

HISTORICAL-POLITICAL SPACES RECREATED:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SHERWOOD ANDERSON AND SU TONG

by

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B.A., Peking University, China, 1997

M.A., Peking University, China, 2000

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
Graduate Program in Comparative Literature

We accept this thesis as conforming
to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

April 2002

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Date April 21, 2002

Abstract

The Mid-West America and the south China are both fundamental to the national consciousness of America and China respectively. Furthermore, both of them have appealed to literary imaginations and thus played significant roles in the two national literatures. This paper looks into the political and historical significances of these two spaces and how they are recreated through the powerful imagination of Sherwood Anderson and Su Tong.

In Anderson's case, I argue against the popular criticism that reads Anderson as a representative of the "Revolt from the Village" group, because Anderson remains faithful to his small town origin. The evil aspects of industrialization and the problems of the modern world that Anderson sees confirm his faith in the land. His active pursuit after a better future for the small town indicates that he is essentially romantic and idealistic. In contrast, Su Tong's south China is bleak and

hopeless. Writing against a long literary tradition that portrays the South as affluent, peaceful, regenerative, and highly cultured, Su Tong is daring in his deconstruction of the popular image. He not only recreates the symbol of rice but also gives a horrific picture of the declining South, physically and spiritually alike.

The two writers also share interest in the youth that are struggling for maturation in these two spaces. Reading *Winesburg, Ohio* as Bildungsroman instead of protest literature, I argue that Anderson harbors hope for American youth with small town origin. Meanwhile the fatalist and decadent traits persist in Su Tong's treatment of this theme. The youth in his fictive world, which is marked by grotesqueness, have no future, nor hope, nor escape. They are doomed even before they reach adulthood.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Michael S. Duke, for without his penetrating comments, careful guidance, and enlightening advice, this thesis would never be finished.

I am also indebted to Professor Jerry Schmidt and Professor Adam Frank for their generous support and unfailing patience. Special thanks are due to Professors Richard Cavell, John Cooper, Eva Maria Kröller, and Geoffrey Winthrop-Young for their critical insights and comments. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Professor Steven Taubeneck who kindly helps me through the progress of the thesis writing. The fellowship from the Faculty of Graduate Studies of UBC has freed me from financial worries and enabled me to concentrate on studies.

I would like to embrace my parents, whose love and understanding have always been a source of spiritual supports. My final thanks are given to my husband Yanyi Huang for everything he has done for me.

Introduction

At first glance, Sherwood Anderson (1867 - 1942) and Su Tong (1963 -) share little in common. Besides the apparent gap of living times,¹ the two writers have come to creative writing from completely different roads. Sherwood Anderson was born in a little town in southwestern Ohio — Camden by name — in 1876,² the third of seven children of Irwin M. Anderson, a harness maker, who by all standards was a never-to-do and poor bread-provider. To save rent, the family moved from one deserted house to another and Anderson's childhood was marked by poverty, a sense of insecurity and indignation at his happy-go-lucky father.³ Anderson's boyhood is spent on such countryside sports

¹ It is also indefinite how much the younger writer has been influenced by the elder one, for Anderson is not on the list of Su Tong's favorite writers.

² For more information on Anderson's life, see three important biographies: William A. Sutton's *The Road to Winesburg*, James Schevill's *Sherwood Anderson: His Life and Work*, and Irving Howe's *Sherwood Anderson*.

³ Anderson's relationship with his father underwent significant changes with the passage of time. It was not until Anderson's later years that he came to reconcile with his father's self-imposed role of story-teller, what he had viewed as mere bragging. The father-son relationship is a recurrent topic in Anderson's three "autobiographies:" *A Story Teller's Story*; *Tar: A Midwest Childhood*; and *Memoirs*.

as horse-racing, which later became highly symbolic in his short stories. Working as a regular assistant to his father's house-painting job and roving from one odd job to the next, Anderson had little opportunity for formal education, and later critics often attribute his occasional language errors to this early deficiency. However, Anderson had a heritage of talent, probably from his mother,⁴ to whom he dedicates *Winesburg, Ohio* with the statement that her "keen observations on life about her first awoke in me the hunger to see beneath the surface of lives." Like many other young mid-westerners, Anderson finally drifted to Chicago. After that, he was a soldier in the Spanish-American war, a special student at Wittenberg College, a factory worker, an advertisement solicitor, a copy-writer, and finally an advertising manager. All this time, Anderson read widely and wildly and practiced writing in secret. Anderson's break with the business world has become a classical American myth.⁵ Although he started his writing career quite late, before he died in 1941 Anderson had produced a large body of works, including eight novels, numerous short stories, (some of the best collected in the three canonical collections, *Horses and*

⁴ Anderson's mother Emma Smith Anderson died a sudden death at a rather young age, probably from exhaustion. The Anderson Family dissolved upon her death and Anderson in later years attributed the loss of his mother to his father's irresponsibility. As a constant source of inspiration, Emma is prototype for many of Anderson's women characters who suffer and collapse under the unbearable burden of life.

⁵ For more description of the incident, please see the ending part of Chapter III.

Men, Triumph of the Egg, Death in the Wood) three "autobiographies," two collections of poems, hundred of articles on literary theory and practice.⁶

In contrast with Anderson, Su Tong's life and career are much simpler. He discovered his talent for writing at an early age and studied Chinese literature in Beijing Normal University, during which years he started to produce and publish poems and short stories. As one of the most prolific writers in Mainland China today, Su Tong has published seven novels and more than one hundred novellas and short stories to date. "A Profusion of Wives and Concubines," "Opium Family," and "1934 Escapes," three novellas written when Su Tong was at his best, were translated and introduced by Michael S. Duke in 1990 and won Su Tong international acclaim. Nowadays, Su Tong enjoys the reputation of one of the representatives of "avant-garde" contemporary Chinese literature whose creative activities draw close attention from international critical circles.

Different as they are in life experience and stylistic matters, a careful study will reveal that there are potentially

⁶ Some recent Anderson criticisms do not read his "autobiographies" as such, but as creative writings, since Anderson took liberties with a great deal of facts and dates. The following statement is included in the preface to *Memoirs*: "I believe in the imagination, its importance. To me there is a certain music to all good prose writing. There is tone and color in words as in notes in music. Persons also have a certain tones, a certain color. What do care I for the person's age, the color of his hair, the length of his legs? When writing of another being I have always found it best to do so in accordance with my feeling. Besides, men do not exist in facts. They exist in dreams. My readers, therefore, those who go along with me, will have to be patient. I am an imaginative man."

rewarding comparative topics to work on. First of all, both Anderson and Su Tong seem to be haunted by their native lands, in Anderson's case, Midwestern America, and in Su Tong's case, South China. The space is so essential an element in their stories that it ceases to be merely the backdrop. Instead, it becomes an indispensable and irreplaceable part of the creative work and demands special critical attention.

Secondly, the two spaces are both highly charged with historical and political significances. Anderson's mid-west America once served as the nation's frontier line, when farmers from New England in their passion for cheap and virginal land pushed their way westward and explored the vast prairie. As a result, the wild nature was conquered and an empire of corn was established. When the pacific coast was discovered, the Mid-West's mission as the nation's border-line was over. However, it continued to be regarded as the backbone of the country, in both economy and morality. In American consciousness, as well as in American literature, Mid-West is in contrast with New England, the Old South, and the Far West. Before Anderson, the so-called mid-western writer catalogue had such central figures as Whitman and Twain within it. In this sense, Anderson is working in a long tradition.

Su Tong's southern China works in a different yet no less

significant way in Chinese literature and national consciousness.⁷ Similarly, Su Tong also has a well-established literary tradition to start from. The most direct one is the so-called "nativist literature" or "nativism"(乡土文学). The concept of "nativism" in modern Chinese literature was first raised by Lu Xun (鲁迅, 1881-1963), who wrote in "Preface to *New Literature II*" (新文学大系二集导言):

Jian Xian'ai (1906-1994) describes Guizhou while Fei Wenzhong is concerned with Yu Guan. Whoever in Beijing that writes what is in his heart, no matter whether he describes himself as subjective or objective, is actually writing nativist literature. As far as Beijing is concerned, they are sojourner-writers⁸. . . . Xu Qinwen (1897-1984) names his first collection of short stories as *Hometown*, which makes him a nativist writer without his knowledge. . . . It seems that according to the theme and style of some works by Wang Luyan (1902-1944), he is one of the nativist writers too. (qtd. Jin 46)

蹇先艾 (1906-1994) 叙述过贵州, 斐文中关心着榆关, 凡在北京用笔写出他的胸臆来的人们, 无论他自称用主观或客观, 其实往往

⁷ There are more discussions in the opening part of Chapter II about the cultural, political, and economical significance of southern China.

⁸ For more discussions on sojourner-writer, please refer to Rosemary Haddon's article "Chinese Nativist Literature of the 1920s: The Sojourner-Narrator," published on *Modern Chinese Literature* (Vol. 8, 1994).

是乡土文学，从北京这方面说则是侨寓文学的作者。……许钦文(1897—1984)自命他的第一本短篇小说集为《故乡》，也就是在不知不觉中自招为乡土文学的作者。……看王鲁彦(1902—1994)的一部分的题材和笔致，似乎也是乡土文学的作家。

As we can see from Lu Xun's definition, nativism as a literary trend first emerged in China in the wake of the May Fourth Movement (五四运动) of 1919 and fused with many of the social, economic and populist concerns of May Fourth. For instance, it directed a great deal of attention at the common people, especially those in rural areas. It dealt with their struggle for social and economic justice in the chaos of that age, the collapse of the old value system and the building of another, the crisis of national identity under the threat of foreign invasion and domestic wars among warlords. Beside those mentioned above, writers working in this trend in the twenties included Xu Yunuo (徐玉诺, 1893—1958), Pan Xun (潘训, 1902—1934), Peng Jiahuang (彭家煌, 1898—1933), Xu Jie (许杰, 1901—1993), Tai Jingnong (台静农, 1903—1990), etc.

The trend took a new direction in the 1930s, when leftist and pro-communism writers, such as Xiao Hong (萧红, 1911—1942), Ai Wu (艾芜, 1904—1992), and Mao Dun (茅盾, 1896—1981), took the lead. In the 1940s and 1950s, it was dominated by the demand

to serve the spiritual construction of socialism; and finally, in the post-Mao era, it evolved into a new subgenre, the "Root-Searching" literature (寻根文学), to which some key writers belong, such as Mo Yan (莫言, 1956-),⁹ Han Shaogong (韩少功, 1953-), and Shi Tiesheng (史铁生, 1951-).

In this paper, I attempt to read some of Anderson and Su Tong's major texts that deliberately include the historical-political spaces as part of their understanding of the rapid changes from agrarian to modern society. I want to examine how they address the seemingly inevitable "wheel of history," and the fate of their home towns, that have haunted their adult years and finally found a way to paper and to a vast audience.

The two writers' repeated return in their literary imagination to their native lands brings up another topic that this paper will deal with: What is the significance of these political-historical spaces to the youth that grow up in them? What destiny is waiting for puzzled teenagers struggling for adulthood in not so favorable environments? Anderson and Su Tong are both in their adult years when they look back at their

⁹ For discussion on the significance of space and history in Mo Yan's works, please refer to the following articles: Yiwen Zhong's thesis "Mo Yan's Fiction: Reconstruction of 'History'," Der-Wei Wang's article "Mythmakers of Native Land," and Vivian Lee's dissertation *The Representation of History in Contemporary Chinese Fiction*.

childhoods and ponder on these questions. They have offered different answers. From the difference, we can further look into the different mentality of American and Chinese modernist writers, whose works nurture national imagination and shape national consciousness.

Chapter One

Shifting World: From Cornfield to Factory

Whitman is in the bones and blood of America. He is the real American singer. What is wanted among us now is a return to Whitman, to his songs, his dreams, his consciousness of the possibilities of the land that was his land and is our land.

—Sherwood Anderson (*The Writer at His Craft* 21)

One of the most persistent and misleading readings of Midwestern Literature is the so-called "Revolt from the Village" myth. At the end of 1960s, Anthony Channell Hilfer published an influential book on some Midwestern writers active from 1910s to 1930s. In this book, Hilfer grouped Sherwood Anderson, who spent his early years in an Ohio small town, together with some others prominent writers, including Mark Twain, Willa Cather, Edgar Lee Masters, Sinclair Lewis, and Thomas Wolfe in the so-called revolt movement. As a matter of fact, Hilfer is not the first critic who attempted to construct American literary history from such a perspective. As early as 1921, this view was first put forward by Carl Van Doren. Basically, Van Doren

was convinced that many writers of Midwestern origin turned their back on the Midwestern American village and its value system. As a rule, Doren argued, they fled to big cities such as Chicago, New York and beyond, for intellectual and psychological liberation from the enslavement of the Midwestern Village. Only through such renouncement and denunciation could these young men as artists obtain necessary maturity and only with the rejection of the myth of Midwestern American Village did they arrive at the sense of fulfillment.

Although Van Doren and Hilfer's interpretation may be illuminating when dealing with some works of Midwestern writers, it is very misleading as far as Sherwood Anderson is concerned. What is problematic with Hilfer's evaluation of Sherwood Anderson is that he bases his argument on a few isolated works. He especially singles out *Winesburg, Ohio* as the only work that is done in the "right" way, attributing the book's superiority over Sherwood Anderson's other works to Anderson's so-called deep understanding and honest (naturalistic) representation of Midwestern American small town life. When defining the concept of "Revolt from the Village," Hilfer puts emphasis on two points: one the discovery of the "buried life," that is, the unfulfilled life that people of the Village lead, and two the "attack on conformity" which threatens the individuality of Americans and

thus must be rejected and rebelled against. According to Hilfer, Anderson reaches the highest point of his career with *Winesburg, Ohio* more because of his treatment of these two themes than because of anything else.

When toward the end of his book Hilfer finally brings himself to face Sherwood Anderson's other works, his embarrassment and indignation are apparent, because he finds that these works do not neatly fall into the "Revolt from the Village" catalogue. With one impatient gesture, he dismisses Anderson's later works, including novels, collections of essays, and autobiographies as degenerations from Anderson's earlier more aggressive social criticism. He views these diverse works as a departure from and thus betrayal of the "Revolt from the Village" movement. Although Hilfer touches upon the stylistic deficiency of these later works, it is apparent that they do not appeal to Hilfer mainly because of the matter of theme and Anderson's "shifting" attitude toward the Village. For instance, Hilfer labels *Hello Towns* as painful "attempts at self-deception [about the Village]" (Hilfer 238), even though the book is often acclaimed by most critics as containing sparks of remarkable insight into the life of the American village. Meanwhile, *Memoirs*, the third semi-autobiography of Sherwood Anderson and which was posthumously published in 1942, is derided by Hilfer

as Anderson's naïve dream of a "warm small-town world that is characterized by the gathering around a drinking keg in the woods after a baseball game" (Hilfer 239).

