

DYNASTIES OF DEMONS: CANNIBALISM FROM LU XUN TO YU HUA

by

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Abstract

Dynasties of Demons: Cannibalism from Lu Xun to Yu Hua focuses on the issue of representations of the body in modern Chinese fiction. My interest concerns the relationship, or correspondence between “textual” bodies and the physical “realities” they are meant to represent, particularly where those representations involve the body as a discursive site for the intersection of state ideology and the individual. The relationship between the body and the state has been a question of profound significance for modern Chinese literati dating back to the late Qing, but it was Lu Xun who, with the publication of his short story “*Kuangren riji*” 狂人日记 (Diary of a Madman), in 1918, initiated the literary discourse on China’s “apparent penchant for cannibalizing its own people.

In the first chapter of my dissertation I discuss Lu Xun’s fiction by exploring two distinct, though not mutually exclusive issues: (1) his diagnosis of China’s debilitating “spiritual illness,” which he characterized as being cannibalistic; (2) his highly inventive, counter-intuitive narrative strategy for critiquing traditional Chinese culture without contributing to or stimulating his reader’s prurient interests in violent spectacle. To my knowledge I am the first critic of modern Chinese literature to write about Lu Xun’s erasure of the spectacle body.

In Chapters II, III and IV, I discuss the writers Han Shaogong, Mo Yan, and Yu Hua, respectively, to illustrate that sixty years after Lu Xun’s madman first “wrote” the prophetic words, *chi ren* 吃人 (eat people), a number of post-Mao writers took up their pens to announce that the human feast did not end with Confucianism; on the contrary, with the advent of Maoism the feasting began in earnest.

Each of these post-Mao writers approaches the issue of China’s “spiritual dysfunction” from quite different perspectives, which I have characterized in the following way: Han Shaogong (Atavism); Mo Yan (Ambivalent-Nostalgia); and Yu Hua (Deconstruction). As becomes evident through my analysis of selected texts, despite their very significant differences (personal, geographic, stylistic) all three writers come to oddly similar conclusions that are, in and of themselves, not dissimilar to the conclusion arrived at by Lu Xun’s madman.

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to Denise Le Blond

Her presence is manifest on every page

And her spirit lives forever in my heart

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Introduction

Traveling through the narrative landscapes of post-Mao fiction is often like stepping into the hellish world of Pieter Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death*; wherever one looks one sees scenes of violence, sexual perversion, and physical deformity. These textual geographies are troubled landscapes inhabited by characters trapped in a Chinese variant of the *danse macabre*. I use the idea of dance because it necessarily implies the kinetic presence of physical bodies — bodies in motion, bodies acting-out, bodies being acted upon. The macabre speaks for itself — during the 1950s, 60s, and 70s millions of docile (and not so docile) Chinese bodies “danced” their way into torture, starvation, exile, and death. Given the horrible magnitude of the carnage it is not at all surprising that textual representations of the period are animated by violence. One does not walk blithely through the pages of post-Mao fiction.

Throughout modern Chinese literary history, it is difficult to find a period in which [the literary scene] is people by so many bizarre characters invested with such complex symbolic meaning. The range of characters that emerge...include: the blind, the mute, the crippled, the humpbacked, the sexually impotent, the bound-feet fetishist..., the living dead, not to mention the mentally deranged and the psychotic.¹

Because graphic representations of violent spectacle are so prevalent in post-Mao fiction, my reading has focused on the body as the site where power is directly inscribed through the use of physical violence. It is an analytical approach that leads to questions about how the body is represented in text, how it is situated in narratives, and how it functions as a site of discourse. My dissertation, then, is an experiment in reading the body in terms of the “representational economy

¹ See David Der-Wei Wang, “Pantheon of the Deformed: The Bizarre Visage of Life as Seen in Contemporary PRC Fiction,” (Jirenxin: Dangdai dalu xiaoshuode zhongsheng ‘guai’xiang 当代 大陆小说的众生‘怪’相), *Zhongsheng xuanhua* 众声哗 (Heteroglossia, Taipei: Yuanliu, 1988) p. 209, as quoted in Joseph S.M. Lau, “Visitations of the Past in Han Shaogong's Post-1985 Fiction,” in *From May Fourth to June Fourth: Fiction and Film in Twentieth Century China*, eds. Ellen Widmer and David Der-Wei Wong (Camabridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993), p.21.

of violence” in post-Mao fiction. By the phrase “representational economy of violence” I mean the value assigned to an act of violence through the nature of its representation in a text. The nature of a specific representation derives not only from its graphical depiction but from its contextualization, as well. For the purposes of the following dissertation I have chosen works from four Chinese writers: Lu Xun (鲁迅), Han Shaogong (韩少功), Mo Yan (莫言), and Yu Hua (余华).

Why these four writers? In answering this question, which is, ultimately, the purpose of my dissertation, I have taken into account three distinct, though not mutually exclusive, contextualizations as the framework for my analysis. I imagine Lu Xun standing on a promontory watching the cataclysmic wave of modernity about to break across China. I read post-Mao writers as the battered survivors of that spectacularly violent deluge; Han Shaogong, Mo Yan, Yu Hua, and Lu Xun are thus linked by China’s ongoing confrontation with the “modern,” which has from the outset been problematized by the issue (question) of national identity. All three of the post-Mao texts I have chosen to discuss engage the question of identity in its personal aspect and/or in the context of a national polity. It is in this sense that I regard Han Shaogong, Mo Yan, and Yu Hua as being linked to Lu Xun as inheritors of the short-lived May Fourth intellectual/literary tradition of exploration and experimentation.

In bringing the work of Han Shaogong, Mo Yan and Yu Hua together into a unified field of discourse that coheres beyond such general categories as “scar” literature (*shanghen* 伤痕), “roots-seeking” literature (*xungen* 寻根), experimental (*shiyan* 实验) and avant garde (*xianfeng* 先锋) fiction I reached back to Lu Xun, who, with the publication of “Madman’s Diary” (*Kuangren reji* 狂人日记) in 1918, penned the opening statement in the modern Chinese literary discourse on the “economy of violence” in Chinese society. Between the lines of all the great

Confucian Classics can be read the words “eat people” (*chi ren* 吃人), Lu Xun’s mad diarist declaimed. With this highly charged and potent phrase Lu Xun, arguably, laid the literary foundation for the Chinese “national allegory” of cannibalism.² Little did he know at the time that the human feast had yet to begin in earnest. As I will illustrate in the following analysis, Han Shaogong, Mo Yan, and Yu Hua are linked to the idea of China’s national allegory of cannibalism through textual invocations of the cannibalistic act. I want to stress that within this discursive frame my linkages are text specific and narrowly focused on how each author narrates the body viz-a-viz represented violence.

The body itself serves as the third discursive link between Lu Xun and the three post-Mao writers. In each of the texts I discuss the authors demonstrate a decided interest in the body as the site of spectacular violence. In this context the emphasis falls not on violence per se but on spectacle as an event, more specifically as an event that necessarily involves spectatorship; spectacle by its very nature demands a witness. In Han Shaogong’s novella “Ba Ba Ba” (爸爸爸爸) the reader stands witness with the unidentified narrator at a carnival of grotesqueries, in Mo Yan’s novel *Red Sorghum Clan* (红高粱家族) the reader stands witness with the unnamed grandson of Dai Fenglian (戴凤莲) and Yu Zhan’ao (余占鳌) as they act out their parts in a theatre of the macabre, and in Yu Hua’s story “Classical Love” (古典爱情) the reader stands witness with Willow (柳), the seemingly hapless examination candidate, who watches the world

²See Gang Yue, *The Mouth that Begs: Hunger, Cannibalism, and the Politics of Eating in Modern China*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 23; Fredric Jameson, “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capital,” *Social Text* 15 (Fall 1986) 65-88; Aijaz Ahmad, “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory,’” in *In Theory*, (New York, Verso, 1992), pp. 95-122; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, (New York, Verso, 1983).

of spectacular events fluctuate between utopian fantasy, unspeakable horror, and the oblivion of forgetfulness.³

Characterizing post-Mao writers as inheritors of the May Fourth literary tradition begs a question regarding the status of literature in China between the mid-1930s and the late 1970s. This is, of course, a highly complex question that begins with the strident polemic debates on the role of literature in society and the nature of literature in the service of revolution, and culminates in the radically politicized literary genre called “Revolutionary Realism-Revolutionary Romanticism.” For the sake of argument I will focus on the period between Mao Zedong’s “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art” in 1942, and the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in the mid-1960s, roughly two decades which can be characterized as the “golden era” of Socialist Realist (社会主义-现实主义) literature.⁴ I have purposefully excluded the literature of this period from my dissertation because Socialist-Realism, by its cross-genre theoretical identity demands a separate analytical treatment — Socialist Realism is a literary genre born of political expediency rather than artistic need. This is not to say that post-Mao writers are free of political control, or that all Socialist-Realist fiction is bad. In fact, within the context of the genre itself there is a canon of “classic” texts⁵ whose narratives, despite rigid formulaic restrictions, are artfully effective in their textual representations of the body. Yet, the fact remains that in Socialist Realist fiction the “spectacle” cum “revolutionary” body functions as a paradigm of

³The world that Willow watches is an allegorical representation of China just prior to, during, and after the Great Leap Forward (大跃进).

⁴One of the best textual references for Mao Zedong’s “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art” is Bonnie S. McDougall’s translation of the 1943 text with commentary. See Bonnie S. McDougall, *Mao Zedong’s “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art”* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1980).

⁵The canon of Chinese Socialist Realism includes such classics as Zhou Libo’s (周立波) novel *Baofeng zhou yu* 暴风骤雨 (北京: 新华书店出版社, 1949); Ding Ling’s (丁玲) *Taiyang zhao zai Sangganhe shang* 太阳照在桑干河上 (北京: 新华书店出版社, 1952); Liang Bin’s (梁斌) *Hong qipu* 红旗谱 (北京: 外文出版社, 1961); and Qu Bo’s (曲波) *Linhai xueyuan* 林海雪原 (北京: 外文出版社, 1962), to name just a few.

orthodox ideology, whereas May Fourth and post-Mao textual bodies are marked by ambiguity and function as sites of discursive contestation.⁶ This fundamental difference between body as paradigm and body as a site of contestation is clearly illustrated by comparing Zhao Yulin (赵玉林), the hero in Zhou Libo's novel *Hurricane*, and Yu Zhan'ao, a hero in Mo Yan's novel *Red Sorghum*.

Because my dissertation jumps from modern Chinese literature at its inception (i.e., the publication of Lu Xun's short-story "Madman's Diary,") to the post-Mao era, I felt it necessary to acknowledge the large body of fiction written during the three decades from Liberation to the rise of Deng Xiaoping, and to give a brief explanation as to why I have not included Socialist-Realist texts in my dissertation. Without getting bogged down in the polemics that attached to Andrey Zhdanov's hybrid theoretical doctrine of Socialist-Realism, I reiterate what I've said above — without exception heroes and heroines in Socialist-Realist fiction strive for an absolute, fixed identity that is defined by political orthodoxy; in sharp contrast to this certainty, the characters whose voices speak out from the texts of Lu Xun, Han Shaogong, Mo Yan, and Yu Hua are voices engaged in an ongoing dialogic relationship with the profoundly ambiguous nature of human identity, more specifically, the ambiguity of being Chinese following the collapse of the Imperial system, and again following the collapse of Mao Zedong's revolution.

Interestingly, the intellectual trajectory of this dissertation is directly the result of a question I began asking when I first read Lu Xun's "historic" short story "Madman's Diary." My first undergraduate paper on modern Chinese literature focused on Lu Xun's treatment of violence, and from that time until the present my primary interest in Chinese fiction has been in mapping the narrative topography of physical violence as it has been represented in the fiction of

⁶See Mark Elvin, "Tales of Shen and Xin: Body-Person and Heart-Mind in China during the Last 150 Years, in *Self as Body in Asian Theory and Practice*, ed. Thomas P. Kasulis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), pp. 213-297.

the post-Mao period. I have chosen specific texts by Han Shaogong, Mo Yan, and Yu Hua in which each of the authors revisits the “national allegory” of Chinese cannibalism. They return to this powerful May Fourth discourse from very different perspectives, and yet they are unified by first hand experiences and a sophisticated understanding of the subtle and not so subtle nuances of meaning to be found in the simple phrase, *chi ren*, when read in the context of Maoist China.

It might seem somewhat ironic that I begin my analysis of the body and violence in post-Mao fiction with a discussion of Lu Xun, but he was the first modern Chinese writer to understand, or at least intuit, the significance of the “spectacle body” in the traditional Chinese regime of power — all Chinese bodies were, potentially, discrete sites for the physical inscription of state/ideological power. While Lu Xun did not have the late 20th century critical lexicon to draw upon, and, therefore, could not have conceptualized the issue in terms of “regimes of power,” he clearly saw that physical bodies were used as sites for demonstrating state power through acts of spectacle violence, demonstrations which helped to maintain a population of docile bodies. Clearly, Lu Xun was not the only May Fourth writer to concern himself with the issue of the exercise of state power through acts of sanctioned violence; Ba Jin’s (巴金) novel, *Family* (家), and Mao Dun’s (茅盾) novel, *Midnight* (子夜) are two very good examples. But Lu Xun was unique among his contemporaries and protégés in that his interest lay not so much in the acts of spectacle violence, but in the “docile bodies” as spectators.

The masses, especially in China, are always spectators at a drama. If the victim on the stage acts heroically, they are watching a tragedy; if he shivers and shakes they are watching a comedy. Before the mutton shops in Beijing a few people often gather and gape, with evident enjoyment, at the skinning of the sheep. And this is all they get out of it if a man lays down his life. Moreover, after walking a few steps away from the scene they forget even this modicum of enjoyment.⁷

⁷ Lu Xun, “What Happens After Nora Leaves Home?” in *Lu Xun Selected Works*, trans. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1957), Vol. 1, p. 91

As I will illustrate in Chapter One, Lu Xun's narrative strategy for dealing with the issue of spectatorship and the "spectacle body," was brilliantly inventive, yet has remained largely unremarked upon.⁸ After reading the stories in *Na Han* 呐喊 (Call to Arms) and *Panghuang* 彷徨 (Wandering), along with a wide range of critiques on both Lu Xun and his fictional *oeuvre*, I sensed that there was a deeper layer of discourse that I still could not access. I felt I was missing something important that was just out of reach. I did note that in stories, such as "Madman's Diary," "Kong Yiji" (孔乙己), "Medicine" (药), "New Year's Sacrifice" (祝福), and "A Public Example" (示众), Lu Xun's narratives seem to purposefully elide any direct representation of the spectacle body as a site for the inscription of power through acts of physical violence.

The importance of Lu Xun's "act of erasure" came to me only later when I began reading post-Mao fiction from the 1980s, so much of which is characterized by the intense spectacle of graphic body violence. The Maoist regime was rigorous in its drive to colonize, subjugate, and make docile bodies of the citizens under its control, so it's not at all surprising that fictional representations of the Maoist regime are characteristically violent. A good deal of the graphic violence found in post-Mao fiction was used for its shock value, for the thrill of literary experimentation, for deconstructing the sanitized textual geography of Socialist Realism, and so on; yet a small group of post-Mao writers looked at the ideology and exercise of power in China and made an observation not dissimilar from that made by Lu Xun sixty years before — the exercise of power in China was (and still is) based on the use of state sanctioned violence. In the necessary public rituals for demonstrating the power of the state, the Chinese Communist Party

⁸ See Jaroslav Průšek, *The lyric and the Epic: Studies of Modern Chinese Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), pp. 105-106.

(CCP) used physical bodies by the tens of thousands as discursive sites for acts of terror, violence, and death.⁹

Lu Xun's iconoclastic literary critique of traditional Chinese (i.e., Confucian) culture is, essentially, a rejection of the rigorously orthodox, autocratic regime of power characteristic of the late Imperial period, particularly during the Ming (明) and Qing (清). Yet, in the Preface to *Call to Arms*, and in "Madman's Diary" as well, Lu Xun represents Confucianism as a totality, and in so doing pens a sweeping indictment against traditional Chinese culture that draws no distinction between the Southern Song (宋) doctrine of Neo-Confucianism as he experienced it in the final years of the Qing, and the far less orthodox Confucianism of the Tang (唐), or still earlier Han (汉) interpretations of the *Analects* (论语) and the *Mencius* (孟子). The point I want to make here is that Lu Xun essentializes two thousand years of a highly heterodox cultural heritage by characterizing it as a "Confucian" totality, the central dynamic of which is the act of "cannibalism."¹⁰ This negative critique of Chinese culture demonstrates not only the profound crisis of confidence that affected so many of the May Fourth literati, but it also reveals a deep crisis of identity that, significantly, re-emerges among intellectuals during the post-Mao era.

I said that one does not walk blithely through the narrative landscapes of post-Mao fiction, and the same can be said of Lu Xun's work; it is a dark realm of cruelty, ignorance, superstition, horror, and spiritual destitution. Amid all of this the issue that troubles Lu Xun most deeply is that of the docile spectator, the disinterested voyeur. Without spectators the spectacle of violence loses its value. Death without a witness is just death; a death witnessed becomes a remembered event, death witnessed by a group becomes a group memory, death witnessed by a nation

⁹ I am not suggesting that Han Shaogong, Mo Yan, and Yu Hua are above using graphic violence for its titillation value, but I do argue that their uses of violence have a more serious intent, as well.

