as a pathetic "waste" of energy (74).

Symbolically, the narrative is structured as a circular enclosure. It starts with the narrator's bewilderment with the character of Li Jindou and ends with his even deeper quandary over the old brigade leader after he revisits the village during Li Jindou's absence. The narrator is unable to enter Jindou's world, but can only look at the enclosure of the village from a distance.

In contrast to Zhu Xiaoping's detached observation of peasants caught in a pathetic struggle for existence in the interior of north China, Zhang Xianliang's Mimosa (1985) presents a rosy picture of farm workers in contrast with mean and petty urbanites. Unlike Zhu Xiaoping's narrator, who remains uninvolved in village life on the strength of his family background, Zhang Xianliang's persona, the released political prisoner Zhang Yonglin, struggles for survival as the local farm workers. Material impoverishment forces him to suspend his romantic ideal of life fostered by his education and urban bourgeois family background. He temporarily bonds with farm labourers through a common material need for survival--food.

Hunger tests Zhang Yonglin's tenacious hold on life and, and, together with imprisonment, deprives him of dignity. Assigned to farm labour upon release, he is daily
exposed to hostility from other persecuted urbanites living in his dormitory. One of his roommates tosses half a bun over Zhang's head to another one, expecting to test Zhang's ability to withstand the temptation. Hunger reveals the morbid mentality in his roommates in response to the dual pressures of political persecution and material impoverishment. In the extreme scarcity of food, Zhang feels smug with the additional 100cc of porridge he receives from the cook.

Material scarcity, on the other hand, highlights the broadmindedness and loving generosity among the local farm workers. Their hard but healthy life is embodied in Mimosa (Ma Yinghua), a young woman farm worker of unknown origin. However, although he takes comfort in the presence of the emotionally open and physically healthy workers, he cannot communicate with them in their language. While Mimosa's love and generously given food restore the narrator to self-respect and health, the narrator's feelings for Mimosa are constantly split between his urge to cast her in the role of one of his literary heroines and his disappointment in her difference from them. He dichotomizes his imaginary world and Mimosa's physical world, frequently feeling "torn between grief as if leaving my nearest and dearest, and joy as if going to see the one I loved most" (96). The critic Ji Hongzhen notes that this confusion indicates the writer's inability to perceive the deep religious implications in his characters ("A New Criticism" 86). The narrator does notice from her facial features and language that Mimosa is a hui (a Chinese Muslim), which only makes her more exotic for him. His lack of intention to enter her world is manifested in his perception of her happiness: "it exasperated me that whatever happened she could always laugh" (98). Because he cannot read her mind, he mistakenly regards her sunny disposition as a sign of mental emptiness.
Mimosa is also the name of a plant, *albizia julibrissin*: "grown mainly in central China, it likes sun, can stand drought and will grow in poor soil" (178). For the narrator, the best explanation for Mimosa's heartiness and her ability to endure difficulties is found in this dictionary entry under "mimosa," as a plant. In other words, Mimosa is naturally endowed with an ability to endure hardships and with a therapeutic function. It is as if she and the local farm workers belong to a different species from the narrator. Although he does not understand their richness, he can trust their "material and moral support" (181). They are his secure oasis. Mimosa is the novel's namesake, but existence is only a stage in his upward move from the verge of an abyss to "the red carpet" in the Great Hall of the People (181). From the red carpet he salutes Mimosa and the farm workers as "lovely, sacred mimosa trees growing over the whole length and breadth of our land" (181). The word "sacred" appears to be the key to the attraction of ordinary labourers like Mimosa: for the narrator they transcend the material world and are impervious to change. Memories of a simple life among these labourers have the comfort of stability and security. Zhang Xianliang, like Zhu Xiaoping, reveals in great detail the conditions of rural life. Meanwhile they also present themselves as outsiders, who are distant from the peasants' inner world, even if their personae live in close contact with the country people.\(^\text{12}\)

Poo Xianliang is not usually identified as a writer of cultural exploration. Yet his writings mark the thematic change from socio-political criticism to studies of humanity in the

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\(^{11}\)The parliamentary building.

\(^{12}\)However, Zhang Yonglin's self-analysis is monumental in modern Chinese literature not only because it reveals the psychological impact of political pressure and poverty but also because it supplements the concept of humanism in modern Chinese literature. For the contribution Zhang Xianliang's sensory representation of hunger makes to post-Mao Chinese fiction see Lei Da (24-25) and Zhang Zhizhang (121).
broad sense of the word. He introduces sensual desire as an ingredient of mental and psychological health—a theme further developed in conjunction with cultural exploration by younger writers such as Mo Yan. However, as he states at the outset this novel is about the spiritual journey of a Chinese intellectual who, "after a long 'ordeal' finally becomes a Marxist" (Mimosa 14). Although his standing on the red carpet as a representative to the national congress (an equivalent to a member of parliament) at the end of his journey indicates his recognition as a Marxist—an outcome of his reading of Marx's *Capital* throughout his stay on the farm—this framework of spiritual journey towards becoming a Marxist is only loosely attached to the substance of his narrative. This structure of Zhang Xianliang's narrative reveals a tendency to use Marxist theory as an accepted framework to give meaning to his experience on the farm, as if the experience required such endorsement.

Mo Yan, however, presents a different perspective. In his fictional narratives of the countryside, the division between the narrator and the characters is increasingly blurred. The narrator frequently moves freely between his characters and his readers. In this respect, Mo Yan appears to be justified in asserting that his "life as a native youth born and growing up in the countryside with no hope" (Shi Shuqing 131) gives him an advantage as a writer of rural fiction over the urban writers. It enables him to understand the peasants' feelings and way of thinking. He believes that "one has to think like the peasants in order to penetrate to the depths of their hearts and understand their essential being" (Shi Shuqing 131). On the other hand, he maintains that writers whose contact with the countryside is limited to the experience of rustication "are allowed some hope to escape the countryside, and they always think of themselves as outsiders" (Shi Shuqing 113). This observation may serve as a useful guide to
his works, regardless of whether one accepts it as a valid explanation of the writing of *zhiqing*.\textsuperscript{13}

Born in a peasant family in Gaomi County, Shandong province, Mo Yan is directly related to peasants while Hardy and Shen Congwen were from a mason's and a local gentry family respectively. Mo Yan's home village is far from the local township and appears to have been ill-favoured by nature as well as by governments throughout the ages. Every autumn the area is washed clean by flooding. Destitution makes for a life that is a struggle for mere survival. However, the residential registration system of the People's Republic of China makes it forbiddingly difficult for rural dwellers to settle in urban areas. As Jasper Becker notices, "[u]rban and rural status was determined at birth and was usually hereditary" (221). If born into a peasant family, one is destined to remain a peasant for life unless blessed with exceptionally good luck.

Mo Yan encountered further difficulties in breaking out of the circle because of his family background. His family was classified as "middle peasants" because his grandfather had been slightly better off than destitute when the communists took over the country. "Middle peasant" was an arbitrary prescriptive class category that touched on the narrow margin between enemies and allies from the late 1940s to the late 1970s in mainland China. According to one account, he was denied admission to secondary school after finishing grade five because of his family background (Leung 146).\textsuperscript{14} He then started working in the fields,

\textsuperscript{13}Some writers, such as Zheng Yi, would not consider themselves detached observers to the extent that Mo Yan describes them (Shi 86). Yet in their representations of the countryside they choose the perspective of outsiders who constantly compare and contrast the peasants' view of life with their own.

\textsuperscript{14}In an interview with Shi Shuqing, a writer and critic from Taiwan, Mo Yan explains that holding different political opinions from his teacher was the reason for his dropping out of school. See Shi Shuqing
when he was in his early teens.

It was due to a stroke of luck that Mo Yan succeeded in escaping the village of his birth at the age of sixteen. He was first transferred to work in a cotton factory in the local township with the help of a relative. After four years of work in this local factory, he was recruited into the army due to a lucky coincidence. When universities were closed down during the Cultural Revolution, the army was looked upon as an admirable occupation. Joining the army, consequently, developed into a nation-wide obsession with the young. The competition for entrance into military service was particularly intense in rural China, as it offered the only escape from the impoverished life of a peasant. Mo Yan would not have been eligible as a candidate because of his family background. However, when a recruiting team arrived in his hometown in the winter of 1976, Mo Yan happened to be the only candidate available for the interview. Others were busy at an irrigation construction site. He was then chosen despite his family background.

Although Mo Yan succeeded in leaving behind the life of a peasant, he often viewed this experience with mixed feelings of relief and dread. In an interview with Leung Laifong, a Canadian sinologist, he refers to it as a narrow escape from a nightmare. However, in spite of the fact that he has spent more time in the army than in the countryside, the grinding poverty of the countryside and the feeling of being trapped in a meaningless existence serve as a source for his writing and shape his creativity. In his writing of the countryside the desire for freedom and rootedness are intertwined to create an at once tangibly materialistic and imaginary homeland.
Compared with Zhu Xiaoping and Zhang Xianliang, Mo Yan's presentation of harsh rural life is multi-faceted. For instance, apart from embracing hunger as a sensation of being alive and a trigger for cultural and existential reflection as his contemporaries do,\textsuperscript{15} he also incorporates a peasant perspective and explores hunger as a vivid motivation for imaginations of prosperity. He uses prosperity, which is both a wish and a faith in the soil, to reconstruct the original rural homeland of his grandparents' time.

However, as Mo Yan does not adhere to any recognized cultural system in his representation of the countryside, he is regarded by some as one of the most important writers of cultural exploration and by others as not belonging to the group at all (Wu Liang 349). Wu Liang, for example, maintains that Mo Yan's "heroes and bad guys do not possess much traditional Chinese ethics and culture" (349).\textsuperscript{8} Even Li Qingxi, who acknowledges that Mo Yan "pushes some characteristics of the fiction of cultural exploration to the limit" ("Return" 22)\textsuperscript{h} is reluctant to discuss him in the light of cultural exploration. This hesitation and uncertainty on the part of Chinese critics reveal both the limitations of their concept of Chinese cultural traditions and Mo Yan's innovations in incorporating the peasant cultural tradition, originally excluded from the literary tradition, into \textit{belle lettres}.\textsuperscript{16}

Mo Yan's introduction of the theme of prosperity in his depiction of the rural homeland is both inventive and a return to a long established popular tradition in the rural cultural market. Mo Yan's home province, Shandong, located in the Yellow River basin, is

\textsuperscript{15}See Wang Binbin for an analysis of hunger as a source of social criticism in post-Cultural Revolution Chinese literature. Wang's study only covers observations or objective descriptions of hunger, however, and does not discuss Mo Yan.

\textsuperscript{16}Daniel Overmyer's observation of the neglect of popular religions by scholars provides an example of a general tendency to exclude popular culture from cultural studies (1).
one of the oldest agricultural quarters of China. It is not only a major grain market but is also noted as an important cultural market for peasant art. A hundred kilometres from Mo Yan's hometown is a place named Yangjia Bu (meaning "Village of the Yang Family"). It is known as one of the four producers of *nianhua*—New Year's posters by peasant artists.\(^{17}\)

As is typical of peasant culture, prosperity constitutes the major theme of the wood-block prints of Yangjia Bu. Sinologist Basi Alexeev describes *nianhua* as a narrative of a popular "cult of wealth which reveres Cai Shen, the 'God of Wealth,' and a host of lesser gods and demigods who support the essential wealth principle" (qtd. in Flath 4). In fact it is the wealth principle that *nianhua* supports. The woodcut prints or the New Year’s posters are devoted to a vision of a good life grounded in the idea of prosperity. *Cai Shen* simply symbolizes wealth or sources of wealth. In Yangjia Bu wood-block prints, the wish for material prosperity is expressed through a variety of either symbolic or straightforward images of wealth, including gold coins, fully stocked barns, large herds of cattle, and happy households of multi-generational families.

The fact that the New Year's poster has survived for three hundred years testifies to a deeply ingrained hope for material prosperity and security. This hope is clearly a reaction to the harsh living conditions in the countryside.\(^ {18}\) The New Year's posters have gone through many changes in their motifs—especially the symbols for wealth—since the early twentieth century, but have retained the theme of prosperity in spite of drastic changes in cultural and political climate. In fact, changes in the motifs of *nianhua* both reflect changes in the cultural

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\(^{17}\)The other three are Yangliu Qing in Hebei Province, Mianzhu in Sichuan Province, and Taohua Wu in Jiangsu Province. For a detailed description of Yangjia Bu woodcut *nianhua* see Zhang Daolu.\(^ {18}\)
environment and contribute to retaining the unchanged theme. Starting in the early 1980s, the New Year's poster resumed using traditional motifs in representing riches: money and gold. During the Cultural Revolution, however, euphemized symbols of wealth, such as a bumper harvest, were the only tolerated indication of prosperity.

Moreover, the aspiration for wealth became recognized by Chinese society at large and no longer had an aura of pettiness or immorality in post-Cultural Revolution China. When ordinary Chinese look back at their experience of the Cultural Revolution, they strongly resent the asceticism that was pushed to an extreme during that movement. The notion of voluntary and respectful destitution, which had been accepted in the Chinese gentry tradition as indicative of moral integrity and cultural accomplishment, lost its appeal for ordinary Chinese owing to the experience of the Cultural Revolution, when material scarcity had become degrading for many, and life-threatening to the impoverished rural population.

Mo Yan is the first modern Chinese writer who crosses the lines between the literary, the popular, and the practical in his fiction. By using the prosperity principle in his reconstruction of the original rural home, he provides a comparative perspective on the deplorable state of the rural region, whereas most of his contemporaries treat the poverty-stricken countryside as a static piece of history and a crystallization of the past.

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18 See Becker for the threat of famine in Chinese history.