As a final judgment, Hilfer finds Anderson unreliable and confused "when playing the role of village spokesman" (Hilfer 239). But is Anderson really as naïve as Hilfer believes him to be? In my opinion, Hilfer's frustration and discontent with Anderson result not from Anderson's unreliability (or "degeneration", to borrow Hilfer's phrase), but from Hilfer's refusal to see *Winesburg, Ohio* in the right light. First of all, *Winesburg, Ohio* can be better understood if read symbolically rather than literally. In other words, this is more "a book of the grotesque" than a "book of small town life." As a matter of fact, Anderson originally intended to use the former for the title of the book and later changed it to its present title following the suggestion from his editor. It is undeniable that in the history of Anderson criticism, numerous materials have been accumulated to prove that Sherwood Anderson based his created town of Winesburg, Ohio on the very real town of his youth, Clyde, in North Central Ohio. For example, in a great effort to produce a would-be "centuries-old, well-loved and newly restored" (White xiii) version of Anderson's masterpiece, Ray Lewis White laboriously places his "identifications of the

corresponding characters, occasions, and places in Clyde and its surrounding area" "alongside the author's fictional character, occasions" (White xiii). However, it is improper to identify Winesburg with Clyde. If a reader is so careless as to identify the two, he will have to face the irony that Clyde in reality enjoys "material prosperity" and "a stimulating cultural life" as well, as Thaddeus B. Hurd points out in his informative article "Sherwood Anderson's Clyde, Ohio" (Hurd 156).

It is equally dangerous to identify the fictional Winesburg with a real small town of the same name in Ohio. When *Winesburg, Ohio* was first published, it was often condemned by some self-righteous readers as being "immoral and ugly" ("To Arthur H. Smith" 143). The citizens of the real Winesburg seemed to share the sentiment against the "filthy" work so that one of its distinguished members, Arthur H. Smith, a Methodist minister, published a book entitled *An Authentic History of Winesburg, Holmes County, Ohio* in early 1930s as an attempt to correct the "false" impression Sherwood Anderson's book had made on the world. This Mr. Smith was so eager to have his point of view known by Anderson that he personally sent Anderson a copy of the book with a letter, in which he called the people of Anderson's Winesburg "burlesque" (143). Obviously, Anderson

did not buy this reading of his book. In the returning letter, he insisted that his book is written and should be read as well with the deepest "sympathy and understanding" (143). Anderson again and again assured his contemporary readers and critics:

Referring again to the people of the book — the people of my own WINESBURG — they are people I personally would be glad to spend my life with. Certainly, I did not write to make fun of these people or to make them ridiculous or ugly, but instead to show by their example what happens to simple, ordinary people — particularly the unsuccessful ones — what life does to us here in America in our times—and on the whole how decent and real we nevertheless are (143).

Obviously it is inappropriate to suspect any cynicism or ridicule on the part of the author of this "book of the grotesque." Although Hilfer is not so naïve as to join Mr. Smith's condemnation on the book, he is nevertheless wrong in believing that the book is a muck-racking report on small town life, an exposé of the dirty laundry of the Village. But we will drop the topic for now since Chapter III will discuss it in more detail.

Another problem with Hilfer's interpretation of *Winesburg*,

Ohio is that he seems to have overlooked some fundamental facts concerning the background of the book's writing. In a letter to Arthur Barton, a New York playwright, who once proposed to Anderson that they collaborate on a dramatic adaptation of *Winesburg, Ohio*, Anderson revealed that the stories of the Winesburg book were really written "in a Chicago tenement, not in a village." Besides, he "got the substance of every character in the book not from an Ohio village but from other people living around me in the Chicago tenement." He simply "transferred them to a small town and gave them small town surroundings" (*Selected Letters* 153). Viewing *Winesburg, Ohio* in this light, we will see that the book's significance transcends a mere exposure of the dark side of Midwestern American small town life; rather, it aspires to explore the psychological condition, as well as the social relationship of Modern Man. It is exactly this higher ambition that makes *Winesburg, Ohio* appealing not only to those of Midwestern American Village origin, but also to those Americans who have no experience with the Village. It is also this deep understanding of human nature, not merely a place, that claims for Anderson an international audience of different ethnicities and regions.

"The Revolt from the Village" myth also cannot be readily applied to Sherwood Anderson because such an interpretation

fails to take a vital factor into consideration. Van Doren and Hilfer assume that Anderson's discontent is directed at the Village which, in Hilfer's word, is characterized by "stasis" — that the Village is exactly what it has always been. However, as I will soon argue in more detail, passage of time is such a critical element in reading Anderson that any insufficient attention will lead to misinterpretation. The following discussion will address these questions: How did Sherwood Anderson react to the apparently shifting world of Mid-West America? That is, when a traditionally agrarian society hurried on its way to industrialization, how did Anderson view the past, as well as the future, of his hometown?

The antithesis between nature and civilization has a long history in American literature. Cooper's forests and garrisons, Hawthorne's forests and scaffold, and Twain's Mississippi River and the riverbank society are all examples of American writers' impulse to contrast idealized natural landscapes with a degenerating human society. This tradition to dichotomize the two gained new momentum when the industrial age dawned on Mid-West America at the turn of the twentieth century. The rise of the gigantic industrial cities broke the monotonous skyline of the cornfield states, and the smoke of the huge chimneys blackened the Midwestern sky. As rural people rushed into the

city for fame and wealth, but ended up in slums, the ranks of the urban proletariat grew larger and larger. The Midwest felt its identity with nature and the community undermined.

Different Midwestern writers reacted to the situation differently. Perhaps one thing that distinguished Anderson in the Midwestern American literature was his primitivism. Both publicly and privately, he called for a return to Nature as the cure to the appalling degeneration by industrial and materialistic civilization. Proofs are abundant. In a letter in which he discussed *Marching Men*, Anderson confessed that the theme of the book appealed to his "rather primitive nature" (*Letters* xv). In another letter, Anderson claimed that "horses and Negroes seem to be the two things in America that give me the most ascetic [sic] pleasure. . . We pay something. . . for our silly minds, don't we?" (*Letters* 101) In *Perhaps Women*, Anderson said, "It may sound childish, but men will have to go back to nature more. They will have to go to the fields and the rivers. There will have to be a new religion, more pagans..." (*Perhaps Women* 57) Yes, a new religion. Anderson was eager to stand up to face the domination of New England Puritanism. In this aspect, Anderson seemed to view himself as a follower of literary fathers. In an "Introduction" to Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Anderson wrote:

Whitman is in the bones of America as Ralph Waldo Emerson is in the American mentality, but what is wanted and needed here now is a return to the bones and blood of life — to Whitman. We Americans need again to have and to be conscious of land hunger, river hunger, sea and sky hunger. For one, two or three generations now the drift of our young American men and women has been away from the land and toward the towns. Industrialism must go on and the machine must be made subservient to man, but here must be also a rebirth of feeling for the fact of America. Now we work too much with our heads. (*Writer at His Craft* 19)

After lamenting the depressing reality of America, Anderson put forward his solution:

There is something beyond this success we Americans have been so intent upon. Where is it? What is it?

It is in the land, waving cornfields of Illinois, Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia hills, piny woods of Georgia, hot red lands of Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, gigantic flow of the Mississippi River, forests that surround Wisconsin lakes, deserts, skies, men plowing. . .

Push hard against horse-collars, broad-breasted horses. . . (*Writer at His Craft* 20)

Anderson's self-proclaimed primitivism is also a returning theme in his short stories, especially those famous race-track stories and those with cornfield as setting. To Anderson, the Cornfield had a kind of mythical power of rebirth. For instance, "The Corn Planting" is a story about life and death and men's bond with the Cornfield. In the story, Mr. and Mrs. Hutching, an old couple on an ordinary Midwestern farm, has one son, Will, whom they love more than their own lives. The bright boy leaves the farm for Chicago and becomes a popular painter. The greatest pleasure in the old couple's life is to receive a letter from the son and read and reread it. Unfortunately, one day the son is killed in a car accident. When Will's good friend and "I", the first-person narrator, manage to break the news to the old couple, the two old people's reaction is quite beyond their expectation. The old couple perform a kind of ritual in the cornfield. The mid-night scene is almost as "ghostly" yet as fascinating as the famous scene in "Death in the Wood" and worthy a full quotation:

They were both in their nightgowns. They would do a row across the field, coming quite close to us as we stood in the shadow of the storehouse, and then, at the end of each row, they would kneel side by side

by the fence and stay silent for a time. The whole thing went on in silence. It was the first time in my life I ever understood something, and I am far from sure now that I can put down what I understood and felt that night. . . I mean something about the connection between certain people and the earth. . . a kind of silent cry, down into the earth, of these two old people, putting corn down into the earth. It was as though they were putting death down into the ground that life might grow again, something like that. (*Certain Things Last* 269-270)

As we can see, the corn planting in this scene is highly ritualistic. The Land is endowed with the power of Goddess of Nature. It seems the old couple is praying to the Goddess by the act of corn planting and their prayer is answered: "They must have been asking of the earth too. . . Hutching and his wife must have got what they were after that night because they were both curiously quiet." (*Certain Things Last* 270)

The symbol of the Cornfield reappears in "Motherhood," a lyrical short story, in which a parallel is developed between corn planting and pregnancy. Playing on the pun "plow," the story tells how a farm boy achieves his self-fulfillment through plowing "many acres of rich black land" and "plowing deeply" a young woman. With such "plowing," the young man becomes "sure of himself." Meanwhile, the pregnant young woman is portrayed

as kind of goddess who saves the world from total barrenness:

There was a field that was barren and filled with stones, in the spring when the warm nights came and when she was big with him she went to the fields. The heads of little stones stuck out of the ground like the heads of buried children. . . A thousand children were buried in the barren field. They struggled to come out of the ground. They struggled to come to her. . . Within herself only the one child struggled. . . Only one small voice coming to her out of the silence of the night. (*Triumph of the Egg* 169-170)

The Cornfield as an essential symbol is further developed in the short story "Out of Nowhere into Nothing," in which it obtains the mysterious power to give spiritual rebirth. Rosalind, the heroine, comes back to her hometown in the hope of finding a solution to her emotional problem in Chicago. The epiphany comes when she passes the cornfield and experiences spiritual liberation:

A little breeze rustled the corn blades but there were no dreadful significant human sounds, the sounds made by those who lived physically but who in spirit were dead, had accepted death, believed only in death. The corn blades rubbed against each other and there was a low sweet sound as though something was being

born, old dead physical life was being torn away, cast aside. Perhaps new life was coming into the land.

Rosalind began to run. She had thrown off the town and her father and mother as a runner might throw off a heavy and unnecessary garment. She wished also to throw off the garments that stood between her body and nudity. She wanted to be naked, new born.... She had herself become something that within itself contained light. She was a creator of light. At her approach darkness grew afraid and fled away into the distance. (*Triumph of the Egg* 266-267)

In the above scene, the device of personification is employed to enhance the rejuvenating and liberating power of the Cornfield. The garments, products of human civilization, metaphorize artificial confinement and the heroine must get rid of them in her imagination for spiritual emancipation.

Both Will in "Corn Planting" and Rosalind in "Out of Nowhere into Nothing" leave the Cornfield of their hometown to adventure into Chicago, the industrial metropolis, where one loses his life, while the other gets spiritually and mentally wounded. It is the Cornfield that comes to the rescue, giving new hope and strength to live on.

As I have said, Anderson's faith in the power of the Cornfield best demonstrates his primitivism and nostalgia when facing the challenge of industrial civilization. In many of

Anderson's works, industrial civilization is represented by Chicago, a perfect example of man-made ugliness, barrenness, and spiritual degeneration. He always spoke publicly of his profound suspicion of the great "progress" that industrialization supposedly had brought, as well as the warning against what might happen to the once agrarian Mid-West. To Anderson a new religion had arrived with industrialization. He raised his outcry in "The Cry in the Night": "It was a moment of pure machine/ Worship. I was on my knees before/ the new god, the American god." (*The Writer at His Craft* 111)

In this new religion, there was a new goddess---Chicago, which Anderson personified in a song dedicated to the city as a seductive and destructive mistress, whose locks were "flying, dusty and black" and whose "gigantic, gaunt and drear" body spread over the fields. Fed on "a million men," the mistress crushed not only "our fathers, in the village streets," but also "old knowledge and all old beliefs." In this new religion, no "thin dream of beauty" could survive (164).

Anderson believed that this new religion was responsible for many aspects of degeneration in America. First of all, it made people feel "impotent" in the face of the Machine because the Machine was "far bigger than the men who owned it, who ran it, who worked in it" (77). Secondly, industrialization and

commercialization naturally led to standardization, which in turn threatened American individuality. Witnessing the tremendous movement toward industrialized society, Anderson argued that two major harms had been done: "the speeding up and the standardization of life and thought." Furthermore, Anderson saw the second impulse as a definite result of the first. In industrial cities like Chicago, an "attempt is being made to channel the minds of all men into one iron groove," and this, Anderson maintained, was very strange in "the land of the free and the home of the brave" (*Notebook* 141).

Despite his ruthless attack on the Machine Age, Anderson seemed not to blame the Machine, the object, for all the evils resulted from mechanical advances. "I do not believe there is anything wrong with the machine." Anderson asserted, "Often it is beautiful, a powerful, a strange and lovely thing in the world" (*The Writer at His Craft* 122). Instead of condemning the Machine itself, Anderson was able to detect its positive potential and it is exactly this rationality that distinguishes Anderson from some other contemporary critics who sentimentalized the evils of the Machine. Above all, Anderson rebuked the belief that no good literature may be produced in this age of the Machine. On the contrary, Anderson boasted, there were as many materials worthy of writing as before. All you

needed was sensitivity:

Why question America as a place for the story-teller or for any other kind of creative workman? If the job is too much for him, if life is too complex and difficult for him to see and feel clearly, that is his failure and not the failure of the civilization out of which he must get his materials if he is to get them at all. And the whole story of the swift, sudden changes in life here, the drive, the rush, the lost sense of values in the modern industrial world, the necessary loss of sensibilities too — is that not a story? (68)

It is evident that Anderson was very conscious as his role as story-teller in the "go-getter" new age. That is, the story-teller must develop a new kind of sensibility to cope with the swift changes, and then revive in the common people the sensibility to beauty. In this sense, the story-teller played the role of redeemer. Despite Anderson's declaration that "the artist cannot change life. That isn't his job" (70-71), he was essentially an idealist for his belief in possible changes toward a better future for America. "I have set myself that job. And I do not want to join the chorus of men who cry out against modern life. . . I have little or no sympathy with the man who declares that the creative workman is unappreciated here" (68).

It seems that Anderson was determined to find a way out for a diseased civilization and to bring together the conflicting forces of aesthetic appreciation and mechanical progress.

When working toward this goal, Anderson had two lessons that he was eager to share with the younger generation of "creative workmen." One was that the story-teller must "stay at where the story is" to get the story. In order to paint, write, and sing life, the artist had to be "in it and a part of it, with its rhythm in his blood" (71). As a native American writer who was firmly rooted in his Midwestern origin and who seemed to be proud of this origin, Anderson was very suspicious of those expatriate writers, because by attempting to escape by running off to other countries, they put themselves out of life in America altogether.