¹⁰ Clearly, Lu Xun uses the idea of cannibalism not in a realist sense, but as a metaphor for a society (a regime of power) that sustains itself at the expense of its own citizens.

becomes a national memory, and the literary record of that memory is most often allegorical—an important characteristic shared by all post-Mao texts discussed in the following dissertation.¹¹

Where Lu Xun erased the spectacle body from his texts, Han Shaogong is one of the post-Mao writers who must be credited with resurrecting it, particularly in texts such as “Ba Ba Ba” 爸爸 (lit. Father Father Father) and “Nü Nü Nü” 奴奴奴 (Woman Woman Woman), both of which enter into the realm of the macabre. As Joseph S.M. Lau says of the central character in the novella “Ba Ba Ba,” Bing Zai (丙崽), he “verges on the scatological.”¹² As we will see in Han Shaogong’s work, as well as in the work of Mo Yan and Yu Hua, characters and deeds Lu Xun deemed unfit for representation emerge quite graphically from the dark corners of the human psyche.¹³ In the texts discussed in the following dissertation (with the exception of Lu Xun’s work), there are characters and events that could well have stepped right out of Pu Songling’s *Liaozhai zhiyi* (聊斋志异), characters such as Bing Zai would not seem at all out of place in a traditional *zhiguai* (志怪) tale.

On one level Lu Xun’s fiction concerns locating the source of the spiritual malaise afflicting the Chinese people, and we know he identified “traditional Confucian” culture as being responsible for the cannibalistic nature of Chinese social ideology. Like his famous predecessor, Han Shaogong seems interested in locating the source of China’s profound social dysfunction. Since the revolutionary culture of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought brought an ever more grotesque feasting on the body, rather than liberation from the “cannibalism” of the past,

¹¹ See Michael Duke, “Reinventing China: Cultural Exploration in Contemporary Chinese Fiction,” *Issues and Studies: A Journal of China Studies and International Affairs* 25 (August 1989).

¹² Joseph S.M. Lau, “Han Shaogong’s Post-1985 Fiction,” in *From May Fourth to June Fourth: Film and Fiction in Twentieth Century China*, eds. Ellen Widmer and David Der-Wei Wong (Cambridge, mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993) p.30

¹³ Lu Xun, “半夏小基” (Notes Culled from Half of a Summer, 1936) in *Lu Xun quanji* 鲁迅全集 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1981), VI, p. 483.

Han Shaogong is forced to reach even farther back to a time that pre-dates the institution of Confucianism. Under the guise of an ethnographic narrative he reaches back into the very shadows of Chinese history, only to discover a world of “ignorance, stupidity, superstition and cruelty.”¹⁴ Here in this brief quote Joseph Lau could well be referring to Lu Xun’s fictional world rather than that of Han Shaogong, thus, it was a seemingly natural step that I took from reading “Ah Q” to reading Bing Zai.

The narrative landscape of Mo Yan’s Northeast Gaomi Township is, in its way, similar to Han Shaogong’s realm of the bizarre, but Mo Yan is not interested in locating the source of China’s spiritual miasma, rather he is interested in the contextualization of violence. Mo Yan accepts brutality, sadism, and perversion *a priori*, as an inherent aspect of life in China. As I will illustrate in my reading of *Red Sorghum*, violence is so prevalent in the text it approaches the status of the quotidian. What is important is not the violence itself but the way in which it is contextualized; there is the violence associated with the individual will to power, and there is the institutionalized violence of the state. Mo Yan’s discourse on power, violence, and body is weighted toward the side of the individual will to power, but I have characterized his discursive mode as being “ambivalent nostalgia.” I will elaborate on this point in Chapter Three.

Chapter Four, the final chapter in my dissertation, is devoted to Yu Hua, who is without question the most enigmatic of the three post-Mao writers under discussion. Anyone familiar with his work knows that there are many texts to choose from, all of which treat the issue of spectacular violence. I decided to use “Classical Love” because the narrative is so graphically cannibalistic and, at the same time, it is Yu Hua’s most densely allusive text. Like Mo Yan, he accepts *a priori* the violence inherent in day to day life in modern China, but unlike Mo Yan who views context as a construction shaped by external socio-political forces, Yu Hua’s text, which is

¹⁴ Joseph Lau, “Han Shaogong,” p.35.

visually graphic and violently cannibalistic, looks to the internal frame of mind of the individual; context for Yu Hua seems to be a much more personal, philosophical question rather than a social one. In this he shares a certain intellectual affinity with Lu Xun — lone visionaries who dare to see and to bear witness. That Yu Hua deconstructs the body Lu Xun erased seventy years before seems an apt point of closure for a stream of intellectual/literary discourse which is bracketed historically by the collapse of Qing imperial ideology in the early 1900s, and the collapse of CCP political legitimacy in June, 1989. These two points very roughly mark the beginning and end of the Chinese modern. Han Shaogong published “Ba Ba Ba” in 1985, and “Nü Nü Nü” in 1986. Mo Yan published *Red Sorghum* in 1987, the same year Yu Hua published “Classical Love.” As Willow wanders from a utopian landscape, into a world of unspeakable horrors, and finally into the oblivion of forgetfulness he traces the history of a people’s hope as it slowly disintegrates into the end of “belief.”

That 1989 marks a point of rupture in Chinese literary culture is evident in the fact that the works of Han Shaogong, Mo Yan, and Yu Hua have far more in common intellectually with the works of Lu Xun, than with those of contemporary writers, such as Mian Mian (棉棉), Hua Ji (花季), Wei Hui (卫慧), and Han Han (韩寒). The novels and short stories being written in urbanized China frame the questions of identity and nation in such a different way that it clearly suggests a fundamental shift in the Chinese literary paradigm. I will return to this question in my conclusion, but I raise it here to mark a boundary. It is a sad irony, indeed, that the cycle of China’s great social revolution should come to an end with such a shockingly brutal spectacle of violence against the body of the people, and against the body of the nation, as well.

Chapter One

Lu Xun's Erasure of the Body

My introduction to modern Chinese literature came by way of Lu Xun's first book of short stories, *Nahan* 呐喊 (A Call to Arms), yet before reading the first story, "*Kuangren riji*" 狂人日记 (A Madman's Diary), I had to read what is arguably one of Lu Xun's most celebrated fictional texts, the autobiographical preface to the collection. By his own account he was a young Chinese intellectual caught in the opposing currents of Confucian tradition and secular modernity. In China, as in every other country, the encounter between tradition and modernity was not a case of clearly defined polar opposites, yet in their stance of "totalistic iconoclasm" many May Fourth intellectuals, Lu Xun among them, perceived the situation in just such terms.¹

Lu Xun rejected a classical education, choosing instead to study medicine in Japan, but his shift to a Western, utilitarian education occurred only after he'd already developed an aesthetic attachment to the arts and sensibilities of the traditional Chinese literati. One significant contributing factor to the tragedy of Lu Xun's life was that his intellectual-ideological stance of "totalistic iconoclasm" conflicted with this aesthetic-intellectual attachment to aspects of traditional culture. Arguably, Lu Xun, more than any other of his contemporaries, embodied, quite literally, the profound conflict between the old and the new in early Twentieth century China.

In the narrative of his prefatory remarks Lu Xun says he was drawn to the study of modern medicine due in large part to the quackery of traditional Chinese medicine, which failed to cure his father's tuberculosis. Yet, in the course of his studies at Sendai something quite unexpected occurred that ruptured the smooth trajectory of his intellectual transition from a

¹ See Lin Yü-Sheng, "The Origins of Totalistic Antitraditionalism in the May Fourth Era," in *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness*. (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1979).

Confucian to a secular world view. While watching lantern slides depicting scenes from the Russo-Japanese war, one particular slide, we are told, triggered a moment of epiphany.²

According to Lu Xun's "autobiographical" narrative the intensity of this experience was so powerful that he abandoned his studies and dropped out of medical school.

Before the term was over I had left for Tokyo, because this slide convinced me that medical science was not so important after all. The people of a weak and backward country, however strong and healthy they might be, could only serve to be made examples of or as witnesses of such futile spectacles; and it was not necessarily deplorable if many of them died of illness. The most important thing, therefore, was to change their spirit; and since at the time I felt that literature was the best means to this end, I decided to promote a literary movement.³

The key question regarding this incident has always been about the nature of Lu Xun's experience. Standard interpretations have consistently taken his own words at face value: if the spiritual character of a society is deviant, then changes in the material basis of that society will have no lasting, transformative effect.⁴ But this does not really tell us anything about the nature of Lu Xun's experience, about what he saw in that moment of "epiphany" that so profoundly altered his relationship to the project of modernity in China; and let there be no mistake, whatever internal transformation occurred to Lu Xun during this period, it absolutely set him apart from his contemporaries, marking him with a difference that might, particularly in hindsight, be characterized as "fatal genius."

² As Leo Ou-fan Lee points out in *Voices from the Iron House*, extensive searches have failed to locate the slide to which Lu Xun refers in the preface to *Nahan*. It is now generally accepted that the "famous" lantern slide is a fictional composite constructed by Lu Xun as a visual representation of his "spontaneous" insight into the deep causes of China's physical, geographic, and spiritual disintegration.

³ Lu Xun, "Preface," *Call to Arms*, trans. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1981). p.iii.

⁴ Lu Xun was not alone in seeing the need for a deep, spiritual transformation in the Chinese people; the early thrust of the New Culture Movement was aimed directly at just such a transformation, but Lu Xun's conceptualization of the problem was fundamentally different than that of his May Fourth contemporaries. This difference became increasingly apparent as radical

Prior to his moment of "epiphany" Lu Xun apparently accepted that the liberating spirit of secular modernity could transform the Chinese people. Yet, on the other side of his experiential divide his vision of China's future became encapsulated in the thoroughly bleak metaphor of the "Iron House." For Lu Xun the iron house represented the totalizing structure of Confucian culture, and in stories such as "Madman's Diary," "Kong Yiji," "Medicine," "New Year's Sacrifice," and "The True Story of Ah Q," there is a great deal of textual material that recapitulates this view of Confucian ideology as a totality; a narrative theme that fits easily into the discursive formulation of May Fourth "totalistic" iconoclasm.

Here we come to what is, arguably, one of the great tragedies in Lu Xun's intellectual and emotional life: if Confucian culture was a totality,

"...and iron house having not a single window and virtually indestructible," with all its inmates sound asleep and about to die of suffocation."⁵

how is it that he could lay claim to the space of the critic, standing outside of, at a distance from the object of his critique? Clearly, the walls of the "iron house" were not impregnable; it was, in fact, through an act of critical engagement that he himself was able to establish a critical space outside the "totality" of the Confucian structure. But, Lu Xun never faced-up to this reality, and herein lies the great tragedy. In a letter to Xu Guangping on March 18, 1925, he wrote:

"My works are too dark because I often feel that only 'darkness and emptiness' are 'reality.' However, I am determined to launch a war of resistance in despair against them."⁶

The seminal idea in Lin Yü-Sheng's analysis of Lu Xun is the tragic irony of his "war of resistance in despair," an irony doubled in that the May Fourth writer with the darkest vision was transmogrified into the progenitor of modern Chinese literature.

intellectuals, such as Chen Duxiu, embraced Marxism and the paradigm of historical materialism.

⁵ Lu Xun, Preface to *A Call to Arms*, p.5.

⁶ As quoted in Lin, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness*, fn. 65, p. 136.

Dying in their sleep, they won't feel the pain of death. Now if you raise a shout to wake a few of the light sleepers, making these unfortunate few suffer the agony of irrevocable death, do you really think you are doing them a good turn?

But if a few wake up, you can't say there is no hope of destroying the iron house.

True, in spite of my own conviction, I could not blot out hope, for hope belongs to the future. I had no negative evidence to refute his affirmation of faith.⁷

Was not, in fact, Lu Xun the writer and critic himself and affirmation of hope? He too had been born into this "culture of sleepers," yet was able to awaken himself and escape, at least momentarily, from the totalizing discursive structure of the "iron house." Was it not, then, highly contradictory for him to disavow hope when his stories themselves where "acts of literature"⁸ carried out in a space created beyond the boundary of the Confucian totality? Critics can elide this contradiction by essentializing the conceptual foundations of Lu Xun's fiction, reducing his texts to cries in the wilderness, acts of futility carried out merely because he could not disprove the efficacy of hope.

So I finally agreed to write.... And once started I could not give up but would write some sort of short story from time to time to humor my friends, until I had written more than a dozen of them.⁹

Reading Lu Xun along the surface of his narratives has a clearly reductive effect—the author, who himself lives without hope, "humors" his friends by writing a number of bleak little stories concerning the futility of attaching hope to the transforming powers of modernity—the Confucian totality is virtually absolute, essential to and inherent in the act of being Chinese. China's hopelessness resonates in Lu Xun's texts as his own, personal sense of "hopelessness." If, on the other hand, we read beneath the surface of his narratives and explore the anomalies and

⁷ Lu Xun, *Call to Arms*, p.v.

⁸ See Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge, (New York: Routledge, 1992), p.2.

contradictions in his texts, quite a different picture begins to emerge, one that suggests a far more subtle and profound layer of discourse—I return to the question of the lantern slide.

I have no idea what improved methods are now used to teach microbiology, but in those days we were shown lantern slides of microbes; and if the lecture ended early, the instructor might show slides of natural scenery or news to fill up the time. Since this was during the Russo-Japanese War, there were many war slides, and I had to join in the clapping and cheering in the lecture hall along with the other students. It was a long time since I had seen any compatriots, but one day I saw a newsreel slide of a number of Chinese, one of them bound and the rest standing around him. They were all sturdy fellows but appeared completely apathetic. According to the commentary, the one with his hands bound was a spy working for the Russians, was to be beheaded by the Japanese military as a warning to others, while the Chinese beside him had come to enjoy the spectacle.¹⁰

What is it in this scene that troubled Lu Xun so deeply? Is it the victimization of a fellow countryman, or is it something deeper and more complex? In asking this question we must keep in mind that the content and composition of the slide are elements in a very carefully, and purposefully constructed visual/linguistic image. Lu Xun skillfully controls the reader's reception of the image by reproducing a caption that goes along with the slide: "the one with his hands tied... was to be beheaded... while the Chinese beside him had come to enjoy the spectacle." Just prior to giving the reader this information, Lu Xun, writing in the voice of the implied author describes the spectators as apathetic, yet the caption clearly assigns them agency—they have come of their own volition, and will enjoy the entertainment (spectacle) to be offered. Within this seemingly simple, visually cohesive image of a battlefield execution, Lu Xun subtly embeds the spectator/victim binary, a discursive formation found in so many of his texts. Lu Xun's characters are assigned the two modes of being that mirror the spectator/victim binary, and this representational field is further defined by its link to visual spectacle, at the center of

⁹ Lu Xun, *Call to Arms*, p.v.

¹⁰ Lu Xun, Preface to *Call to Arms*, pp. ii-iii

which stands the victim, the body, the object of inscription. In forging this discursive link Lu Xun articulates a triangular relationship between victim, victimizer, and spectator—the “unholy trinity” of this fictional epiphany. With this in mind, if we re-examine the composition of the lantern slide (a lone Chinese victim and a group of Chinese spectators) we discover that one aspect of the trinity is missing; nowhere in this carefully constructed image do we see the Japanese soldier, sword poised, ready to strike down the hapless Chinese victim; yet this is one of the essential elements needed to infuse the image with the heightened dramatic tension that would complete the narrative and infuse the image with the visual tension of spectacle. What we see instead is a lone Chinese with bound hands, surrounded by a group of onlookers. The actual image constructed by Lu Xun is flat, static, and ambiguous. It is only through the use of an accompanying commentary that the reader is given a framework for contextualizing and decoding the image.

In effect, Lu Xun erases the visual markers of spectacle, leaving only their traces in the accompanying text. How are we to interpret this act of erasure? Read visually, without reference to the textual commentary, the “lantern slide” is not about the spectacle of execution, rather it is about the act of spectatorship. By erasing both the agent (i.e., the sword wielding Japanese soldier) and the spectacular act (i.e., the beheading), Lu Xun establishes the act of mindless spectatorship itself (i.e., passive voyeurism) as a key element in his discourse on the technology of power, and the “political economy of the body” in early Twentieth century China.¹¹ In the core structure of this discourse Lu Xun privileges the visual, and thus, with the fictive lantern slide a single image comes to embody all of China’s sad and complex problems.

¹¹ Admittedly, Lu Xun would not have been able to conceive of, nor discourse upon the “technology of power,” or the “political economy of the body,” meaning that neither he nor the scholarly world at large possessed the very specific lexicon of the postmodern critique. This does not mean that Lu Xun was incapable of writing about power, physical and psychological violence, and victimization.

When finally persuaded to take up the pen in support of the New Culture Movement, Lu Xun meant to trigger in the reader a moment of epiphany similar the one he ascribes to his own viewing of the famous, Sendai "lantern slide." It is a mark of his true genius that he employed a brilliantly conceived counter-intuitive narrative strategy to reproduce a purely visual/cognitive experience using the medium of words. In his use of text to reproduce a visual experience Lu Xun does not amplify the spectacular (i.e., the visual), rather he subtly shifts the reader's focus to the act of mindless spectatorship itself. It is not the overt seductive power of the visual experience he means to reproduce, but the self-reflexive experiential loop of the observer suddenly becoming aware of her or his own complicitous gaze.