19 Even the political agenda of the Communist Party incorporated changing attitudes towards prosperity in Chinese society. The Secretary-General of the Chinese Communist Party, Deng Xiaoping, repeatedly declared that the Chinese government aimed at leading China to reach "a comfortable level of living" (xiaokang shuiping) by 2000. See Deng (2:237, 259, 235, 416-17, 3: 105, 109, 117, 61, 206, 204, 210, 218, 224, 226, 233, 250, 251, 266, 278, 374). This emphasis on economy in the official media revealed both the government's effort to retain the current political structure through economic reform, and the devastated state of the Chinese economy after the Cultural Revolution.
While cultural exploration legitimates diverse perspectives and forms of literary expression, Mo Yan, like his contemporaries, also went through a period of apprenticeship in order to reach out to a wider and richer field beyond the confines of the socialist realism. He started with writing about his own experience both in the army and in the countryside. However, his early writings reveal an uncertainty as to whether he should identify himself with the army or with the countryside. Both his narratives of the army and of the countryside take the perspective of an observer, who is somewhat distant from the characters or their world. For instance, his army stories are almost always narrated by a soldier of rural background who cannot fully identify himself with the army. His narratives of the countryside are usually presented from the standpoint of a native who has settled in the city or the army. The narrator is insignificant other than as a reporter or commentator, and narratives are often detached and one-dimensional.

Mo Yan enriched his literary imagination by incorporating visions and fantasies while studying in the Literature Department of the People's Liberation Army Art Institute in 1984. His story "The Crystal Carrot" marks his transition from a socialized to a personalized vision. It is an instance of "turning the mundane into fantasy." Mo Yan confessed that the inspiration of the story came from a dream. His initial effort to extend his visual field into fantasy and dream is manifested in the character Hei Hai's personalized vision of the world, in images such as the blue sun and transparent carrot.

However, his real breakthrough, according to Mo Yan, came after he read Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1971). He admitted: "Márquez's works woke up my memories of past life experience. They pushed me back to my hometown."
It dawned on me that was where I should stand" (Shi 109). While most writers of cultural exploration concentrate on a static rural life, his reading of Márquez sets Mo Yan on track to an imaginary past. Like the Columbian writer, he blends his imagination with his birthplace in his reconstruction of a regional history to activate a memory of the region's past. However, his vision of the past is always made tangible through a sensitivity to the land. That is where his rural experience and exposure to a regional culture fit in. Mo Yan implies that Márquez taught him a way to break the restraints of realism. Yet the world he creates is his own: "Márquez woke up my dream, but he did not dream my dream" (Shi Shuqing 111). By "dreaming" Mo Yan obviously refers to the effort to retrieve by imagination and fantasy what is buried and obscured under layers of history. Mo Yan compares the relationship between Márquez and Chinese literature to that of seed and soil. He even claims that "if Márquez had not existed, a Chinese Márquez would have emerged" (Leung 151). If Gabriel García Márquez' s work served as catalyst to accelerate his construction of a multi-dimensional rural homeland, his harsh experience as a young peasant served as the incentive to activate the "past memory" of better days in the region. His "memory" of the region is shaped by the touch of his native soil and an inbred peasant culture.

*Red Sorghum: the reconstruction of the originally fertile homeland*

Rooted in agrarian life, the evocation of the supernatural for protection as visualized in *nianhua* manifests the peasants' response to the unpredictability of nature that often nullifies their year-long efforts and expectations. The feeling of insecurity accentuates the desire for prosperity or economic security. However, this feeling is not a subject for genteel literature and art. As Zhang Daolu observes, from the outset "the government, scholars and artists were
very indifferent to *nianhua* by peasant artists" (68). On the strength of his survey of the wood-block prints of Yangjia Bu, James A. Flath maintains that *nianhua* is not only a simple expression of optimistic desire for economic wealth but also a commentary on the elite as seen through peasants' eyes.

I would like to take over from where Flath leaves off. Based on some of Mo Yan's works written in the mid-1980s, such as *Red Sorghum*, "The Autumn Flood" (1985), "The Flying Ship" (1987), "The Black Beach" (1983) and "The Dry Creek" (1985), I would argue that he not only reconstructs his imaginary rural homeland through the lens of prosperity but examines the bankruptcy of the countryside in light of it. Instead of presenting his imagination of the past as a mere statement of the present, Mo Yan makes the glorious past of the region and the "original" fertility of the native soil illuminate and explain each other. On the other hand, the poverty-stricken countryside of the 1960s and 1970s is also presented as a result of man-made disaster and betrayal of the spirit of place.

Mo Yan develops the "fruitful life" of his rural homeland in his family saga *Red Sorghum* (a literal translation from Chinese would be *The Red Sorghum Family*). As suggested by the blending of the past of the region with family history in this family saga, the richness of the rural world is embedded in a sense of connectedness between Mo Yan's persona and the rural world. In the novel the grandson tries to reconstruct the life of his grandparents, interweaving it with the history of the region. While the absence of the father suggests an interruption in the family as well as in the rural tradition, the writer tries to reconstruct the history through his sensitivity to the land. His reconstruction of the life of the grandparents is much like reconstructing a fragmented history.
However, the grandparents are not presented as a pure product of the narrator's imagination. Dai Fenglian, the grandmother, and the grandfather Yu Zhan'ao are both legendary heroes as well as real people recorded in local history. Their fame not only rests on their role as defence heroes in the Sino-Japanese war but also on their unconventional alliance. The grandmother is married by her father at the age of sixteen to a wealthy but syphilitic wine distillery owner for the price of a mule. She meets Yu Zhan'ao, her chief sedan bearer, in the wedding procession. Yu saves her out of affection from the hands of a gunman on her way to her new home, but a few days later he ambushes her himself in the red sorghum field and starts their stormy and passionate relationship. Their story spreads by word of mouth among the local residents. The memories of the grandparents presents a mixture of the factual and the imaginary. The first thing the narrator does with the memory of the grandparents is to locate them in reality. The narrative, therefore, starts with the "factual": "I returned to Northeast Gaomi Township to compile a family chronicle, focusing on the famous battle on the banks of the Black Water River that involved my father and ended with the death of a Jap general" (Red Sorghum 13).

In addition to local history, the narrative consists of a multitude of stories that the narrator gathers from sources such as legends and recollections by family members and others about the grandparents. The narrator tries to prove that even before he contributes to the narratives of the family history, the grandparents are already creations of people's subjectivities and of the conventions of literary presentation. An example is provided in the clapper song by a ninety-four year old woman:

Northeast Gaomi Township, so many men, at Black Water River the battle began, Commander Yu raised his hand, canon fire to heaven, Jap souls
scattered across the plain, ne'er to rise again; the beautiful champion of women, Dai Fenglian, ordered rakes for a barrier, the Jap attack broken. ...(13)

The clapper song stands for a deliberate effort to remould the grandparents in the cliché image of resourceful and victorious heroes as in post-1949 mainland Chinese literature. The larger than life image of Dai, the grandmother, however, is soon replaced by that of a morally dubious woman in a personal recollection of the same character:

At the mention of my grandma, the old woman grew expansive. Her narration was cheap and confused, like a shower of leaves at the mercy of the wind. She said that my grandma had the smallest feet of any woman in the village, and that no other distillery had the staying power of ours. . . Arhat, your family's foreman . . . something fishy between him and your grandma, so everyone said . . . Aiyaya, when your grandma was young she sowed plenty of wild oats . . . Your dad was a capable boy, killed his first man at fifteen, eight or nine out of every ten bastard kids turn out bad . . .(13)

Although the narrator is apparently not happy with the old woman's comments about his grandmother's personal life, he values her recollection as the only adult memory of his grandparents among his sources. Her story is presented as a *mise-en-abyme* of the overall narrative: each fragment in her recollection is developed into an episode by the narrator in the family saga.

As a source of information, the clapper song as a literary representation or political propaganda proves to be less reliable than personal recollection. The narrator's representation of the battle scene corrects the fallacies of the recitation. The narrator challenges the dramatization by the old woman, and represents the Black Water River battle as a hard-fought battle for both the Chinese and the Japanese. Yu Zhan'ao is not given an opportunity to command cannon fire in this presentation of the battle scene, because the
peasant guerrilla force is only equipped with self-made guns. The narrator makes it questionable whether any side can be considered to be the winner of the battle. While a detachment of Japanese troops is eliminated, Yu Zhan'ao and his son are the only male survivors in the village.

The narrative reveals the creative involvement of all perceptions and presentations of the grandparents by questioning their reliability in terms of factual accuracy. The contrast between his father's memory of the relocation of the grave of his grandmother and the reaction of other witnesses to the event even raises questions regarding the credibility of eye witnesses and memories.

According to father, Grandma emerged from the resplendent, aromatic grave as lovely as a flower, as in a fairy tale. But the faces of the Iron Society soldiers contorted whenever they described in gory detail the hideous shape of her corpse and the suffocating stench issuing from the grave. Father called them liars. His senses were particularly keen at that time, he recalled (263).

The incorporation of multiple strands of narratives in Mo Yan's fictional reconstruction of the family history reveals the influence of oral literature. As he indicates in his interview with Leung Laifong, when he worked in the countryside, the familiar cultural medium was oral literature. Peasants would tell each other stories during their recess from work. Mo Yan admits that he especially appreciates the way a story is told orally and reconstructed through narration: "Every time the tale was told, something was added. The more times the tale was told, the richer it became. The images became more and more colourful. Gradually, history became a myth" (Leung 149-50). The narrator of the family saga is obviously interested in the contribution a storyteller can make to the story rather than in its accuracy or the ultimate truth. Meanwhile the multiple strands of narratives contribute to construct a massive, multi-
faceted, living edifice of the grandparents in contrast to one-sided images conjured up from any single strand or impression.

The embellishments of narration that one finds in oral literature elucidate the method with which the autobiographical narrator reconstructs the lives of the grandparents. The narrator asserts his share in the construction of the family saga, which is more than putting together scattered information about the grandparents or assembling fragmented impressions of them. He makes no attempt to assimilate the narration of his characters. The multi-layered narrative reveals diverse facets of the grandparents, none of which is cancelled out by another. The information he gathers from various sources provides him with a framework that is supplemented by his own imagination.

The narrator, however, presents his contribution to the family saga not as mere imaginings but as knowledge which none of his informants can provide. His presence in the family saga, therefore, presents a paradox about what he claims he knows and what he can possibly know. Being present in his own narrative as a first-person narrator, who is not a witness of the events, the grandson's knowledge of his grandparents and the time they lived is theoretically restricted to second-hand sources. These restrictions, however, are not observed in the narrative:

Father had taken this path so often that later on, as he suffered in the Japanese cinder pit, its images often flashed before his eyes. He never knew how many sexual comedies my grandmother had performed on this dirt path, but I knew. And he never knew that her naked body, pure as glossy white "jade" had lain on the black soil beneath the shadows of bright stalks, but I knew. *(Red Sorghum 6)*

The fact that the narrator claims to know more of his grandparents than the sum of
information supplied by his sources may appear inexplicable. He even dismisses any speculation that his grandfather could tell him anything about his grandmother when he served as a companion to the elderly man in the last years of his life. He mentions twice, as if for emphasis, that his grandfather had lost the ability of verbal communication when he returned from Japan as a prisoner of war: "Granddad had returned from the desolate Japanese mountains of Hokkaido scarcely able to speak, spitting out each word as though it were a heavy stone" (78).

The narrative pushes the mystery over the source of his information further. It is no longer a question of who informs him of what he knows, but who can possibly know what he knows. He presents himself as having knowledge that would have been impossible to gain. For instance, he appears to observe the grandma and enter her mind as she lies dying in the sorghum field: "Grandma looks contentedly at Father's exquisite face. She and Commander Yu had joined to create him in the shadows of the sorghum field; lively images of the irretrievable past streak past her eyes like racehorses" (67). The narrator appears to know what none other than grandma herself or her creator is supposed to know at that moment. David Der-wei Wang refers to the narrator's inexplicable presence in the scene as "superomniscient" ("Imaginary Nostalgia" 125), and thus points out the discrepancy between conceptual restrictions on an external narrator and the narrator's free hand in playing with them.

In his essay on Red Sorghum, Zhou Yingxiong tries to rationalize this "superomniscience" in terms of a genetic connection between the narrator and his grandparents. With the proverbial phrase "blood is thicker than water" (xuebishiwinong), he
implies that a frame of mind is genetically inherited (503). In other words, family connection grants the narrator entry into the minds of his grandparents, for which verbal communication is unnecessary. Zhou supports his argument for blood connection with the narrator's observation: "So my fantasies will chase yours while yours were chasing Granddad's" (181). This passage, however, is preceded by the statement: "You [the father] . . . wondered what was going through the mind of your father" (181). In this context, the pursuit of fantasy points to the effort the father makes in order to understand the mind of the grandfather. Instead of an innate concordance between the father and the son, genetic connection does not necessarily facilitate the communication between different generations. For instance, the father would like to forgive his enemies, and so cannot understand the grandfather who sees revenge as a way of survival.

It is true that the narrator, as a member of the family, has access to some family secrets. Yet, his knowledge is greater than his relationship with the grandparents could have supplied him with. Although Mo Yan perceives that "past history is closely related to the present world. It comes to life again in the lives of contemporaries" ("Furnaces" 299), he nonetheless does not present the family history in terms of an unbroken chain of blood relationships. Instead, he compares the connection between the past and the present to "the soft tail-lights of an automobile constantly fading out and coming back into view" ("Furnaces" 299). The disappearance of the past, the death of yesterday, is perceived as a precondition for its rebirth and renewal in the present. In Red Sorghum, the gap between the past and the present, symbolized by the absence or negligible presence of the father, is presented as an incentive for the narrator to bring the grandparents back to life. In a sense, the desire to
resume an interrupted family tradition is made all the more poignant because of the rupture.

Mo Yan refers to the perspective of the grandson in the family saga as an effort to "make the narrative believable" (Leung 151). However, while the narrator relates himself to his characters genetically, he nonetheless locates himself in a different time zone from theirs. This disjunction makes him openly resort to imagination in his reconstruction of the lives of the grandparents.