Besides closeness to native soil, Anderson insisted that the complexity of the modern life must be respected. To Anderson, too many stereotypes of factory-owner, mine investor, mill superintendent, and soap salesman had been recently produced to cater to the general discontent about industrialism. However, these ridiculed people were not less human than the miners and weavers. "Is every man and woman in America who owns stock in a mill thereby outside the human circle?" (260) Anderson impatiently questioned. In this aspect, Anderson is in the

western mainstream of liberalism which insists on the universal value of human beings on the one hand and sufficient consideration of individuality on the other hand.

In Anderson's eyes, unreserved attacks on the Machine, King Coal, King Cotton, or the Railway is as naive as, and thus as futile as, blind worship of them. To better understand the American reality, a more balanced point of view is essential:

I am protesting against an unbalanced view of modern industrial life. I protest against the point of view that sees nothing in the small town but Rotarians and boosters, that sees nothing in industry but devils and martyrs, that does not see people as people realizing that we are all caught in a strange new kind of life. (*The Writer at His Craft* 260)

As we can see, Anderson related the stereotypical portrayal of industrial life to that of the small town, and he was as impatient with one as he was with the other. He was quick in drawing a parallel between the two. For example, in an essay "Cotton Mill" he told how he was compelled to read "a certain very popular novel built about an American town" since it was being read all over the world and it had "made a certain definite fixed picture of life in the American small town in innumerable minds" (255). The best-seller left in the mind of every reader the impression

that in all American small towns "no grass ever grows. Grapes and apples never ripen. There are no spring rains" (256). Anderson was convinced that, to a great extent, the success of books written in this tone was due to "that quality in them that arouses people's contempt." "There is that streak in all of us." Anderson said, "We all adore hating something, having contempt for something. It makes us feel big and superior" (256).

Anderson's worry over simplistic sketches brings us back to Hilfer's talk of "Revolt from the Village." As I have argued, Hilfer's point of view is founded not on an overall evaluation of Anderson's work, but on a few isolated pieces, which in turn, cannot lead to a closed conclusion. If we take Anderson's essays and later creative works into consideration, we will see that in essence, Anderson remained an idealist. Despite his persistent nostalgia, he saw clearly that the old innocent past was over. He was fully aware of the futility of the attempt to bring back the past. Instead of weeping over lost innocence and doing nothing positive, Anderson struggled to find a solution to the "trap" that had caught everyone, the mine-owner and the miner alike. For instance, in the early phase of his career as a writer, Anderson dabbled with communist ideals. In his first two novels, *Windy McPherson's Son* and *Marching Men*, we see Anderson the moralist. The reader follows the heroes, Sam

McPherson and Beut McGregor as they moved through three successive stages toward maturity and moral consciousness: the youth spent in a small town, the escape to the city and pursuit of success, and the sudden denouncement of the go-getter ethic. After breaking with the conventions of the business world, the two heroes transformed themselves into reformers. Although neither of them had developed a comprehensive plan, either economic or political, both were determined to help the weak, the oppressed masses to fight with their oppressors. Although neither of them succeeded in bringing about a new world, Anderson seemed to be anxious to let us believe that they had achieved moral victories in making the effort.

If we say Anderson's early attention to social injustice originated more from his intuition as a liberal than from any exposure to communism, then his enthusiasm in the 1930s was definitely brought out by the ethos of the time. In 1931, Anderson found himself swept along with the surge of left wing sympathy and he told his lecture agent that he wanted to speak only on "Industries and Modern Machinery." He also spent hours in the mills and factories of Georgia, talking eagerly to laborers or just standing by the machines and studying how they worked. He pondered on his experiences in the factories, and in June came out the little book of essays, *Perhaps Women*, which

contained his observations on the industrial world. The main thesis of the book was that women might provide a solution to the evils of the industrial age. In the same year, Anderson agreed to give his name to a communist organization for the relief of political prisoners and later even served as chairman of the Prisoner's Relief Fund for a while. It was also in 1931 that Anderson led a group of writers to make a personal protest to President Hoover. Anderson fully participated in the populist movement of his time and answered to the call of the age.

Despite his active role in the movement, Anderson never forgot his role as artist. As a matter of fact, even by the time he finished *Marching Men* Anderson had come to realize that there was no easy answer to the problems of the Industrial Age. It is this discovery that makes him a writer instead of a mere propagandist fighting against the corruption of the American ideal by materialism. As a conscientious writer, Anderson moved beyond protest and condemnation and attempted to find lasting values on which to build a new world. Just because he managed to go beyond protest literature he safely stayed in the American tradition of idealism. In his firm belief in the possibility of a life that was based on compassion, love, and understanding, he looked forward to theories such as communism for justice, equality and freedom from the tyranny of the Machine

on the one hand, and back to the agrarian past, to the old faith in the inherent goodness of the Land and the small town on the other hand. This backward look transcends sentimental nostalgia. In the place of pessimistic nostalgia is the eager pursuit of a source of new strength to face the confused and confusing new age.

These romantic and idealist traits of Anderson's work passed almost unnoticed during his lifetime. Instead he was often called a naturalist, a Freudian, and a Marxist, all of which he was not. Sometime he was even associated with the post-World War I decadents, especially T. S. Eliot. However, if we just look at one of the passages in which Anderson uttered his understanding of "Living in American", we will see how misleading the association is:

The main point of this drifting that I so love
— I tell myself — [is] to remember (may the gods
not let me forget) the land itself. It's so gorgeous,
so big, so infinitely varied. Mountains, valleys,
rivers, strips of forests coming down to look at roads,
little creeks, prairies, pine forests, beaches
facing oceans and lakes, rich land — plenty of rich
land yet. . . the vastness of it. . . the gorgeous
swank and richness of it. . .

To remember how utterly silly it is to have

depression here — down-and-outs apologizing for being alive. . . how fast they learn to whine. . . whining and apologizing for being alive, even as they walk — homeless and hungry, like as not — across the face of it.

Will we ever have sense enough to take what is so obviously spread out so temptingly before us here? To remember it could be done? (*The Writer at His Craft* 132)

The drifting mentioned above refers to the adventures of Anderson, who drove his car at top speed all across America. By the time of writing this essay, Anderson had overcome his first suspicion of the Machine and devoted himself to this new invention the automobile. Once Anderson asked, "Impotence comes from the fear of impotence. In our machine age can we help fearing?" (121) Anderson's answer to this self-imposed question is apparently "yes," which may sound overly optimistic. However, it represents the general tone of Anderson's writing, from *McPherson's Son* to *Memoir*. The image of wasteland can be found nowhere in Anderson's work. The land is always generous and abundant and never lets down those who have true faith in it.

Anderson is a man that can find hope in a despairing situation. To me, what Hilfer and some other critics call the "ambiguity" or "unreliability" of Anderson actually indicates

that he is mature enough to reconcile the past and the present, the rural-agrarian and the urban-industrial, the landscape and the cityscape. This reconciliatory trait can be illustrated by the following quotation: "All of my success as a writer has been in telling the story of failure. I have told that story and told it well because I know failure" (111).

After all, "Life, not death, is the great adventure" Anderson thus told us (qutd. Schevill 259).

Chapter Two

Decline of the South China: Fatalism in Su Tong

Everything is revolting. This is the reality of the gentle and beautiful "South" people used to imagine. I don't care whether I will be accused of smearing and defiling the South. This is the South in my eye. I admit I am an unfilial offspring of the South. I just don't like the mossy, filthy and overcrowded South. So what?¹⁰

——Su Tong (*The Decline of the South*)

Just as Mid-West America is constructed in the American national consciousness in contrast with New England, the Old South and the Far West, "South China" is a concept constructed as an antithesis to "North China" in the Chinese national consciousness. Geographically speaking, "South China" generally refers to those provinces south of the Huai River, and more specifically to those on the middle and lower reaches of Yangtze River, namely, today's Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Hunan, Hubei, and Jiangxi provinces, etc. Meanwhile, "North China" mainly refers to those provinces north of the Huai River, and

¹⁰ 一切都令人作呕。人们想象中的温柔清秀的南方其实就是这么回事。我不管别人是否说我有意识给南方生活抹黑，反正我就这么看。我承认我是南方的叛逆子孙，我不喜欢潮湿、肮脏、人头簇拥的南方，谁也不能把我怎么样。见《南方的堕落》95页。

more specifically to those on the middle and lower reaches of Yellow River, namely, today's Shaanxi, Shanxi, Hebei, Henan, and Shandong provinces, etc. Thus in a certain sense, the competition and conflict between South China and North China reflect those between the two civilizations both founded on rivers: the Yangtze River Civilization and the Yellow River Civilization.

There are three aspects of the North/South dichotomy: political, economical, and cultural. As the myth goes, in Chinese history, especially before the Song Dynasty, the South had a secondary and inferior political status compared with the North, which claims to be the orthodox origin of Chinese civilization, despite the fact that many powerful kingdoms were once built in the South, such as the Chu, Yue, and Zhao Kingdoms of the Warring States Period and the Wu Kingdom of the Three Kingdoms Period.

Another sign of the political marginality of the South is that in history (especially before the Ming Dynasty) it often served as one of the destinations of political exile. In political struggles losers were not allowed to stay near the emperor, not even around the political center in the north, but were banished to the South. Thus we see the antithesis of Miaotang / Jianghu (庙堂/江湖) in Fan Zhongyan's (范仲淹) famous

essay "On Yueyang Tower" (岳阳楼记), which was written at the request of his good friend Teng Zijing (滕子京), who had been banished to Baling (today's Yuyang of Hunan province) and who had rebuilt the Yueyang Tower. Also in exile like his friend, Fan Zhongyan took the opportunity to express his (and in a way Teng's) ambition and courage in the face of an evil fate. One of the most celebrated quotations from the essay is "When I stay as high as Miaotang, I worry about the common people; when I stay as far as Jianghu, I worry about my emperor" (居庙堂之高, 则忧其民; 处江湖之远, 则忧其君). The concept of Miaotang is a combination of Miao (庙) and Tang (堂). Miao originally refers to the temple of the royal family, where the emperor paid respects and offered sacrifices to his ancestors. Tang refers to the Ming Tang (明堂), the Bright Hall where all kind of important events and rituals were held, such as royal meetings, offering sacrifices, awards and honors ceremonies, and royal examinations. Thus in Fan Zhongyan's essay, Miaotang stands for the royal court or the central government. Meanwhile the concept of Jianghu (River and Lake, 江湖) is much more complex. Literarily speaking, it originally refers to the Yangtze River and Dongting Lake, and later generally refers to the Three Rivers and the Five Lakes (三江五湖), all of which are in the middle and lower

reaches of the Yangtze. Metaphysically speaking, the term "Jianghu" denotes local powers that were beyond the control of the central government. This made the South *the other* of the central government in the north.

If we say Fan Zhongyan is in the tradition of Confucianism, then another famous poet, Tao Yuanming (陶渊明) is more in the tradition of Taoism. Disgusted and despairing of political struggles, Tao Yuanming retired to his hometown in today's Jiangxi province. In his most celebrated poem "Peach Blossom Spring" (桃花源诗并记), Tao Yuanming portrayed an ideal world, which was totally free from the strife, disaster, and suffering that was all too common in the real world. Despite the long-lasting debate over the prototype of the legendary land, everybody seems to agree that this oriental Eden is intended to be located somewhere in south China.

The underlying assumption is that before the Song Dynasty, the South was less urbanized and thus less contaminated by the evils of the city. It was more rural and thus preserved more virtues usually associated with rustic life. Despite the fact that since the Song Dynasty, the South has been more and more populated and urbanized, in literature its rustic and harmonic image persists. As in many other national literatures, nature is frequently celebrated in pastorals about the South. There

is a profusion of such images as singing streams, tranquil lakes, refreshing forests, and inspirational mountains. In this "natural" background, the rural people live a simple, contented, and untroubled life. Thus the South has gained a regenerating power of uplifting spirits and curing wounds. The bucolic life in the South is always promised to be consoling and rewarding

The South has been celebrated as "the Land of Rice and Fish" (鱼米之乡), the main supplier of nutrition of the country. Compared with other parts of China, the middle and lower reaches of Yangtze enjoy many natural conditions favorable for agricultural production. As it was more and more populated, it became the granary of China, just as the Mid-West is the granary of America. Beside rice and fish, vegetables, fruit, and silk are also on the list of offerings to the court in the north. One main function of the Grand Canal, which was constructed in the Sui Dynasty, was to provide cheaper and easier transportation of these agricultural products to the North to be consumed by northern cities.

This is the South most Chinese believe to be: politically marginalized, economically affluent, and culturally sophisticated. This impression is founded not only on historical facts, but also on many literary classics. However, in Su Tong's stories, they confront a south that is completely beyond their

expectation. Bleak, moldy, and poverty-stricken, the South made up by Su Tong is corruptive, degenerative, and hopeless.

In the preface to *Folk Songs of Maple Village* (枫杨树山歌), Su Tong writes about the South he has created:

In this work, I imagine a village called "Maple." Many friends believe that this reveals my "nostalgia" and desire to "return home". There may be some kind of shadow of my ancestor's hometown in Maple Village. However, to me, the shadow is too vague and faint to be represented. I have picked up the fragments of history and sewed and mended them together. This is a good way to write fiction. During the process of writing, I feel the pulse of my ancestors and my hometown. I see where I am from, as well as where I am going. The creation of this work is my spiritual "return home".

在这部作品中我虚拟了一个叫枫杨树的乡村，许多朋友认为这是一种“怀乡”和“还乡”情绪的流露。枫杨树乡村也许有我祖辈居住地的影子，但对于我那是漂浮不定的难以再现的影子。我用我的方法拾起已成碎片的历史，缝补缀合，这是一种很好的小说创作的过程，在这个过程中我触摸了祖先和故乡的脉搏，我看见自己的来处，也将看见自己的归宿。创作这部小说是我的一次精神的“还乡”。

As we can see, Su Tong is not interested in representing history. He appropriates historical fragments without qualm and makes

them serve his personal imagination. To Su Tong the writer, fiction, rather than history, is a more viable way to get in touch with family history and the geo-political space that is the Southern watercountry.

In January 2001, a huge audience was attracted to Su Tong's "new novel" *Folk Songs of Maple Village*. To the critics' surprise, the book stayed on the bestseller list for many weeks. Ironically, the ten "chapters" in this "novel" were all selected from Su Tong's short stories and novellas published in the mid-and-late nineteen eighties. Apparently, both Su Tong and the publishing house intended the book to be read as a "novel" rather than a collection of short stories and novellas. On the back cover, the book was called "Su Tong's first novel in which he makes a spiritual trip to his hometown, an unprecedented novel in contemporary Chinese literary history . . . It covers all forms of human existence."