I am not the first person to notice that Lu Xun shifted the reader's focus away from dramatic spectacle. In his remarks on plot structure in Lu Xun's story "*Huai jiu*" 怀旧¹² (Remembering the Past), Jaroslav Průšek remarks that, "Lu Hsün shows that he deliberately repressed dramatic effects...that [his] interest lay else-where than in the creation of exciting plots to arouse the fantasy of this readers."¹³ While Průšek notes Lu Xun's proclivity for lessening dramatic effect, he fails to recognize the full importance of this technique. As I will demonstrate below, it was not that Lu Xun's "interest lay elsewhere," rather his deliberate avoidance of overt drama is the result of a well thought out technique used to achieve a very specific effect in the reader.

¹² Strictly speaking, *Diary of a Madman* was not Lu Xun's first published story. In 1911, *Xiaoshuo yuebao* published "Remembering the Past." However, Lu Xun published the story using the pseudonym Zhou Chuo, and in his collect works it is not included in either *Call to Arms* or *Wandering*. It can be found in *Collection of Items Not Included in Any Collection (Ji wai ji shiyi 集外集拾遗)*, Lu Xun Collected Works (*LXQJ*), vol. 7, pp. 257-264.

¹³ Jaroslav Průšek, *The Lyric and the Epic: Studies in Modern Chinese Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), pp.105-106.

Lu Xun's strategy for suturing two fundamentally dissimilar modes of experience (textual and visual) is elegant in its simplicity—he erases the spectacular body from his texts. In effect, through this act of body erasure, spectacle is experienced only through the lingering trace of the mindless gaze. Lu Xun reinforces the foregrounding of the gaze by drawing a clear discursive boundary between the reader and text, which is, in itself, an interesting aspect of his narrative strategy. For the purposes of this analysis I will focus on acts of erasure as performed in “Madman's Diary,” “Kong Yiji,” “Medicine,” and “A Public Example.” I begin with “Madman's Diary.”

Two brothers, whose names I need not mention here, were both good friends of mine in highschool; but after a separation of many years we gradually lost touch. Some time ago I happened to hear that one of them was seriously ill, and since I was going back to my old home I broke my journey to call on them. I saw only one, however, who told me that the invalid was his younger brother.

I appreciate your coming such a long way to see us, he said, but my brother recovered some time ago and has gone elsewhere to take up an official post. Then laughing, he produced two volumes of his brother's diary, saying that from these the nature of his past illness could be seen and there was no harm in showing them to an old friend.¹⁴

The opening section of the story establishes a narrative frameworks for the diary which is to follow. It offers the reader a definite point of view – the text you are about to read is an aberration, a “medical” curiosity of no real value. Of course, the great irony in this story turns on the fact that the madman's psychosis signifies a moment of sanity amid an age old culture of madness. But the effect of this irony is not apparent in the opening paragraph of the story, so the reader approaches the diary from a traditional cultural perspective.

Using the text of the diary itself Lu Xun establishes a tone of ironic distance between the implied author who addresses the reader in classical *wen yan* style, and the diarist who writes in

¹⁴ Yang, *Lu Xun Selected Works*, vol.1., p.39; *LXQJ*, vol.1.p.9.

highly fragmented *bai hua*. Lu Xun's use of irony coupled with his oblique treatment of spectacle combine to form a powerful device that "contrives to throw the story upon the reader's faculty of moral judgment."¹⁵ Twice in the third section of the inner text the diarist specifically states that "*fanshi xu dei yanjiu, cai hui mingbai*" 凡事需得研究, 才会明白 (everything must be carefully considered if it is to be understood).¹⁶ This declaration accentuates the ironic distance between the implied author, who has informed the reader that the diarist is not to be taken seriously, and the diarist himself who is warning the reader to examine everything very carefully.

Through the use of "presentational irony"¹⁷ (between the implied author and the diarist), Lu Xun establishes distance between the reader and the diarist, and in turn between the reader and the graphic revelations of the "madman" that are about to follow. In effect, he disrupts the normal, mutually reinforcing interaction between the docile spectator and the event, between the mindless voyeur and the victim. In this way the readers' relationship to the prurient entertainment value of surface events is very subtly altered.

Tonight the moon is very bright. I have not seen it for over thirty years.... I begin to realize that during the past thirty-odd years I have been in the dark.

Tonight there is no moon at all, I know this is a bad omen. This morning when I went out cautiously, Mr. Zhao had a strange look in his eyes, as if he were afraid of me, as if he wanted to murder me.

A group of children in front were also discussing me, and the look in their eyes was just like that in Mr. Zhao's while their faces too were ghastly pale.¹⁸

¹⁵ Patrick Hanan, "The Technique of Lu Hsün's Fiction," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 34 (1974): 55-96.

¹⁶ Yang, *Lu Xun Selected Works*, vol.1.,p.10; *LXQJ*, vol.1.p.12.

¹⁷ Hanan, *Tecinique*, p.77.

¹⁸ Lu Xun, *Call to Arms*, pp. 1-2.

Both the first and second entries in the diary concern themselves almost entirely with the act of seeing. First the diarist declares that he has been living in the dark, that for many years his view of the natural world has been totally obscured. Lu Xun reinforces the importance of this act of seeing by invoking the image of eyes looking threateningly in at the diarist, first Mr. Zhao, then a group of adults on the street, and finally a group of children. They are all staring inward, while the diarist, along with the reader, looks back out at them. What the diarist sees in their eyes frightens him deeply.

The most extraordinary thing was that woman on the street yesterday who was spanking her son. "Little devil!" she cried. "I am so angry I could eat you!" Yet all the time it was me she was looking at. I gave a start, unable to hide my alarm. Then all those long-toothed people with livid faces began to hoot with laughter.

The folk at home all pretended not to know me; they had the same look in their eyes as all the others.¹⁹

While Lu Xun's objectives in writing fiction were varied, one of his fundamental intellectual concerns was the voyeuristic act of spectatorship. Here at the beginning of the third diary entry he once again draws the reader's attention to the image of eyes staring in at the diarist. I have already discussed Lu Xun's use of a framing text and temporal displacement to distance the reader from the diary, yet the structure of the narrative, the act of reading the "madman's" diary, puts the reader on the inside looking out. In effect, the reader shares the diarist's point of view while simultaneously maintaining another, more distanced critical perspective. Both inside and outside, the reader's perspective is further problematized by Lu Xun's erasure of the "spectacle body" and foregrounding of the voyeuristic gaze.

A few days ago a tenant of ours from Wolf Cub Village came to report the failure of the crops and told my elder brother that a notorious character in their village had been beaten to death; then some of the people had taken out his heart and liver, fried them in oil, and eaten them as a means of increasing their courage. When I

¹⁹ Lu Xun, *Call to Arms*, p.3.

interrupted, the tenant and my brother both stared at me. Only today have I realized that they had exactly the same look in their eyes as those people outside.²⁰

Lu Xun employed two specific techniques to minimize the spectacle value of this account. He uses temporal displacement to reinforce the distance between the reader and the event (i.e., the act of cannibalism occurred in the recent past not the present), which diminishes its immediacy. Both the diarist and his brother receive the information second hand; however, the tenant reports directly to the older brother, while the diarist is made to seem like an eavesdropper—yet another form of voyeurism.

When I interrupted, the tenant and my brother both stared at me. Only today have I realized that they had exactly the same look in their eyes as those people outside.²¹

In effect, then, the information comes to the reader thrice removed. The description of the act itself is minimal and the reader's attention is immediately shifted from the act itself to the reaction its telling elicits in the eyes of the tenant and the diarist's brother. While the description of this cannibalistic act is relatively graphic, it is embedded in the text in such a way that Lu Xun leaves the reader no time to linger on its prurient details.

In the tenth diary entry, very near the end of the story, Lu Xun employs oblique narrative to eliminate the reader's access to spectacle altogether. Early one morning the elder brother is standing on the veranda looking into the garden. The diarist approaches him and begins, "*gewai chenjing, gewai heqi*" 格外沉静, 格外和气 (especially calmly and especially politely) to speak.²² What follows is an extended passage in which the diarist expounds on the evolution of men from beasts and the troubling persistence of cannibalism in Chinese society. However, what begins as a calmly delivered and "rational" discourse becomes an "irrational" diatribe. But the

²⁰ Lu Xun, *Call to Arms*, p.3.

²¹ Lu Xun, *Call to Arms*, p.3.

reader is denied direct access to the spectacle of the madman's increasingly frenetic behavior. The diarist's agitation is experienced only as it is reflected by the gathering of a crowd of voyeurs outside his brother's main gate.

Outside quite a crowd had gathered, among them Mr. Zhao and his dog, all craning to peer in. I could not see all of their faces, some of them were masked; others were the old lot, long-toothed with livid faces, concealing their laughter. I knew they were one gang, all eaters of human flesh.²³

While the elder brother's reaction goes from one of condescending tolerance to anger, it is the reaction of the crowd that keys the reader to the diarist's behavior. Lu Xun uses this technique of oblique narration, or indirect narrative, as a highly effective device for limiting the reader's access to spectacle; a technique that achieves it fullest, and most sophisticated development in the story "A Public Example" (*Shi zhong* 示众),²⁴ as we will see.

In experimenting with methods to diminish the direct impact of violent spectacle in his work Lu Xun tended to avoid the standard first and third person narrative voices associated with the formal realism of, say, Mao Dun or Ba Jin. This is borne out by Patrick Hanan and Lee Oufan Lee, who have both noted that the foreign writers who most attracted Lu Xun's attention were Gogol, Andreiev, and Sienkiewicz, all of whom were known for their sardonic irony and/or extensive use of symbolism.

As with the erasure of overt spectacle in the lantern slide, Lu Xun performs a similar erasure in the passage cited above. Neither the diarist nor the reader are present in Wolf Cub Village, and thus direct access to the visual spectacle of cannibalism is denied; the act itself exists only as a trace in the textual commentary. Beneath the surface narrative of cannibalism and psychosis Lu Xun embeds a more subtle thread of discourse about the significant role played

²² *LXQJ*, vol.1, p.16.

²³ Yang, *Lu Xun Selected Works*, vol.1, p.49; *LXQJ*, vol.1, p.17.

²⁴ This title is sometimes translated as "Peking Street Scene."

by the docile spectator in traditional Chinese culture. From the pages of the diary the madman and the reader look out at a multitude of hungry, leering eyes. Lu Xun thus burdened his readers with the dual perspective of looking in and looking out simultaneously, and one wonders if there came a moment when readers spotted themselves in the crowd of onlookers and suddenly found themselves in a self-reflexive loop meant to recreate Lu Xun's fictional "epiphany" experienced while viewing the fictional lantern slide at Sendai.

As a coda to this brief analysis of "Diary of a Madman," I would like to reiterate that structurally the *wen yan* framing text encloses the *bai hua* diary just as the walls of the "Iron House" enclose the Chinese people. The framing text is a totality just as Confucian culture is a totality. The madman, whose illness is an aberrant moment of sanity, cannot sustain his wakefulness, and eventually slips back into the soporific of convention. Before readers even begin the diary they are told the outcome—the "madman" regains his proper sense of social equilibrium and carries on, which makes the text far more sardonic than hopeful.

The narrator who tells the deceptively simple story of "Kong Yiji" is reminiscing about events that occurred more than twenty years prior to their retelling, which immediately establishes a temporal distance between the reader and the events to be described. Moreover, the narrator assumes the voice (or eye) of the twelve-year old boy he was when he first witnessed the events in question. What some scholars have characterized as a naive narrative voice, I regard, instead, as amoral. Throughout the text the "boy" narrator never expresses any emotion, never makes any evaluations or passes any judgments on the events he is describing. He is wholly lacking interior space and must be considered unreliable.

At the age of twelve I started work as a pot-boy in the Prosperity Tavern at the edge of the town. The boss put me to work in the outer room, saying that I looked too much the fool to serve long-gowned customers. The short gowned customers there were easier to deal with, it is true, but among them were quite a few pernickety ones who insisted on watching for themselves while the yellow

wine was ladled from the keg, looked for water at the bottom of the wine pot, and personally inspected the pot's immersion into the hot water. Under such strict surveillance, diluting the wine was very hard indeed. Thus it did not take my boss too many days to decide this job too was beyond me. Luckily I had been recommended by somebody influential, so he could not sack me. Instead I was transferred to the dull task of simply warming wine.²⁵

The readers' sense of the narrator's unreliability is further strengthened by the fact that in Prosperity Tavern he is inept at all but the simplest tasks. The fact that Lu Xun uses such an amoral, unreliable narrator, as well as a significant temporal displacement between event and retelling, effectively places the reader at a great distance from the text.

Our boss was a grim-faced man, nor were the customers very pleasant, which made the atmosphere a gloomy one. The only times when there was any laughter were when Kong Yiji came into the tavern. That is why I remember him.²⁶

The distance between the reader and the text, and more importantly the distance between the reader and Kong Yiji, distances the reader from the spectacle in a manner similar to the way Lu Xun was distanced from the event depicted in the lantern slide. Hence, the reader's relationship to the text is that of the spectator observing spectators observing the object of a spectacle.

Kong Yiji was the only long-gowned customer who used to drink his wine standing. A big, pallid man whose wrinkled face often bore scars, he had a large and grizzled beard. And although he wore a long gown it was dirty and tattered. It had not by the look of it been washed or mended for ten years or more. He used so many archaisms in his speech that half of it was barely intelligible. And as his surname was Kong, he was given the nickname Kong Yiji from *kong, yi, ji*, the first three characters in the old-fashioned children's copy book. Whenever he came in, everyone would look at him and chuckle. And someone would call out

"Kong Yiji What are those fresh scars on your face?"

²⁵ Yang, *Lu Xun Selected Works*, vol.1, p.52; *LXQJ*, vol.1, p.20.

²⁶ Yang, *Lu Xun Selected Works*, vol.1, p.53.

Ignoring this he would lay nine coppers on the bar and order two bowls of heated wine with a dish of aniseed-peas. Then someone else would bawl:

"You must have been stealing again!"

"Why sully a man's good name for no reason at all?" Kong Yiji would ask, raising his eyebrows.

"Good name? Why the day before yesterday you were trussed up and beaten for stealing books from the Ho family. I saw you!"

At that Kong Yiji would flush, the veins on this forehead standing out as he protested. "Taking books can't be counted as stealing... Taking books...for a scholar...can't be counted as stealing."²⁷

The above passage introducing Kong Yiji is a masterwork of how Lu Xun subtly affects the erasure of violent body-spectacle from his texts. The apparent focus of the narrative is a pathetic, impoverished, old scholar who earns a few coppers now and then working as a tutor. He is a source of amusement at Prosperity Tavern because he habitually steals books from his employers, and is always beaten for the offense. Significantly, Kong Yiji only appears at the tavern when his wounds have healed into a painful calligraphy of scars. The scars inscribed on Kong Yiji's body are the physical traces of a deadly serious drama about power, violence, and uses of the body in China.

However, Lu Xun's discourse on power and the "spectacle body" eschews all direct representation spectacle, focusing instead on the spectator, on the mindless cruelty and lack of empathy in the act of spectatorship. The reader never witnesses Kong Yiji's beatings, hence Lu Xun uses him as the object of spectatorship that mirrors the nature and character of the spectators.

One day shortly before the Mid-Autumn Festival I think it was, my boss who was slowly making out his accounts took down the tally-board. 'Kong Yiji hasn't shown up for a long time,' he remarked suddenly. 'He still owes nineteen coppers.' That made me realize how long it was since we had seen him.

²⁷ Yang, *Lu Xun Selected Works*, vol.1., p.53.

"How could he?" rejoined one of the customers. "His legs were broken in that last beating up."

"Ah!" said my boss.

"He'd been stealing again. This time he was fool enough to steal from Mr. Ding, the provincial-grade scholar. As if anybody could get away with that!"

"So what happened?"

"What happened. First he wrote a confession, then he was beaten. The beating lasted nearly all night, and they broke both his legs."²⁸

"And then?"

"Well, his legs were broken."

"Yes, but after?"

After?... who knows? He may be dead."²⁹

In this passage the narration of Kong Yiji's second beating is slightly more protracted than the first description but no more graphic. The details are kept to an absolute minimum and the reader is offered nothing more than the necessary facts, nothing that might stimulate or titillate the reader's prurient interests. Unlike in the first case, however, the reader's attention is not diverted by laughter. Instead Lu Xun diminishes the spectacle impact of the event by delivering the facts in a narrative voice that is totally indifferent. Not even the fact that Kong Yiji might have been beaten to death arouses any real interest. In this way Lu Xun shifts the reader's attention away from the spectacle of the beating itself to the voice (tone) of the

²⁸ I would like to make note here of the fact that Kong Yiji is made to sign a confession before he is beaten. This is a technique used in certain regimes of power where the individual has no inalienable rights as human beings. We see this same technique still being used in Maoist China beginning as early as the first *zheng feng* campaign launched in Yan'an in early 1942. It is a technique that is used repeatedly throughout the Maoist period, such as in the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957, the campaigns of the Cultural Revolution in the mid to late 1960s, again after the Tian'anmen Square Massacre in the spring of 1989, and the anti-Falun gong campaign of the 1990-2000, and still more recently in the ongoing "Crack Down Hard" campaign in which one hundred and thirteen people were executed in a four day period in April, 2001.

secondary narrator and the reaction of the tavern owner. For Lu Xun the patrons in Prosperity Tavern represent most of the Chinese people, which is, in effect, a powerfully damning social critique.

Kong Yiji makes one final appearance in the text when he arrives at the tavern severely crippled. Despite his pitiful condition he still serves as the foil for the crowd's perverse sense of humor.

"Warm a bowl of wine."

It was said in a low but familiar voice. I opened my eyes. There was no one to be seen. I stood up to look out. There below the bar, facing the door, sat Kong Yiji. His face was thin and grimy—he looked a wreck. He had on a ragged lined jacket and was squatting cross-legged on a mat which was attached to his shoulders by a straw rope. When he saw me he repeated:

"Warm a bowl of wine."