Yet the fact that the narrator prefers to present his imagination of the grandparents as sensual knowledge indicates an attempt not to rely completely on the gap between himself and his grandparents. He evokes the presence of the land as a connecting link:

> With this book I respectfully invoke the heroic, aggrieved souls wandering in the boundless bright-red sorghum fields of my hometown. As your unfilial son, I am prepared to carve out my heart, marinate it in soy sauce, have it minced and placed in three bowls and lay it out as an offering in a field of sorghum. Partake of it in good health (Red Sorghum title page).

The narrative appears to be dedicated as much to the land as to the grandparents of the narrator. A common homeland is perceived as a tangible connection between the narrator and his grandparents. He is related to the grandparents as much through the land they all reside in, albeit at different times, as through blood. The narrator thus savours the bond with his Second Grandmother, the second wife of his grandfather, perhaps more than he does the bond with his biological father. The Second Grandmother, who is not the narrator's grandmother by birth, acts as a spokesperson of "the red sorghum family," a reference to the narrator's family as well as to the forefathers who live on and are identified with the land of red sorghum.

Just as his remembrance or reconstruction of the life of the grandparents is presented as a tribute to the land that gives birth to them, the narrator's imagination of the
grandparents is based on his interpretation of the black soil of Gaomi in light of the cult of prosperity. The narrator both takes his point of departure from and aims at reconstructing an organic connection between the land and its residents, centering on the romance of the narrator's grandparents. Both the reconstruction of the grandparents and that of the vast landscape of red sorghum are, therefore, supported by the narrator's sensitivity to the originally fertile and productive black soil of his home region. The fact that the grandparents lived in this piece of land is taken as evidence that it is a landscape in accord with their temperament.

Being convinced of an inner connection between the land and the people, the narrator presents the legends of the grandparents and of a land of abundance as mutually illuminating. The fertility of the land serves as an explanation of the heroic impulses of the grandparents, while their legend is treated as a revelation of the spirit of the place. "The black soil of my hometown, always fertile, was especially productive, and the people who tilled it were especially decent, strong-willed and ambitious" (9). The exploration of the original fertility and productivity of his home region appears to echo the prosperity principle in nianhua in the rural cultural market. Mo Yan is inclined to set the golden years or glory days of Gaomi back to times when people enjoyed the generosity that the land provided.

Admiration for the first settlers is also articulated in his short story "The Autumn Flood." As is common in Mo Yan's writing of an imaginary past, this is also a story of the grandparents. They, as the first settlers in this swampy land, are blessed with the rich natural resources that unexplored nature alone can provide. Mo Yan's persona, whose memory of life is haunted with hunger and poverty, marvels at the richness of nature encountered by the grandparents:
The damp grass would give out a shimmering green light after nightfall. The light coalesced together like flowing water. Crabs residing in the mud always went out for food under this phosphorescent light. If you looked at the mud when daylight broke, you would find it densely covered with crab claw prints. These crabs grow to the size of horseshoes when reaching adulthood. I have never seen crabs this big, not to mention tasting one. I am drawn to the swampy land as my grandfather described it to me. How I wish that I had been born sixty years earlier than I was. ("Autumn Flood" 232)

This description of crabs may remind one of Gabriel García Márquez's short story "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," which opens with crabs crawling ominously into the house and followed by a strange old man with wings falling into the yard. However, Mo Yan's presentation of crabs is simply an indication of the natural abundance in which the first settlers find themselves. Plenitude is a recurrent motif of the landscape in Red Sorghum. The richness of the land becomes manifest in all its aspects, such as the water, the soil, the vegetation, and the people living in this environment.

While Shen Congwen dwells on the transparency of the water in West Hunan, the river in the land of red sorghum appears to be very productive: "The white eels of the Black Water River, like plump sausages with tapered ends, foolishly swallow every hook in sight" (9). This rendition of the water in Red Sorghum echoes the description of the river in "The Autumn Flood." While the size and weight of the eels serve as evidence of the nurturing fertility of the water, their naivety regarding anglers suggests a state of nature unsullied by human presence.

The richness of the water that contributes to the fertility of the soil also bears on the vegetation and the people.

Father ate crab until he was sick of it, and so did Grandma. . . . So Uncle Arhat minced the leftovers and ground them under the bean-curd millstone, then
salted the crab paste, which they ate daily, until it finally went bad and became mulch for the poppies. The crab-nourished poppies grew huge and fleshy, a mixture of pinks, reds, whites that assailed your nostrils with their fragrance. (8)

As in *nianhua*, the idea of having a surplus (*yu*—left-over or savings) features prominently in this reconstruction of the rural homeland. This interrelation between the land and the people living on it lays the foundation for Mo Yan's reconstruction of the past glory of the land in the time of the grandparents. The landscape he envisions for the grandparents is a vast stretch of land overgrown with red sorghum. As it is with his family saga, the narrator does not conceive the land of the red sorghum as a pure product of his invention. His sensitivity to the soil convinces him of its existence, even if he has not seen it with his eyes. Red sorghum is presented as the best thing the black soil can produce, because "their roots were buried in the black soil; they soaked up the energy of the sun and the essence of the moon":

In late autumn, during the eighth lunar month, vast stretches of red sorghum shimmered like a sea of blood. Tall and tense, it reeked of glory; cold and graceful, it promised enchantment; passionate and living, it was tumultuous. The autumn winds are cold and black, the sun's rays intense, white clouds, full and round, floating in the tile-blue sky, casting full round purple shadows onto the sorghum fields below. (4)

The abundance of the crop is applauded both as an indication of its fitness to the land of Gaomi and as a revelation of the fertility of the soil. The sensory harmony the red sorghum forms with its surroundings is seen as evidence of its belonging to the black soil of Gaomi. Red sorghum is more than a sensible choice for the peasants' food supply; it is a revelation of the older generation's sensitivity to the soil and the aura of the place.

The landscape of red sorghum clearly points to human presence on the land rather than an unexplored natural state. Its overwhelming sweep represents selective planting.
Compared with the original wilderness of "brambles, underbrush, and reeds" (180), human involvement in the process is obvious. This is confirmed by the narrator: "People of my father's generation who lived there ate sorghum out of preference, planted as much of it as they could" (4). The selection testifies to people's sensitivity to the land and attitude towards life, even if red sorghum is chosen primarily as a food supply. *Red Sorghum* expresses an agricultural optimism, in which human involvement in the landscape presents no threat to the ecosystem, but maintains, or enhances, the productivity of the land instead.

In a country that has been constantly harassed by famine as a result of flood, drought, or war, adequate supplies of food have always been a concern, especially for the farming population who live on the land.\(^{20}\) The concern with the food supply evidently gives rise to the peasants' wish for abundance and prosperity that constitutes the major motif of *nianhua* in the local culture market. The equation of happiness with having surplus, symbolized by fish (*yu*), a homophone for surplus (*yu*) in Chinese--and a plentiful harvest stored in the barn in *nianhua*, is obviously in reaction to a dread of scarcity. The fact that red sorghum is praised as a practical choice for the soil of Gaomi recalls the *nianhua* image of fully stocked barns--a popular way to cement the wish for surplus. "Northeast Gaomi Township is largely swampy land that is flooded by autumn rains, but since the tall sorghum stalks resist waterlogging it was planted everywhere and invariably produced a bumper crop"(39). This prospect of prosperity that red sorghum promises, makes it the right crop for the region. The choice reveals a relationship between the rural residents and the land they

\(^{20}\)See Jasper Becker for a detailed discussion of famine as a result of natural disaster as well as political turmoil and social unrest (9-23).
reside on. Moreover, the narrator explores in the landscape of red sorghum the original spirit of the place. Even if red sorghum is initially planted for a utilitarian purpose, the land of red sorghum retains aspects of untamed nature. In an attempt to retain a touch of wilderness, the narrative rarely focuses on peasants at work in the sorghum fields. The crop is given an illusory wild appearance, as if it were a species that flourished on its own. Its wild appearance is likely designed to further emphasize the original fertility of the soil.

Descriptions of red sorghum such as "graceful," "cold," "promising enchantment," "passionate and living," not only stand for a projection of the narrator's subjectivity in his perception of the landscape, but also grant red sorghum a life that is independent from the people who plant it. By shifting his perspective from the red sorghum as a food supply to his subjective experience of it, the narrator represents red sorghum as analogous with the people in their relationship with the land. In this respect, "glory" serves as a key word to indicate the adaptability to the environment of both people and sorghum. It indicates their delight in finding the right soil for the roots rather than pride in conquering nature. Theirs is a pride derived from the effort of making "human economic activity compatible with the ecological health of the environment in which it occurs" (Rolston 273). The past generations are proud of this connection with the land. As indicated by their close identification with their environment, they are at home in the red sorghum world. Mo Yan's reconstruction of the grandparents incorporates their physical environment. To a great extent, he structures his characters with what they eat and where they live. His creation of human figures is closely related to his perception of red sorghum. People acquire the character as well as the stature of red sorghum. Analogous to the fertility of the land and abundance of
the vegetation, the grandparents, the hero and heroine of the family saga, are presented as full-figured and healthy-looking. The fertility of the land, incarnated in red sorghum, is reflected in the people: "The young men of [the grandfather's] generation were as sturdy as Northeast Gaomi sorghum, which is more than can be said about us weaklings who succeeded them" (43). Red sorghum, which is mutually illuminative with the male folk of Gaomi, is represented as an assertion of life in harsh living conditions. Zhou Yingxiong describes the red sorghum as a symbol of suffering (509), emphasizing its ability to endure hardship. Mo Yan, however, stresses the vitality of red sorghum, stimulated by adversity instead of using conventionalized images for peasants' endurance. He reveals that his vision of his native land is inspired by the magnificent spectacle of vast stretches of red sorghum raising their heads above patches of yellow water in autumn. Red sorghum is the only crop that flourishes in the swampland of Gaomi. It is not only noted for its ability to endure hardships but for its capacity to get nourishment from the soil. Again the same thing applies to the local people, who actually enjoy life despite the harsh living conditions. He therefore equates the people with red sorghum in an attempt to show the impact of prosperity on them, which is discussed below.

The grandfather and his generation of male folk are modelled on the defiant energy of the red sorghum. The grandmother's first impression of the grandfather and his fellow sedan bearers provides a visual image of the red sorghum generation: "she [Grandma] could make out the shapes of the bearers' statuesque legs poking out from under loose black satin trousers and their big, fleshy feet encased in straw sandals" (42). Being confined in a sedan chair, the grandmother focuses her attention on the fleshiest of their feet, and the strength of their legs, which imply a freedom of movement that is associated with the open field.
In contrast to the male characters, whose appearance corresponds both to the vitality and generosity of the land of red sorghum, the characterization of the grandmother directly reflects a prosperous life that is produced by the land of red sorghum. The grandmother is pretty and plump. Her appearance suggests that of a nianhua character and testifies to prosperity, and contentedness with life. At sixteen, the grandmother is presented as "1.60 metres tall, weighing about 60 kg" (40). As is typical with Mo Yan's presentation of the past, his criteria are obviously modern. By using modern measures such as metres and kilograms instead of traditional units and by measuring the grandmother against the average height (1.60m) of women in north China in the 1980s, he obviously intends to impress the contemporary reader with the fact that the Grandmother is more heavily built than the average urban Chinese woman. Contrary to the common knowledge that people's average height and weight have shown a gradual increase in the past decades in China, the narrator suggests that the grandmother lived at a time when people were taller and heavier than people today. This description implies a significant value judgement when prosperity is used as the criterion for his reconstruction of the rural homeland.

The grandmother represents the narrator's notion of being well favoured by nature. Perhaps because his childhood memories are scarred with hunger, Mo Yan especially stresses the importance of a well-provided childhood for later well being and happiness. Born into the family of a silversmith, the grandmother is better off than most peasant girls from the very beginning:

She was wearing a cotton jacket over green satin trousers, with scarlet bands of silk tied around her ankles. Since it was drizzling, she had put on a pair of embroidered slippers soaked a dozen times in tong oil . . . . Her long shining braids shone, and a heavy silver necklace hung around her neck. (40)
The narrator describes her outfit as a display of satin, silk, and jewellery, which are not available to ordinary farming families. The elaboration on the design and making of her tiny embroidered slippers further indicates the leisured interest of the well-to-do as well as the narrator's mental picture of wealthy life.\textsuperscript{21}

The narrator at times presents himself as diverging from the taste of his grandparents' generation. For instance, he is morally and aesthetically repelled by the sight of bound feet: "Just seeing them [bound feet] saddened me so much that I felt compelled to shout: 'Down with feudalism! Long live liberated feet!'" (40). This view of bound feet reveals his position as a modern, who does not share the aesthetic obsessions of past generations. May Fourth intellectuals interpreted footbinding as a sign of the sickness of Chinese culture. Zhou Zuoren, for example, maintains that "footbinding is sacrificing health for the sake of ugliness; it is savagery" ("Natural Feet" 124). While Zhou Zuoren indicates that he is ashamed of being a Chinese because of the existence of footbinding in China, writers such as Fei Ming ("Mr and Mrs Zhang") explore the embarrassment associated with it.