For a long time critics have called Su Tong's stories with Maple Village as background the "Maple Series." While Su Tong himself made his first attempt to systemize these stories when in 1993 he published *Both Sides of the World* (世界两侧), in this book, he divided his formerly published stories into two parts. The first part, entitled "Stories of Maple Village," included nine stories that would later appear in *Folk Songs of Maple*

Village. There were seven stories in the second part "Tramps of the City," including "Why the Girl is Crying?" and "Hello, My Beekeeper" and "The Boy in the Well." Despite his attempt, it is apparent that Su Tong did not regard the first part as an inseparable whole, that is, a novel. However, in *Folk Songs of Maple Village*, Su Tong made his intention clear, for he not only rearranged and renamed these ten stories, but also turned them into "chapters." For example, his masterpiece "Opium Family" became chapter one "The Landlord's Two Sons" while "1934 Escapes" became chapter two "Grandmother Jiang, My Grandfather, and My Father." "Flying Over my Hometown Maple Village" which was first published in *Shanghai Literature* became the third chapter "Little Uncle;" the short story "Escape" was chosen as the fourth chapter "Chen Sanmai;" "The Season of Grandmother" published in *October* was changed into the fifth chapter "Grandmother." The titles of the following chapters were "Red Horse" (originally "Sacrifice to the Red Horse"), "Lao Dongye" (originally "Outsiders"), "Nymphs" (originally "Song of the Lost Osmanthus"), "Goose Keeper: Idiot Bian Jin," "Chun Mai and One-Armed Liu E" (originally "Nineteen Houses").

Apparently, *Folk Songs of Maple Village* is inherently insufficient as a novel. First of all, out of the ten stories, only the first seven definitely have Maple Village as background.

As to the other three stories, we can only be certain that they happen in the Southern watercountry (南方水乡), because there are frequent references to this network of rivers and lakes. Secondly, as far as the plot is concerned, the book lacks a coherent story line. Characters in one story are not related to those in another. For example, the "Chen family" in chapter two has nothing to do with the "Chen family" in chapter four, while the "Tong family" in chapters three, seven and eight is not one family at all. In this sense, *Folk Songs of Maple Village* is not even in the same category as *Winesburg, Ohio*. Thirdly, the narrative perspective is confusing. Even in the first eight chapters that use the first person narration, it would be very misleading to identify "I" in one story with "I" in another.

Then what gives these ten stories, unique and complete by themselves, a sense of unity? The answer lies in the general theme, which is revealed by the two original titles of chapter two and four: "1934 Escapes" and "Escape" respectively. It is this theme of "escape" that gives the stories a backbone that qualifies the book as novel. Whether it is escape from the declining village to the degenerating city; or from the rapidly changing history to eternity; or from the emptiness of present reality to a narration based on imagination, folklore, and legend; or from the corruptive civilization to purifying

primitivism; the theme of escape is repeated and developed in all the stories like the melody of a symphony.

This fascination with the motif of "escape" best illustrates fatalism in Su Tong's writing. In "1934 Escapes," Su Tong writes, "My old Maple Village home / Has been silent for many years / And we / Who have escaped here / Are like wandering blackfish / For whom / The way back is eternally lost" (Duke 103). ("我的枫杨树老家沉没多年 / 我们逃亡到此 / 便是流浪的黑鱼 / 回归的路途永远迷失")¹¹

Unlike Sherwood Anderson, Su Tong never has first-hand experience with South China countryside. Instead, he is a typical city man, spending almost all his life in big cities.¹² However, this lack of experience does not prevent Su Tong from devoting himself to the depiction of a fictional southern watercountry, which has caught the imagination of so many generations of Chinese writers, and which has always been a recurrent topic in Chinese literature. What distinguishes Su Tong's southern watercountry and what many readers find shocking are its pervasive decadence and fatalism. Probably because of this, The Maple Village stories were not successful in the

¹¹ 见《枫杨树山歌》第二章"蒋氏、我祖父、我父亲"(原名"1934年的逃亡")73页。

¹² Su Tong was born and grew up in Suzhou, a scenic city in today's Jiangsu province, and finished his college education in Beijing, and after graduation, he has been working as editor and writer in Nanjing, the capital of Jiangsu province.

popular market when they were first published in the mid-and-late nineteen eighties, when the mainstream (officially approved) Chinese literature was either idealistic, when addressing the immediate reality, such as economic transformation, or introspective, when addressing immediate past, the Cultural Revolution. Whether the work was treating the past or the present, the authorities were anxious to make the writer tell the reader that we were learning lessons from the past disasters, and that we were making good changes. Humanism and socialist idealism were celebrated and recommended. Su Tong's stories of the Southern watercountry, which abound in murder, suicide, rape, loss, and betrayal, were not fit for the national imagination "called for by the age," and thus were not appealing to either the official authorities or the common reader.¹³

Su Tong fictional southern watercountry revolves around its central symbol — the rice. As I have said, rice, the main agricultural product of the rural south, transcends material significances in the national consciousness of China. A parallel can be safely drawn between the rice of South China and the corn

¹³ As I have shown earlier, it was not until the turn of the twenty-first century that the good reputation of these works went beyond critical circles. There was such enthusiasm in Su Tong's work that he was voted "the most promising contemporary Chinese writer" by Chinese college students. (See Song & Cao) There was also much discussion on the so-called "Year of Su Tong." (See Xu)

of Mid-West America. Both are lifelines to large populations and both are frequently addressed in national literatures.

Daring and unprecedented is Su Tong's unreserved deconstruction of the symbol of the rice. First of all, the ricefield stops to be sustainable — a large part of it is appropriated to grow opium poppies. The "white powder" of opium surpasses the rice as the main source of income of the village, as we see in Su Tong's masterpiece "Opium Family:"

The opium collectors came once a year to Maple Village; the salt boat transported both opium and rice down the river. After this went on for some time, the Maple Villagers considered the two plants equal in status. Grandfathers pointed to the rice on the left bank and the opium fields on the right bank and told their grandsons, "There's food growing on both banks, and we depend on that food to go on living." (Duke 216)

收罂粟的人一年一度来到枫杨树乡村，贩盐船把收获的罂粟和稻米一起从河上运走，久而久之枫杨树人将两种植物同等看待。祖父指着左岸的稻地和右岸的罂粟对孙子说，“两岸都是粮食，我们就靠这些粮食活下去。”（罂粟之家 30）

There is a clear tone of irony in the above quotation. The opium which impairs life brings prosperity to the village. Meanwhile, Liu Laoxia, the largest landlord of Maple Village, successfully

transforms himself from the King of Rice to the King of Opium:

His father walked out of the workshop with a handful of opium powder, and held it out in the sunlight to check the quality; his facial expression was as serious and stern as if he were cradling a sacred fire in his hands. Chencao thought, "Perhaps the powder Dad has in his hands really is the sacred fire we all depend on for life. It nurtured Maple Village after a century of hunger, and it nurtured me, but I'm still confused about it." (Duke 213)

爹手掬一把花粉走出罂粟作坊，他把花粉高举迎着阳光辨别成色，其严峻坦荡的面容一如手捧圣火的天父。沉草想也许爹手里的花粉真的是我们赖以生存的天火。他养育了百年饥饿的枫杨树乡村，养育了我可我依然迷惘。（罂粟之家 28）

Possibly, Su Tong is referring to Prometheus who brings fire from heaven to earth. Thus, Liu Laoxia is sanctified as a modern god. The transformation of "the land of rice and fish" into "the opium kingdom," as well as the parody of Prometheus, should not be read literally, but symbolically, for Maple Village is an epitome of China. As Su Tong tells us: "Prior to 1949 about a thousand people cultivated wet rice and opium poppies for the landlord Liu Laoxia; tenant farmers rented land and paid in food grains; and Liu Laoxia's renting land to buy more became a fixed

way of life. As I see it, it was a *typical southern village*" (my Italics) (Duke 184). (1949 年前大约有 1000 名枫杨树人给地主刘老侠种植水稻与罌粟，佃农租地交粮，刘老侠赁地而沽，成为一种生活定式。在我看来那是一个典型的南方乡村。(罌粟之家 5))

The sense of inevitability is developed in another novel *Rice* (米), which describes the "success" and destruction of Five Dragons (五龙), a peasant that has escaped from Maple Village in famine to the city. When Five Dragons has accumulated enough wealth, he does what every Chinese peasant would do: purchases a great deal of land in the village that he is originally from:

Maybe, he thought, I'll take a walk around that dark, rich earth I've missed for so long. Or survey the paddy fields on the left bank of the river and the poppy fields on the right. His cousin had said that in the spring the farmers had planted only those two crops on his land, as instructed; he knew all about current trends in agricultural production. (Goldblatt 243)¹⁴

五龙想他也许会在那片久违的黑土地上走一走，看看河岸左侧的水稻田，然后再看看河岸右侧的罌粟地。堂弟告诉他春季以来枫杨树农民种植的就是这两种作物，这是五龙的安排，充分体现了五龙作为一个新兴地主经济实惠的农业思想。(米 272)

¹⁴ I have retranslated the last clause here since Goldblatt's translation is not very loyal to the original. "This is Five Dragons's arrangement, and it surely reflects the pragmatism of Five Dragons as one of the new generation of landlords."

This passage has a familiar tone of irony: the wealth of the South comes from the opium poppy, the destructive plant, and it is the dream of every peasant of the legendary "land of rice and fish" to become king of opium one day.

Besides the transformation of the ricefield, Su Tong reveals it as a dirty transaction. Annexation of the land is so brutal that the myth of the peaceful and consoling south becomes ridiculous. For example, the last deal between Liu Laoxia (刘老侠) and his brother Liu Laoxin (刘老信) is done in a brothel, where the latter is dying of venereal disease besides a pile of rubbish. The following dialogue between the two brothers is beyond imagination:

The younger brother said, "I'll give you my burial plot if you'll take me home, all right?"

The older brother took the deed and answered, "Sign it over and we'll go."

Liu Laoxia pressed his younger brother's ulcerated fingers down on the deed; signing it not in red ink, but in blood. Everything was finally accomplished when Liu Laoxia had carried his younger brother over to the river and thrown him down in that salt boat; the people of Maple Village said at that point the two streams of the Liu Family bloodline had

been united into one. (Duke 189)

弟弟说，“把我的坟地给你，送我回家吧。”哥哥接过地契说，“画个押我们就走。”刘老侠把弟弟溃烂的手指抓过来摁到地契上，没用红泥用的是脓血。刘老侠背着他弟弟找到那只贩盐船后把他扔上船，一切就结束了，刘家的血系脉络由两只并拢成一只。（罍粟之家 8—9）

If we say this piece of land coming with a "burial plot" and "ulcer and blood" must be doomed, then the 150 acres of ricefield at the price of a woman is no less cursed. After Liu Suzi (刘素子) is sold by her father to a disfigured, impotent, yet rich businessman, she predicts with malice, "Father, that hundred and fifty acres will be flooded with water and blasted by thunder; that hundred and fifty acres will slip through your hands; you just wait, that will be fate, too." (Duke 202) (爹, 那 300 亩地会让水淹没让雷打散 300 亩地会在你手上沉下去的, 你等着吧那也是命。(罍粟之家 19)) While Liu Laoxia thinks the deal is perfectly justifiable, Chen Baonian (陈宝年) feels more guilty when he does the same thing to his younger sister, Fengzi (凤子), whom he sells to landlord Chen Wenzhi (陈文治) for five acres of ricefield. In families rich and poor alike, women are merely high-priced commodities. Punishment on the evil land is quick and appalling.

The three babies born to Fengzi are all buried alive in the bamboo garden — their heads are soft and disfigured and covered with thick golden hairs. Meanwhile, the first four male babies of Liu Laoxia are all "like fish, having neither legs nor arms...with sword-shaped tails . . ." (Duke 185) (像鱼似的没有腿与手臂, 却有剑行摆尾。(罍粟之家 6)) Fish-like, the disfigured newborns are all deserted in river.

Yanyi (演义) is the only surviving male baby of Liu Laoxia before Chencao, but even he is the outcome of murder and incest. Liu Laoxia has committed adultery with Jade Flower (翠花花), his old father's young concubine, and murdered his father to take over the land and the woman. In the idiot Yanyi, we can see how Su Tong deconstructs the abundant and nutritious image of southern China. Yanyi is introduced into the story in this curious way:

Grandfathers told grandsons, "Maple Village became rich because the people there had the good rural habits of living frugally and running their homes with industry and thrift. Look at the rice stored in the houses in big piles; even if the rice has mildew or maggots, it's still food grain, and you don't want to eat it anytime you feel like it. All of us eat thin rice gruel with salted vegetables; every Maple

Villager does the same. Even the landlord Liu Laoxia does the same." Grandfathers spoke with great emphasis on this point: "Liu Laoxia's family eats thin rice gruel every day, too. Haven't you seen his little brat Yanyi? He's so hungry he's a skinny yellow bag of bones, hollering and complaining all day long — just like you." (Duke 185)

祖父告诉孙子，枫杨树富庶是因为那里的人有勤俭持家节衣缩食的乡风。你看见米屯在屋里堆得满满的，米就是发霉长蛆了也是粮食，不要随便吃掉它。我们都就着咸菜喝稀粥，每个枫杨树人都是这样。地主刘老侠家也是这样。祖父强调说，刘老侠家也天天喝稀粥，你看见他的崽子演义了吗？他饿得面黄肌瘦，整天哇哇乱叫，跟你一样。（罍粟之家 5—6）

In this apparently nonsensical speech, Su Tong satirizes the Chinese tradition of frugality that is celebrated as one major virtue of good family, imitating the tone of Grandfathers lecturing to Grandsons on how to rise in the world. There are two aspects of the irony. First, everybody in the prosperous and productive village is hungry. This lasting and wide-spread famine is brought out not by any natural disaster, but by an absurd tradition (乡风). Second, this daily practice of "fasting" is not limited to poor families. The rich people are all starving too: their children are as desperate as those of

the poor. A sort of equality is achieved in this absurd way. The absurdity of the Grandfathers' argument about how to get rich and their hardly concealed smugness about the "equality" between the poor and the rich well illustrate the satiric undertone so pervasive in Su Tong's writing.