At this point my boss leaned over the bar to ask, "Is that Kong Yiji? You still owe me nineteen coppers."

"That... I'll settle next time." He looked up dejectedly.
"Here's my cash. Give me some good wine."

My boss, just as in the past, chuckled and said: "Kong Yiji, you've been stealing again!"

But instead of a stout denial, the answer was: "don't joke with me."

"Joke? How did you get your legs broken if you hadn't been stealing?"

"I fell," whispered Kong Yiji. "Broke them in a fall." His eyes pleaded with the boss to let the matter drop. By now several people had gathered round, and they all laughed with the boss. I warmed the wine, carried it over and set it on the threshold. He produced four coppers from his ragged coat pocket, and as he placed them in my hand I saw his own hands were covered with mud—he must have crawled there on them. Presently he finished

²⁹ Yang, *Lu Xun Selected Works*, vol.1., p.56.

his wine and, to the accompaniment of taunts and laughter, slowly pushed himself off with his hands.³⁰

No one who participated in this final exchange seemed to take any real notice of the fact that Kong Yiji had been crippled, spiritually as well as physically. Not even the primary narrator who describes Kong Yiji's pitiful state engages him on any real, personal level. The factual tone of the narration effectively neutralizes the spectacle value of Kong Yiji's condition, which in turn denies the reader access to the perverse, emotionally charged state of the agent—victim—spectator syndrome. Thus, when Kong Yiji crawls away from the tavern, “to the accompaniment of taunts and laughter,” Lu Xun intentionally draws the reader's attention away from the sad spectacle of Kong Yiji, to the reaction of the crowd and the perverse gaze of the spectator. The fact that Kong Yiji's beatings and his final maiming are a source of amusement to the patrons of Prosperity Tavern begs the question about the source of human cruelty, a question he wanted his readers to consider very seriously.

When the plot of a story forces Lu Xun to invoke spectacle he does so quickly with minimal detail, keeping the visual/emotional impact of the event low-key. In the examples I have cited from both “Madman's Diary,” and “Kong Yiji,” once the spectacle has been described, either through secondary or oblique narration, the narrative immediately shifts focus to the reaction of the peripheral characters. In this sense the protagonists (e.g., the diarist and Kong Yiji) are mere ciphers meant to draw the readers' attention to the cruelty and lack of empathy of the spectators, and by extension the docile cruelty of the Chinese people, and the Chinese nation.

Both structurally and symbolically more complex than either “Madman's Diary” or “Kong Yiji,” “Medicine” (*Yao 药*) reveals growing technical sophistication in Lu Xun's work. Of particular interest in the context of my argument is his erasure of the spectacle body from the text. The execution of a young revolutionary is the pivotal event (spectacle) in the text, and is

³⁰ Yang, *Lu Xun Selected Works*, vol.1., pp. 56-57; *LXQJ*, vol.1, p.24.

one of the keys to its allegorical meaning, yet the reader is never allowed to experience the spectacle or spectacle body directly. To illustrate my point I will focus on the character Old Shuan's attendance at the execution, and the secondary narrative of the event later that same day.³¹

Basically, "Medicine" is about the owner of a small tea shop who has a son dying of tuberculosis. He and his wife have been told that if they feed their son a piece of *mantou* (馒头), Chinese steamed bread, that has been dipped in the fresh blood of a newly executed revolutionary it will cure their son's consumption. Old Shuan and his wife gather their coppers and make the necessary arrangements.

Old Shuan started again and, opening his eyes he saw several men passing. One of them even turned and looked at him, and although he could not see him clearly, the man's eyes shone with a lustful light, like a famished person's at the sight of food.... Then he looked around and saw many strange people, in twos and threes wandering about like lost souls. However, when he gazed steadily at them, he could not see anything else strange about them.

Presently he saw some soldiers strolling around.... The next second, with a trampling of feet, a crowd rushed past. There-upon the small groups which had arrived earlier suddenly converged and surged forward. Just before the crossroad they came to a sudden stop and grouped themselves in a semi-circle. Old Shuan looked in that direction too, but he could only see people's backs. Craning their necks as far as they would go, they looked like so many ducks, held and lifted by some invisible hand. For a moment all was still; then a sound was heard, and a stir swept through the onlookers. There was a rumble as they pushed back, sweeping past Old Shuan and nearly knocking him down.³²

³¹ For further discussion of structure, narrative, and symbolism in "Medicine," see Milena Doleželová-Velingerová, Lu Xun's "Medicine," in Merle Goldman, ed., *Modern Chinese Literature in the May Fourth Era* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), pp. 221-231; Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Voices from the Iron House*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 65-68.

³² Yang, *Lu Xun Selected Works*, vol.1, pp.59-60; *LXQJ*, vol. 1, pp.26-27.

Throughout the entire first section of this text the narrator articulates a world seen exclusively through the consciousness of Old Shuan. While this perspective is far more immediate than the temporally shifted narratives in "Madman's Diary," and "Kong Yiji," it affords the reader even less access to the drama of violent public spectacle. Lu Xun accomplishes this by employing techniques he experimented with in the previous two texts (i.e., oblique narration, ironic distance). As Milena Doleželová-Velingerová points out, Old Shuan's character is "depicted with maximum economy...[and] only those traits meaningful to the ensuing action are provided."³³ This type of suggestive characterization minimizes Old Shuan's intrusive presence in the narrative. It is not Lu Xun's intention that the reader identify with or pity Old Shuan, in fact, quite the opposite is true; he asks only that the reader look at the world through Old Shuan's eyes, to see, momentarily what he sees.

Along with minimal characterization, "the action in this section is fragmented and difficult to comprehend."³⁴ Velingerová uses the words "deranged" and "incoherent" to describe the narrative voice in "Madman's Diary." In point of fact, Old Shuan is no more reliable as a narrator than the "mad" diarist, or the dull, uncomprehending clerk in Prosperity Tavern. Once again Lu Xun employs an unreliable narrator to establish ironic distance between the implied author and narrator, a technique used to objectify events and de-emotionalize the reader's response to textual events.

Lu Xun's greatest demonstration of technical control is illustrated by the fact Old Shuan (hence the reader) is present at the execution (the act of body spectacle), but sees nothing more than wraiths moving through the half-light, the back of the crowd, and the heads of the observers moving like those of "ducks" craning to catch a glimpse of the victim, the body, the spectacle of the physical inscription of power. In keeping with the economical tone of the preceding

³³ Milena Doleželová-Velingerová, Lu Xun's "Medicine," p.224.

narration, the execution, when it does occur, is treated with an absolute economy of detail.³⁵ In effect, the execution is reduced to a single sound that is immediately lost in the tumult of the crowd.

The crowd itself is a mere suggestion, just so “many strange people...wandering around like lost souls,” until it suddenly coalesces into a discernable semi-circle just before the execution takes place. The most dramatic characteristic Lu Xun ascribes to this nebulous group is the fact that their eyes shone with a “lustful light,” eyes hungry to consume the spectacle of the execution. Once the public drama has been enacted the crowd rushes off, nearly knocking Old Shuan to the ground in the process. Watching this scene one cannot help but be reminded of Lu Xun’s comments about the spectators at Beijing butcher shops.³⁶

...a heavy-jowled man burst in. He had over his shoulders a dark brown shirt, unbuttoned and fastened carelessly by a broad dark brown girdle at his waist. As soon as he entered he shouted to Old Shuan.

“Has he taken it? Any better? Luck’s with you, Old Shuan. What luck! If not for my hearing of things so quickly....”

Holding the kettle in one hand, the other straight by his side in an attitude of respect, Old Shuan listened with a smile. In fact, all present were listening respectfully. The old woman, dark circles under her eyes too, came out smiling with a bowl containing tea leaves and an added olive, over which old Shuan poured boiling water for the newcomer.

“This is a guaranteed cure! Not like other things!” declared the heavy-jowled man. “Just think, brought back warm, and eaten warm!”

“Yes indeed, we couldn’t have managed it without Uncle Kang’s help.” The old woman thanked him very warmly.

³⁴ Milena Doleželová-Velingerová, Lu Xun’s “Medicine,” p.224.

³⁵ Jingle yihui, shihu you dian shengyin, bian you dongyao, qilai, hong de yi sheng, dou xiang houtui (静了一会, 似乎有点声音, 便又起来, 轰的一声, 都向后退); ...see *LXQJ*, vol. 1, pp. 26-27.

³⁶ “Nuola zouhou zenyan?” (What happens after Nora Leaves Home), in *LXQJ* vol.1, pp.268-274. Yang, *Lu Xun Selected Works*, vol.II, p. 91.

“A guaranteed cure!” eaten warm like this. A roll dipped in human blood like this can cure consumption!”³⁷

As in “Madman’s Diary” and “Kong Yiji” Lu Xun uses secondary narration to distance the reader from the body/spectacle event, as well as to identify the victim and to fill in some of the narrative details. What is significantly different about the secondary narrator in “Medicine” is that he is not a nameless voice in the crowd, but a carefully drawn character with a specific identity.³⁸ It is an example of Lu Xun’s well-honed sense of irony that Old Shuan’s wife refers to this dark and villainous character as Kang Dashu, Uncle Kang. This character type is almost a stock villain in Chinese popular fiction. Kang, after all, was the agent who acquired the blood-dipped *mantou* for Old Shuan. But Kang is not alone at the execution and his morally deficient behavior epitomizes that of the entire crowd of spectators. And once again in a scathing critique Lu Xun implicates the Chinese people in Kang’s moral and spiritual deficiencies.³⁹

While the actual execution is mentioned by an unidentified voice in the crowd at Old Shuan’s teahouse, “Uncle” Kang’s narrative immediately deflects the focus of the conversation to other matters. He perfunctorily dismisses the revolutionary’s (Xia 夏) death by declaring that the “*xiao dongxi*” 小东西 just didn’t want to live. “Uncle” Kang’s familiar, almost comic attitude to the victim is strikingly similar to that of the patrons who mock Kong Yiji in Prosperity Tavern; no form of perverse spectacle is beneath their threshold for amusement. “Uncle” Kang’s attitudes and behavior epitomize what Lu Xun believed to be the crux of China’s great

³⁷ Yang, *Lu Xun Selected Works*, vol.1, pp62-63.

³⁸ In her article “Medicine,” Velingerová draws a parallel between Kang Dashu and the “butcher from Chapter 27 of *Shuihu zhuan*, based on his physical description and similar function (see note 7, p.433).

³⁹ When I say that Lu Xun “implicates the Chinese people in Kang’s moral and spiritual deficiencies,” the “people” does not include the readers of *New Youth*, who comprised a newly emerging intellectual elite who felt only disgust for the cruelty and superstition of the traditional Confucian system.

"spiritual" illness. To acknowledge this fact, to confront this reality, and to rise above it, as he has, is specifically what Lu Xun demands of his readers. In the end, like the diarist and Kong Yiji, the victim of the execution (i.e., the young revolutionary Xia) is declared "mad" by the very people who cannibalize his corpse. Ultimately it was the apathy of the Chinese people that was the cause of Lu Xun's despair.

When the time for publication [of *Vita Nova*] drew near, some of our contributors dropped out and then our funds ran out, until there were only three of us left and we were penniless. Since we had started our venture at an unlucky hour, there was naturally no one to whom we could complain when we failed; but later even we three were destined to part, and our discussions of a future dream world had to cease. So ended this abortive *Vita Nova*.

Only later did I feel the futility of it all. At that time I had not a clue. Later it seemed to me that if a man's proposals met with approval, that should encourage him to advance; if they met with opposition, that should make him fight back; but the real tragedy was for him to lift up his voice among the living and meet with no response, neither approval nor opposition, just as if he were stranded in a boundless desert completely at a loss. That was when I became conscious of loneliness.⁴⁰

Before moving on to my concluding point on Lu Xun, body erasure, and the technology of power in traditional China, I have to say a few words about "Shi zhong" 示众 (A Public Example), for it is in this text that Lu Xun elevates the crowd (the spectator's gaze) to its greatest prominence.⁴¹ The text is, quite literally, a masterful study of crowd behavior. As Patrick Hanan points out,

Lu Hsün loathed people's capacity for treating tragic or pathetic scenes as occasions for diversions or curiosity, instead of as a matter for conscience and sympathy.... All emotion is suppressed. A placid observation replaces the fury and contempt that are called for. The narrative itself treats the scene as a diversion. Like

⁴⁰ Lu Xun, "Preface to Call to Arms," trans. Yang & Yang, (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1981) pp. iii-iv.

⁴¹ "Shi zhong" can be found in *Panghuang* 彷徨 (Wandering). Lu Xun's second collection of short fiction.

voyeurs, we watch the onlookers who, like *voyeurs* watch the criminal, uncomprehending.⁴²

Hanan's use of the term voyeur is extremely apt because it captures what Lu Xun believed to be the perverse nature of the Chinese people's addiction to violent public spectacle, to the "sado-masochistic" triangular relationship between victim-victimizer-spectator. Beyond calling attention to this fact there is no plot in "A Public Example," like a camera lens the narrative pans back and forth through a crowd of onlookers who have gathered to gawk at a condemned prisoner being paraded through the street.

A fat boy of eleven or twelve, eyes narrowed, mouth crooked, was calling out in front of a roadside shop. His voice was already hoarse and rather drowsy, as if the long summer day had made him sleepy. On the rickety table beside him sat two dozen steamed buns and dumplings, not steaming hot but stone cold.

"Hey! Steamed buns and dumplings piping hot...."

Suddenly, like a rubber ball rebounding from a wall, he flew across the road. By the telegraph pole opposite, facing the road, two men had halted. One, a scrawny policeman with a sallow face in a yellow uniform, had a sword at his waist. He was holding a rope, its other end tied around the arm of a man in a blue cotton gown, and white sleeveless jerkin. His new straw hat, its brim turned down, covered his eyes. They seemed to be fixed on his head. He hastily lowered his eyes to look at the white jerkin, on which were lines of writing large and small.

In a second a semi-circle of onlookers gathered. After they were joined by an old bald-head, the little space left was promptly occupied by a bare-chested fat fellow with a red nose. Being outsize, he filled the place of two people, so that later arrivals could only form a second row to peer between the necks of those in front.⁴³

This is, arguably, Lu Xun's most interesting crowd scene from the perspective of pure craft. Everyone, including the prisoner, is watching everyone else and, at the same time being

⁴² Hanan, "The Technique of Lu Hsün's Fiction," p.89.

⁴³ Lu Xun, *Wandering*, trans. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang (Beijing: Foreign languages Press, 1981), pp.63-64; Lu Xun, *Panghuang* 彷徨 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshi, 1976) pp.

watched themselves. The soldier has only to halt momentarily for a crowd to gather. The image of the bouncing ball perfectly encapsulates the speed with which the scent of victim electrifies the otherwise somnolent scene. In addition, the quality of the narrative is exclusively visual, or as both Patrick Hanan and Marston Anderson remark, "cinematic,"⁴⁴ which reinforces the voyeuristic quality of the text.

Since there is nothing happening beyond the interaction of the crowd Lu Xun does not have to worry about distancing the reader from the text. Instead he uses the "cinematic" narrative lens to bring the reader in closer than in any other story.

As a result, the reader, though his quality of observation retains the clinical exteriority of the camera, feels himself pressed into the crowd, unable to attain the equanimity of a distanced view. The disorienting cinematic technique of "A Public Example" thus forces on the reader an unwilling identification with the crowd. To the extent that the reader resists such identification on ethical grounds, he is compelled to scrutinize his own process of observation.⁴⁵

"A Public Example," written six years after "Madman's Diary" clearly illustrates Lu Xun's mastery over his subject and craft. The anonymous prisoner and policeman are reduced to the merest trace of spectacle; it is the crowd itself, the physicality of the bodies, their behavior, their interactions that commands Lu Xun's creative attention. In this textual foregrounding of the crowd he identifies and denounces the spectator's gaze as an essential component in the physical spectacle of power (be it personal or state power) manifest in its most primitive form of violence against the body.

From the outset of his brief career as a fiction writer Lu Xun specifically put the "spectacle body" under erasure, it exists merely as a trace in the text; he does this to foreground

86-87.

⁴⁴ See Marston Anderson, *Narrative and Critique: The Construction of Social Reality in Modern Chinese Literature* (Doctoral dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1985), pp. 73-74.

the act of watching, the lust of the spectator, the arousal of the voyeur at the sight of violent physical spectacle. Lu Xun left for Japan believing in the liberating power of science and technology, he arrived home with a profoundly altered and decidedly melancholic view of the situation. He understood the victimizer-victim-spectator architecture of power in China, as did his contemporaries, yet the role of the spectator clearly emerged as the primary theme in his fiction—spectacular acts of power require not only victims and victimizers, they also require witnesses. In the context of his historical moment, Lu Xun's insight into the functional relationship between spectacle and spectator in an autocratic state is clear evidence of his intellectual power. But great intellectual power is a sword that cuts both ways, and his confrontation with the deep apathy of the Chinese spectator was the cause of his "war of resistance" waged in a penumbra of despair.

Despite being the "father" of modern Chinese fiction, Lu Xun remained to the end of his life personally melancholic and ambivalent about the project of Marxist revolution. Following his death in 1936, his fiction has served as an endless source of fine scholarly work, but not until I began reading post-Mao writers like Han Shaogong, Mo Yan, and Yu Hua did I get the sense that for the first time in sixty years there were young Chinese writers engaged in the same body-centered discourse that so occupied Lu Xun's attention. Certainly the post-Mao writers come to this discourse from very different historical and discursive perspectives, yet the texts I have chosen to discuss all display the characteristic body-centeredness of the discourse.