However, although Mo Yan's persona does not share the older generation's fondness of bound feet, he is not critical of their fetish. Instead he emphasizes that the grandmother's beauty and value are enhanced in the eyes of her contemporaries by her bound feet:

Even a pockfaced witch is assured of marriage if she has tiny bound feet, but no one wants a girl with large unbound feet, even if she has the face of an immortal. Grandma, with her bound feet and lovely face, was one of the true

\textsuperscript{21}Although foot binding prevailed in China from the seventeenth century to the early twentieth century as a Han tradition, gentry families and the leisured class were particularly serious about the custom. As Dorothy Ko discovers in her research on the teaching of traditional womanly virtues, "a pair of bound feet was also a statement of a woman's class background or her privileged upbringing" (171).
beauties of her time. (88-89)

Tiny bound feet make the grandmother a desirable choice in marriage, attracting men regardless of age, disposition, and social status. Her marriage to Shan Bianlang and her alliance with Yu Zhan'ao are both brought about by her feet. In the first instance, Shan's father chooses her for his son because of the tininess of her feet. Later, Yu Zhan'ao saves her from the gunman at the risk of his own life only after he sees and touches her feet. The grandfather's fondness for bound feet shows that unique and heroic as he is, he does not transcend the aesthetic values of his time. The narrator also reveals a great interest in footbinding. Yet unlike his grandfather he does not associate it with erotic fantasy. Instead, his interest lies in its association with wealth, and the general impact of the wealthy lifestyle on one's mentality.

The narrator's interest in the bound feet of the grandmother appears to be closely related to his admiration for her being brought up outside of poverty. He calls attention to the fact that bound feet are a dowry that a destitute family could not afford to give to their daughters, although footbinding has been endorsed by custom for centuries in China. Poor farmers would not comply with the fashion, because for them it was financially necessary that everyone in the household work. In the grandmother's time, the size of a woman's feet was an indicator of her parents' financial status. The family servants, Passion and Aunt Liu, both have natural feet, which means that their parents were not rich enough to invest in their future well being. Another person who is aware of the economic implications of foot binding is his great-grandmother. Only the great-grandmother's enthusiasm for footbinding focuses on the future for her daughter. She treats footbinding as the best way to equip her daughter for attaining
The grandmother's appearance is then perceived both as a sign of wealth and as an access to more wealth. Being brought up in wealth dignifies the grandmother. Although the narrator touches in passing on the cruelty of selling a woman into marriage, the narrative cuts the marriage short with the death of her husband shortly after the marriage. Since she succeeds in defending herself against the groom's advances with a pair of scissors, she manages not to sacrifice herself. The death of her husband leaves her as the owner of a wine distillery, which makes her well established for life. The narrator defines the concept of a "fruitful" life with the story of his grandmother. "Fruitful" is the word with which the grandmother concludes her life in the red sorghum country: "My heaven. . . . You gave me a lover, You gave me a son, you gave me riches, you gave me thirty years of life as fruitful [robust] as red sorghum" (72). The narrative reveals through the life of the grandmother that the notion of happiness is as substantial as the touch of the red sorghum and richness is an indispensable ingredient of a fruitful life. Yet the narrator appears to be especially interested in the influence wealthy living has on the capacity to enjoy life. He explores the connection between a fruitful life and prosperity, between enjoying wealth and enjoying life.

Wealth makes the grandmother well favoured for life in terms of beauty, health, and sexual appeal. Wealth, health, and sexuality are interrelated, with wealth as the precondition of the other two. The narrator sees in prosperity a possibility to increase one's capacity to enjoy life, which is symbolized by appetite for food. The grandmother is imagined as often feasting on fish, crab, and wine. Her appetite for food and life is topped only by her appetite for opium. The grandmother is said to be an opium smoker, but (miraculously) not addicted. The
narrator even considers opium as a contributor to her mental and psychological health, so that she "had the complexion of a peach, a sunny disposition, and a clear mind" (9).

Such descriptions of an opium smoker are unprecedented in modern Chinese literature. Mo Yan appears to be the first writer to explore the healthy effects of opium smoking in contrast to other writers. While De Quincey records his opium smoking as a source of artistic inspiration, in Chinese literature opium has no such associations. For instance, in Ai Wu's fiction, opium, as an import from English India and a trigger of China's first conflict with the west, is closely associated with colonization. In his short story *A Journey to the South*, the writer's persona burst out at an opium smuggler that "there was no opium in China in ancient times" (282). The narrator traces the source of the evil to colonizers. He underscores the political implication of opium, seeing it as a means of control. On the other hand, opium is associated with China's and Asia's powerlessness.

"The Golden Cangue," by the Chinese woman writer Eileen Chang (Zhang Ailing 1908-95), further relates opium smoking to the decline of a family. In the novel opium is associated with sickness and decay. It is associated with Cao Qiqiao's paralyzed husband and her imprisonment in a wealthy but unhealthy marriage. Opium smoking permeates her suffocating environment and eats away at her life. The writer borrows the voice of Tong Shifang, a returned overseas student, to mock the sentiment for traditional China: "A concubine gives birth to a child. This is the old China that he has been nostalgic for. His gentle and chaste Chinese maiden smokes opium! " (140) Tong Shifang's observation cements the connection between opium smoking and the decadence of old China.

Among Mo Yan's contemporaries, Su Tong in his novel *The Poppy Family* also
explores the relationship between opium smoking and the decline of the family, violence, insanity, and incest. Mo Yan must have been aware of these circulating literary associations of opium smokers, since he points to the rare exception of being able to smoke without becoming addicted. The implication may be that people become addicted to the drug because they need to remedy something in their life. Addiction arises out of awareness of the hopelessness of their circumstances.

The grandmother, who has no such need, does not become dependent on the drug. For her, opium is just a harmless natural product of the black soil of Gaomi. The issue is whether one has the capacity to enjoy a full range of products offered by nature. In fact everything that grows in the land of red sorghum—including opium—can contribute to the mental as well as physical health of the people if they possess healthy appetites. Like sorghum wine, opium is presented as a strong dose of life that is rooted in the soil of Gaomi. Only people who are used to the vigorous life of the black soil of Gaomi can enjoy it without being overwhelmed. A healthy appetite for food, therefore, becomes an indication of a great capacity to enjoy life.

In addition to the appetite for food, the narrator presents sexuality as another important ingredient and manifestation of a fruitful life. Mo Yan's rural fiction presents both sexuality and appetite for food through prosperity. While sexuality in the grandmother is nourished by a life of abundance in the land of red sorghum, Second Grandmother, the second wife of grandfather, stands for the wild vitality of the black soil in her sexuality. Second Grandma, the opposite of the first grandmother in appearance and sexuality, parallels the grandfather in her energy and unrestrained sexuality. She incorporates the intoxicating effect
of red sorghum wine, on which she has been brought up. Her lack of parental guidance, which
is made apparent by her unidentifiable origin and natural feet, relates her directly to the defiant
spirit of the black soil.

Despite their differences, sexuality in both the grandmother and the second
grandmother is related to the cult of wealth. Peasants are inclined to regard sexuality
(presented in the form of productivity) and prosperity as interrelated. Family reproductivity is
an important sign of prosperity in the wood-block prints of Yangjia Bu. In the peasants'
conception, a prolific family with the elderly in company of a cluster of plump grandchildren is
both an indication of prosperity and a means to achieve prosperity. Mo Yan, who looks upon
family productivity as an end result of sexuality, makes similar connections between prosperity
and family productivity and sexuality. In a reminiscence entitled "Miscellaneous on Cat" he
quotes the Chinese proverb "warmth and a full belly give birth to licentious desires" (Wenbao
sheng yinyu ) (280). Mo Yan uses this derogatory term in a neutral sense. By licentious
desires, he refers to sexual desire in general. He offers a materialistic interpretation of the
maxim as meaning that sexual desire is preconditioned by the fulfilment of basic needs in life
(286). He supports his philosophy by an observation that in the early 1960s, when there was a
major famine, only one baby was born in his village in the course of three years. In the year
following a bumper harvest of sweet potatoes, the village witnessed a baby boom. These
babies are later referred to as "sweet potato babies" (digua xiaohai), because their lives
derived from sweet potatoes (280).

As with the appetite for food, sexuality contributes to and is conditioned by a
fruitful life in the two female characters, although the grandmother and the second
grandmother give different connotations to sexuality. If the grandmother stands for the
desirable in conforming to the aesthetic standard of the day, the second grandmother may be
described as desire itself. The image of the grandmother in the novel alternates between a
well-brought-up daughter and a contented mother. She is prepared by her parents to be a
desirable choice for marriage, which starts with footbinding at six. She remains passive rather
than aggressive. Sexuality is an undercurrent in the life of the grandmother, which only
surfaces when called for. The narrator rationalizes the sexuality of his grandmother as an
assertion of her rights to her own body. Her alliance with the grandfather is viewed as
defiance of the violation of her rights by her father who arranged her marriage with a
syphilitic man. Her ambivalent relationships with Uncle Arhart and Black Eye, a bandit, are
presented as further assertions of this right. Sexual desire in the second grandmother, on the
contrary, is persistently present in her features and stature. She is described as having "a
strong, healthy body, long legs, and large unbound feet. Her dark face featured round watery
eyes, a pert little nose, and thick, sensual lips" (273). Sexuality in the second grandmother is
affluent, aggressive, and even threatening at times. While the grandmother represents a
household goddess, the second grandmother suggests a connection with the wilderness, an
indefinable fertility of the black soil, and the strength of red sorghum wine.

The assimilation of the richness of the soil is not restricted to characters' physiology
alone. The narrator stresses the substantiality of the grandparents' sensitivity and represents
sensuality as a tangible reaction to a hardy existence on the land. He describes the thoughts of
Second Grandma as if they were tangible and measurable: "Her thoughts are broad, deep,
stately, reflective yet serene and firm, and liberal" (357). The imagery of her thoughts echoes
his perception of the texture of the soil and the topology of the red sorghum country.

Although Mo Yan assimilates the cult of prosperity into his imagination of the original fertility of the land, what he admires most in the grandparents is a defiant spirit or spiritual freedom that results from close contact with a fertile and vast land of red sorghum. If Second Grandmother's thoughts are suggestive of the substantial touch of the soil, Grandmother's imagination represents a liberal spirit that is engendered by the land as well.

Grandmother was hoping for something without knowing what it was. She picked up the scissors again, but what to cut? Her fantasies and dreams were shattered by one chaotic image after another, and as her thoughts grew more confused, the mournful yet lovely song of the katydids drifted up from the early-autumn wild woods and sorghum fields. A bold and novel idea leaped into her mind: a katydid has freed itself from its gilded cage, where it perches to rub its wings and sing. After cutting out the uncaged katydid, Grandma fashioned a plum-blossom deer. The deer, its head high and chest thrown out, has a plum tree growing from its back as it wanders in search of a happy life, free of care and worries, devoid of constraints. (131-2)

After her abnormal marriage with a sick man is resolved through his death, the grandmother tries to express her feelings of relief and hope for the future in the form of cutouts. However, she finds that she is compelled to make her own inventions for the purpose. Conventional cutout images that focus on domestic prosperity do not provide a fit expression for her newly recovered independence. When she has exhausted her creativity, she gives up "brain-beating" and relies on the red sorghum fields for inspiration. Her creativity is stimulated as much by the feel of the land as by a defiance of restraints and a celebration of freedom embedded in the vast stretch of red sorghum fields. The grandmother's imagination, the newly recovered freedom of the katydid, and the leisurely stride of a deer that assimilates the wild spirit of the

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22 This cutout pattern is of a regional feature. It is popular locally in Gaomi. See Wei Liangxue (137).
place, defy imitation and regulation.

The narrator, therefore, emphasizes: "If she [the grandmother] could become a writer, she would have put many of her literary peers to shame" (132). The grandmother's imagination points to a rich source of creativity that lies in fusion with the fruitful life in the red sorghum world. The wildness but substantiality of her imagination is a spiritual wealth that the narrator considers his contemporaries to be in need of. If the grandparents and the grandson are differentiated in terms of wealth and poverty, the discrepancy in wealth is determined by the kind of landscape they find themselves in. The rich imagination of the grandmother is backed up by a rich land of red sorghum. Because later generations are brought up in a land of hunger, their imaginations are starved accordingly. The narrator's lament about the starved imaginations of his contemporaries, that they are "a shrivelled insect that has gone hungry for three long years" (132), is a two-edged metaphor of the physical state of hunger and the confined literary imagination of modern Chinese literature. On one hand, it is directly related to hunger as a physical state. Meanwhile, starvation also describes the poverty of the literary imagination in the mainstream socialist realist literature, which reached its limit during the Cultural Revolution. The range of Mo Yan's characters' imagination appears to reflect their relationships with the black soil. The grandparents' generation is presented as being in concert with the land: they meet in the red sorghum field, make love in it, and conceive their offspring in it. They ally themselves with the world of the

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23 Jasper Becker's investigation of peasants who have been through the famine Mo Yan mentions in his fiction confirms the connection between severe hunger and the inability to think. One of the peasants Becker interviewed recalled that "in those years, starvation became a sort of mental manacle, depriving us of our freedom to think" (205).
red sorghum rather than with laws observed in the villages and township. Their behaviour, that would be unlawful in most human communities, is acceptable in the world of red sorghum. Like red sorghum, they are rooted in the black soil of Gaomi, which provides them not only with a prosperous life but also with a spirit of defiance.

Stories told by the family members, such as the mother's story about the secret recipe for red sorghum wine (grandfather adds urine to the wine), and the father's recollection of the grandmother's going to a burial ground in the middle of the night to weigh a child's corpse in an attempt to find the winning number of the lottery, reveal some unexpected turns in the grandparents' imagination. This imagination, like the land of Gaomi, defies norms and restraints. Instead of referring to his native region as the most nurturing environment on earth, the autobiographical persona reveals the challenges involved in living in the region. In an interview with Shi Shuqing, a writer and critic from Taiwan, Mo Yan admits living conditions in his home region are extremely harsh owing to the annual flood. Yet, he admires the defiance of mediocrity in the spirit of the place, made manifest in a profusion of extremes:

Northeast Gaomi Township is easily the most beautiful and most repulsive, most unusual and most common, most sacred and most corrupt, most heroic and most bastardly, hardest-drinking and hardest-loving place in the world. (Red Sorghum 4)

The series of superlatives Mo Yan applies in the description of the natural as well as the

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24 In her article on Red Sorghum, Lu Dongling attributes the consequent use of the word "most" to the influence of Maoist language, recalling in particular former vice chairman of the Chinese Communist Party Lin Biao's use of the word in a stream of praise for Mao (Lu 63). Mo Yan does use Maoist language from time to time primarily as parody. Despite the deep influence of Maoist language on his generation, he is capable of suppressing any language that does not contribute to the designed effect of his work. The surfacing of the language of the 1960s to 1980s in Red Sorghum appears to be a deliberate attempt to reveal the time fracture between the narrator and his grandparents. The inclusion of such phrases as "great leader" and particularly "down with" not only contrasts his limitations with the grandparents' broadness but also
human geography of Gaomi is his first announced attempt to defy the "lukewarm water" or drabness of the clichéched rendition of rural life in contemporary Chinese fiction. It is a conscious effort to expand the range of his imagination. In his words he is trying to "go to extremes" (zuojiduan Shi, 110).