Su Tong makes the idiot Yanyi the incarnation of hunger. At the beginning of the narration, he is locked in the storehouse by his father as a punishment for stealing a steamed roll. To Yanyi, the storehouse resembles a prison while the agricultural tools stored in the storehouse "looked like a line of human beings" (看上去就像一排人的形状 (罍粟之家 1)). Driven by constant hunger Yanyi is dehumanized into a "cub" that is aggressive and violent to anyone near him: "Their genealogy also records that Yanyi was an idiot. You would think he looked like a hedgehog rolling around here and there; he used a staff made from a tree branch to attack all the people nearby who were forever strangers to him. It was his habit to swallow his food while repeating his favorite words: 'I'm hungry I'm going to kill you.'" (Duke 185) (家谱记载演义是个白痴。你看见他像一只刺猬滚来滚去, 他用杂木树棍攻击对他永远陌生的人群。他习惯于一边吞食一边说: 我饿我杀了你。(罍粟之家 6))

Equally dehumanized is another major character of the story, Chen Mao (陈茂), a young tenant of the Liu Family, the

lover of Jade Flower, and the biological father of Chencao (沉草). To Liu Laoxia, his master in the daytime, and to Jade Flower, his master at night, Chen Mao is merely a "bulldog." For the sake of survival, he has to repeat after Liu Laoxia that "Chen Mao is a dog of Liu Laoxia" and imitates a dog's barking. When he breaks up with the Liu Family out of rage but has to return some time later, Chencao discovers that "the figure of Chen Mao driving the mule turn into the silhouette of a dog" (拉驴的陈茂呈现出一条黑狗的虚影) and that "Chen Mao's tired expression looked just like a dog under the hot sun" (陈茂困顿的表情也仿佛太阳的里的狗 (罂粟之家 25)). When Chen Mao's first attempt to start a revolution in Maple Village is suppressed, he is hung in mid-air. Once again, Chencao believes he has "the fantastic image of a creature with the body of a dog and the face of a man." (人面狗身的幻影 (罂粟之家 42))

Chen Cao's status is not improved with Jade Flower, who treats him as merely a pet. During their lovemaking, Chen Mao feels like a rooster whose feathers have been plucked while Jade Flower is like a curling white snake with pink tongue. It is not that Chen Mao is not aware of his status, but that he can only attribute his misery to fate. "Chen Mao reflected that all of his days stacked up together amounted to nothing more than

a pile of fodder; some of it he wasted in the Liu Family's fields; this was life, too, and he had to go on living this way" (Duke 210). (陈茂想起他的所有日子叠起来就是饲料堆, 一些丢在女人身上, 一些丢在刘家的大田里了, 这也是生活, 他必须照此活下去。(罍粟之家 26))

The curious association of "dog" with man appears again and again in Su Tong's works. Beside Chen Mao, we also have Dingo(狗崽), Little Blind (小瞎子), and Five Dragons (五龙), all of whom are dehumanized by poverty. In "1934 Escapes," Dingo collects dog-shit everyday, dreaming of saving enough for a pair of shoes, and finally he smells like a dog. Little Blind loses one of his eyes in a fight with a stray dog over a piece of pork; while Five Dragons squats on the ground begging for a bite of pork in Abao's hand. When Five Dragons agrees to marry into Feng family, which is a great shame to a Chinese man, he describes his marriage in this way: "I am giving myself to the rice emporium, not to you people. What you get in the bargain is a strong, sturdy watchdog for all generations, a bulldog right off the farm." (Goldblatt 84) (其实我不是入赘, 其实是米店娶我, 娶一条身强力壮传宗接代的看家狗, 娶一条乡下来的大公狗。(米 98)) When Five Dragons first arrives in the city, he notices that "travelers from home are like stray dogs; they sleep when they're tired, wherever they are, and their expressions — lethargic and groggy at times,

ferocious at others —— are more doglike than human" (Goldblatt 2). (所有远行的人都像一条狗走到哪里睡到哪里, 他们的表情也都像一条狗, 倦怠、奢睡或者凶相毕露。(米7)) When a plague kills off a large number of Maple Village people, Grandmother Jiang notices that the new tombs grow out of the ground overnight like numerous piles of dog shit. Besides dogs, human beings in Su Tong's works are also often compared to rats, flies, worms, cats, cows, pigs and chicken. Human nature is repressed when facing the threat of death. Su Tong's ill-fated characters have to go through "voluntary" debasement to survive.

In "1934 Escapes," Su Tong further creates a declining and decaying rural south. We follow the narrator in his spiritual trip back to Maple Village in 1934 and witness the whole process of degeneration of the main character, Grandmother Jiang (蒋氏). In the first part of the story, Grandmother Jiang is portrayed as the goddess of life. Fertile and strong, she gives birth to eight children. The childbirth scene in the rice field is highly symbolic:

In times past there was no sex anywhere in Maple Village in October, but this year was a mystery. Perhaps that warm southerly wind confused the entire network of sexual desire in Maple Village. Why did

the men and women cutting rice in the fields throw down their sickles in droves and drift off into the waves of ripe rice without leaving a trace, huh? What sort of a wind would you say that was, anyway?

Grandmother Jiang, dragging around her ponderous body, was in a daze in that kind of wind. She heard the wanton clamor of men and women, full of happiness and lusty vitality, carry over from the depths of the waves of ripe rice to surround her and her fetus. . . .

She was pushed and pulled front and back by wave after wave of rice stalks, her whole body a dazzling golden yellow. . . . Just before she gave birth to a new life, Grandmother Jiang's tired body grew abundant and richly beautiful, burning without inhibition like a wild chrysanthemum made large by the sun's light. (Duke 118 - 119)

从前的枫杨树人十月里全村无房事但这个秋季却是个谜。可能就是那种风吹动了枫杨树网状的情欲。割稻的男女为什么频频弃镰而去都飘进稻浪里无影无踪啊你说到底是从哪里吹来的这种风？

祖母蒋氏拖着沉重的身子在这阵风中发呆。她听见稻浪深处传来的男女之声充满了快乐的生命力在她和胎儿周围大肆喧嚣。……

她被大片大片的稻浪前推后涌，浑身金黄耀眼……蒋氏干瘦发黑的胴体在诞生生命的前后变得丰硕美丽，像一株被日光放大的野菊花尽情燃烧。（1934 年的逃亡 84—85）

However, soon the goddess of life deteriorates to the goddess of plague. Her breasts, which have nurtured eight children,

become poisonous. At the dawn of the plague that deprives her of five children, she dreams "her body was blasted to pieces and transformed into the Plague Goddess of popular legend, floating through the length and breadth of Maple Village like a spirit, singing dirges all the way while poisonous vapors spewed from every pore" (Duke 142). (裂变成传说中的灾女浑身喷射毒瘴, 一路哀歌, 飘飘欲仙, 游荡整个枫杨树山村 (1934 年的逃亡 102)) When Grandmother Jiang intentionally causes the miscarriage of Huan Zi (环子) to take revenge on her husband, the former goddess of life further degrades into murderer.

The degeneration of Chen Wenzhi's (陈文治) white jade jar forms a parallel with that of Grandmother Jiang. According to the local legend of Maple Village, the content of the jar is made of virginal teenagers' semen, and thus is a precious and mysterious aphrodisiac or elixir. For many generations, it has been enshrined and worshipped by villagers. However, before the plague strikes the village, the magical medicine is almost exhausted. As a result, virginal teenagers of the village fall victim to Chen Wenzhi's crazy attempt to reproduce it. Later the medicine is even condemned as the source of the epidemic. There are intersections of these two processes of degeneration. Once Chen Wenzhi witnesses Grandmother Jiang in childbirth in

the ricefield and finds it very erotic. He rapes Grandmother Jiang beside "the Pond of the Corpse." At the end of the story, when Grandmother Jiang has lost all her children, she voluntarily walks into the black brick building where Chen Wenzhi resides with his concubines. The union of two people that have experienced degeneration and lost their life force highlights the total corruption of the village.

The degeneration of the South is accelerated not only by plague, flood, and famine, but also by the process of urbanization. People desert their native land to live in the city, which is even more corruptive and depraving. For example, in "1934 Escapes," Chen Baonian deserts his newlywed wife and the ricefield and runs to the city for a new start. Strong and aggressive, he makes a fortune out of his skills as a bamboo craftsman and becomes the founder of the famed "Chenji Bamboo Emporium." As a natural result, other Bamboo craftsmen follow him to the city, which promises gold and young woman:

Nineteen thirty-four was the year of escape for Maple Village's bamboo craftsmen; it is reported that by the end of that year men from Maple Village had set up bamboo goods shops in every single town on the lower reaches of the Long River.

I imaging Maple Village's wide yellow mud road

probably came into being at that time. Grandmother Jiang watched with her own eyes as that road was transformed from a narrow path to a broad thoroughfare and from desolation to prosperity. . .

From that time on, that yellow mud road also extended into my family history. The people of my clan crowded together with their Maple Village neighbors like a line of ants on the move; countless pairs of bare feet strode upon the road of their ancestors, hurriedly departing in the direction of unknown cities and towns. (Duke 129)

1934 年是枫杨树竹匠们逃亡的年代，据说到这年年底，枫杨树人创始的竹器作坊已经遍及长江下游的各个城市了。

我想枫杨树的那条黄泥大路可能由此诞生。祖母蒋氏亲眼目睹了这条路由细变宽从荒凉到繁忙的过程。……

黄泥大路也从此伸入我的家史中。我的家族中人和枫杨树乡亲密集蚁行，无数双赤脚蹂踏着祖先之地，向陌生的城市方向匆匆流离。

(1934 年的逃亡 92—93)

Bamboo craftsmen are all male and have to make desperate escape from their native land and their families. Sometimes their escape is possible only at the price of others' lives. This "progress" is accompanied by murder, desertion, and betrayal and thus must be doomed. What Su Tong sees in this process of urbanization is not new hope and joy for bankrupt peasants. Instead, these wretched people arrive at the city with a mixture

of desperation and expectation only to be further corrupted and degenerated.

The bamboo knife, the major tool of bamboo craftsmen, symbolizes the process of degeneration. Originally, it is one of the common agricultural tools, because in the Southern countryside bamboo is one important production material. A good bamboo knife is passed from father to son in the family of bamboo craftsman and thus represents the continuity of the family line. However, in order to make the escape to the city, bamboo craftsmen turn it into lethal weapon, as in the horrific scene in which the last bamboo craftsman in desperation murders his wife who tries to hold him back. In the city, the bamboo knife is made the emblem of the criminal underworld of bamboo craftsmen who make money not by honest work, but by murder, abduction, and robbery. A tool for production and life-making finally degenerates into a tool for destruction and life-taking.

Su Tong's suspicion of the progressiveness of urbanization is further confirmed in the novel *Rice* (米). As the title implies, the novel centers on the symbol of rice. More audacious than the Maple stories, the treatment of the symbol is totally unprecedented in modern Chinese literary history. For example, Five Dragons, an ordinary peasant from Maple Village, becomes a rice fetishist. Not only does he believe that

rice is the only good thing in the world that is worth fighting for and dying for, he also practices the strange sadism of stuffing woman's vagina with rice during lovemaking.¹⁵

Five Dragons's spiritual corruption by the city is materialized in his physical degeneration. Healthy and strong when he first arrives at the city, he experiences a successive loss of his body organs. First, he loses one of his toes when his father-in-law, Proprietor Feng (冯老板), hires killers to get rid of him but is too stingy to pay the full fee. Then two more toes are bitten off by his two wives, Cloud Weave (织云) and Cloud Silk (绮云). His left eye is dug out by Proprietor Feng, who on his death-bed makes a last attack on him; his right eye is poked blind by his nephew, who has Five Dragons arrested by Japanese occupiers and tortures him half to death. Year in and year out, the violence of city life deprives Five Dragons of parts of his body. The final blow comes from an unexpected direction: he is infected with syphilis which causes his skin and flesh to rot and fall off. This putrescence puts the final touch on the ghastly picture of Five Dragons's decay over the years which started from the first day of his adventures in the city.

¹⁵ Ironically, the incredible association of rice and woman's sexual organ evokes the famous Chinese saying, "Appetite for food and sex is human nature" (食色性也).

One of the first things that catch his attention on the first day is the gaudy advertisements on which are painted "soap, cigarettes, and a variety of herbal tonics in the hands of pouty, pretty young women with lips the color of blood" (Goldblatt 2).

(肥皂、卷烟、仁丹和大力丸的广告上都画有一个嘴唇血红搔首弄姿的女人。(米7)) The young peasant notices that "tucked in among the sexy women are the names and addresses of VD clinics." (Goldblatt 2) (挤在女人中间的还有各种告示和专治花柳病的私人门诊地址。(米7)) Five Dragons's first impression of the city is echoed at the end of the story, when at the threshold of death he recalls his road of escape to the city:

He realizes how little meat he had on his bones; he was like a dislodged branch being carried along atop flowing red vinegar. He pictured a young man fleeing Maple Village through an expanse of rotting rice shoots and cotton plants on the surface of vast floodwaters, then across raucous roads chocked with refugees. The young man had strong limbs and a pair of radiant eyes filled with the bright light of hope — how I envy that young man, and how I miss him . . . It was all he could do to force back thoughts of death that surfaced with the wrenching hacks; he concentrated on the refugee-packed road as it slowly disappeared in floodwater. Everywhere he saw the victims and perpetrators of death; all around him were

poverty and looting. Penniless people hunted desperately for distant stores of rice. Me, I found one, an endless supply of snowy rice, but with such a long road ahead, I wonder when and where I'll find rest in the grave. (Goldblatt 211-212)

五龙发现自己的重量在疾病中慢慢消失，他像一根枯树枝浮在暗红色的醋液中，看见多年前逃离枫杨树村的那个青年，他在茫茫大水中跋涉而过，他穿越了垂死的被水泡烂的水稻和棉花，在拥挤的嘈杂的逃亡路上奔走。那个青年有着敏捷而健壮的四肢，有着一双充满渴望的闪烁着白色光芒的眼睛——我是多么喜欢他，多么留恋他。……他竭力抑制住由咳嗽带来的死亡的联想，固执地回忆起那条洪水包围中的逃亡之路。这条路上到处是死尸和杀人者，到处是贫困和掳掠，饥寒交迫的人们寻找着遥远的大米垛。我找到了一座雪白的经久不衰的大米垛，但是我不知道这条路有多长，我不知道这条路将把我带到哪里栖息并且埋葬。（米 238）

A careful reader will see how this road of escape resembles the yellow mud road in "1934 Escapes" which leads out of Maple Village to the tempting city at the remote end. "The victims and perpetrators of death" as well as "poverty and looting" everywhere on Five Dragons' s road of escape also echo the ghastly scene of murder on the yellow mud road.

The vicious cycle implied in the story pattern also illustrates the pervasive decadence depicted in Su Tong' s works. Five Dragons first appropriates the Rice Emporium and replaces

the proprietor Feng as the owner of a big business. Then he manipulates Abao's murder by Sixth Master (六爷) and takes over Abao's position in the underworld. As the next step, he dresses himself in Abao's clothes to play Abao's ghost at night, scares everybody to death, and finally brings down Sixth Master's criminal empire. Soon afterwards, he inherits the title of the head of the gangsters and thus makes himself a younger generation Sixth Master.

Five Dragons's tragedy is destined to be repeated and the vicious cycle fulfilled. The last link is incarnated in the young docker who agrees to call Five Dragons "Dad" for a couple of dollars and is beaten by Five Dragons for doing so. Five Dragons is satisfied to see himself in the outraged young docker and lectures him on how to rise in the world: "[Now] I see hatred in your eyes, he said. That's good. I was more craven than you once.¹⁶ Want to know how I managed to become what I am today? By nurturing that hatred. It's the prize of human capital. You can forget your mother and father, but you must never relinquish your hatred." (Goldblatt 172) (现在我从你的眼睛里看到了仇恨。这就对了。我以前比你贱, 我靠什么才有今天? 靠的就是仇恨。这是我们做人的资本。你可以真的忘记爹娘, 但你不要忘记仇恨。(米 191-192)) As we can see,

¹⁶ I think "cheaper" is a better translation than "more craven." What drives the young docker to do the despicable thing is not cowardice but poverty, just like Five Dragons who once did the same thing out of hunger.

there is a paradox in Five Dragons's argument: the process of climbing the social ladder must be accompanied by the loss of innocence. Corruption is an indispensable condition for success in the city.