Post-Mao writers are not inheritors of Lu Xun's discourse, their works are textual nodes in a field of discourse, they make their own statements in their own ways. Not surprisingly, the post-Mao texts are worlds away from those of Lu Xun, marked more by difference than similarity. Yet all four writers share an interest in the "political economy of the body." Each of

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 74

the writers sees the physical body as a real discursive site in the Chinese technology of power, and each in his own way grapples with the most difficult task of representing that which is physical in a purely textual medium.

Chapter Two

Han Shaogong and the Return of the Spectacle Body

In my introduction to this dissertation I likened the narrative landscapes of post-Mao fiction of the mid-1980s to the fabulist grotesqueries of Pieter Bruegel at his most hellish. This might seem a rather fanciful analogy, yet all the texts discussed in the following analysis share the characteristic of highly visual narratives that are used to represent images not unlike those produced by Bruegel, images that assault the human sensibility with their graphic depictions of death in all its raw and terrifying presence, images that bear mute witness to events so big and so incomprehensibly real they exceed the limits of the written word.

For serious writers such as Han Shaogong, Mo Yan, and Yu Hua, fresh from their experiences of the Cultural Revolution, bearing witness to the mad reign of Mao Zedong was a serious and difficult challenge. How does one capture hysteria and madness in a word, or in a hundred thousand words? The three writers mentioned above, each in his own unique way, very creatively use language as a palate for the creation of highly graphic and profoundly disturbing narratives that evoke the deep resonance of the horrors experienced by the Chinese people, rather than merely cataloguing the instances and varieties of spectacle.

There is no question but that Han Shaogong, Mo Yan, and Yu Hua are all very different writers in terms of voice, literary styles, and the various techniques employed in their texts, yet for all their apparent differences they share certain affinities, two of which are of particular importance in the context of my discussion of violence, spectacle, and the body in modern Chinese fiction. All of the texts examined in the following analysis are informed by the exercise of power through acts of overt, physical violence, and all three writers employ narrative strategies that exceed the limits of realism. I will elucidate the importance of these points in the course of my discussion.

If, as I have argued in the preceding chapter, Lu Xun initiated modern China's literary discourse on power, social violence, and the body, then it was the first generation post-Mao writers who reanimated that discourse after decades of exclusion under the orthodox doctrine of Socialist Realism. Admittedly, drawing any kind of direct correlation between May Fourth and post-Mao writing is problematic. As the participants at a 1990 Harvard conference concluded, "apparent commonalities need careful qualification before they can sustain meaningful comparisons and that in many ways it is discontinuity, not continuity, that prevails."¹ However true this may be, we should not lose sight of the fact that even in situations of great discontinuity questions of commonality, of inclusion and exclusion are, to a large degree, contingent on the critical framework being employed.

To map the influence of Lu Xun in the context of post-Mao fiction one must conceive of a discursive formation situated on a level beneath the obvious discontinuities of personal experience, historical perspective, language, narration, style, etcetera. Beneath the apparent discontinuities of surface narratives one discovers a "unity of discourse."² In the context of my analysis the operative "unity" is the body as the nexus for power, spectacle, and violence in modern Chinese literary discourse. Certainly, once the first generation of post-Mao, post-Cultural Revolution writers had satisfied their initial need for a cathartic outpouring of pain and bitterness, that is, satisfied it to the degree allowed by the Party, they were confronted by the same questions that had so troubled Lu Xun seventy years earlier: Why is China's national culture characterized by acts of violent spectacle? Why do the Chinese people continue to "eat"

¹ *From May Fourth to June Fourth: Fiction and Film in Twentieth-Century China*, ed. Ellen Widmer & David Der-Wei Wang (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), p.ix.

² Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Shridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books), 1972. pp. 21-30.

one another?³ Anyone familiar with Lu Xun's work knows that he identified Confucian culture as the root of China's "spiritual" illness, the source of its perverse social dysfunction.⁴ But the problem confronting post-Mao writers was that the Chinese penchant for spectacular social violence did not disappear with the overthrow of "Confucian" ideology. On the contrary, the spectacle of violence, and the violence of spectacle intensified in the post-Confucian era of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought. What, then, is the cause, the root, the source of China's culture of violence? It is in taking on this question that certain post-Mao writers, such as Han Shaogong, are linked to Lu Xun by contributing to the literary discourse he initiated in the spring of 1918.⁵

I begin my analysis with Han Shaogong for a number of reasons, primary among them being that of the three post-Mao writers discussed in this dissertation his short story "Ba Ba Ba" can be most easily and most directly linked to the ethos of Lu Xun's fiction, and by extension to his social critique. There are, of course, more differences than similarities between Lu Xun's fiction and that of Han Shaogong, but at the deeper layers of discourse they are both grappling with the question of social violence and the "national character" of the Chinese people.⁶

When he was born he showed no sign of life for two whole days, his eyes remained closed, and he refused to feed, scaring his folks out of their wits. It was not until the third day that he started to cry. Later on when he could crawl, the villagers often played with him, teaching him this and that. Very soon, he picked up two

³ Here the word "eat" is meant metaphorically, yet there were numerous instances of actual cannibalism that took place during the Cultural Revolution. See Zheng Yi, *Scarlet Memorial: Tales of Cannibalism in modern China*, trans. T.P. Sym (Bolder: Westview Press, 1996).

⁴ As I pointed out in the Introduction, Lu Xun's "totalistic" condemnation of "Confucian" culture was highly reductive, conflating two thousand years of evolving social practice into an intellectual singularity that signed for cruel, oppressively orthodox late Qing social order.

⁵ It was in April of 1918, that Lu Xun's first short story, "A Madman's Diary," was published in the magazine *New Youth* (*Xin Qingnian*).

⁶ Personally I do not support arguments of "national character," or inherent racial traits, as they are specious at best, but for May Fourth writers, as well as a good many post-Mao writers questions framed in this way have appeared legitimate and viable.

expressions, one was “Papa,” the other was “Fuck Mama.” The second was a vulgar expression, but coming from a toddler it didn’t really mean anything, and could simply be taken to mean “Fuck ha ha.”

Time passed...then he was seven or eight years old, but still these were the only words he could say. Besides, his eyes were dull, his movements slow, and his head was big, fleshy, and lopsided like a green gourd turned upside down. Anyway, it passed for a head, whatever oddities there were inside it. After each meal he left the house, a grain or two of rice sticking to the corners of his mouth, a large oily stain on his chest, and rocking and swaying, tottered up and down the village, greeting passers-by of all ages and sexes with a cordial “Papa.” If you scolded at him he would return the compliment at once—staring at a certain point on your head, he would slowly roll his eyes skyward, showing the whites of his eyes, and then spit out the words. “Fuck Mama.” Then he would turn and make his escape. It was no easy job for him to roll his eyes: it seemed as if he had to mobilize all the muscles of his neck, chest and abdomen before he could manage it. Turning his head was an equally laborious job. His neck was weak, and his head had to roll like a pepper grinder, tracing a big arc before steadying into the turn. But running took the most effort. He stumbled and staggered, and had to thrust the weight of this head and chest forward to drag the rest of him along. To get his direction he had to strain to see from under his brows. Every stride was huge—he was like a sprinter approaching the finishing line in slow motion.

He had to be given a name—for use at formal celebrations and for his tombstone. And so he came to be called Bastard Bing.⁷

Thus opens the story “Ba Ba Ba.” I have quoted the text at such length here to establish the fact that Bing Zai is the primary agent of signification in Han Shaogong’s narrative, and as such is given a special status in the text. Before the reader is given any other information he is introduced to the bizarre singularity that is Bing Zai. For the first three days of this existence he is, essentially, stillborn: he does not open his eyes, he does not feed, he does not cry out. He is

⁷ In the Chinese text the name of the child is Bing Zai. Translating this name to mean Young Bing is a fair translation, but in Chinese the name can also be read as Bing the whelp or Bing the bastard, which is more in keeping with the overall tone of the story. In my reading of the text I will thus refer to Bing Zai as Bastard Bing. Han Shaogong, “Ba Ba Ba” in *Homecoming and Other Stories*, trans. Martha Cheung (Hong Kong: A Renditions Paperbacks), pp. 35-36.

there but not there, the flesh and bone have arrived but the animating spirit is missing. It is as though the child exists outside of time.⁸ And when finally he begins to show signs of life it is in a body that is hideously deformed and functionally mute—Bing Zai can say only “papa” and “fuck mama.”

What is most significant for me in Han Shaogong’s creation is the fact that Bing Zai is denied the power of speech. Whatever or whoever he is, and that is what the reader is asked to ponder, he issues forth from a place that exists outside the normal boundaries and comforts of language. There is something terrifying and primordial about Bing Zai, he has physical presence and little else; hence, what he has to tell us must be discerned, almost exclusively, from his physical state of being. It is in this sense that Han Shaogong privileges Bing Zai (i.e. the body) as the site for his discourse on power and violence in Chinese society, and in so doing establishes a clearly identifiable discursive link with Lu Xun. As I demonstrated at length in the previous chapter, Lu Xun’s literary engagement with the questions of power, social violence and spectacle focused primarily on the body, specifically, the spectacle body, body as the site for the violent enactment of social and political power. However, where Lu Xun adopted a strategy of removing the “spectacular” body from his narratives, Han Shaogong adopts an opposite strategy. As can be seen from the opening paragraph of “Ba Ba Ba,” the representation of the spectacle body, far from being hidden is offered in a direct and highly graphic manner.

The graphic depiction of violence is a shared characteristic of all the stories treated in the following analysis. While each of the authors in question approaches the topic in his own,

⁸ Curiously, in the fourth section of the story there is a brief record of something very similar happening to an old man in Chicken Tail Village. “Third Grandpa of Chicken Tail had been bitten by a huge centipede at home and died, but no one learned about it until two days later, by which time one of his feet had been half eaten away by rats, All bad omens, it seemed.”

“But later on someone else said that Third Grandpa was still alive, for he was seen gathering bamboo shoots on the slopes a few days ago. And so Third Grandpa seemed there and yet not there, his very existence open to question.”

unique way, representing power as it is exercised through acts of physical violence necessitates foregrounding the body in the narrative, which, in effect, elevates the status of the body to that of a primary signifier in the text. Reading the texts in question is, in one sense, a process of reading bodies: deformed bodies, devolved bodies, bodies that are diseased, bodies that are mutilated, bodies that are rotting corpses. Somewhat paradoxically, it is this textual foregrounding of the body as the site of socio-political spectacle that links Han Shaogong, Mo Yan, and Yu Hua to one another, and to Lu Xun. I should point out here that the use of the body as the site for representing social and political discourse is nothing unique to Lu Xun or post-Mao writers. The Socialist Realist writers put the body to good use in the service of the state. What distinguishes the body in the texts by Lu Xun, Han Shaogong, Mo Yan, and Yu Hua from that of the Socialist Realist body is its economy, that is, how the body is represented and used in the text. As I will demonstrate below, once freed from the narrow constraints of Socialist Realist dogma, the body as a discursive site becomes marked increasingly by ambiguity.

Bastard Bing had a lot of "papas," but he had never seen his real father. The story has it that his father, tired of his ugly-looking wife and fed up with the monstrosity she had given birth to, had long left the village to become an opium trader and had never been back....

Bastard Bing's mother grew vegetables and raised chickens for a living, in addition to being midwife.... She had cut the umbilical cords of many a young life at birth, but the lump of flesh she had brought into the world would never make a man....

Mother and son lived in a solitary timber hut on the edge of the stockaded village....

He [Bing Zai] often amused himself in the yard in front of the house, poking earthworms or rolling chicken droppings in his palms.⁹

⁹ Han Shaogong, "Ba Ba Ba," pp.36-37.

Everything about Bing Zai isolates him from the normal social life of the village. He is physically deformed, he is unable to communicate with others in any reasonable sense of the word, and his paternity is clouded in ambiguity. There is more than a little irony in the fact that as village midwife Bing Zai's mother has been responsible for assisting in many healthy births, yet the life that issued forth from her own womb was little more than a deformed "lump of flesh." The portrait of Bing Zai drawn quickly and concisely in the opening paragraphs of the story is of a repellant yet oddly compelling character who exists almost entirely as a physical presence. Bing Zai exists as a body; what little consciousness he possesses extends no farther than the edges of his physical form. As a social being he is opaque to everyone around him, and as a character he is opaque to the reader.

One after another, the lads found bristles growing on their chins; slowly, their backs began to arch. Another batch of snot-nosed kids grew into lads. Bastard Bing, however, was still no taller than a pack basket, and he still wore a child's red floral open crotch pants. For many years his mother had been telling people he was "only thirteen," but he had aged visibly and faint lines began to mark his forehead.¹⁰

The entire first section of "Ba Ba Ba" is devoted to the characterization of Bing Zai, which, in effect, assigns him a preeminent position in the text. As a character he thus occupies an elevated status in the narrative, and it is through him that all of the events that follow acquire meaning. However, Bing Zai's singular function in the text is made problematic by the fact that he exists not as a "normal" functioning character but as a docile body that lacks the power of agency. For the most part Bing Zai experiences life as a series of slaps, punches, and pummelings. As I will illustrate below, the body of Bing Zai is the surface on which Han Shaogong inscribes the history of events in Chicken Head Village, and by extension a critique of Chinese society past and present. The novella "Ba Ba Ba" can thus be read as a character study

¹⁰ Han Shaogong, "Ba Ba Ba," p.39.

of the Chinese people, and in attempting such a critique Han Shaogong shares a definite affinity with Lu Xun.

Before moving on I want to clarify how I am using Han Shaogong's text. There are a number of elements in this first section of the narrative that I have not cited and do not include in my analysis. Han Shaogong incorporated many aspects of archaic, rural Hunanese and Miao linguistic and social culture into his early narratives, which led inevitably to the classification of his early work as "root seeking" (*xungen* 寻根) literature.¹¹ There has already been a great deal written about "root seeking" in post-Mao fiction, and I do not want to get side-tracked by this issue beyond acknowledging that in both texts examined in the following analysis, Han Shaogong delves deep into China's mythopoeic past looking for a context that will give meaning to the recent historical present.

The village perched high in the mountains above the clouds. When you left the house you often found yourself stepping into rolling clouds. Take a step forward and the clouds would retreat, while those at your back would move in behind you, bearing you on a solitary island without end, floating.... Sometimes you caught sight of the armored birds on the trees. Black as coal and the size of a thumb, their call was loud and clear and rang with a metallic twang. They seemed to have remained unchanged since time immemorial. Sometimes you would see a gigantic shadow drifting towards you on the clouds, a shadow like two open pages of a book. At first glance it looked like an eagle; on closer examination you realized it was a butterfly. At first glance it was grayish black; on closer examination you found that the black wings had green, yellow and orange markings, as well as spots and lines so faint they looked like indecipherable hieroglyphics....

What happened below the clouds was of no consequence to the inhabitants of the mountain villages. In the Qin dynasty the government had set up a county in this region. In the Han the government had also set up a county here. Later on, during the Ming dynasty and the Qing dynasty, administrative and other major reforms had been introduced—but all these accounts came from the lips of cattle-hide dealers and opium traders plying their

¹¹ See Joseph S.M. Lau, "Visitation of the Past in Han Shaogong's Post-1985 Fiction;" Jeffrey C. Kinkley, "Shen Congwen's Legacy in Chinese Literature of the 1980s." et.al.

trade in the mountains. And for all that had been said about government policies and reforms, the people still had to depend on themselves for their livelihood.¹²

Like Bing Zai, who exists in the timelessness of the infinitely occurring present, the village in which he resides exists outside of time as well. In the world beneath the clouds powerful dynasties rise and fall (the Mao dynasty included), but the inhabitants in Han Shaogong's mountainous landscape exist largely untouched by the ongoing cycle of historical events. Thus, the reader is presented with a world whose origins stretch backward into the time before time, backward into the realm of myth, a myth at the center of which stands a deformed, mute, intellectually deficient old man who, in his thoroughly aberrant physical presence is the key to the meaning of Han Shaogong's story.

Because my critical interest is the political economy of the body in post-Mao fiction I focus on and cite text solely with this in mind, consequently there is a great deal of interesting material I do not incorporate in my analysis. For example, Han Shaogong's use of rural Hunanese linguistic anachronisms are quite interesting, but concern me only in that they contribute to the "dawn on time" atmosphere of the narrative landscape which mirrors the timelessness of Bing Zai the docile body.

There was no knowing where these villagers had come from. Some said Shanxi, others said Guangdong—all conjecture only. They spoke a language quite different from that spoken by the peasants of Qianjiaping at the foot of the mountain. For example, they still used a lot of archaic words.... They also had an unusual way of addressing relatives. The emphasis seemed to be on unity—the unity of a large family—for there was a deliberate confusion of the distinctions between close and distant relatives.... The term "papa" came by way of Qianjiaping and was not widely used.¹³

¹² Han Shaogong, "Ba Ba Ba," pp.40-41.

¹³ Han Shaogong, "Ba Ba Ba," pp.43.

Han Shaogong's text is rich in ambiguity, not always to the benefit of his narrative, but that in no way diminishes his intellectual courage in taking on the big questions of his generation. "What is it that just happened here in China?" "What is it that we've done to ourselves, once again?" "What is it about us a people that we abandon ourselves so easily to the spectacle of violence?" These are essentially the same types of questions that occupied Lu Xun as a young intellectual, but for Han Shaogong there is no two thousand year old ideology to blame for the spectacle of inscribing the power of the state on the "numberless" bodies of society's victims.