The entanglement of extremes Mo Yan reveals in his birthplace, nonetheless, is consistent with his concept of prosperity. With the consecutive use of "the most", the narrator emphasizes a forcefulness and vitality in the people and the landscape that are in accordance with the rich potential of the black soil. Gaomi is presented as characteristic of earthly life, with an entanglement of differences and opposites. Mo Yan accommodates this intertwining of opposites in his vision of his birthplace as well as his interpretation of its fertility.

Binary opposites such as the ugly and the beautiful are perceived as being embedded in each other in the black soil. In his novella "Red Locust," Mo Yan reverses the poetic imagery of fertility to dig up its repulsive elements; fertility is examined in the form of the mud in the river bed, a very fertile soil for plants. River mud, a fertilizer for life, is represented as a manure-like substance that contains an accumulation of dead bodies for an indefinite period of time. It is a rich fertilizer of life because of its incorporation of the dead and the rotten. Similarly, the black soil in Red Sorghum is also fertilized by corpses and blood. Life (red) and death (black) become complementary and fused in red sorghum (purple).

Mo Yan's rural fiction relates the diffusion of extremes to the notion of fertility. His attempt to enhance rather than sort out the entanglement is summarized by a playwright in his novella "Red Locust":

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highlights his contribution to making legends of them. For further discussion of the issue, see Donghui He.
One of these days, I will produce a real play in which dream and reality, science and fairy tales, God and Devil, love and lust, the great and the mean, beauty and shit, gold medal and contraceptive . . . are interwoven into a chain to create a complete world. ("Red Locust" 123)

It may appear doubtful whether this paradoxical view of life is equivalent to a comprehensive picture of the world as he claims. By stressing the connection between the seemingly contradictory and irrelevant in nature as well as in human life, Mo Yan associates complication and diversity with richness. The land of red sorghum is perceived as inclusive enough to embrace extremes of diverse nature. Instead of forming any contradiction and tension, binary opposites are both accepted and assimilated in the black soil and contribute to its richness. Extremes that fluctuate between the positive and negative stand for a mobility that resides in the spirit of the place. Regardless of whether they are positive or negative, beautiful or ugly, they are a defiance against a stagnancy and scarcity that would reduce and suppress the richness of the land.

The narrative draws an analogy between the sauciness of the grandparents and the vitality of the red sorghum fields—an extension of abundance and prosperity. In this respect, sorghum fields represent the opposite of the town and villages in the narrative. People in residential areas follow the institutionalized laws of society, enforced by parents, clan leaders, and local authorities. The sorghum fields, on the other hand, defy authority and order. They are governed by power, passion and an instinct to survive—a different value system from the town and village. For the villagers, the sorghum fields represent a blank space between human destinies. It is a space they cross in necessary rituals of life such as weddings and funerals. Their presence in the fields is that of passengers. The absence of human destinations
represented by the red sorghum fields presents a threat to domesticated people like that of an untamed world of nature.

Although Mo Yan applies the prosperity principle in the reconstruction of the lives of the grandparents, the kind of wealth that he imagines that his grandparents enjoy overlaps but goes beyond that exhibited in *nianhua*. The red sorghum generation apparently leads a more prosperous life in comparison with the rural residents in the 1960s and 1970s, who have barely enough to survive. However, the fruitful life attributed to the grandparents by the narrator is different from mere domestic prosperity. Theirs may not be a prosperous life in the conventional sense of the word, because it cannot be calculated with money. It extends from the prosperity principle, as peasant artists express it in *nianhua*, to an energetic attempt to mobilize and diversify one's life.

The red sorghum fields are inhabited by bandits who are very often poor outcasts of human society. Poverty, as the narrator admits, is one of the factors that produces banditry. The red sorghum fields in the narrative are compared to the woods where outlaws gather. Also like forest outlaws, the grandparents and their contemporaries look for a place where they can distance themselves from the restraints imposed by society. Unlike real peasants, the bandits are not engaged in tilling the soil on which they are settled. They "killed, they looted, they did the most terrible things and defended the country in a valiant, stirring ballet" (4). Their ambivalent status as heroes and villains, however, makes them different from traditional greenwood heroes motivated by poverty as well as by a calling to do justice.

Mo Yan models the bandits after past generations of peasants in his home region. They work in the fields during planting and harvesting seasons, but turn to banditry when they
can be spared from agricultural engagement (Shi 115). It is a way to survive in times of social
disturbance. The narrator, however, admires their courage to attempt an illusive break from
poverty with no regard for its cost: they are willing to pay with their lives for a moment's
freedom from want. Mo Yan's glorification of banditry has to be considered in light of the
deplorable situation that he explores in the post-1949 Chinese countryside. He admires the
past generations' resistance to being yoked to a meagre existence based on farming. The
evocation of banditry reveals his admiration for its defiance of the political oppression under
which his generation was brought up.

The reverse side of nianhua--suppressed spirit and impoverished homeland

In Mo Yan's world, the main disruption of the spirit and landscape of red sorghum
comes from politics. In place of an energetic landscape of red sorghum, Mo Yan's
representation of the countryside of the 1960s and 1970s is characterized by its oppression-
related stagnancy. Pervasive political oppression is highlighted in landscape descriptions, as in
the opening lines of "The Dry Creek:"

When the immense watery crimson moon rose over the dusky fields to the east,
the smoke and mist enveloping the village grew heavier and appeared to take
on the bright melancholy red of the moon. The sun had just set, leaving behind
on the horizon a long swath of purple. A few stunted stars momentarily gave
off a pale gleam between the sun and the moon. An eerie atmosphere
shimmered through the village. Dogs did not bark, cats did not cry, geese and
ducks were all mute. (209)

The monopolizing redness that spreads from east to west along the horizon suggests the
dominance of a suffocating and oppressive force. The overwhelming redness suggests of a
seemingly endless period of red terrorism: the Cultural Revolution. Unlike the red sorghum fields where the redness of the sun and sorghum is dynamically adjusted to a background of clear blue sky and white clouds, the intimidating reddish colour that fills up the evening sky creates a sense of suffocation, as the blind fury of mass movement did. From the perspective of a village boy, the "watery crimson moon" serves as a reminder of the gauntlet he ran not long before. The few stars that are paled and dwarfed by the presence of the sun and moon suggest the opposition that is silenced and made invisible under the dominance of red, naked, political power.

This landscape description serves as an allegory of the experiences of a village boy crushed to death by political oppression. Coming from the family of former landowners, the boy is born into a low caste in the political hierarchy. He is consequently warned against setting foot in the forbidden zone--the vicinity of the party secretary's house; moreover, he is told not to play with Xiao Zhen, the party secretary's daughter, and not even to climb the tree growing near their family compound. Being an uninitiated observer, the boy can sense the despair and fear that engulf his family but fails to understand the cause. He is equally bewildered that he should be destined to suffer. It was not up to him to choose the family he was born into. His fatal mistake is brought about by a violation of the class system of which he is ignorant. When Xiao Zhen challenges him to climb the tree next to their yard to get a branch for her, he hesitates but finally gives in to her request. However, the branch breaks as he reaches for it. He lands on the ground and the branch falls on Xiaozhen and kills her.

The boy is later beaten to death because of his ignorance of the political construction of society. Like the glimmering stars that are obscured by the glaring reddish sun and moon,
the boy is symbolic of the insignificance of individuals on the scale of political struggle, and their struggle for existence in the presence of overpowering hostility. The local Communist Party secretary beats the boy for trespassing and for killing his daughter, exercising his legitimate authority over the downtrodden. The fatal blow that ends the boy’s life, however, is struck by his nearest kin, his parents and brother, out of fear of revenge by the Party secretary. The village boy, a victim of pervasive political power, is like one of the little stars obscured by the overwhelming redness of the moon flooding the landscape.

Mo Yan’s narrative of his home country frequently reveals the direct impact of politics on the rural land. He often uses landscape imagery as an allegorical reference to social relations in his representation of the post-1949 countryside. In contrast to the boundless land of red sorghum he imagines the grandparents inhabiting, the rural landscape of the 1960s and 1970s has lost its former magnitude. This loss is accompanied by a shift of narrative focus to internecine struggles, rather than with an external Japanese enemy.

In Mo Yan’s rural fiction, political movements and poverty go hand in hand. As is suggested in *Red Sorghum*, the narrator’s initial recollection of poverty and starvation is associated with the Great Leap Forward, a misconceived political and economic campaign started in 1958. Although the founding of the People’s Republic of China owed much to peasants’ participation, peasants became the target of reform in the communist regime. Peasants were not allowed much time to rebuild their homes battered in a series of wars. Instead of protecting the family-based traditional agrarian life as promised, the government launched a commune movement to draw peasants into the co-operative system less than ten years after its establishment. In an attempt to show the advantage of the commune system,
cadres of all levels falsified the yields of their districts. The peasants were taxed many times more than their due because of the much exaggerated figures. In addition, as part of the propaganda program, public canteens were set up all over the country, where people could have a taste of communism in advance. Peasants were ordered to smash their woks to show their confidence in the commune system.25

The heat of communist reorganization only lasted for a few months. The following three years happened to be filled with a sequence of natural disasters. Drought and flood severely affected agriculture. The country was plunged into the most widespread and longest famine in Chinese history, and it was the peasants who suffered the most. Urban dwellers lived on rations allocated by the central government, of which the rural residents had no share. There were over 25 million extra deaths (beyond the normal death rate) in the course of the three years; the majority of the dead were peasants.

Apparently owing to this childhood experience of famine, Mo Yan’s representation of the countryside articulates a refusal to poeticize poverty. His representation of post-1949 Gaomi usually features the three years of famine or its aftermath as its background. Mo Yan attributes the acquisition of his value system, world outlook, and even his writing to the experience of hunger. This is manifested in the biographical notes about his country background and the experience of poverty usually inculcated in his novels.

The decline of Mo Yan’s rural homeland is not due to urban invasion or the exodus of the rural population in search of a better life in urban areas. Unlike Shen Congwen’s West Hunan, which is polluted by imports from the outside world, the original rural home in Mo

25 See Jasper Becker for a detailed discussion for the Great Leap Forward and its consequences (46-111).
Yan's narrative of the countryside is destroyed by the peasants themselves under the influence of a frantic drive to change nature. Mo Yan explores the defacement of his native country between the 1950s and early 1980s when modernization was still quite foreign to the rural areas. He deals with a time when peasants were trapped on their ancestors' land, but deprived of their reverence for it. His peasant characters are not proud of their connection with the land as the older generation were. They continue traditional methods of agriculture but no longer relate themselves to the land as their forebears did.

On the other hand, Mo Yan does not attribute the poverty of the Chinese countryside in the 1960s and 1970s to the peasants' lack of initiative in the commune system. Instead he takes in view the ecological disaster caused by politics. His representation of the rural world reveals the influence of political interference coming between the people and the land. As Becker describes, the politically oriented agrarian policies were "pseudo-science, a fantasy that could not be validated by science, or stand up to rational examination" (61). They challenged traditional farming experience and the prosperity principle, leading to a suppression of the fertility of the soil and the poverty of the rural region.

"Black Beach," a short story written in the early 1980s, also highlights the connection between the suppression of the spirit of the place and its resultant poverty. Black Beach, a seaside strip of land which later proves to be an ideal location for water products, is chosen to grow wheat so as to show that human beings can defy the natural environment and accomplish miracles. An army farm is set up on Black Beach for this purpose. As expected, the army throws so much work and money into the project that their cost of production triples the market price of wheat. Yet, no other economic activity is considered as politically
acceptable for Black Beach, because nothing else would create as big a sensation as wheat
growing on the beach. The whimsical decision made in accordance with Communist Party's
policy presents a sharp contrast with a native tradition—a tradition that is applauded as a
practical and sensible choice based on people's sensitivity to the native soil.

The extravagant investment in the wheat grown for a political cause contrasts with
the pathetic life of the villagers, who have to rob the farm to survive. In the land of red
sorghum, the ill-treatment of the black soil in the region after 1949 is indicated by the
replacement of red sorghum with hybrid sorghum. Hybrid sorghum, which is represented as
"short stalked, thick stemmed, broad-leafed plants covered by a white powder and tapered by
beards as long as dogs' tails" (Red Sorghum 358), is used by the narrator to indicate the
degeneration of his generation of peasants.

The narrator plays with the fact that hybrid sorghum is brought from Hainan Island in
the south. The introduction of the alien species to the soil of Gaomi signifies a disruption of a
native tradition imposed on the land of red sorghum. The narrator's derogation of the ugly
and hateful appearance of hybrid sorghum is not merely out of nostalgia for the age of red
sorghum. His strong dislike of the crop appears to stem from a conviction that hybrid
sorghum abuses rather than enhances the richness of the black soil. He observes with disgust:
"Hybrid sorghum never seems to ripen. Its grey-green eyes seem never to be fully opened"
(358). The languid appearance of the crop in a land of vitality points to his generation of
peasants' negligence towards the spirit of the place. It signifies an insensitivity to the black soil
as well as a self-denial on the part of the peasants.