In Five Dragons's comments on the city there is a distinct voice of Su Tong. As a young peasant, it is quite unlikely that Five Dragons could systemize his ideas so well when he first arrives in the city. It is the implied narrator who is speaking on his behalf: "This is the city: chaotic and filled with weird things that draw people like flies, to lay their maggotty eggs and move on. Everyone damns the city, but sooner or later they come anyhow" (Goldblatt 2). (这就是乱七八糟千奇百怪的城市, 所以人们像苍蝇一样汇集到这里, 下蛆筑巢, 没有谁赞美城市但他们最终都向这里迁徙而来。(米 7)) Here the city is portrayed as something reeking of pus and blood. New arrivals are corrupted by it and then corrupt it in return. Five Dragons, "the conquering hero" (Goldblatt 243), who manages to rise to an incredibly high position and acquires everything a peasant dreams of, has to pay for his "success" with everything he treasures. At the end of the story, the narrator summarizes the significance of the city to new comers:

The idea that the city was an immense, ornamental

graveyard occurred often to Five Dragons at night. That's what cities are for: They come into being for the sake of the dead. . . For them the city is a gigantic coffin. . . An arm, shapeless yet limber and powerful, grows out of the coffin. . . The arm reaches into the streets and alleys to drag wanderers into the cold depths. (Goldblatt 241)

城市是一块巨大的被装饰过的墓地。……城市天生是为死者而营造诞生的，……城市对于他们是一口无边无际的巨大的棺椁，……它长出一只无形然而充满腕力的手，将那些沿街徘徊的人拉进它冰凉的深不可测的怀抱。(米 270)

The fatalism and decadence of Su Tong's fiction are evident in this metaphor of city-coffin. On the one hand, as I have said, Su Tong emphasizes how historically determined is the escape from the degenerating and disastrous countryside to the city. The force behind the massive migration of southern peasants is beyond their control. On the other hand, the road of escape inevitably leads to corruption and destruction. Equally hopeless is to remain on the native land, where nothing is left after plague, flood, and famine. Everyone is doomed. There is no escape.

Once in an interview Su Tong talked about his understanding of "escape:"

"Escape" seems to be an action that fascinates me. This action or attitude toward society reveals our panic and rejection. I think this action or attitude is an excellent topic to write on because it is all-inclusive. Many of the so-called values of life, as well as the tragedy of life, are fulfilled in the course of escape.

"逃亡"好像是我所迷恋的一个动作……人只有恐惧了、拒绝了才会采取这样一个动作，这样一种与社会不合作的姿态，才会逃。我觉得这个动作或姿态是一个非常好的文学命题，这是一个非常能够包罗万象的主题，人在逃亡的过程中完成了好多所谓她的人生价值和悲剧性的一面。(Xu)

At the beginning of this chapter, I wrote that Su Tong has appropriated historical fragments to build a "history" of his own. Whether he is constructing family genealogy (such as the Tong family, or the Chen Family) or constructing the geo-political space at a critical moment of history (such as 1949 or 1934), what matters to Su Tong is not historical fact, which may be forever lost in the mist of time. Not interested in recapturing and representing the real history of escape, Su Tong insists on telling his story, because only in the course of story telling can he meditate on such fundamental questions as "who I am, where I am from and where I am going."

Chapter Three

Young Man on Main Street

The young man's mind was carried away by his growing passion for dreams. . . when he aroused himself and again looked out of the car window the town of Winesburg had disappeared and his life there had become but a background on which to paint the dreams of his manhood.

—Sherwood Anderson (*Winesburg, Ohio* 138)

From the very beginning critics have noted the unique form of *Winesburg, Ohio*, often praising its originality and contribution to the development of the short story and novel as well. Indeed, Anderson's masterpiece is composed of twenty short stories, one novella which in turn consists of three short stories and one curious introduction which can also be read as a short story. All these were published in a long span of time and later collected in the form of a book. For example, "Hands" first appeared in *Masses* in March 1916 while *Seven Arts* published "Queer" in December 1916 and "Mother" in March 1917. *The Little Review* published three Winesburg stories: "The Philosopher" in

June 1916, "The Man of Ideas" in 1918, "An Awakening" in December 1918. While Enoch Robinson's story, "Loneliness," was not published prior to its inclusion in *Winesburg, Ohio* as late as April 1919.

What, then, makes Anderson believe that these stories can be taken as an organic whole? It may be helpful to look at one of Anderson's earliest letters to Waldo Frank, an editor of *Seven Arts*, which in its first issue (November 1916) carried his admiring review of Anderson's first novel *Windy McPherson's Son*. Over the following few years, Frank and Anderson became good friends and corresponded frequently. In the letter, Anderson called his stories that were going to appear in *Winesburg* "a series of intensive studies of people" (*Letters* 5). At the end of the short letter, Anderson frankly pointed out: "It is my own idea when these studies are published in book form, they will suggest the real environment out of which present-day American youth is coming" (5). Obviously, from the very beginning of the publication of the *Winesburg* stories, Anderson had in mind the general theme that should underlie the whole book.

Despite diverse interpretations of *Winesburg*, Anderson's idea about the general theme did not change with the passage of time. In 1932, sixteen years after the above quoted letter

to Waldo Frank, and when *Winesburg* had been admitted into the canon of modern American Literature, Anderson again stated his idea in a letter to Arthur Barton, a New York playwright, who had proposed to adapt *Winesburg* into a play. In this long and informative letter, Anderson expresses his excitement about the possibility that *Winesburg* might appear on the stage. Having modestly admitted that he knew very little about drama, Anderson hurried to show his design for the plot of the play. It is evident that in the letter Anderson was fully aware of the unique requirements of drama and made efforts to meet them. First of all, he had to abandon the "loose" form of *Winesburg* so well acclaimed by critics, and give the whole story more sense of coherence. He started the job from the ending of the story:

You will realize that to make the end effective — the boy leaving the town where he has been raised to go out into the world — we will have to build up this feeling of George's departure to give it significance.

To do that we will have to build all through the play to that one end and this will naturally affect all the characters throughout the play. The feeling will have to be given that George's departure from the town is also a beginning — the beginning of manhood — a thing keenly felt in that way in him

at least by the girl Helen. (*Selected Letters* 152)

To show how the effect can be achieved, Anderson invited Frank "to go over the actual theme of the book which should be the theme of the play". It is certain that for Anderson the theme "is the making of a man out of the actual stuff of life." Anderson affirmed that the story was about "an American growing up in an American village. . . an ordinary American town." "There are all sorts of influences playing over him and around him. These influences are presented in the form of characters, playing on his own character, forming it, warning him, educating him." (*Selected Letters* 153) However, Anderson immediately warned against any attempt to read the story as a mere depiction of the Midwestern American village. With much confidence, he pointed out the universal value of the story:

The same sort of influences would be at work on any boy in American life whether he was raised in a small town or a city. In the midst of the confusion of life the boy is always accepting or rejecting the suggestions thrown out to him by other people, directly and indirectly. In this play we will have to get from the beginning a feeling of growth in the boy. (*Selected Letter* 153)

Unfortunately, Anderson's interpretation of his own book is often ignored by some critics who are eager to group *Winesburg, Ohio* with protest literature and who engage themselves in excavating the "buried lives" of the small town and in speaking up for "the inarticulate and the meek" (Geismar 245). They are so preoccupied with the defeated and unfulfilled lives that they forget in the center of the book there are a group of confused teenagers struggling for adulthood. Although Anderson agreed with everybody else that "there is a sad note running through" the book (*Letter of Sherwood Anderson* 4), it is wrong to assume that Anderson harbored no hope for the future of these young people. Against the arguments of some critics, I do not see a vicious circle implied in the book; that is, Anderson does not seem to suggest that there is no escape, that what has happened to the last generation will inevitably happen to the new generation. What Anderson actually wants to say to the world is that "Here it is. It is like this. This is what the life in America out of which men and women come is like. But out of this life does come real men and women." (*Selected Letters* 153)

A typical reading of *Winesburg, Ohio* as exposé literature can be found in Irving Howe's influential book *Sherwood Anderson*. Although most beautifully written, the chapter on *Winesburg, Ohio* is misleading, as so many other contemporary and later

criticisms of *Winesburg* as, in its unbalanced devotion to the "grotesques." To Howe, *Winesburg* should be read "as a fable of American estrangement, its theme the loss of love" (Howe 101).

It goes without saying that *Winesburg* is populated by grotesques. The book opens with a recluse, Wing Biddlebaum, who never communicates with anybody except George Willard, because his wish to blend intellectual learning with spiritual communion has been fatally misinterpreted in another village. The striking image of "hand" is going to reappear again and again in other stories, symbolizing the desperate wish to reach out to a fellow human being. It is essential in the second story "Paper Pills," which tells the legendary love story of the retired Doctor Reefy, who, after the death of his wife, resumes his old habit of scribbling on bits of paper the odds and ends of his thoughts and then stuffing them away in his pockets to become round hard balls. In "Respectability" we encounter Wash Williams, an arch-misogynist, who comes to hate all women because he unwittingly discovered the promiscuity of by his angelic-looking wife. Then his mother-in-law thrusts his faithless wife into his presence naked, hoping to reconcile the couple. In fact, in more than half of the stories we encounter some sort of grotesque. In contrast with Hilfer, Howe is quite right to point out that these grotesques become what they are

not because they fall victim to the traditional values of the village, but because of a sense of loss. These grotesques lack something that was formerly available but now exists only in memory:

The book's major characters are alienated from the basic sources of emotional sustenance — from the nature in which they live but to which they can no longer have an active relationship; from the fertility of the farms that flank them but no longer fulfill their need for creativity, from the community which . . . once bound men together in fraternity but is now merely an institution external to their lives; from the work which once evoked and fulfilled their sense of craft but is now a mere burden; and, most catastrophic of all, from each other, the very extremity of their need for love having itself become a barrier to its realization. (Howe 101)

Howe's interpretation becomes problematic only when he insists on calling attention to the grotesque's desperate yet futile need to draw sustenance from young George Willard while ignoring the fact that almost all of the grotesques approach Willard with the conviction that it is *they* that have something to give him. Furthermore, Howe interprets Willard as an inert and inadequate receptacle of the grotesque's passion, unfitted

for "the burden" (Howe 104) which the grotesques impose on him. He emphasizes on how once and again Willard lets down the grotesques and fails to play his supposed role of "a small-town Hermes" or "a young priest" (Howe 102).

Obviously, Howe's reading and other similar readings of *Winesburg* assign George Willard a minor role, never suspecting that Anderson has intended the young reporter to play a vital role that unifies the stories not only in the sense of form, but also in the sense of theme. However, as I have argued before, *Winesburg* safely belongs to the genre of Bildungsroman; furthermore, it is a portrait of the artist as a young man on the verge of self-discovery.

The young man's maturity results first of all from his interaction with the grotesques, each of whom comes to see him in hopes of revealing to him the small piece of truth that he/she has snatched as "the Truth" and tries to live his/her life by. In the first story "Hands," George Willard forms "something like a friendship" with Wing Biddlebaum the recluse, who has apparently some important message for the would-be writer. Otherwise inarticulate, Wings lets himself walk with the youth and lectures him endlessly on topics that are new to George. But George at that time is not knowledgeable enough to catch the message. "Wing Biddlebaum made a picture for George Willard.

In the picture men lived again in a kind of pastoral golden age. Across a green open country came clean-limbed young men, some afoot, some mounted upon horses. In crowds the young men came to gather about the feet of an old man who sat beneath a tree in a tiny garden and who talked to them" (11). George probably will never realize that Wing is talking about Plato and his wonderful Akademeia, founded in a grove of trees in Athens in 387 B.C. However, the young man may after all, remember the more direct advice of this self-assumed teacher: "You have the inclination to be alone and to dream and you are afraid of dreams. You want to be like others in town here. You hear them talk and you try to imitate them. . . You must try to forget all you have learned. . . You must begin to dream. From this time on you must shut your ears to the roaring of the voices" (11).

In the third story, "Mother," George receives the same encouragement to dream, this time, from his own mother, another grotesque in the book. Like Wing Biddlebaum, she lives a reclusive and inarticulate life. Moping around the desolate little hotel she owns only in name, she is like a ghost buried in her unloving marriage. There is a secret family war going on between the mother and the father, Tom, and the prize to be won is George's future. The mother, who has been a dreamer all her life, wants the boy to inherit her trait of dreaming and

fulfill her unfulfilled dreams of adventure, while her rival, the father, a true believer in "go-getter" ethics, lectures the boy on proper ways of rise in the world. Also noticing George's tendency to daydreaming and lack of responsiveness, he warns him: "Well, I guess you'll get over it. . . I told Will that. You're not a fool and you're not a woman. You're Tom Willard's son and you'll wake up. I'm not afraid. What you say clears things up. If being a newspaper man had put the notion of becoming a writer into your mind that's all right. Only I guess you'll have to wake up to do that too, eh?" (19) For the first time in *Winesburg, Ohio*, the reader learns of George's intention to be a writer. Toward the end of the story, the mother gets the upper hand in the war since the boy seems to have made up his mind not be "a dull clod, all words and smartness" (18).

More and more grotesques in the town will influence George's way to becoming an artist. Sometimes, they consciously give him lectures, and at other times, their influence is more indirect, and can be understood only in retrospect. Among these people, there is Doctor Parcival, "the philosopher," who teaches George the advisability of adopting a line of conduct that he was himself unable to define. He challenges the youth to be a real investigative reporter and to investigate, for example, the mystery surrounding Parcival himself. He also tries to teach

George a philosophy of life, this time, not the Platonist wisdom of Wing Biddlebaum, but superman ethics of the Nietzschean type, the supremely egoistic and therefore superior being. In "A Man of Ideas," Joe Welling, only on occasions a grotesque, teaches George the magic and wonder of words through his own successful love affair. Meanwhile, George witnesses the violent outburst of Wash Williams, who tells "his story of hate," of female deceit and wickedness. Kate Swift, George's former school teacher, once delivers him a clear message about writing: "It would be better to give up the notion of writing until you are better prepared. Now it's time to be living. I don't want to frighten you, but I would like to make you understand the importance of what you think of attempting." Kate warns George against the temptation of becoming "a mere peddler of words." And she sums up her understanding of the right way to become a real writer: "the thing to learn is to know what people are thinking about, not what they say" (23).

Once George's mother eavesdrops on George speaking his mind, of his decision to go on her way, and she is so pleased by her discovery that she prays, on behalf of all the grotesques, that this boy be allowed to express something for them all. Inarticulate themselves, what these grotesques ultimately want of George Willard is to have their stories told. In their

approaches to the artist-in-the-making, they are searching for an author, a voice. Meanwhile, they wish to have a hand in the way that the stories are going to be told, or we can say that they want a share in the making of the young artist. Each grotesque in turn comes forward to offer his/her life secret and carefully hand over his/her little piece of wisdom in exchange for a release into expressiveness which everyone of them needs but only the artist can achieve.