In and of itself it is not so unusual that Han Shaogong is asking questions about the nature of his society that are not so very different from the ones asked by Lu Xun. What is of particular interest, however, is that despite the great socio-temporal distance that separates them, there is a curious similarity in how they represent the deep social structure of power in China. Here I am not using "how" in the sense of the style or the craft of the representations, but of the fundamental similarity of the thing being represented — power (i.e. social control) achieved through the use of victim bodies as sites for the spectacle of state sanctioned violence. From the outset of the Maoist regime ideological campaign followed ideological campaign, and in each one the technology of power relied on the spectacle of public humiliation, torture, and execution.¹⁴ This point is of critical importance in my analysis because it speaks to the uses of the body in post-Mao fiction.

¹⁴ See Anita Chan, Richard Madsen & Jonathan Unger, *Chen Village: the Recent History of a Peasant Community in Mao's China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Merle Goldman, *China's Intellectuals: Advise and Dissent* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984); William Hinton, *Fanshen* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966); Nien Cheng, *Life and Death in Shanghai* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986); Mark Seldon, *The Yenan Way in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988); Anne Thurston, *Enemies of the People* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988); Yang Jiang, *A Cadre School Life: Six Chapters*, trans. Geremie Barmé (Hong Kong: A Joint Publication, 1982); Yue Daiyu & Carolyn Wakeman, *To the Storm: The Odyssey of a Revolutionary Chinese Woman* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Zheng Yi, *Scarlet Memorial: Tales of Cannibalism in Modern China*, trans. T.P. Sym (Boulder: Westview, 1996).

Dusk came early in these parts and during the long evenings the villagers would stroll over to their neighbor's and sing a song or two, tell stories, chat about farm work, tell tales about the bandits, doze, or do nothing

Delong was the best singer. He had faint eyebrows and no beard, and led a wild life. At the mention of his name the women would grin and start cursing him. His voice was small and high-pitched—a woman's voice. When he broke into his nasal tunes it was like a knife inside your head turning and twisting and scraping, sending chills up and down your body. Everybody admired him. What a voice Delong had!...

He would just drop in, playing with a poisonous green snake whose fangs had been knocked out, grin cheekily at the jibes thrown at him, and without much persuasion, he would fix his gaze on the beams, pinch his throat once or twice, and start to sing in earnest....

The songs that amused the folks most were his raunchy love songs....

When there was a celebration or a sad event, or on New Year's Day and other festivals, everyone in the village would observe an age-old custom and sing "*Jian*" meaning sing about ancient times and the dead....

It was said that an official historian had once visited Qianjiaping and pronounced that there was no truth to the peasants songs....

But the folks of Chicken Head Village never cared for the words of the official historian. Instead they believed what Delong's ancient songs told them, even though they were none too fond of Delong's faint eyebrows. Eyebrows faint as water presaged a poor, lonely life.

Having entertained his folks with his songs for over a decade, Delong left with his small green snake.

He was probably Bing Zai's father.¹⁵

The passages cited above greatly abridge Han Shaogong's text, yet the essential elements of the narrative are evident. The inhabitants of Chicken Head Village are located in a physical and spiritual geography so far from the quotidian world at the foot of the mountains, that they

exist in the realm of myth. It is a dark and gloomy landscape, damp and fetid where malevolent spirits abound. In the evenings villagers gather around a fire, and are entertained by the singer/bawd, *De long* 德龙 (Virtuous Dragon). Without a written history the story of the clan is preserved in a ritual song (*Jian* 简), a Miao genealogy that retells the villager's creation mythology and authenticates their identity.

But what is that identity? Thus far in the narrative three distinct characters have emerged: Bing Zai, his mother, and Delong—the familial triangle, the basic building block of Chinese social architecture. But this scared social triangle is more an unholy trinity fraught with hideous defects and troubling ambiguities. To Bing Zai's thoroughly bizarre physical presence we can now add Delong's highly ambiguous sexuality. The fact that his "poisonous green snake" has been defanged suggests a number of possible meanings, but heroic virility is not one of them. And then there is the mother, the sacred vessel, the mid-wife whose own defective womb produced the abomination Bing Zai.

What interests me most about these characters is the way and the degree to which their bodies, that is their "physical" representations in the text, are used as the most fundamental discursive elements in Han Shaogong's political allegory. Other characters appear in and are important to the narrative, but none of them has the same "body" status; they exist primarily as linguistic constructions. Bing Zai, the mother, and Delong are not so much linguistic constructions as they are inscribed bodies, the defining archetypes in Han Shaogong's bizarre mythology. And truly, given the spirit of Han Shaogong's critique, could he have found a more eloquent representation of Mao's revolution than Bing Zai, the stillbirth that most unnaturally came to life.

¹⁵ Han Shaogong, "Ba Ba Ba," pp.44-46.

Bastard Bing loved looking at people and was particularly interested in strangers.

The kiln master had come to the village. Bastard Bin wanted to go to the kiln with him, but the kiln master wouldn't hear of it because of a rule laid down in ancient times.

Women and children were forbidden to go near the kilns while the lads sent to carry bricks were forbidden to use foul language. These rules gave the kiln master an aura of mystery. At break time the lads would gather round him, offer him cigarettes, and enquire respectfully about the outside world. Shiren was probably the most courteous of them all towards the kiln master. With lavish hospitality he would invite the kiln master home for a "meat meal" and to "bed the night." But of course that was because he was by no means master of the house, and so he simply didn't have to keep his word.

Shiren was nicknamed "Idiot Ren," he was getting on in years but was still a bachelor. He often stole into the woods and hid himself near the stream where the young women went to bathe, their laughing, screaming white shadows delighting and tormenting him. But his eyes were poor and he couldn't see clearly. To ease his frustration he often watched the little girls peeing by the roadside, or peered at a certain part of a bitch or cow.¹⁶

I do not want to overplay the idea of intertextual linkages between Han Shaogong and Lu Xun, but I do want to call attention to a certain sense of Ah Qism that threads its way through the text, particularly through the character of Shiren. In the Chinese text the character *shi* 石 has the meaning of stone, the character *ren* 仁 has the meaning of benevolence, kindness, humanity. Taken together as a name Shiren (石仁) suggests a man of unshakable benevolence. Given Shiren's sexual proclivities, along with other oddities of behavior, it is clear that Han Shaogong uses him for ironic effect in a manner not unlike the way Lu Xun uses Ah Q. But there is a side to both Ah Q and Shiren that is spiritually dark and morally twisted—both epitomize the psychological need of victims to find others weaker than themselves to victimize; a form of cowardice both writers assign as a characteristic of the Chinese people.

Once, [Shiren] was studying a cow with a stick when Bastard Bing's mother walked past. The woman loved to stir things up; as soon as she was back at the village she let loose her long tongue and started whispering into people's ears.... Since then, Idiot Ren found that no matter where her went—digging bamboo shoots or collecting pine rosin up the mountains, or attending to the fodder in the cow shed, the woman was just round the corner, pretending to be looking for some medicinal herbs or what not, her dead-fish eyes glancing smugly in his direction. Idiot Ren was furious, and yet he could find no pretext to explode. He swore and cursed at no one in particular, but it brought him no relief. So he took it out on Bastard Bing. If he ran into Bastard Bing when his mother was not around, and if no one else was around, he would box Bastard Bing's ears ruthlessly.

The little old man was used to such treatment; he could take it. His mouth twitched, but no pain showed on his face.

Idiot Ren didn't stop until his fingers started to hurt....

Bastard Bing burst into tears. But tears were useless—Idiot Ren knew all too well that by the time Bastard Bing's mother arrived he'd be gone and the half-mute couldn't tell on him. And so Idiot Ren took his revenge time and again. What the mother owed him, he took back with full interest from the son, and he never had to suffer any consequences.¹⁷

* * * * *

As far as Ah Q could remember... after the thwacking stopped it seemed to him that the matter was closed, and he even felt somewhat relieved.... He walked slowly away and by the time he approached the tavern door he was quite cheerful again.

Just then, however, a little nun from the Convent of Quiet Self-Improvement came towards him. The sight of a nun always made Ah Q swear; how much more so, then, after these humiliations? When he recalled what had happened his anger flared up again.

I couldn't think what made my luck so bad today—so it's meeting you that did it! He fumed to himself. Going towards her he spat noisily. Ugh!... Pah!

The little nun paid not the least attention but walked on with lowered head. Ah Q stepped up to her and shot out a hand to rub

¹⁶ Han Shaogong, "Ba Ba Ba," pp.47-48.

¹⁷ Han Shaogong, "Ba Ba Ba," pp.48-49.

her newly shaved scalp, then with a guffaw cried, Baldhead! Go back quick, your monk's waiting for you...

Who are you pawing?... demanded the nun, flushing all over her face as she quickened her pace....

If the monk paws you why can't I? He pinched her cheek.... Ah Q pinched her hard again before letting her go.

This encounter had made him forget Whiskers Wang and the Bogus Foreign Devil, as if all the day's bad luck had been avenged.¹⁸

What so inexorably links these two small narratives is the cowardly victimization of society's most defenseless citizens—the victim victimizing an even more powerless being, an even more docile body. What is so interesting in the comparison of these two small dramas is that writing from vastly different historical epochs, Han Shaogong and Lu Xun arrive at two similar conclusions: cowardice is a fundamental characteristic of the Chinese people; the public spectacle of sanctioned victimization is a fundamental component in the technology of power in China. However, unlike Lu Xun, Han Shaogong is not critiquing two-thousand years of Imperial/Confucian ideology, politics, and culture, but the social carnage that had occurred over the preceding thirty years—the force of the Maoist oligarchy consolidating and legitimizing itself by physically inscribing its power on untold millions of real bodies through deprivation, humiliation, privation, punishment, torture, and death, all staged as spectacle events to be witnessed as lessons to ensure a population of docile, productive bodies. Which bring us back to a fundamental issue confronting post-Mao writers: if the anatomy of power inherent to the autocratic Imperial/Confucian ideological regime was to be annihilated by the egalitarian ideology of Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zedong Thought, how does one account for China's insatiable appetite for self-consumption? How does one account for the fact that the Maoist regime of

¹⁸ Lu Xun, *Selected Works*, vol.1, pp.116-117.

power did not eliminate the “cannibalism” of the Imperial system, rather it refined and intensified the techniques of “consumption?”

In “Ba Ba Ba” Han Shaogong critiques the Maoist revolution through the use of allegory. His text is, for the most part, a skillfully drawn mythical geography, historically distant and virtually self-contained. The transparent subterfuge of setting a dangerously topical critique in the distant past is a standard practice in Chinese literature,¹⁹ yet there is another reason why Han Shaogong created the “outside-of-time” spatiotemporal geography of Chicken Head village. At a fundamental²⁰ level of discourse he is clearly influenced by the locational aspect of Lu Xun’s critique (i.e., locating the source of China’s spiritual dysfunction). Himself a *zhiqing* 知青 (sent-down youth)²¹ Han Shaogong mythologizes the Hunanese hinterland, fictionalizes the ancient culture of Chu, along with the ethnographically robust culture of the Miao, creating a landscape for his characters to act out an allegory about the “moral/spiritual dysfunction” in the Chinese “national character” that originates in a time that pre-dates the advent of Confucian orthodoxy.

Within the context of the story, the narration, the allegory there is a sense of searching for the moment when it all went terribly wrong, the point of rupture when the Chinese people started down the historical road of amorality that lead ineluctably to the cannibalistic spectacle of the Cultural Revolution. There was, of course, no point of rupture, no ideological event when it all went wrong in Chinese society. That Lu Xun and others of his contemporaries conceptualized their national predicament in terms of China’s “spiritual/ideological illness,” reflected their utter

¹⁹ *Jinpingmei* 金瓶梅 (The Plum in the Golden Vase) and *Honglou meng* 红楼梦 (Dream of the Red Chamber, or the Story of the Stone) are just two pre-modern vernacular novels that come to mind for setting dangerous topical critiques in historically distant dynasties.

²⁰ I use the word fundamental advisedly. I find the very idea of “national character” to be specious.

²¹ See Thomas P. Bernstein, *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside*: the

confusion at being caught between Confucian tradition and Western secular modernity, the latter being a system so vastly more powerful it rendered the vibrant body of Imperial China into the docile body of a subject nation.

How much more disconcerting it must have been for the intellectuals of Han Shaogong's generation to have lived-out the promised dream of liberation, only to discover that Maoist secular modernity in China meant a refinement in the technology of power, and a stunning intensification in the political economy of the body: bodies for peasant armies, bodies for mass movements, bodies for torture, bodies for execution, bodies for annihilation, and bodies for beatification. This is not a fictive narrative, it is the reality of Mao's power to inscribe his will on the physical bodies of his subjects. For the post-Mao writers grappling with the questions of Chinese national identity, and Chinese "national character," the history of the Maoist era had to be written in a discourse on the spectacle-body. Thus there is much more to Han Shaogong's myth-making than "root-seeking," or literary gamesmanship; on the contrary he has attempted to write an allegorical narrative about the "national character" of the Chinese people, and it is a darkly ironic portrait.

In recent years Chicken Head Village had fallen on hard times and there were many bachelors besides Ren Bao....

There were a lot of young women living in the valley and Ren Bao always went down the mountain on the pretext that he was going to meet some friends, and he wouldn't be seen for days on end. Suddenly he would be gone; suddenly he would be back, no one knew when.... When he came back he always brought with him some fancy playthings—a glass bottle, a broken barn lantern, and elastic band, and old newspaper, or a small photograph of somebody or other. As he strutted about in a pair of over-sized leather shoes, the clack-clack of the shoes added to his air of familiarity with new-fangled ways....

Today a council was held in the temple to discuss the details of an offering to the rice god—a custom Ren Bao frowned upon.

Feeling that no one understood him, Ren Bao was crestfallen. He turned his gaze to the women to his left. Among them was a married woman who kept whipping the sweat on her face with her sleeve. She, too was kneeling; the side-seams of her trousers had split, exposing the soft white flesh, but she wasn't aware of it. Ren Bao squinted, he couldn't see clearly, but it was good enough for his imagination to do the rest. Like a snake, his gaze crept into the trousers through the narrow gap, spiraled nimbly round the curves, and leapt freely up and down the soft smooth surface. In his mind, he had already started to kiss the woman—her shoulders, kneecaps, even her toes, one after another; and he could feel a sour, salty taste on the tip of his tongue....²²

Once again I caution that I do not want to over play the link between Shiren and Ah Q, it is by no means a clean fit, but there are certain shared characteristics that bear remarking upon. Both men act as informants for events outside their villages, but neither character has the slightest understanding of what they've witnessed; they are completely ignorant and unreliable. Both men are cowards, and both rationalize their cowardice through the use of nonsensical internal narratives in which they see themselves in highly inflated terms. Both Ah Q and Shiren are thoroughly base characters motivated by fear and libidinal desires, a behavioral binary perfectly articulated by Bing Zai's two phrase vocabulary: "Papa/Fuck Mama." In the mythical realm of Chicken Head Village, Bing Zai is, quite literally, the physical embodiment of Ah-Qism: deformed, ignorant, and thoroughly loathsome. There is nowhere else for Han Shaogong to look for the "moment of rupture," the emergence of the national defect, than in the realm of antiquity before Confucian China, to a time of myth when the essential character of the Chinese people was being forged in the crucible of survival. In this world Bing Zai is the atavistic avatar in an allegory about the Chinese people, yet what it is that the avatar-body Bing Zai is telling us remains ambiguous.

It so happened that in recent years the birth rate in the village had been high, and every housewife found there was so little rice in the

²² Han Shaogong, "Ba Ba Ba," pp.50-54.

rice-urn that it was all too easy to scrape bottom. Some started to borrow grain and this sparked off a chain reaction—everyone started to borrow in earnest, whether she needed it or not, just to show that she, too, knew how to take advantage of her neighbors....

The villages went on borrowing until there was panic in the air, and the women again started talking about making offerings to the rice god. This raised Bastard Bing's mother's spirits, and she threw herself enthusiastically into the discussion.

To those young women who had never heard of the rice god, she would explain patiently, "It's an old custom, you see, A man must be killed—the one with the thickest hair, and his flesh will be carved up and fed to the dogs. The family whose man is to be sacrificed is known as the family that 'eats the year's bounty'...."²³

My reading of Chinese fiction from the perspective of the body is about mapping the post-Mao literary discourse on the anatomy and technology of power in China. In each of the texts I discuss, the body (necessarily a textual entity), is meant to mirror the physical body as it was colonized, subjugated, and made docile in the totalitarian state of Mao's China. How this process was accomplished, that is the technology of power used throughout the Maoist era, focused relentlessly on the body. The bodies of the masses were made docile and productive; non-compliant bodies were the stuff of violent public spectacles, sites for the raw, physical inscription of state power.

To the inhabitants of Chicken Head Village, Bing Zai, the most abject and docile body, was the most natural choice to play the role of victim in the sacrifice to the rice god.

They had wanted to offer up Bastard Bing's head as a sacrifice to the rice god. To take the life of this useless blockhead was in fact to do him a good turn. He would be spared the pain of having his ears boxed, and he would no longer be a torment to his mother. But when the cleaver was raised, there was a clap of thunder. And everyone started to wonder: was the rice god angry because it was such a meager sacrifice.²⁴

²³ Han Shaogong, "Ba Ba Ba," pp.55-56.

²⁴ Han Shaogong, "Ba Ba Ba," p.62.