The fruitful life of the red sorghum generation disappears with the elimination of red
sorghum. Abuse or neglect of the land is ultimately takes its revenge on the people. The inert appearance of hybrid sorghum points to an undignified existence—a life that is reduced to the instinctive satisfaction of hunger. Hybrid sorghum represents a desperate attempt to acquire food in a famished condition:

High-yield, with a bitter, astringent taste, it is the source of rampant constipation. With the exception of cadres above the rank of branch secretary, all the villagers' faces are the colour of rusty iron.

*(Red Sorghum 358)*

The contrast between the land of red sorghum and that of hybrid sorghum is self-explanatory. The successors of the heroic ancestors, the hybrid generation in the black soil, find themselves on the verge of starvation. The presence of hybrid sorghum not only indicates a drop in living standards but a degeneration of the local residents. Destitution deprives the people of all interest in life other than the pursuit of food.

While Mo Yan highlights a causal relationship between the abuse of the land and the poverty of the rural people, he focuses not so much on the state of famine as on its effect on people's feelings. Indeed, in Mo Yan's fiction hunger is a sensation of being alive and a way to get to the core of existence. For instance, in "The Black Beach," the autobiographical persona mocks his wife, an urbanite, for not being able to imagine the satisfaction of overeating. The wife's measured appetite suggests that urbanites fail to know the real quality of life because they have never been pushed to the verge of death as with hunger.

Although hunger is presented as a way to reach to the essence of existence, Mo Yan is never sentimental about the moral effect of hunger. Although he marvels at the tenacity people display in clinging to life in extremely adverse circumstances, he would not adopt
Zhang Xianliang's lyrical representation of rural harshness. His portrayal of childhood memory in particular is devoted to exploring the dehumanizing effects of poverty. If hunger and the dread of hunger have been incentives to his imagination of prosperity, the cult of wealth in the peasant culture also provides him with a point of departure for the exploration of its opposite. He approaches human values from a practical angle and presents poverty as degrading. Although material wealth does not necessarily raise the value of the individual, poverty is undeniably degrading and dehumanizing. His numerous descriptions of the grotesqueness of hunger allude to the appreciation of genteel poverty by urban writers as a lack of understanding of stark poverty.

Just as Mo Yan applies the principle of prosperity to the construction of the past glory of the region, prosperity similarly provides him with a perspective in his critical presentation of post-1949 rural life. However, his representation of the present rural region resembles an exploration of the reverse side of the nianghua picture. Although the narrator echoes the generally accepted view in pinpointing urban culture as having had a weakening effect on himself (Red Sorghum 357), the spiritual, moral, and physical degeneration of his generation are obviously attributed to the material destitution its members have experienced since childhood.

In "Miscellaneous on Cat," dedicated to his childhood memories, the narrator portrays a fight between humans and a cat over a mouse:

The cat came out of the side room with a big mouse in her mouth. . . . My sister and I rushed to her. . . . When the mouse was barbecued, it became all black and looked much smaller than before. Grandma knocked it on the floor. She tore off a leg and put it in my cousin's mouth, then tore off another leg and put it into my mouth. The rat tasted beyond words. My cousin spat out bones to the cat. But I gulped down everything. After we finished the mouse, we both
fixed our eyes on Grandma’s hands. (290)s

The eyebrow-raising fact about the incident is that it represents the everyday life of peasants in the region. People involved in the fight for survival only did what was natural under the circumstances. However, the hungry look the children fix on the dark stove and grandmother’s hands is creepy. It appears to suggest that the beast in human beings can surface at any moment in this condition.

Mo Yan makes it explicit that human dignity has to be guaranteed by the basic necessities of life. The devaluation of human beings brought on by extreme poverty is illustrated by the grotesque sensationalism produced by his 1987 short story "The Flying Ship." The story centres on the effect a plane crash has on a group of villagers on a begging trip. The narrator reveals the strong will to live the villagers show in destitution as well as the pathetic means they employ to make a living.

All the kids from our village went begging to Nanshan in those days, and not just the kids, old women and unmarried young women too. Our village begging brigade set off for Nanshan just as the sun came up. Outside the village a big company would form; by the time we’d gone a quarter of a kilometre, there were people scattered all over the road like goat droppings. (Explosion 96)

Begging was accepted as a way of life, or rather a walk of life, in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. As a member of the "begging brigade," the narratorial persona receives his early lesson from this environment that to live in poverty is to live at the expense of dignity. However, his mother and his elder sister’s argument about whether it is wise for an eighteen-year-old woman to put on a neat appearance while going out begging shows that peasants are not born without self-respect. They are forced to suppress their dignity in a desperate effort to survive. Human dignity is just too expensive for hungry peasants.
When the only other option is to die, the villagers strive to find the most effective way to get charity from others. The narrator observes with a touch of black humour: "Like every other walk of life, begging also produces its experts" (39). The expert beggar in the story is Granny Fang, a peasant wife. Granny Fang is very resourceful as a beggar, because she is stripped of her last grain of self-respect. She even uses her nursing baby as a stage prop in order to win sympathy.

When dignity is sacrificed to an effort to survive, so is conscience. With the experiences of Granny Fang, Mo Yan shows that political interference leads to the poverty of people while politics uses poverty to control them. In exchange for food, Granny Fang accepts the role of a political puppet. She agrees to testify to the improvement of her life under the communist reign at a "recall-bitterness meeting," although her living conditions show no improvement at all. It is true that she was a beggar under the previous government. Yet, with many more villagers taking to begging since the early 1960s, her life has actually become more difficult than before. As a witness, she cannot even produce the desired evidence: "A few years ago, for a morning's begging in Nanshan, I would get a basketful of dried sweet potatoes. These days I'm lucky to get half a basket for a morning's work..." (Explosion 100).

Ironically enough, even the "recall-bitterness" meal (yikufan), food cooked to remind one of the miserable life before 1949, is not available to her in her supposedly much improved present life. Naturally, she does not enjoy "poking out the filthy trivialities of the past" in front

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26 Recall-bitterness meeting (yiku dahui) refers to a kind of political gathering which was often held in the countryside and factories in the 1960s and early 1970s. Elderly peasants and workers were invited to recall their hard life before 1949 to show their gratitude to the Communist Party for supposedly raising their social status and improving their living standart.
of a whole village, but she is willing to trade them for a meal provided at the meeting.

That's what it's all for, for that recall-bitterness meal. Otherwise who'd rake up the filthy rotten trivial past for you? Wish on the stars, wish on the moon, the recall-bitterness meal's what we're wishing for!

(Explosion 101)

The elderly woman forfeits personal dignity in her attempt to cling to life. Yet life itself is devalued in the midst of her pathetic struggle for it. On one of their begging trips, the villagers find themselves in the vicinity of a plane crash. When they find that the baby Granny Fang carries in her arms has been killed by a stone sent up by the explosion, a villager suggests that she go to the army base (to which the plane belongs) for compensation. Granny Fang hesitates. It is not that she is unwilling or does not have the nerve to fight for her rights. She simply does not believe that an insignificant baby's short life is worth anything. When she is told by the villager that the compensation may provide her for the rest of her life and put an end to her begging career, she becomes more confused. Her husband similarly dismisses the idea of compensation as absurd. He orders his wife to take the baby home and "find a piece of matting to wrap it up in and bury it. A kid that's only one or two years old isn't really a kid" (109).

The tragic fact about people like Granny Fang lies in a discrepancy between their harsh struggle for life and the devaluation of life. Life for her and many others living like her, appears to be merely an effort to survive. It is not endowed with any significance or pleasure. However, when life is not treasured, the struggle for life becomes meaningless as well. The story also explores other kinds of damage caused by hunger such as mental health deterioration. Poverty is observed to engender brutality and hostility. When an adequate supply of food is almost impossible to obtain, the desire to survive may deprive people of their
self-respect and dignity as well as make them dangerous to one another. They are capable of doing anything to anybody for a chance to appease their hunger even if just for a little while. For the meal that Granny Fang craves, the narrator admits that he could have shot Granny Fang to cut her speech short, if only he had been given a gun ("Flying Ship" 101).

Hunger can alienate people from one another and deprive them of all sympathy for their fellow human beings. Hunger may even develop into a desire to feed on others' misfortune. The story "Flying Ship" brings to light a cannibalistic tendency in the hungry villagers at the site of the plane wreckage:

We heard that there'd been three men on board, but all we found in the wreckage was a big fat human rump. It was charred coal-black and had an appetizing smell. . . . Our little pack of beggars hated to see the stretcher go and followed along behind it like a pack of fox-whelps hungry for the taste of barbecued human flesh. (Ill)

While the villagers pursue the smell, they obviously do not realize or choose to disregard the fact that it is from the bodies of the dead pilots. In any case, they do not regard the dead pilots as fellow human beings. They do not give up their hunt until the cadres "chase them all off" (111). There is a scene paralleling their chase in Red Sorghum: homeless dogs hunt for human bodies after the Black Water River Battle and have to be driven away from the corpses with gun shots. The tragedy that befalls the pilots does not arouse in the villagers any sympathy or self-identification such as animals would feel towards the fallen of their own kind. Instead, the burnt body of the pilot is simply looked upon as barbecued meat, and is thus edible. Their deprivation gives the villagers the excuse to hate those who enjoy what they do not. Hunger is enough to drive people insane:

We listened sourly as they told how they'd eaten a whole steamer basket full of
white-flour steamed buns and a pot of beancurd, stewed with pork. How we'd have liked to split open their stomachs and let all that steamed bread, bean curd and pork come gushing out. I smelled pork on the leader's belch—it wasn't so very different from the smell of that rump. (111-12)

Mo Yan suggests that the desperate greed is a natural reaction of people to desperate circumstances as when peasants were reduced to begging to survive. Such reactions are not a built-in quality of rural life. Instead they occur when the peasants are forced to leave their land.

Mo Yan relates this bankruptcy of the countryside to the disruption and suppression of the original fertility of the place, which he exemplifies in the contrasting landscape of red sorghum and that of hybrid sorghum. Mo Yan therefore expresses a confidence in a buried but existent spirit of red sorghum. His effort to reconstruct the lives of the grandparents, indeed to live inside them, is an effort to recuperate the spirit of red sorghum, which has been suppressed by politics. The imaginary land of red sorghum is not represented as a pure reaction to the deplorable life of the post-1949 Chinese countryside. Mo Yan's narrative links the original rural home on the black soil with the past glory of the region, revealing the potential of the land to provide a healthy living.

The original rural homeland, like the family history, lies deep in the memory of the black soil. This soil aids and nourishes his search for the original rural homeland as well as the story of his grandparents. The reconstruction of the lives and landscape of the grandparents is ultimately an attempt to capture the spirit of the place embedded in the pure red sorghum. The imagined landscape of the grandparents' time, demonstrating the innate vitality of the black soil, is not only perceived as desirable and possible but is also applied as a criterion in the author's perception of the present.
As a writer who rates dreams as the essence of literature, Mo Yan blends memories of the red sorghum generation to relive the history of the land. Putting the emphasis on an ancient aspect of the land, *Red Sorghum* ends on the hopeful note that so long as the black soil of Gaomi remains, the spirit of the place will not die.

Mo Yan's reconstruction of his fictional rural homeland culminates in a fictional representation of the countryside in his revelation of the inexhaustible power of the native soil for literary imagination. The emancipating spirit of the red sorghum land represents a home for the "fruitful life." As with the fictional rural homelands by Hardy and Shen Congwen, Mo Yan's fictional Gaomi presents a new interpretation and justification of his actual rural region, whose richness is only detectable to the eye of one closely related to it. Like Hardy and Shen Congwen, he stresses the dynamism of the rural world. Mo Yan, who enlivens the history of the past with his colourful stories, emphasizes the force of memory embedded in the sensory touch of the soil, a culture that still lives and should be accepted as the backdrop of cultural exploration for Chinese writers in the post-Mao era.
Conclusion

Michael Bunce suggests that the association of the countryside with a comfortable rural retreat from modernity, which stems from a fundamental human desire for harmony with land and nature, synthesizes the inside view of rural writers and the distant view of urban writers to form a diffuse and pervasive countryside ideal in rural fiction (59). While insisting that both groups contribute to this image, he finds it necessary to add that rural writers have presented a more realistic picture:

> From [those who either live in the country or who know it intimately] has come a more serious and accurate account of country matters, in which nostalgia blends with understanding to become a reflective appreciation of rural folk and rural ways. (59)

Thus the "understanding" of the rural writers and the purely imaginary "armchair" reconstructions contribute to different images and ideals of the countryside. I have demonstrated in the course of this dissertation that the three writers of rural background whom I have discussed sustain this ideal only by redefining and reconstructing it. The fictional narratives of the countryside of Thomas Hardy, Shen Congwen, and Mo Yan—representatives of this contesting perspective in three different cultural climates—represent unidyllic but authentic and multi-dimensional homelands. They restore the countryside to the status of an active life centre endowed with current values.

On the basis of my reading of the fictional rural homelands by these writers I conclude that they reconnect the countryside with the "home" as an inhabited place. The idyllic representation of the countryside, on the other hand, despite conventionalizing the countryside ideal, conceptualizes the countryside as an unreal place for spiritual regeneration for urbanites (Tuan, "Place: An Experimental Perspective 156-57). Moreover, the rural homeland is situated
in the modern world instead of on the margins of human existence. Thomas Hardy, Shen Congwen, and Mo Yan join survival in the presence of natural elements, its challenges and accompanying moral and spiritual values, to successfully unite modern values and traditional virtues in their recreation of the fictional rural homeland. The multi-sensory structure of Hardy's Weatherbury and Egdon, Shen Congwen's West Hunan, and Mo Yan's Gaomi County testifies to the rural world as a real place under the influence of nature. The dynamic interaction between human beings and natural elements in the rural homelands undermines the idyllic myth of a serene and peaceful countryside, but reconstructs the countryside ideal on the basis of physical and earthly living.