It is so easy to have our attention fully engaged by the grotesques, for their problem is apparent and shocking in a certain sense. However, a careful reader should not fail to notice that there is an antithesis between the fixity of the grotesques and the development of George Willard. Actually, Anderson took pains carefully to balance the two forces. Although slow and often hidden, there is a steady undercurrent of George Willard's growth toward maturity beside the apparent stasis that has trapped the grotesques. Ray Lewis White once laboriously collected pieces of information to construct the following schematic chronology for *Winesburg, Ohio* (White 54-55):

Narrative Past

1. "Godliness"

2. "The Untold Lie"
3. "Adventure"
4. "Paper Pills" and part of the "Death"
5. "Hands"

Narrative Present

1894

1. "Mother"---July
2. "Nobody Knows"---August/September
3. "Respectability"---Summer
4. "Tandy"---Summer
5. "Loneliness"---Autumn

1895

1. "An Awakening"---January
2. "The Strength of God"---January
3. "The Teacher"---January
4. "Death"---March
5. "Drink"---Spring
6. "A Man of Ideas"---May
7. "The Thinker"---June
8. "The Philosopher"---August
9. "Sophistication"---September/October
10. "Queer"---November

1896

"Departure"

As we can learn from this chronology, George Willard's growth is viewed as the main storyline. Besides his intellectual growth, George has several sexual adventures that indicate his gradual progress toward maturity. In "Nobody Knows," George only

congratulates himself on a physical conquest of Louise Trunnion, one of the most appealing and more available young women in the small town. The short sexual encounter, due to George's self-centeredness and naivety, turns out to be nothing more than the sexual initiation of George by a willing young woman. In place of tenderness, gratuity, or love, there is only the carnal joy of wild youth. George's immaturity brings him to his fiasco several months later, when he with his new-felt manliness embarks on another sexual adventure with the beautiful Belle. He has to face a humiliation that he will probably never forget for the rest of his life — he is flung aside three times by the outrageous bartender, Belle's shy suitor. Hopefully, George has learned something from his defeat by the silent bartender, so when he finally faces his true love, the rich and beautiful Helen White, the only daughter of the banker of the village, he has come to realize the value of silence and is able to listen rather than babble on about himself. "Sophistication" is one of the few stories in the book which has a happy ending and it concludes with what is for *Winesburg* a startling statement: "For some reason they [George Willard and Helen White] could not have explained they had both got from their silent evening together the thing needed. Man or boy, woman or girl, they had for a moment taken hold of the thing that makes the mature life of men and

women in the modern world possible." (136)

"Sophistication" as the climax of the whole book, reveals much of Anderson's thinking about human experience in modern society and abounds in paradoxical remarks. For example, the two young people feel that they are surrounded by "ghosts, not of the dead, but of living people." "The place has been filled to overflowing with life. . . and now it is night and the life has all gone away. . . One shudders at the thought of the meaninglessness of life while at the same instant, and if the people of the town are his people, one lives life so intensely that tears come into the eyes" (134-135). Also for the first time in the book, George learns to respect woman as individual on an equal standing. "In that high place in the darkness the two oddly sensitive human atoms held each other tightly and waited. In the mind of each was the same thought. 'I have come to this lonely place and here is this other,' was the substance of the thing felt" (135). Loneliness is recognized as the universal living condition of human beings, rather than an abnormal personal disaster. Love can temporarily relieve the isolation only through a mutual acceptance by two people of the fact that people must live lonely and die lonely. It is because of this valuable understanding of the human condition that George Willard transcends the grotesques, who will not accept

their isolation and thus never grow up.

At the end of the book George Willard takes his departure to the big city, presumably Chicago. Like the endings of so many of Anderson's other works, Anderson deliberately makes George's future ambivalent and open for many potentialities. Although we should be careful not to identify George Willard with the narrator of *Winesburg*, or even Anderson himself,¹⁷ Anderson's life story does help us to clear up the significance of George's departure. After leaving his hometown Clyde, Ohio at approximately the same age as George, Anderson wandered from factory to factory, working as cheap laborer for several years. Then conquered by the "go-getter" philosophy of the industrial age, Anderson devoted himself to the business world and became "successful." Celebrated by local papers as a perfect example of the viability of the American dream, he became a contemporary proof of the rags-to-riches myth. Yet all through these years Anderson had been reading widely and writing in secret. It was as late as 1912, seventeen years after his departure from his hometown, that Anderson was utterly disillusioned with the business world. He collapsed under psychological pressure and financial crisis and wandered wildly for several days before

¹⁷ For more detailed discussion on the relationship between George Willard, the narrator of *Winesburg*, and Sherwood Anderson, please refer to Marcia Jacobson's article "*Winesburg, Ohio* and the Autobiographical Moment" in *New Essays on Winesburg, Ohio* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990. 53-72).

he was found many miles from home. His aphasia and amnesia hospitalized him and put an end to his Ohio business career. Anderson returned to Chicago and had some of his works published and thus was gradually recognized as a serious writer. After he had succeeded as a writer, Anderson moved to southwestern Virginia, where he bought a small farm and built his only permanent home. He also became owner, reporter, writer and publisher of two local newspapers.

As we can see, Anderson went a long way before he finally made up his mind to be a writer. How long George will go before he finds his calling is a question for which Anderson has no ready answer. However, there is one message that Anderson clearly implies in his masterpiece, that is, the artist has a unique role to play in modern society. The same idea is echoed in a famous passage from *Poor White*:

All men lead their lives behind a wall of misunderstanding they themselves have built, and most men die in silence and unnoticed behind the walls. Now and then a man, cut off from his fellows by the peculiarities of his nature, becomes absorbed in doing something that is impersonal, useful, and beautiful. Word of his activities is carried over the walls. (*Poor White* 227)

The image of the wall is not so novel in modern literature. What is peculiar about this passage is the way it envisages the artist. Isolated as all other men, the artist has a curious power to penetrate the walls of isolation. Isolation and peculiarities in his case lead not to destruction but to creation. Like his faith in the possibility of a way out of a confused age, this faith in the potentiality of the young man as an artist once again places Anderson in the realm of idealism, rather than decadence.

Chapter Four

Gone on a Skateboard: Youth in the South¹⁸

The South is disappearing silently in the dark.

Year after year, I walk to and fro on Fragrant Street. I have exhausted my memory and emptied every pocket of prattle and tattle to return them to the street. But now I feel weak, because I have been accused of rumor mongering and defaming my neighbors. I am said to be traitor to Fragrant Street that has nourished and nurtured me. But what else can I do? Even if I don't sell Fragrant Street, someone else will do it, and in a more vicious way. After all, the street has become a symbol of decline.¹⁹

—Su Tong (*The Decline of the South*)

¹⁸ "Gone on a Skateboard" is the title of one of Su Tong's short stories, "乘滑轮车远去." The story, which centers on the symbol of a skateboard, depicts the painful growth of adolescences at Fragrant Street.

¹⁹ "南方在黑暗中无声的飘逝。年复一年我在香椿树街上走来走去。我曾经穷尽记忆，掏空每一只装满闲言碎语的口袋，把它们还给这条香椿树街。但是我现在十分脆弱，已经有人指责我造谣生非，肆意诽谤街坊邻居，指责我愧对生我养我的香椿树街。问题是我有什么办法，即使我不出卖香椿树街，别人会比我更加阴险狠毒地出卖香椿树街。毕竟它已成为一种堕落的象征。"见《南方的堕落》117页。

In "Opium Family," Su Tong constructs a family genealogy in his attempt to reconfigure the history of the eventful 1930s to 1950s. The novella records the doom of the largest landlord family in Maple Village. It is a tragedy, but neither in the sense of a Greek tragedy that is caused by gods nor in the sense of a Shakespearean tragedy caused by human nature. Rather, it is through the destruction of Liu Chencao that the sense of tragedy is achieved. Chencao is doomed from birth. Almost all male babies born to his family before him are all disfigured and drowned in the river; his physically normal elder brother Yanyi turns out to be mentally an idiot. Thus, Chencao is destined to be the only heir of the family business — opium. At first he rejects the role, and when he finally surrenders himself to it, his family's doom is approaching. As a member of the doomed class of landlord Chencao has no escape. Throughout his short life he lives as a scapegoat, never be able to exercise his own will power.

Ironically, Chencao has received some modern education. However, his chances for a better future are doomed to be ephemeral. He must forget his modern education to adapt himself to the role of the "second young master" of the Liu Family. His painful degeneration is symbolized by the refined game of tennis that Chencao learned as part of his genteel education:

Someone had come from home. Chencao's pace began to slow; he searched in his pocket with his hand, and brought out a tennis ball. The tennis ball was gray; as it rolled along over the lawn, it was quickly swallowed up in the grass. The melancholy feeling that he was saying good-bye to all this with a wave of his hand pressed down on Chencao's slender shoulders; he shrugged and walked toward the horse cart. He felt something slip away from him that afternoon, just like the tennis ball. Chencao looked back repeatedly as he walked slowly along. He heard his father shout, "Chencao, what are you looking at? Let's go home."

He answered, "The ball disappeared." (Duke 191)

家里来人了。沉草的脚步滞重起来，他的另一只手在口袋里掏着，掏出一只网球。网球是灰色的，它在草地上滚动着，很快在草丛中消失不见了。有一种挥手自兹去的苍茫感情压在沉草消瘦的双肩上，它缩起肩膀朝那辆马车走。他觉得什么东西在这个下午遁走了，就像那只灰色的网球。沉草一步三回头。他听见爹在喊，“沉草你看什么？回家啦。”沉草说，“那只球不见了。”（罍粟之家 10）

When he has just returned home, he cannot connect himself with his father's land and feels totally isolated: "Chencao discovered that he was standing on an isolated island; he felt

dizzy; the murmuring sound of the waves of opium poppies pushes you onto an isolated island where everything is far far away from you and there is only that murderous odor penetrating your lungs; at that moment Chencao felt his weak, slender body floating off of that isolated island" (Duke 193). (沉草发现他站在一块孤岛上, 他觉得头晕, 罂粟之浪哗然作响着把他推到一块孤岛上, 一切都远离你了, 唯有那种致人死地的熏香钻入肺腑深处, 就这样沉草看见自己瘦弱的身体从孤岛上浮起来了。(罂粟之家 12))

Chencao attempts to break through the isolation by reaching out to another marginalized and isolated figure, his idiot brother Yanyi. He makes desperate efforts to teach Yanyi to play tennis, but the experiment is doomed to fail. The home-made tennis ball disappears without a trace. Chencao finally comes to realize that "you will never be able to play tennis in a Maple Village family, never, never, never" (Duke 198). (在枫杨树的家里你打不成网球, 永远打不成。(罂粟之家 17)) Toward the end of the story, the sense of doomed fate is reinforced by the encounter between Chencao, the target of communist-led land reform, and Lu Fang (庐方), his former classmate and good friend, now a communist cadre in charge of the land reform in Maple Village:

Lu Fang said, "Chencao, let's go play tennis."

Chencao's whole body convulsed momentarily, his eyes flashed brightly for an instant, and then grew dull once more. He raised his hand and rubbed his eyes; his body gave off the odor of dried opium poppies. "That tennis ball fell off the roof and disappeared." Chencao sighed.

Lu Fang quickly pushed Chencao's soft limp arm away and said, "So it fell off and disappeared; if it disappeared, there is nothing I can do about it." (Duke 258-259)

庐方说, "沉草, 打球去。"沉草浑身一颤, 他的眼睛闪亮了一瞬复又黯淡。沉草抬起手臂擦着眼睛, 他的身上散发出罂粟枯干后的气味。"那只球掉下去不见了。"沉草叹了口气。庐方很快甩开了沉草软绵绵的手臂, 他也说, "掉下去不见了, 不见了我也没办法。" (罂粟之家 48)

Apparently, the encounter is meant to recall the former two games of tennis, one with Lu Fang on the last day of Chencao's schooling and one with Yanyi, who devours the tennis ball, mistaking it for steamed roll. The experiment with Yanyi ends with Chencao's accidental fratricide, and Chencao's surrender to his fate. First of all he grows accustomed to the smell of the opium, which once panicked him. Then he develops the habit of chewing poppy leaves and finally he is addicted to opium. At the age of twenty, Chencao inherits the platinum keys from

his father in the family temple and becomes the representative of the new generation of landlords in Maple Village. He loses his former handsome and innocent image, and develops a striking resemblance with Liu Laoxia, his aged, waxy, and stooped over legitimate father.

As a last attempt to resist Liu Laoxia, his "father," and his fate, Chencao divides his family's land into small pieces and distributes to tenants only at the price of half harvest. It is worth noticing that this is a very unusual action in his times and vaguely resembles land-form that will later be led by the community party. The idea of dividing land and giving it away to tenants may be influenced by his talks about Marxism with Lu Fang, his good friend in the middle-school. Unimaginably generous as this is to the villagers, it does not prevent the approaching doom of Chencao, which arrives in the 1949 revolution.

Chencao escapes twice after the revolution, yet neither escape is out of his own free will. The first time is after a communist-style "struggle meeting" (斗争会) when and his father sends him to join the local bandits. Curiously, Chencao seems to be indifferent to the outcome of his escape. Neither concerned with his mission of survival, nor the revival of the Liu Family, Chencao only agrees to play his tragic role to the end of the

historical farce. His impatience and boredom are obvious. The second escape is more absurd. When his elder sister Liu Suzi is raped by Chen Mao, now a communist cadre, Chencao, as the only young man in the Liu Family, is destined to be her avenger: the honor of the family must be preserved and the vengeance must be fulfilled. Ironically, Chencao himself does not have the slightest desire for revenge. He is first told by his sister that "if you're really a man of the Liu Family, you'll go kill Chen Mao." When Liu Suzi has committed suicide the same message is repeated by his father, "come back after you kill Chen Mao." It is no wonder that when he carries out the execution, what he says is "they want me to kill you" rather than "I kill you to revenge my sister." It is in total passivity, torpor, and confusion that Chencao commits another sin — patricide, because Chen Mao is actually his natural father. After this passionless, almost unconscious murder, Chencao embarks on another unenthusiastic action of escape from the sure punishment of the communist party.