What better victim for beheading than Bing Zai. As the most defenseless inhabitant of Chicken Head Village his entire existence had been as a target for one cruelty after another: slaps, kicks, punches and boxed ears. Bing Zai is the most primitive morphology of the Chinese correlative universe—Baba and Fuck Mama. In light of the purges of the 1950s, the famine of the early 1960s, the Cultural Revolution and “lost years” it is not surprising that Han Shaogong wrote an allegory in which a stunted and deformed “lump of fresh,” exists as the primary signifier. Yet, an interesting question arises here as to whether Han Shaogong uses Bing Zai merely to personify Mao’s still-born and ultimately failed revolution, or at another level of discourse does Bing Zai personify the Chinese people themselves, the mute, stunted, deformed survivors of the *danse macabre*—the docile bodies who endured and bore witness to the spectacle of power as it was inscribed on the body of the nation, one body at a time—millions upon millions, one body at a time?

When the folks in Chicken Tail Village were sure that Chicken Head Village was going to blow up Chicken Head, they were furious.... The two parties exchanged bitter words on the mountain a few days ago, the row had ended in a scuffle, and the lads from Chicken Head Village retreated.

But now the village was still quiet.... Bastard Bing stumped along, striking a small brass gong. His pocket was stuffed with sweet potato shreds; he fished out a few, dropping almost as many, and attracted two dogs. They followed him about, weaving in and out between his legs.... Lately, he had taken a liking to the ancestral temple—he probably hadn’t forgotten the big meal he had there the day his head was due to be chopped off. So he pressed forward and, rocking and swaying, made his final sprint in that direction.

The children playing in front of the temple caught sight of him....

Bastard Bing beat the gong, licked the snot running down his nose, and greeted them excitedly, “Baba”

“Bah! Who’s your baba? Kneel down!”

The kids crowded around him, held him by the ears and forced him to kneel before a pile of cow dung. Then they pressed down until his nose almost touched the mucky heap.

Luckily for Bastard Bing a group of grown-ups was coming towards the temple and there was quite a bustle.... When Bastard Bing finally realized that the kids had gone, he scrambled up to his feet, muttering, looking furtively about him. Then he stamped viciously on the bamboo hat one kid had left behind. And after that, he joined the adults as if nothing had happened, and craned his neck to see what was going on.²⁵

Here again we see Han Shaogong scripting a situation that is very Ah Q-like. One moment Bing Zai is being cruelly victimized, is released and vents his anger on an inanimate object, forgets his humiliation and abuse, then in a characteristic Ah Qism, he switches roles from victim to spectator as he joins a crowd heading towards the temple where a sacrifice is about to take place. That Han Shaogong consistently embeds this type of information throughout his text strongly suggests his allegory is more than a critique of the Maoist regime; at a deeper level of discourse he is critiquing Chinese culture as Lu Xun critiqued it with Ah Q, the “everyman” of early Twentieth-century China. In Chicken Head Village, Han Shaogong gives us the Weizhuang of post-Mao China, a village and a people caught between one myth and another, where the archetype of the real is the ultimate docile body, a semi-mute, deformed “lump of flesh” named Bing Zai.

A big man carrying a hatchet came up. He jabbed the hatchet into the earth, stripped the upper half of his body naked, picked up a large bowl of wine, and gulped it down....

The man had finished drinking: he threw down the bowl, smashing it to pieces. Then he snatched up the hatchet, stamped his feet, let out a grunt, raised his arm and struck. The earth shook and the mountains trembled as the ox's head was severed from its body and then fell slowly to the ground like a lump of earth....

A thunderous cheer went up as the ox fell forward. The sound was too loud and too sudden, and smelled too strongly of alcohol;

²⁵ Han Shaogong, “Ba Ba Ba,” pp.64-65.

Bastard Bing was frightened, his upper lip twitched and he started to mutter.

He saw a thread of something red and streaming towards him from under the grown-ups' feet. It looked like a slithering crimson snake. He squatted down and felt it with his fingers. It was slimy. He rubbed it on his clothes—that looked nice! Soon his face and body were stained with ox blood. The blood probably tasted a bit strong as it trickled into his mouth, and the little old man rolled his eyes.²⁶

Up to this point I have made repeated references to Lu Xun. As I pointed out in my introduction, I use this fiction as a baseline because his texts represent the genesis of the literary discourse on power, violence, and the body in China. I have pointed out thematic linkages to emphasize that the works of all four writers discussed in my dissertation are textual nodes in a coherent field discourse. As we begin to see in the above passage, Han Shaogong does not share Lu Xun's aversion to representing scenes of graphic spectacle. Where Lu Xun put the spectacle body under erasure to distance the reader from this type of experience, Han Shaogong uses graphic visual imagery to draw the reader closer into the textual experience. The head of the ox falls, a red snake-like substance trickles across the floor, Bing Zai squats, touches the sticky liquid, then proceeds to anoint himself in the sacrificial blood.

Note how Han Shaogong uses Bing Zai in the above passage. The beheading of the ox is only a prelude to the spectacle of Bing Zai smearing himself with blood and tasting the sticky red liquid trickle into his mouth. These events are inscribed on Bing Zai's body, they are taken in through his physical sense, and have a definite signifying value in the text, yet there is no omniscient narrator to assist the reader in decoding the meaning of Bing Zai's actions. This situation raises an interesting and rather problematic issue: in post-Mao fiction as the spectacle-body is assigned greater prominence and status in the text it becomes increasingly ambiguous as a discursive site. As the representation of spectacle intensifies in the works of Mo Yan and Yu

Hua the body takes on a much greater visual presence in the text, which further diminishes the role of narration. As the visual imagery of violent spectacle becomes increasingly brutal and increasingly graphic more and more is demanded of the reader in decoding the significance of events without the aid of conventional forms of narration. For the survivors of the madness of Mao's totalitarian regime the representation of the body as the site for the inscription of state power was a discourse that needed no narration. All those who survived into the 1980s were witnesses to the most fantastic power/body spectacle of the Twentieth-century.

Eventually the inhabitants of Chicken Head Village go to "war" against the inhabitants of Chicken Tail Village, and the former come off the definite losers, which leads to yet another strange sacrificial ritual.

The light was growing brighter and stronger. The villagers had formed themselves into a ring and set up in their midst a tall, make-shift kitchen range, on top of which sat a big iron pot. The mouth of the pot was well above eye-level, but it was obvious something was boiling and bubbling inside the pot.... The grown-ups all knew that a pig and an enemy's corpse had been carved up and thrown into the pot. A man climbed up a sturdy ladder, lifted a bamboo spear longer than a carrying pole, and jabbed it into the pot. Whatever he speared out he then distributed to the villages, young and old, men and women. You didn't know what you were eating, you simply ate it. If you said no someone would drag you out and force you to kneel before the iron pot, and then poke you in the mouth with the bamboo spear....

Bastard Bing's mother's name was called. Her eyes were blurred with tears, and she was still beating her knees.

"I don't want it...."

"bring your bowl here."

"It's human flesh...."

"You eat it, Bastard Bing."

²⁶ Han Shaogong, "Ba Ba Ba," pp.65-66.

Young Bing, biting on the cord of his open-crotch pants and looking annoyed was pushed to the front. He grabbed a piece of some sort of lung and stuck it into his mouth; but it didn't taste nice, for he showed the whites of his eyes and staggered anxiously back into his mother's arms.

"Eat it!" Someone yelled.

"Eat it!" Many voices urged him.

An old man pointed a finger with a fingernail over an inch long at Bastard Bing, then coughed loudly to clear his throat and lectured, his voice quivering with emotion, "We must all hate our enemy and we must live and die together. You're a son of Chicken Head clan, how can you not eat it!"

"Eat it" the man holding the bamboo spear thrust the bowl at Bastard Bing. And the huge looming shadow of a hand appeared on the ceiling.²⁷

In this scene the violence of the spectacle is intensified as the members of Chicken Head clan enact the most primitive and sinister form of power/body spectacle, cannibalism; the body transcends its role as the object of inscription to become the object of physical consumption. In the mythic time-space geography of Chicken Head Village, by extending the roots of China's "moral dysfunction" back into antiquity Han Shaogong apparently creates an even more damning critique of the Chinese "national character" than did Lu Xun. The phrase "*chi ren*" 吃人 (eat people) found by Lu Xun's mad diarist written everywhere between the lines of the Confucian classics were mere textual traces of a practice that dates back nearly to the dawn of Chinese being/time.

It is interesting, and I think highly significant that the functionally insensate Bing Zai recoils from eating human flesh. What Han Shaogong is doing here is very subtle; as with the *deus ex machina* clap of thunder that saved Bing Zai from being beheaded, his natural aversion to cannibalism adds a dimension of inner being that problematizes the apparent limitations of his

²⁷ Han Shaogong, "Ba Ba Ba," pp.68-70.

physical existence. For all his deficiencies and deformity Bing Zai is the archetype of Han Shaogong's mythic realm. He is monstrous and he is opaque, but on a deep body, non-linguistic level he is the physical representation of the survival of the inviolate "Father Father Father/Fuck Mama" social morphology. Even the ignorant inhabitants of Chicken Head Village come to this rather astonishing conclusion, although it is nothing that registers on their consciences in any meaningful way.

They were defeated again and again; again and again heads were lost to the enemies. They panicked, and let their imagination run away with them. A lad suddenly remembered something peculiar. He said that the day when they were about to offer up Bastard Bing as a sacrifice to the rice god, a clap of thunder had come out of the blue. Afterwards, they had tried to read their fortunes in the battle by killing an ox, but it didn't work. It seemed to have been a bad omen when Bastard Bing swore "Fuck Mama," and something bad did happen.... Was't it strange?

Now that he'd mentioned it, everyone found Bastard Bing most mysterious. Just think: he could only say "Papa" and "Fuck Mama." Could it be that these two expressions are actually the divination symbols of *yin* and *yang*?

They decided to tap this living medium's power of divination. So they quickly took down a door and used it to carry Bastard Bing to the square outside the temple.

"Bing, our master."

"Bing, our lord."

"Immortal Bing."²⁸

What joke is this that Han Shaogong is having at the readers' expense: At last, Bing Zai, the atavistic "lump of flesh," the body that has endured the years of cruel abuse is miraculously transformed into a being of status, a "man" of mystery, a diviner, an immortal. It is a matter for debate whether Bing Zai failed in his role as diviner, or the clan elders misread the meaning of his sign, but the outcome of the event was a carnage, and the dogs of Chicken Head Village grew

²⁸ Han Shaogong, "Ba Ba Ba," p.76.

fat on a diet of corpses. I could cite text to illustrate the visually graphic scenes of dogs eating bodies, but I will save that particular spectacle for a later chapter. What I want to draw attention to here is the fact that as “Ba Ba Ba” develops as a narrative it becomes increasingly, graphically violent, and there is a corresponding assault on the readers’s sensibilities.

If you take “Kong Yiji” and “Ba Ba Ba” as textual nodes in a cohesive field of literary discourse that spans approximately sixty years, it is interesting to note the difference in representational strategies and objectives. Han Shaogong, as a child of the new, modern China, is, to a significant degree, the product of spectacle—endless campaigns to build the new China, and endless campaigns to ferret out enemies of the State. Han Shaogong comes from a world where the victimizer-victim-spectator power structure was served up in a utilitarian ideological package that lacked the traditional Confucian philosophical and cultural niceties. There are many post-Mao writers who do not write about spectacle, their narratives eschew the public for the private — Wang Anyi’s novel *Changhenge* 长恨歌 (Songs of Eternal Regret) is a good example.²⁹ But for a writer grappling with the same deep questions that so obsessed Lu Xun, what else could he possibly write but spectacle? What was there but spectacle? And what is it that stands at the center of spectacle—the body, the object to be inscribed, the object inscribed, the will of the “State” made flesh. The only acts of erasure that occur in Han Shaogong’s texts are bodies erased by death.

Life in Chicken Head Village becomes increasingly grim, and one day Bing Zai’s mother simply walks away and abandons him.

With a vegetable basket in her hand, she staggered slowly up the mountain and never came back again. Later on all sorts of stories were told about her.... None of those stories could be proved. But you could know for sure that her body had been devoured by the dogs.³⁰

²⁹ Wang Anyi, *Changhenge* (Beijing: Zuoja chubanshe, 2000).

³⁰ Han Shaogong, “Ba Ba Ba,” p.80.

Somehow Bing Zai survives for a time, but conditions in the village worsen and it is decided that the old and the weak will drink poison, and the young will move on to new, more fertile ground as had been done in the past. Bing Zai was the first to be given his poison to drink. All the elders sat facing east as they took the liquid. Their ancestors had come from that direction, and they were going to return there.

As for those who would carry on:

As a farewell ritual they went and prostrated themselves before the rows of new graves. Then everyone scraped out a lump of earth and put it inside his jacket. And that they raised their voices in a chorus, "Hey! Yo! Wei!," and they started to sing "*Jian*."....

Naturally it was splendid and magnificent song; it was like the singers' eyes, like the women's ear-rings and bare feet, like the dainty smiling flowers beside their bare feet. There was no trace of wars and disasters, and not the slightest hint of bloodshed or violence.

None whatever.

In the distance the human figures looked like a herd of cattle as they dwindled into black specks.³¹

Thus, the cycle of violence and spectacle repeats and repeats, and the "defect" in the Chinese national culture, as personified by Bing Zai, is as old as the race itself. Han Shaogong, the young fatalist—the survivors of the Maoist regime move on, doomed to repeat the carnage of the past because it is erased in the official history, it is erased in the National "*Jian*."

I have maintained from the outset of this brief look at "Ba Ba Ba," that Bing Zai, the body, is the primary signifier in Han Shaogong's narrative. Because of, rather than despite of his obvious physical limitations Bing Zai represents the basic morphology of Chinese correlative thinking: Baba/Fuck Mama—*Yin and Yan*—the universal forces of male and female *qi* 气 (energy) ebbing and flowing in an endless dance of possibilities. Thus, Bing Zai is a natural force,

neither inherently good nor inherently bad, but a force that is influenced nonetheless by the discursive formations and social institutions that are in play around him. For Han Shaogong, Bing Zai equals Chinese culture in the Lu Xun sense of some inherent defect in the Chinese “national character.” They are both wrong, of course, but such ideas as inherent “national character” and inherent “national consciousness” are hard to stamp out.

As the physical embodiment of nature’s most basic force (light/dark; Yin/Yang; Male/Female) Bing Zai exists resolutely through all time. Thus, it is not surprising, though it is mildly ironic, that Bing Zai, the “lump of flesh,” the victim deified and proclaimed immortal by the inhabitants of Chicken Head Village, survives the poison drink meant to kill him.

Bastard Bing had surfaced from no one knew where. Believe it or not, he survived. What was more, the running sore on his head had stopped festering and a scab had formed. He was sitting naked on a low wall and stirring the water in a half-full earthenware jug with a twig, stirring up eddies of reflected sunlight. Listening to the song in the distance, he clumsily clapped his hands once and, mumbling in a very very soft voice, he called again and again the man whose face he had never seen —

“Papa.”

Although he was skinny, he navel was the size of copper coin, and the kids hovering round him stared at him with wonder and amazement, with admiration too. They glanced at that admirable navel, and offered him a handful of pebbles, smiling, looking friendly. Then they clapped their hands, like he’d done just now, and shouted,

“Pa Pa Pa Pa Pa!”

A woman came and said to another woman, “is this big enough for the swill?” And she walked up to Bastard Bing and took away that half jug of swirling light.³²

And so ends Han Shaogong’s narrative. No one knows how for sure, but Bing Zai, the “little old man” survived his abandonment and poisoning, and now sits naked atop a low stone

³¹ Han Shaogong, “Ba Ba Ba,” pp.88-89.

wall, where clan youngsters admire him for the size of his navel. It is significant that the “Ba Ba Ba” narrative begins and ends with the body of Bing Zai. In subtle ways he evolves, but he has not changed, he remains forever inviolate as the word made flesh. Cataclysmic events overtake Chicken Head Village, yet it is only Bing Zai, “the lump of flesh,” who functions as a coherent discursive entity. In one way or another all of the significant events in Chicken Head Village are inscribed on Bing Zai’s body: his strange birth, the ambiguity of Delong’s identity, the attempted beheading, the sacrifice of the ox, the ritual cannibalism, his elevation to immortal diviner, the poisoning, and the survival of the clan—it is all inscribed on Bing Zai’s body. Reading the calligraphy of power and powerlessness inscribed on Bing Zai’s body is to read a violent history that no one cares to remember, but it is a history that abides at the center of the Chinese national consciousness. It can be erased textually, but in 1985, when “Ba Ba Ba” was published, no one could erase the victims, and no one could erase the physical inscriptions of State power that were etched into their bodies.

For post-Mao writers engaged in the discourse on the “technology of power” in Maoist China, the body is the center of the discourse because the anatomy of power was essentially autocratic and demanded victim-bodies to assist in the colonization, and subjugation of docile bodies once Liberation had been declared. In Maoist China the technology of power was refined down to the level of individual households, and acts of public spectacle assumed a scale and intensity of violence that defies the power of language to convey its enormity. Lu Xun warned his fellow intellectuals against their complicity in acts of spectatorship, the post-Mao writers are coming from a place where everyone was involved in the spectacle either as victimizer, victim, or spectator. To absent oneself from the spectacle was not a viable option. Those who survived

³² Han Shaogong, “Ba Ba Ba,” p.90.

bore the physical traces of inscribed power, others were spectators, often they'd played both roles, and sometimes all three roles in the great spectacle of building Mao's revolutionary China.