These common qualities, however, are manifested differently by the three authors. Visible differences between one fictional rural homeland and another compel recognition of different cultural frameworks as well as the social values underlying each writer's construction. The rural homeland as an authentic, attractive, and often personal "home" accumulates specific meanings and significance from different cultural concepts of nature, literary tradition, and current social values.

For Hardy, who wrote in the realistic tradition, the key to this authenticity is objectivity and distance. He tries to achieve a quasi-scientific distance in his representation of the countryside. His sombre-looking landscapes of the farming community testify to a scientific detachment interested in "truth" or "reality." The underlying reality of rural life, as Hardy perceives it, is the struggle for existence in the presence of an indifferent nature. He consequently downplays scenic attractions in his representation of the rural world to emphasize the challenge from an indifferent nature. Hardy's assertion of the desirability of the rural world
includes an absence of sentimentality. In *Far from the Madding Crowd*, the virtues of rural life are attributed to purposeful attempts to adapt to, and survive in, a harsh environment. Because of the tremendous efforts required by rural life, survival in the rural world comes to serve as an indication of the moral and intellectual fitness of the individual. Although Hardy's representation of the rural community includes rustics like Poorgrass, the focus of his attention is on Oak, Bathsheba, and Farmer Boldwood, who constitute the rural elite. Hardy's countryside ideal is embodied in Oak as associated with maturity—the central moral and intellectual quality of rural life. As suggested by Oak's vigilance and sense of responsibility, the poetics of rural life in Hardy's fiction lies in the courage and strategies people demonstrate in their effort to retain a subtle balance with nature.

For Shen Congwen and Mo Yan, both incorporating a deep-rooted ontological monism in their respective value systems, sensual experiences are the key to authenticity. They make it quite explicit that they owe their perspectives, standards, and likes and dislikes to their rural upbringing. Shen Congwen declares that his contact with and observation of "the beautiful life" along the rivers of his native region make him unable and unwilling to conform to the pettiness of the urbanites (*WJ* 11: 323). Mo Yan, in particular, negates the validity of objective distance and rational thinking in favour of sensual experience and fantasy. He foregrounds a generic connection with the earth which parallels familial connection with his ancestors in the construction of his fictional rural homeland. Both Chinese writers relate the attraction of the countryside to its natural spontaneity. Unlike Hardy, who focuses on the efforts demanded by

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1 This observation is limited to Hardy's early rural fiction. His later novels embrace more complicated themes than the novels studied in this dissertation.
rural life, Shen Congwen and Mo Yan both emphasize virtues, and the purifying effect derived from a sensual harmony with the vital spirit of the elements. Shen Congwen explores the purifying passions of the common and mostly nameless folk. Mo Yan highlights the sanguine nature of his homeland. The two Chinese writers reveal, in different forms, the healthy effects of following natural instincts.

Hardy's emphasis on active engagement in agrarian life and the Chinese writers' emphasis on intuitive involvement in it are manifested in the roles human beings play in times of crisis. In Hardy's representation of the rural world, natural forces cannot be tampered with, but disasters can be avoided with adequate alertness. This is suggested by Oak's rescue of the ricks from fire and then from the storm. Although Shen Congwen and Mo Yan also incorporate the indifference of natural forces, the harshness of the natural environment remains largely implicit or as a source of cosmological wisdom in their fiction. Shen Congwen considers it natural that people accept the capriciousness of the elements as fate. He therefore will not blame people for resignation to natural disaster or fate. He even philosophizes about people's awareness of the indifference of nature and fate, endowing exposure to mishaps with cosmological wisdom. For example, the death of the old ferryman in *The Border Town* awakens Cuicui, his granddaughter, to the complex world of adults. It also triggers a general reflection on the insignificance of human beings in the vast universe. In Mo Yan's rural homeland, nature is largely benign and accords with human nature in contrast to the politics which suppresses and distorts human beings. For Mo Yan human beings have done too much harm to the land for the benefit of the countryside or themselves. It is time for them to resume an instinctive reverence for the earth such as their grandparents had in the past.
Hardy's emphasis on the rational and the Chinese writers' focus on sensual involvement in rural life are perhaps most ardently articulated in the different stands the writers take on love in rural life. Hardy values relationships that last. A lasting relationship in his view has to be integrated with a practical consideration for survival. Hardy favours steady partnership in the struggle for survival over romantic or passionate love. Oak’s marriage to Bathsheba affirms a connection between survival and a lasting marital relationship in Hardy's rural world.

For the Chinese writers, on the other hand, love is an assertion of life for its own sake. They value spontaneous and unscheming passion over rational and lawful marriage. For them it is morally dubious when a relationship is involved with anything other than love itself. Although passionate love is represented as an integral part of country life, both Chinese writers appreciate their characters for placing love ahead of life itself. While Hardy shows the vulnerability of all relationships that are unrelated to survival, Shen Congwen upholds the unconscious, childlike love of the rural folk. Mo Yan literally glorifies sexual desire pure and simple as a sign of both physical and psychological health.

The different perspectives upon which the rural homelands are constructed also conform to different literary conventions in Victorian and in twentieth-century Chinese rural fiction. Although the detachment Hardy assumes is very different from the distant, sentimental view embodied in rural idylls, his effort to abstract himself from his rural connections is still related to the landscape approach in Victorian rural writing. Especially in the first five chapters of *Far from the Madding Crowd*—as in the ironic distance his narrative keeps from his character in his first description of Oak—his narrative stance often overlaps with that of writers
of the rural pastoral. However, instead of the "single view" and voice which characterize Victorian idylls such as *Our Village* (Edwards 5-25), Hardy dramatizes his narrative from the perspective of his characters, who express in their own voice (either in standard English or a modified dialect), their feelings about actual life in the rural world.

Shen Congwen and Mo Yan assert their connection with the countryside through the presence of autobiographical personas. As with their contemporaries, their use of dramatized first-person narrators constitutes a prevalent feature in rural writing in China. While the May Fourth generation addressed this rural connection with resignation, the mid-1980's generation of Chinese writers desired to be reconnected to it. In the two Chinese writers' constructions of the rural homeland, the dramatized first-person narrators no longer imply authorial uncertainty, but explore their rural connection as a way of looking at the world. While Shen Congwen's rural lyricism merges water—a landscape image—with his own perception, Mo Yan's sensory connection with the rural world becomes the guide to his fantasy-laden world of the past.

As John Short suggests of Hardy's rural fiction, the rural homeland incorporates the countryside into the modern world "with national codes and standardized life styles" (177), instead of pushing it away into the remote past. As a case in point, all three writers successfully yoke contemporary values and rural virtues together in their respective countrysides, though in different ways and with different values. Hardy responds to a modernist nostalgia for the stability of the traditional countryside in Victorian rural writing. He focuses on the continuity of rural life, though he reveals the efforts involved to retain this continuity in the present. He introduces the landmark of his rural community, the Great Barn of Weatherbury, by appealing to a Victorian interest in medievalism, although he immediately animates it with lively scenes of
agrarian activities.

Shen Congwen, by contrast, highlights the youthfulness of West Hunan in an attempt to justify the life of the countryside in light of the May Fourth search for power and youthful energy in preference to the past and tradition. In his fictional rural homeland, the ancient and the youthful are interrelated through a new interpretation. Mo Yan, who highlights blood ties and direct sensual experience in the rural world, exemplifies the desire to resume an interrupted cultural tradition spurred by post-Mao cultural reflections. His family saga fills the gap of written records with a landscape of sensuality and fantasy. His return to a culture of the earth articulates a desire to break free from the dominant official discourse of social realism, a desire shared by a majority of his contemporaries.

The contemporaneity of the rural homelands is also reflected in the way they address different concerns. Hardy's Wessex is consciously intended as a corrective to the romantic and domesticated rural landscapes that had been equated with the actual countryside in Victorian rural idylls. In Shen Congwen's West Hunan the fragmented rural world coheres into an organic homeland instead of giving rise to random sentiments. A fully developed rural landscape helps not only to validate this connection, but also to legitimize attachment to rural culture, which, as indicated by Lu Xun's apologetic reflection on his own nostalgia, was considered to be politically ambivalent in the first decades of the twentieth century. Mo Yan, on the other hand, underscores the rich imagination of the peasants and his sensual memory of the land to counterpoise the antiquarian interest of the writers of cultural exploration, who are interested in the countryside mainly as a relic of history.

Like the idyllic countryside, fictional rural homelands are reconstructed in reaction to
social changes and flux. Their very structure incorporates concern with the disturbance of rural order. As J. Douglas Porteous maintains, "the home is used for sleeping, grooming, and reproductive behaviour, all of which are activities which divert attention away from outside threats and therefore render the individual more vulnerable to intruders" (383). A home needs privacy to enable it to function properly, so the rural homeland is vulnerable to drastic disturbances. However, this vulnerability does not lie in rural people's weakness or intellectual incompetence, as often assumed by urban writers, but in the nature of rural life. It is a life that, in Hardy's view, demands constant alertness to dangers in nature, but for the two Chinese writers is built on a harmonious fusion between nature and human beings. Hardy demonstrates that any lack of attentiveness within the rural community, such as Bathsheba's wedding to Troy, or a harvest revel, not to mention drastic disturbances from the outside, is enough to upset the subtle balance between human beings and nature, and thus also the continuity of the rural community.

Shen Congwen tries to incorporate jarring scenes in a deeper layer of his self-regulating rural world. Yet his misgivings about the modern world are manifest in his tenderness towards the primitive purity of West Hunan which, like pristine water, is vulnerable to pollution from outside. In Mo Yan's rural world the most fearful force of alienation comes from politics. In his contrasting imagery of the fertility of his original native region and the

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2Shen Congwen refers to the threat from the outside world as contamination or pollution. He uses the metaphor of water also to reveal both the robustness of the rural people and the fragility of their world. In his only full-length novel, The Long River, the river of life in West Hunan is clogged up by superficial progress. It is turned into a muddy pool, where the flow of life has lost its proper channel.
meagreness of his childhood countryside, the larger-than-life figure of the grandfather and the almost invisible father-figure attest to politics as the most devastating and oppressive force which can twist and suppress the life of people and the land. However, this vulnerability does not arise from defects.

John Short also describes Shen Congwen and Mo Yan, when he writes of Hardy as fortunate "to live when social changes were pronounced and profound, yet there were still memories and traces of an earlier period" (177). The construction of the fictional rural homeland demonstrates the rich and specific involvement with the countryside of each writer as well as their contribution to the countryside ideal--an ancient as well as modernistic theme in literature. However, for them the desirability of the countryside does not rely on romantic misconceptions. The fictional rural homeland frequently presents reflective interpretations and positive readings of rural life as well as its unpleasant facts. The rural homeland is strengthened by its extensive interpretation of the harsh reality. As a result, although the rural homeland can hardly be compared with the idyllic countryside in terms of comfort, it replaces the idyllic countryside as an authentic homeland--a solid habitation with the endowment of contemporary ideals.

Despite the above similarities, there is no sufficient evidence either from their own works or from secondary sources, to prove that Shen Congwen or Mo Yan had read Hardy. Chinese literature, particularly that of the early twentieth century, is noted for its indebtedness both in language and pathos to nineteenth-century European literature. However, as Ellen Widmer observes, writers of the May Fourth period as well as of the 1980s "tended to pick what [they] needed from among the available foreign literatures" (x). Perhaps because of his
cultural conservatism, Thomas Hardy was not among the western writers popular in China in the May Fourth era. According to the index of translations in the *Compendium of Modern Chinese Literature*, none of Hardy's novels was published in Chinese from the time of the May Fourth movement to 1935 (Daxi 10: 87, 378). The Chinese interest in nineteenth-century English literature lay largely in Romanticism, as represented by the Promethean rebelliousness or melancholic assertion of individuality of Byron, Shelley, and Keats, and in the realistic social novels of John Galsworthy, Dickens, and others.

The fact that his favourite writers were Maupassant and Chekhov emphasizes that Shen Congwen, who did not read any foreign languages, was restricted in his contact with Western literatures to the availability of translations. (As Kinkley observes, there is only one line in a foreign language quoted in Shen Congwen's works [*Odyssey* 93].) Shen Congwen's contact with foreign literature was confined to Russian writers, English Romantic poets, and French short stories which were in wide circulation in China (*WJ* 6:21, 6:27, 7:24). However, Xu Zhimo, Shen Congwen's literary patron, translated five of Hardy's poems into Chinese in the late 1920s. Considering the crucial part Xu Zhimo played in promoting Shen Congwen's literary career, Shen Congwen might have read Xu's translation of Hardy's poems. Yet Xu Zhimo was interested in Hardy mainly as a Romantic poet rather than as a rural fiction writer. He was attracted to the grotesqueness and cynicism of Hardy's poems, which may not shed much light on Hardy's representation of agrarian life.

The 1980s is known in Chinese literary history for its intense interest in foreign literatures. Mo Yan, and, to some degree, his generation of Chinese writers, embrace new narrative techniques. He takes the lead in exploring the politics of rhetoric—the use of new and
different narrative strategies in defiance of the dominant social-realistic discourse in modern Chinese literature, and has a different interest in foreign literature from that of the May Fourth writers and of Chinese writers of the 1950s. The older generations of modern Chinese writers took nineteenth-century European writers or Russian writers as their major sources of influence.

Mo Yan's generation, on the other hand, admits the influence of Gabriel Garcia Márquez's magic realism. The half-real and half fantasy world of red sorghum reveals Mo Yan's indebtedness. However, as I have indicated in the course of this discussion, the onion-like construction of the rural homeland is planted in specific cultural climates as well as the personal contacts writers make with the countryside. Borrowing, in terms of imagery and metaphor, from a different culture is greatly modified. Mo Yan maintains that García Márquez "inspires me to reexamine my experiences afresh" (Leung 151). He acknowledges his indebtedness to the Columbian writer for leading him out of the confines of realism into new forms of expression. However, he insists, "Márquez does not dream my dream for me" (Shi Shuqing 111).