As we can see, Chencao's inchoate individuality is repressed and distorted by the demands of a patriarchal family. His effort to develop his self is first lost in the ancient tradition of the Chinese countryside, which burdens the sons with the role of land-owner and leaves them no chance for an

alternative life. When Chencao finally becomes the patriarch himself and gains some power, he is crushed by "the wheel of history." Chencao's nightmare can be seen as a key to the story. Even before the arrival of the revolution, Chencao dreams about his destruction:

He heard the sound of rain all over Maple Village. He was walking in the rain. Out of the boundless rain and mist of a long road stretched toward the north. There was a many-storied red brick building on the sandy slope of the northern hills. He saw that he had been transformed into a snail crawling along in the rain. He saw a tennis ball rolling down the roof of the red brick building; the ball fell from the building and bounced away on the rain-soaked ground. The snail was actually crawling toward that tennis ball. By the time the snail reached the grass, the tennis ball had long since disappeared. He heard the sound of rain all over Maple Village. The shell on the snail's back was terribly heavy; he lay down in the shallow pool of water and went to sleep, but many people were running wildly along that road; they were running wildly up behind him; the snail heard the frenzied sound of their running feet; he wanted to hide, but he could not move his shell. He saw his shallow pool of water trampled underfoot as beautiful drops of water splashed up into the air. He heard the loud reverberations of a crisp clear crackling sound

as the snail's shell was squashed into the ground.
(Duke 235)

他听见整个枫杨树在下雨。他走在雨中，一条路在茫茫雨雾中逶迤向北。北面的沙坡上又一座红色楼房。他看见自己变成了一只蜗牛在雨中爬行。他看见红色楼顶上有一只网球在滚动，那只球掉下来在雨地里滚动。蜗牛就是朝那只球爬过去的。蜗牛爬到草地上球已经不见了。他听见整个枫杨树在下雨。蜗牛的背上很沉重，他在水洼里睡着了，而那条路上有人在雨中狂奔，他们从后面狂奔而来，蜗牛听见了疯狂的脚步声，他想躲一下却无法挪动身子。他看见水洼被踩碎了，美丽的水花飞溅起来。他听见蜗牛的身子被踩出清脆的巨响，怦然回荡。（罍粟之家 45）

One year later, his nightmare becomes true. Chencao, the snail, perishes in the thunderous gunshot of Lu Fang leading the so-called revolutionary masses. However, his last words "I will be reborn" (Duke 267) implies that the tragedy does not end with the physical destruction of Chencao but will reappear in later generations.²⁰

As I have said in the second chapter, Su Tong divides his stories into two groups: one on rural space and the other on urban space. If we say the Maple Village series reconfigures "the land of rice and fish," then the Fragrant Street series

²⁰ Ironically, the Chinese Communist Party cadres experienced worse fate in a succession of political movements after the success of the "revolution," especially during the Cultural Revolution, than the landlords of the 1930s and 40s that they had suppressed.

reshapes the Chinese imagination of the Southern city. As an ancient saying puts it: Heaven is up there, while Su-Hang is right here. (上有天堂, 下有苏杭) Su-Hang is the short name for Suzhou (Su Tong's hometown) and Hangzhou, two famed southern cities that have long enjoyed the reputation of being scenic, rich, and highly cultured. However, in Su Tong's work, we have a completely different picture of the Southern city:

Never with such affection have I depicted Fragrant Street where I was born. Nor have I extolled the pallid and callous gravel street, those two endless rows of dilapidated, hideous, mossy houses, the moldy air full of flies, the dwarfish, wretched-looking neighbors appearing and disappearing in the murky windows. I grew up in the South. Just like a seed dropped by a wild goose, I have no choice. But I have been long disgusted by the South, which is the eternal imprint of Fragrant Street on me. ("The Decline of the South")

我从来没有如此深情地描摹我出生地香椿树街, 歌颂一条苍白的缺乏人情味的石砾路面, 歌颂两排无始无终的破旧丑陋的旧式民房, 歌颂街上苍蝇飞来飞去带有霉菌的空气, 歌颂出没在黑洞洞的窗口里的那些形体矮小面容猥琐的街坊邻居。我生长在南方, 就像一颗被飞雁衔着的草籽一样, 不由自己把握, 但我厌恶南方的生活由来已久, 这是香椿树街留给我的永恒的印记。(南方的堕落 73)

As we can see, Su Tong intends to make Fragrant Street the epitome

of the Southern city. There is a clear tone of irony implied in the identification of the two: instead of "condemning" Su Tong says that his works "extol" the Southern city. He insists on the writer's right to commemorate the city in his own way. First of all, Su Tong sets the Southern city in the general background of Maoist communist industrialization and modernization that started from the 1950s. The process of this industrialization in Su Tong's works is symbolized by the three chimneys and the railroad that runs through the city. The gigantic chimneys of the coal, cement and chemical factories look over the street with its wretched residents like kings looking down upon their subjects. They belch tons of black and white powder that accumulate on window sills and form a layer of curious mixture which "children often mistake as flour." (孩子们往往误以为是一层面粉 (城北地带 1)) Meanwhile, even the adults of the street, when looking up at the chimneys, have the illusion that the chimneys are making fragrant components of the air. The grotesqueness is strengthened as the chimneys are painted bright orange, which was a rare and thus beautiful color in the 1970s, when China was dominated by the gloomy colors of black and blue.

The railroad is another indication of the presence of modernization. There is a steel bridge over the river, one part

of the water-network that marks the uniqueness of Suzhou. If we say the chimneys are chronic killers that poison Fragrant Street residents day by day, then the train is a fast one that brings news of sudden death once in a while, because Su Tong writes "everybody knows that the railroad is a simple and neat death-machine beside a wonderful means of transportation." (谁都知道铁路作为神奇的交通工具外,它也是一部简单而干脆的死亡机器。)²¹ What is more grotesque is that because of these frequent and violent deaths, the railroad becomes a site for sensational spectacles and public entertainment. Whenever there is an accident or suicide, the railroad is transformed into a kind of "theatre" or "circus" where a large audience watch, remark, and argue about the situation, enjoying a break from their daily toil.²²

Su Tong's Fragrant Street is also a world of living ghosts. All sorts of grotesques either wander on the street or hide behind the shut windows of decaying houses. There is Madman Lü (吕疯子) who has the permanent image of standing before the pharmacy with a package of medicine in hand telling passing girls that they are "as beautiful as angels."²³ There are spinster

²¹ See Su Tong's short story "Walking Along the Railroad for One Kilometer" (沿铁路行走一公里), collected in *The Age of Tattoo* (刺青时代).

²² The most famous depiction of Chinese spectators can be found in Lu Xun's works, such as short stories "Yao" (药) and "The True Story of Ah Q" (阿Q正传).

²³ See Su Tong's short story "As Beautiful as Angles" (像天使一样美丽) collected in

sisters Jian Shaozhen (简少贞) and Jian Shaofen (简少芬), who form a peculiar relationship similar to lesbians in their self-imposed reclusive lives for half a century.²⁴ We also have Xian (娴), Xiao (萧), and Zhi (芝), representatives of three generations, whose tragic lives all turn them into grotesques.²⁵

In this grotesque world, a group of teenagers try to reach adulthood, but their failure is certain. In this doomed struggle we see Su Tong's fatalism and decadence again. Take *The Northern Zone of the City* for example. A typical Bildungsroman, the novel portrays a group of teenagers living in the northern zone of the city, more specifically, on Fragrant Street. Though the fates of these few teenagers may look exceptional and incredible to contemporary readers, it is clear that Su Tong intends them to be "typical."

Like many other Su Tong works, a story pattern is implied in the novel. The book begins with a violent death and ends with another. One rainy season is just over when Dasheng (达生) unwittingly causes his father's death — he steals his

The Age of Tattoo (刺青时代).

²⁴ See Su Tong's novella "Another Life of Women" (另一种妇女生活), collected in *The Last Love*, (末代爱情). The story is also entitled "Embroidery" (刺绣), collected in *The Decline of the South* (南方的堕落).

²⁵ See Su Tong's novella "Life of Women" (妇女生活), collected in *The Last Love* (末代爱情).

father's bike for fun so that his father has to rush to work with a broken bike without brakes and is then run over by a truck. By the end of the book, several years have passed and the rainy season is coming again. But Dasheng is not going to see this one — he gets killed in a punch-up when he tries to play hero and challenges a gang of teenagers on his own. Su Tong writes at the end of the book:

The rain drops on Tengfeng's oil-cloth umbrella as well as on our Fragrant Street. For now the weather is cool in the northern zone but we all know that the rainy season comes in haste and leaves in haste. What's the use of so much rain? After the rain there is always another hot summer. Year after year, the hot and disturbing summer is for certain to return.

雨点打在腾凤的黄布雨伞上，打在我们的香椿树街上，城北一带的气候暂时是凉爽的，但谁都知道雨季是匆匆而来匆匆而去的。下那么多雨有什么用？雨季一过炎热的夏天又将来临，年复一年，炎热的令人烦躁的夏季总是会来的。（*城北地带* 207）

What happens in the hot, disturbing and always returning summer? It witnesses the degeneration and corruption of the Fragrant Street teenagers. The leader of the teenagers Hongqi

(红旗)²⁶ ends up in prison for raping his neighbor Meiqi (美琪), who later drowns herself due to social pressure; another boy Xudeng (叙德) almost commits patricide during a fight with his father over a woman but finally elopes with her; the girl Mianhong (棉红) is raped and strangled by a group of teenagers. Little Cripple's (小拐) case is different yet no less tragic. Formerly thievish, Little Cripple becomes a "revolutionary star" overnight: he discovers an ammunition depot under the rubbish-collector's cabin. Ironically, his discovery is made partly by his habit of burgling. More tragically, the preposterous transformation of Little Cripple from thief to "hero" is at the expense of another disadvantaged figure, Old Kang (老康), who has lived a marginal life like his.

With so many deaths and so much violence, Fragrant Street is doomed to be a world of ghosts. Even before his destruction, Old Kang is regarded by his neighbors as a living ghost, who mourns over the loss of his pharmacy at "liberation." The ghost of Mianhong haunts Fragrant Street, so does Meiqi's, who sticks paper-cut hearts on doors and sings at midnight on the steel bridge with a cat in her arms. After the violent death of Dasheng,

²⁶ In Chinese, the young man's name means "Red Flag." A typical name then, it well captures the ethos of that period (1950s to 1970s). The irony is that Hongqi becomes the "leader" of the teenagers and sets an example for them, not in "revolution," but in crimes.

his mother Tengfeng joins the set of ghosts. Now widowed and childless, she rambles in rain with her oil-paper umbrella. She will suddenly show up and stare into your eyes, inquiring, "Hi, have you seen our alarm clock? It is a Double-Cat. Have you seen it?" (喂, 你看见我家的闹钟了吗? 一只双猫牌闹钟, 你看见了吗? (城北地带 207))

In this grotesque world, friendship is betrayed, love ridiculed, while homicide, suicide, rape, accidental death, self-mutilation, and madness are all major components of the daily drama of Fragrant Street. Yet the northern zone is not so special in the city. To borrow a saying in the book: "Eastern Zone is savage; Western Zone is cruel; Southern Zone is packed with murderers and arsonists; Northern Zone is a shit-pit." (城东蛮, 城西恶, 城南杀人又放火, 城北是个烂屎坑。(城北地带 206)) Growing up in the "shit-pit" are generations of southern youth, the heirs of Mao's revolution. At the end of the story, we witness how an eight-year-old girl attacks a policeman's bike for no reason at all. An attack for no reason is more horrifying than an attack out of hatred. In the policeman's words, "The virus of evil has infected the whole Fragrant Street, and even a lovely little girl is not spared." (罪恶的细菌已经在整条香椿树街传染扩散, 连一个美丽可爱的小女孩也不能幸免。(城北地带 205)) Su Tong seems to be

telling us that the vicious cycle does not stop at the corruption of one generation. It is going to continue in a younger one.

Whether it is in the Southern village or the Southern city, the youth in Su Tong's works all share the same fate of and corruption destruction. They must go down with the moldy, decaying, and declining south. There is no escape, nor hope. In the doom of the youth, we again see the fatalism and the decadence so pervasive in Su Tong's writings.

Conclusion

Nelson Antrim Crawford once called Sherwood Anderson "the wistfully faithful."²⁷ Indeed, throughout his life and writing career, Anderson remains faithful to his small town origin, as well as the good old faith in land. In contrast with the popular interpretation of Anderson as a representative of "the Revolt from the Village" group, I have argued that there is always a trace of romanticism and idealism in Anderson even at his most despairing moment. Anderson's Mid-West is set in a critical period of American history when industrialization inevitably brings along standardization of living and thought, as well as the displacement of bankrupt farmers and small town people seeking their fortunes in the city. Like other conscientious contemporary intellectuals, Anderson is discontented about the evils of the city and the appalling impacts of industrialization on the agrarian society of Midwestern America. However, instead of sentimental condemnation, Anderson actively seeks solutions

²⁷ See Crawford's article "Sherwood Anderson: the Wistfully Faithful," originally published in *The Midland*, 8 (November, 1922), pp 297-308, and reprinted in *Critical Essays on Sherwood Anderson* (ed. David D. Anderson. Boston: G.K. Hall & Company, 1981).

for his diseased civilization and one of the potential solutions is a return to the old morality represented by the Mid-West. Anderson's lamentation over the lost past and his nostalgia may sound pessimistic in some ways; however, Anderson's activism in a seemingly chaotic age indicates that Anderson is still a firm believer in ever-lasting values and the possibility of salvation. It is also this fundamental faith in hope, future, and value that enables Anderson to reconcile landscape and cityscape, the past and the present.

Like Anderson, Su Tong also deals with the painful process of modernization in rural areas. However, Su Tong does not share Anderson's faith in land. In fact, he subverts the popular image of an affluent, peaceful, regenerative, and highly cultured southern China. Through Su Tong's powerful imagination, we see a completely desolate rural South, which is on the verge of collapse due to draught, flood, plague, and famine. Su Tong's deconstruction of the image of the South is most powerfully rendered in the symbol of rice, because like the cornfields of Anderson's Mid-West, the ricefields of southern China are regarded as the granary of the country. In Su Tong's fictive world, more horrific and pervasive than the decline of the material world, however, is the concomitant spiritual degeneration. Frequent disasters of mysterious origin seem to

be sent from heaven to visit the southern villages where vice pervades. Instead of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism that are supposed to be the pillars of Chinese morality, we see omnipresent desertion, betrayal, homicide, and incest. Villagers that make their escapes to the tempting city are further corrupted there, only in new ways. Thus, in the world of Su Tong's fictional South, there is no escape, and no hope. In Su Tong's total negation of a possible way out, as well as his denial of the progressiveness of history, we see how decadent and fatalistic his writing is.

Haunted by their native lands, Anderson and Su Tong also pay a great deal of attention to the youth growing up in these lands and they both write many works that belong to the genre of Bildungsroman. The two writers also differ here. George Willard of *Winesburg, Ohio* receives messages from the surrounding grotesques and successfully fulfils his intellectual, psychological, and sexual maturation. More importantly, he seems to have made the self-discovery of becoming a writer. Although Anderson cautiously leaves the ending of *Winesburg, Ohio* ambiguous, it is evident that he harbors hope for American youth.

The youth in Su Tong's fictional world, be they rural or urban, seem to have no chance. Their world is marked by

oppression, violence, sexual frustration, and intellectual waste. Chencao's gradual degeneration and final destruction in Maple Village, as well as the decline of a dozen young people on Fragrant Street, all imply that their creator Su Tong does not share Anderson's optimism. It seems that Su Tong is so horrified by the reality that in contemporary China he will not even give these youth a chance to grow up into adulthood.

Geographically and historically separate as they are, Anderson and Su Tong are interested in similar topics of writing. Their writings reveal their understanding of the historical moments that their native lands have to go through, as well as the impact of these historical moments on the maturing youth. One being idealistic and romantic, while the other is decadent and fatalistic, Anderson's and Su Tong's writings send us into meditation upon our origin: Where are we from and how do we come to where we are? Who are we and how do we become what we are? These questions are fundamental to every serious reader, just as they are to Anderson and Su Tong.

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