E. M. Forster predicted at the beginning of the twentieth century that with the shrinking of rural space, the countryside would no longer serve as a source of inspiration for future writers (105). In fact, the countryside continues to accumulate meaning from a cultural, historical, and ecological understanding of nature and human beings. In the face of a growing population and increasing ecological awareness, the countryside will continue to exercise readers' imagination of a lost "home." One thing that appears to be certain is that the countryside as an imaginary home will continually be positioned in a state of flux (Keith, Rural
As indicated by the rise of environmental writing in North America, positive nostalgia, story, dream, fantasy and creative reconstruction of the rural home are continuing in different forms. Affection for the countryside takes its diverse points of departure from viewpoints such as the romanticizing of the agrarian life or the dissemination of environmental responsibility to the environment. The rural homelands of the three writers I have discussed may serve as a reminder of what is overlooked or neglected in distant views of the countryside in either the past or in the future.

As mentioned at the outset of this dissertation, I have looked for a place where the love of the countryside of the east and west meets beyond the recreation and holiday resorts of rural scenery. I believe I have found rich connections between them by way of the fictional representation of rural homelands. Meanwhile, I have been looking to these writers for guidance about the multilayered meaning of the rural homeland. While the diversity of the rural homelands as provided by Hardy, Shen Congwen, and Mo Yan may make it appear questionable as to whether there is a unified discourse of nature or rural life transcending culture and history, it at the same time testifies to the tenacity of the countryside ideal in its adaptation to different cultural environments and forms of modernity.
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Chapter II. Shen Congwen

a.
水的德性為兼容並包，從不排斥拒絕以不同方式浸入生命的任何離奇不經事務！卻也從不接受他的沾污影響。水的性格似乎特別脆弱，且及容易就範。其實則柔弱中有強韌，如集中一點，即涓涓細流，滴水穿石，卻無堅不摧。水教我粘合卑微人生的平凡哀樂，作横海揚帆的美夢。

b.
我來了，二十歲的人，青年，年輕，明亮又健康。叢植著杉樹的路上，我來了哪，挾著網球拍子，哼著歌。

c.
自從我看見了都市的風景畫片，我就不再愛那鄙陋的村莊了。

d.
中國的城市，表面上好像有別與中國的鄉村，但由於中國的城市不發達，其文化（除上海，廣州等個別城市）並無形成其獨特的價值，在本質上依然是鄉間的變體。

e.
天下之至文，未有不出于童心焉者也，苟童心尚存，則道理不行。

f.
蓋兒童者小野蠻也，自居小天地中，蓋逐其生，唯以自力解決一切。其斗也，猶野人之戰，所以自衛其權利，求勝于凡眾。

g.
我從老遠的貴州跑到北京來，灰沙之中徬徨了也快七年，時間不能說不長，怎樣混過的，我自身都茫然不知，是這樣匆匆地一天一天的去了，童年的影子越發模模糊糊起來，像朝霧似的，驪騕的飄失，我所感到的只有空虛與寂寞。這幾個歲月，除近兩年信筆塗鴉的幾篇新詩和似是而非的小說之外，還作了些什麼呢？每一回憶，終不免有點慟粟撞擊心頭。所以現在決然把這個小說集付印了……藉以記念從此闕別的可愛的童年。

h.
他彷彿感到起了一種在渺茫中摸索久久不得歸屬的悲哀。

i.
我想父親的花園就是能夠重行種起種種的花來，那時的盛況總是不能恢復的了，因為已經沒有芳姊。

j.
無可奈何的悲憤，是令人不得不捨棄的……這一種冷靜和詼諧，如果滋長起來，對於作者本身其實倒是最危險的。

k.
我有一時，曾經屢次憶起兒時在故鄉所吃的蔬果：菱角，羅漢豆，菱白，香瓜。凡這些，都是極其鮮美可口的：都曾是我思鄉的感。後來，我在久別之後麁到了，也不過如此：惟獨在記憶中，還有舊來的意味猶存。他們也許要哄騙我一生，使我時時反顧。

l.
放棄吟詠“蝴蝶”的斑斕，而傾心于“毛毛虫”的稚拙。
m. 他的小小的心兒沒有響響的碎了，同王老大雙眼對雙眼。

n. 從直直的讀者看來，就只見其有意低徊，顧影自憐之態了。

o. 在路旁小小池沼負手閒行，對蠟火出神，為小孩哭鬧感到生命樂觀與紛紜，用平靜的心，感受一切大千世界的動靜，從為平常眼睛所疏忽處看出動靜美。

p. 作者的作品，是充滿了一切農村寂靜的美。差不多每篇都可以看到一個我們熟悉的農民，在一個我們所生長的鄉村，如我們同樣生活過來那樣活到那片土地上。不但那農村少女動人情郎的笑聲，那聰明的姿態，小小的一條河，一株孤零零長在溝壑一角的酸樹，我們可以從作品中接近，就是那略帶牛糞氣味與略帶稻草氣味的鄉村空氣，也是彷彿把書拿來就可以嗅出的。

q. 這地方是有的，不過很遠很遠罷了。這地方，雖然在地圖上，指示你們一個小點，但實際上，是你們北方人思想以外的。也正因其為遠到許多北方人（還不止北方人）思想以外，所以我才說遠。

r. 中國現在所切要要的是一種新的自由與一種新的節制，去建造中國的新文明。

s. 要少－或者竟不－看中國書，多看外國書。

t. 我所寫的故事，卻多數是在水邊的故事。故事中我所最滿意的文章，常用船上作為背景。

u. 這人，人和柳渾相類。

v. 桃花李花開得如此熱鬧好看畫眉杜鵑之類叫得如此好聽，太陽如此和暖，地下的青草如此暖和，

w. 四狗不認字，所以當前一切卻無詩意，然而聽一切大小蟲子的叫，聽著水的蛙聲，點點句句，點點句句，全是在詩的。

x. 可為慢慢的看罷。小橫西斷語下得太早了一點不相宜。

ty. 你們能欣賞我故事的清新，照例那作品背后蘊藏的熱情卻忽略了：你們能欣賞我文字的樸實，照例那作品背后蘊藏的悲痛也忽略了。

z. 是為你們高等人造的一面鏡子。

aa. 凡是有錢的老爺天南地北差不多都是這個樣子。
bb. 人因為有了理智，根本固然不能違反生物的原則，卻想多少加以節制，這便成了所謂文明，但是一方面也可更加放縱，利用理智來無理地掩飾，乃是禽獸所不為的勾當。

cc. 在私塾這人不逃學，這人是有病，不能玩，才如此讓先生折磨。若這人又並無病，那就是呆子。呆子固然不必天生，父親先生也可以用一些謊話，去注入到小孩腦中，使他在應當玩的年齡，便自成聖賢，這人雖身無病，全身的血卻已中毒了。

dd. 這小子，還能心野不服管束，想方設法離開這勢力，顧自走到外邊去闖蕩，這小孩的心，當是褻透世的心。

ee. 你們是城市中人。城市中人生活太匆忙，太雜亂，耳朵眼接觸聲音光色過分疲勞，加之多睡眠不足，雖僕然事事神經尖銳敏感，其實除了色欲意識和個人得失以外，別的感覺官能都有點麻木不仁。這並非你們的過失，只是你們的不幸。造成你們不幸的是這一現代社會。

ff. 我是個鄉下人走到任何一處照例都帶一把尺、一把秤，我用不著你們名叫“社會”為制定的那個東西，我討厭一般標準。

Chapter III. Mo Yan

a. 莫言，原名管漠業，一九五六年生於山東高密東北鄉一個荒涼村莊中的四壁黑暗的草屋里舖了乾燥沙土的土炕上，落土時聲音嗚咽，兩歲不會說話，三歲方能行路，四五歲飯量頗大，常與姐姐爭食紅薯。

b. 文學有“根”，文學之“根”應深植於民族傳說文化的土壤里，根不深，側葉不茂。

c. 我寫的不能說是農村的題材，而是知青和農村的關係，一種狀態。因為不熟悉，我極少去寫一個農民的故事。

d. 我做一個農村生長永遠沒有希望的青年。

e. 要能夠鑽到農民的心底深處，解釋那最深刻，最精髓的東西，就得靠他們一樣的思維方式了。

f. 知青並非農民，還能允許有一種理想，可跳出農村，而且老覺得自己是局外的。

g. 他小說中的英雄和莽種，極少有中國道德文化的烙印。

h. 是他將“尋根派”的某些風格特點推向了極致。
讀了馬蓋斯的作品，強烈地呼喚起了我對過去生活的回憶，一下子把我推向我的家鄉去，我知道我該站在那個地方。

他喚醒了我夢，並沒代替我的夢。

官府及封建社會中騷人墨客對民間年畫持冷漠態度。

過去的歷史與現在的世界密切相連，歷史的血在當代人的血管中重複流淌。

像汽車尾燈柔和的燈光，不斷消逝著，又不斷新生著。

潮濕的草中，每到晚間就放出幽幽綠光，融成一片，好像水在流動，泥沼里的螃蟹總是趁著磷光覓食，天明你去淤泥上覓，密密麻麻全是蟹爪印。這些螃蟹，長成了都如馬蹄大。我甭說吃，連見也沒見過這些大蠻。聽爺爺講過去的大漁河子，令人神往神壯，悔不早生六十年。

身殉丑觀的縱足終是野蠻。

古時候，我們中國並沒有紙片。

姨奶奶添了孩子了。這就是他所懷念著的古中國・・・・・・他的勃勃原野靜的中國關秀是抽紙片的！

總有一天，我要編寫一部真正戲劇，在這部戲里，夢幻與現實，科學與童話，上帝與魔鬼，愛情與賤淫，高貴與卑賤，美女與大便，過去與現在，金銀牌與避孕套・・・・相互糅和，緊密相連，構成一個完整的世界。

那貓刁著一匹的鼠從廂房里跳出來，我和姐姐衝上去・・・・・・燒熟的老鼠比原來小了許多，烏黑的一根。祖母把它往地上揍揍，然後撕下一條尾腿，塞到我嘴里。鼠肉之香無法形容，姐姐把鼠骨吐出來給了貓，我是連鼠骨都嚼碎咽了下去。然後我們眼睜睜地看着祖母的手。
Appendix II: Glossary

A Cheng 阿城
A Hei 阿黑
Ai, Qing 艾青
Ai Wu 艾無
Ba'er 八兒
Bai Pu 白樸
Baozi 豹子
Bing Xin 冰心
Baizi 柏子
Cao Qiqiao 曹七巧
Changan 長安
Chatong 茶桐
Chongdan 沖淡
Cai Peiyuan 蔡培元
Caishen 財神
Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀
Chen Sihe 陳思和
Chen Pingyuan 陳平原
Chi de chiru 吃的恥辱
Chu 楚
Cuicui 翠翠
Dangdaizuojiaplinglun 當代作家評論
Dao 道
Daoyan 導言
Deng Xiaoping 鄧小平
Diguaxiaohai 地瓜小孩
Ding Fan 丁帆
Duan Baolin 段寶林
Ertongre 兒童熱
Fei ming 廢名
Feng Wenbing 馮文炳
Gaomi 高密
Guan Meye 管謨業
Guo Moruo 郭沫若
Hainan 海南
Han 漢
Han Shaogong 韓少功
Hebei 河北
He Xiangyang 何向陽
Hong Kong wenxueyanjiushe 香港文學研究社
Huagou 花狗
Huaijiu 怀舊
Huang Xianwen 廣獻文
Huang Ziping 黃子平
Hui 回
Huiming 會明
Hunan 湖南
Jian Xian'ai 舍先艾
Jiangnan 江南
Jiangsu 江蘇
Ji Hongzhen 季紅真
Jin Yanyu 金燕玉
Jingpai 京派
Jingwei 京味
Kang 炕
Lao Tzu 老子
Lei Da 雷達
Li Hangyu 李杭育
Li Jindou 李金斗
Li Qingxi 李慶西
Li Tuo 李陀
Li Yukun 李玉坤
Li Zhi 李贇
Lin Yu-sheng 林毓生
Ling Yu 凌宇
Liu Bannong 劉半農
Liu Heng 劉恆
Liu Hongtao 劉洪濤
Long Zhu 龍朱
Lu Xun 魯迅
Luan Meijian 樂梅建
Ma Yinghua 馬缨花
Meijin 媚金
Meng Yue 孟悅
Mianzhu 繑竹
Miao 苗
Mo Yan 莫言
Nanshan 南山
Nianhua 年畫
Nuxingdepingdan 女性的平淡
Pan Nan 潘南
Qian Liquan 錢理群
Shan Bianlang 畲扁郎
Shandong 山東
Shangchun 傷春
Shanghen 傷痕
Yikudahui 憶苦大會
Yin 陰
Yu 余，魚
Yue 越
Yu Pingbe 俞平伯
Zeng Huiyan 曾慧燕
Zhang Ailing 張愛玲
Zhang Daolu 張道路
Zhang Xianliang 張賢亮
Zhangxiansheng yu zhangtaitai 張先生與張太太
Zhang Yonglin 章永璘
Zhang Zizhang 張子樟
Zhao Jiabi 趙家璧
Zhao Jinghua 趙京華
Zhao Xueyong 趙學勇
Zhao Yuan 趙圓
Zhejiang 浙江
Zheng Wanlong 鄭萬隆
Zheng Yi 鄭義
Zhiqing 知青
Zhou Yingxiong 周英雄
Zhou Zuoren 周作人
Zhu Xiaoping 朱曉平
Zhuang Zi 庄子
Ziran 自然
Zoujiduan 走極端