I cannot conclude my discussion of Han Shaogong without saying a few brief words about his story "*Nü Nü Nü*" 女女女 (Woman Woman Woman). Without spending another thirty pages discussing this very interesting story, I must comment on the end of the narrative when the central character, "Aunt Yao" has been sent off to a hinterland village to die. Once again Han Shaogong concentrates his creative focus on the body as a discursive site for spectacle. "Woman Woman Woman" is a case study in how power (in the form of an individual's will) is used to subdue, subjugate, and shape the subject under one's control. In Aunt Yao's case, who is left in the care of her sworn sister Auntie Zhen, her body undergoes a bizarre devolution from human form to some unnameable form of primitive fish-like being. These changes that occur to Aunt Yao over time are the direct result of Aunt Zhen's will, transformed into a power discourse that is inscribed on Aunt Yao's body.

If she [Aunt Zhen] caught the slightest movement out of the corner of her eye, she would pick up the handy bamboo rod she had placed beside her, and make a quick swipe with it. Smack—! That shadow would invariably draw back to the other side of the black charcoal line drawn on the ground. For Aunt Zhen had ruled that no part of Aunt Yao's body would cross this line....

It took Aunt Yao some time to appreciate the authority of the bamboo rod. The first few times, she yelped with pain. Later on, she just groaned. Finally she was tamed. When she saw the bamboo rod she would behave herself and sit huddled up on the other side of the black line, lick her lips slowly and slowly turn her gaze to the small depression washed into the soil by the water dripping off the eaves....

* * *

But then she couldn't sit there with the bamboo rod all the time. One day, she pondered on this for a while and then shouted to her eldest son, "Danmao, come and do something for me. Make me a cage...."

When I finally set eyes on it, the cage was locking up a palpable mass of emptiness and loneliness, incarcerating a disappearance that could never really disappear....

... hunger and cold didn't bother her; in winter she went without a padded jacket and crawled about on bare limbs, yet her palms were even warmer than the young men's. When Aunt Zhen opened the cage to help her put on more clothes, she snarled and scowled at her, she didn't want them.

* * *

One day, it suddenly occurred to people that she was a little like an ape....

And then one day, people hit upon another discovery: she was like a fish!³³

"Woman Woman Woman" is one of Han Shaogong's most significant texts, and it deserves far more attention than I can give it in this general survey, but I had to at least mention it in closing because the physical devolution of Aunt Yao from human to human-like, to ape-like, to fish-like is a perfect example of body as discourse. Aunt Zhen gradually establishes what is essentially an autocratic penal regime designed to transform the troublesome Aunt Yao into a docile body. She begins exerting limitations, inflicting pain, incarcerates, deprives, and allows to die. Here is a body portrait of the technology of power in China not as intellectual discourse, but as the power of discourse used to physically transform bodies, to defile and deform them, to inflict pain, to incarcerate, to deprive, to exterminate—all duly witnessed by multitudes of obedient spectators.

At the end of the text of the narrator states:

—after you've eaten, you do the dishes; when you've done the dishes you make a phone call Get that and you've got the simplest and most profound truth about life.³⁴

³³ Han Shaogong, "Woman Woman Woman" in *Homecoming: And Other Stories* trans. Martha Cheung (Hong Kong: A Renditions Paperback., 1992) pp. 143-145.

³⁴ Han Shaogong, "Woman Woman Woman" p.161.

Is this, then, Han Shaogong's conclusion: the recent past is a dark and dangerous place; just leave it be. The clan always moves on, moves forward singing "*Jian*" and there's never any mention of war or famine or catastrophe. It's our way. Is this what Han Shaogong is saying? I will reserve further comment for my conclusion when I can discuss his work in relation to that of Mo Yan's and Yu Hua's as well.

Chapter Three Ambivalence and Nostalgia in *Hong gaoliang jiazu*

Of the three post-Mao writers discussed in this dissertation the inclusion of Mo Yan presented me with the most difficulties. In his early stories, such as “*Touming de hong luobo*” 透明的红萝卜 (The Crystal Carrot), “*Ke he*” 枯河 (Dry River), and “*Baigou qiujianjia*” 白狗秋千架 (White Dog and the Swings), he explores the issue of power and violence, but it is only in *Hong gaoliang jiazu* 红高粱家族 (Red Sorghum Clan), that he fully develops his critique on the exercise of power and the relative social value of spectacle violence from the early Republic to post-Mao era.¹ In addition to the more complex logistics needed to discuss a significantly larger text, I was faced with the task of forging a genuine discursive link between Lu Xun and Mo Yan. On the surface *Red Sorghum* has far more in common with *Shuihu zhuan* 水浒传 (Water Margin) than with *Call to Arms* and *Wandering*, however, when one reads *Red Sorghum* beyond the prurient entertainment value of the sex and violence a case can be made for linking Mo Yan and Lu Xun at the discursive level of “cannibalism” as a defining feature in the modern Chinese allegory of national character. One cannot read the third section of *Red Sorghum*, “Dog Ways” (狗道), without resorting to an allegorical interpretive scheme — humans eating dogs who have grown fat eating human corpses.

Without question, much of the graphic violence and scenes of the macabre in *Red Sorghum* come right out of the *Water Margin* narrative tradition, which itself is based on the robust tradition of oral story-telling, and Mo Yan indulges himself quite liberally in narrating acts of unspeakable violence. Hence, in reading *Red Sorghum* it is important to keep in mind that within the complex narrative structure of text not all acts of physical violence are allegorical, a preponderance of the sex and violence are used to shock and to entertain. At the same time,

¹ Mo Yan, *Hong gaoliang jiazu*. 红高粱家族 (Taipei: Hongfan shudian, 1988)

there are acts of spectacle and violence to which Mo Yan assigns a deeper significance, and it is in these acts that I perceive a connection between Mo Yan and Lu Xun. I would never suggest that Mo Yan writes with the single-minded didacticism of Lu Xun, far from it; Mo Yan enjoys spinning an entertaining story. But his understandable lack of interest in the predominantly didactic text does not preclude him from constructing a more serious subtext, or from articulating a more serious-minded critique on the exercise of power and the uses of socially sanctioned violence in modern China.

Before moving on to my reading of *Red Sorghum* I want to clarify one very important point that pertains not only to Mo Yan's work, but to the works of Han Shaogong and Yu Hua, as well. Whereas Lu Xun was able to achieve a coolly didactic narrative distance (voice) because his battlefield was by and large an intellectual arena, all three post-Mao texts included in this dissertation were written in close to events where things get dirty; this is particularly true of *Red Sorghum* and "Classical Love." During the Maoist era artists and intellectuals lost the luxury of the distanced view; everyone was forced to participate, as observer, enforcer, or victim, in the rituals of public spectacle. As a consequence there is an implication of self in the works of the post-Mao writers that is lacking in Lu Xun's fiction.

It is neither practical, nor necessary for me to give a close textual reading for all four hundred and ninety-six pages of Mo Yan's novel, hence I will cite text only as needed to support my reading of the post-Mao literary discourse on power, body and violence in modern China. As with his contemporaries, Han Shaogong and Yu Hua, Mo Yan appears to accept *a priori* the physical body as a primary discursive site for the exercise of power during the Maoist regime.² Yet, unlike Han Shaogong who reaches backward to a pre-Confucian source for the spectacle of "cannibalistic" violence so "seemingly" inherent in the Han national character, or Yu Hua who

² See Ann Anagnost, "Making History Speak," in *National Past-Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), pp.17-44.

explores the same issue from a syncretic philosophical perspective which, Mo Yan's contribution to the discourse centers on subtle issues of contextualization. He returns to the tradition/modern binary first articulated by Lu Xun in "*Kuangren riji*" 狂人日记 (A Madman's Diary), but does so from a radically different aesthetic, ideological, and experiential perspective.³

I have characterized the *Red Sorghum* narrative as being an admixture of nostalgia and ambivalence. Mo Yan writes lyrically about both the criminal and heroic violence of his beloved Red Sorghum clan, while contemporaneously narrating a sense of repulsion for both the power-violence endemic to rural Shandong in the pre-Communist age, and the institutionalization of state sponsored violence during the Maoist regime. This somewhat hazy dichotomy between ambivalence and nostalgia is reflected in the structural complexity of the text. The narrative itself is built upon the historical layering of three generations of the Red Sorghum clan: Grandma (Dai Fenglian) and Yu Zhan'ao, their bastard son Douguan, and an unnamed grandson who serves as a semi-omniscient narrator. I call attention to the fact that the source for the grandson's narration is an old woman who recounts to him his family history in the traditional folk method of a bamboo clapper tale. And when the tale is told it is the voice of the unnamed grandson that is the filament that sutures together the constantly shifting temporal-historical modalities of this rich and complex text.

In the introduction to her book *National Past-Times: Narrative, Representation, and Power in Modern China*, Ann Anagnost notes:

...how the paradoxical unity of the "nation" in time and space has been fragmented by the accretion of layered temporalities within social memory. These different layerings of time that break up the continuum of the recent past become expressed as modes of

³ Certainly, Lu Xun was not the first Chinese intellectual to identify the dialectic of the tradition/modernity binary (See Yen Fu, Liang Qichao, et.al.), but Lu Xun was the first Chinese intellectual to introduce the binary into literary discourse.

nostalgia or lament for moments when the nation had been
“imagined” in very different terms.⁴

I cite this passage not to draw an equation between nation and text; but to help elucidate the temporal period in which Mo Yan's vague sense of nostalgia is understandable given the particular nexus of historical events. Without question Mo Yan's text is informed throughout by a strong sense of nostalgia—nostalgia for place, for the vast seas of sorghum, nostalgia for the world where Grandma was the sexually liberated owner-operator of a thriving sorghum wine distillery, and granddad, Yu Zhan'ao, father of Yu Douguan, was a murderous bandit and later the famous hero of the battle against the Japanese on the Blackwater River Bridge. There is little doubt that the grandson-narrator is both ennobled and repulsed by the heroic violence of his forebears, yet, when held in the balance against the institutionalized violence of the Maoist state, the pre-Communist world of northeast Gaomi Township, even with, or because of, its lawlessness and violent brutality was alive with the potential for heroic deeds, whereas in the highly systematized semi-autocratic state that emerged in post-Liberation China, the potential for heroic violence ceased to exist.

Reading *Red Sorghum* is further problematized by the sense of ambivalence that flows quietly through the text as a murmuring rill of words. At times Mo Yan writes about Northeast Gaomi Township with great lyricism; the fields of sorghum themselves express a vast range of emotions that call forth a strong sense of nostalgia for a time and a place in rural China that has passed into history. At the same time, lyricism, love, hate, power, violence, body, these are the elements that give rise to the voice of profound ambivalence in *Red Sorghum*. At the well of deep meaning Mo Yan's textual world is informed by the love/hate dialectic, a discursive structure that allows the grandson-narrator to experience feelings of repulsion for the brutal

⁴ Anagnost, *National Past-Times*, pp.1-2.

violence of which his grandparents were capable, and also to feel ennobled by their heroic deeds; it is all a matter of context.

Red Sorghum opens with a quick, *zhiguai* (志怪)-like vignette which introduces the novel's three principal characters (i.e., Grandma, Yu Zhan'ao, and Douguan), but it is in the remarkable passage that follows that Mo Yan establishes the conceptual, that is, the dialectical framework for the entire novel.

I had learned to love Northeast Gaomi Township with all my heart, and to hate it with unbridled fury. I didn't realize until I'd grown up that Northeast Gaomi Township is easily the most beautiful and most repulsive, most unusual and most common, most sacred and most corrupt, most heroic and most bastardly, hardest-drinking and hardest loving place in the world. The people of my father's generations who lived there ate sorghum out of preference, planting as much of it as they could. In late autumn, during the eight lunar month, vast stretches of red sorghum shimmered like a sea of blood. Tall and dense, it reeked of glory, cold and graceful, it promised enchantment, passionate and loving, it was tumultuous.⁵

The autumn winds are cold and bleak, the sun's rays intense. White clouds, full and round, float in the tile-blue sky, cast full round purple shadows onto the sorghum fields below. Over decades that seem but a moment in time, lines of scarlet figures shuttled among the sorghum stalks to weave a vast human tapestry. They killed, they looted, and they defended their country in a valiant, stirring ballet that makes us unfilial descendants who now occupy the land pale by comparison. Surrounded by progress, I feel a nagging sense of our regression.⁶

The tone of the narrative is epic, all-encompassing. Each characteristic is cast in the hyper-reality of dichotomized superlatives (i.e., *zui meili*, *zu choulou*; *zui chaotou*, *zui shisu*, ...*zui* ...*zui* ...*zui* ... 最美丽, 最丑陋, 最超脱, 最世俗, ...最, ...最, ...最...). The narrator reverences the fields of sorghum that hold the history of his family and their cohorts. And

⁵ For continuity I'm using Howard Goldblatt's translation (New York: Viking, 1993), p.4. Chinese text: *Hong gaoliang jiazuo*, (Taipei: Hongfan shudian), p.2.

⁶ In the Chinese text the word regression, *tuihua* (退化), can also be read in a slightly harsher way as "degeneration, degenerate" 红高粱, p. 2.

although Northeast Gaomi Township is “the most sacred and most corrupt, most heroic and most bastardly” of places, it is a source of wonder and magic for the narrator. At the same time, for the unnamed grandson-narrator this highly dichotomous structure gives rise to a profound sense of ambivalence. In measuring himself and his generation against that of his grandparents’ he finds something of great value missing in “post-Liberation” society. “Surrounded by progress, I feel a nagging sense of our species’ regression.” Thus, one is asked to read *Red Sorghum* by digging through the macabre realm of corpses to find that priceless gem that makes the pre-communist horror of life in rural China less horrible than life during the Maoist regime.

Not coincidentally, the most brutal, grotesque, and graphic, as well as the most lyrical, romantic, and heroic power-violence events in the text are those directly related to the activities of the Red Sorghum clan. As previously noted, *Red Sorghum* does not read as a linear narrative. The text itself begins with a single event (i.e., the battle of the Black Water River Bridge), which occurs on “the ninth day of the eighth lunar month, 1939,” then expands backwards and forwards through time by means of a number of constantly shifting, yet interlocking, temporal modalities. However, the historical narrative itself is set in motion on Dai Fenglian’s (Grandma’s) sixteenth birthday, which occurs around the time of *Qingming* (清明) in 1923.

It is, indeed, curious that the initiation of this complex narrative begins with something as paradoxically simple and psychologically complex as the size of Grandma’s feet

On her sixteenth birthday, my grandma was betrothed by her father to Shan Bianlang, the son of Shan Tingxiu, one of Northeast Gaomi Township’s richest men

Grandma’s marriage into the Shan family was the will of heaven, implemented on a day when she and some of her playmates, with their tiny bound feet and long pigtails, were playing beside a set of swings. It was Qingming.... That year Grandma was five feet four inches tall and weighed about 130 pounds. She was wearing a cotton printed jacket over green satin trousers, with scarlet bands of silk tied around her ankles.... Her long shiny braids shone, and a heavy silver necklace hung around her neck—Great Granddad was

a silversmith. Great-Grandma, the daughter of a landlord who had fallen on hard times, knew the importance of bound feet to a girl, and had begun binding her daughter's feet when she was six years old, tightening the bindings every day.

A yard in length, the cloth bindings were wound around all but the big toe until the bones cracked and the toes turned under. The pain was excruciating.... The result of Grandma's suffering were two three in gold lotuses, and by the age of sixteen she had grown into a well-developed beauty. When she walked, swinging her arms freely, her body swayed like a willow in the wind.

Shan Tingxiu, the groom's father, was walking around Great-Granddad's village...when he spotted Grandma among the other local flowers. Three months later, a bridal sedan chair would come to carry her away.⁷

It is interesting, at the very least, that Mo Yan begins his epic historical narrative with this particular event because the practice of female foot binding represents such a highly charged and contested site of the power, violence, body nexus. The manner in which this discourse is embedded in the text makes it appear almost insignificant, yet it is Grandma's "three inch golden lotuses" that attract Shan Tingxiu's attention, and it is her bound feet that arouse the interest of Yu Zhan'ao, which in turn triggers Grandma's "rape" in the sorghum field, and the subsequent murder of Shan Tingxiu and his son Shan Bianlang.

It was Grandma's tiny feet that had caught the attention of Shan Tingxiu, and it was her tiny feet that aroused the passions of the sedan bearer Yu Zhan'ao. She was very proud of them. Even a pock-faced witch is assured of marriage if she had tiny bound feet, but no one wants a girl with large unbound feet, even if she has the face of an immortal. Grandma, with her bound feet *and* lovely face, was one of the true beauties of her time. Throughout our long history, the delicate, pointed tips of women's feet have been viewed as genital organs, in a way, from which men have derived a sort of aesthetic pleasure that sets their sexual juices flowing.⁸

Note the abrupt change in the narrative voice when the focus of the narration shifts from Grandma to a more general, distanced statement regarding the highly sexual nature of bound feet

⁷ Goldblatt, *Red Sorghum*, pp. 39 – 40.

⁸ Goldblatt, *Red Sorghum*, pp. 89 – 90.

in the context of “traditional” Chinese culture.⁹ This shift marks the intrusion of the “implied author,” a voice distinct from that of the unnamed grandson-narrator.¹⁰ At the beginning of this chapter I referred to the profound sense of ambivalence that informs the text, what occurs in the above passage clearly illustrates this point. On one hand, the grandson-narrator extols Grandma’s beauty and virtues, first among which are her “three inch golden lotuses,” while on the other hand, the voice and tone of the implied author’s narration clearly suggests that the practice of foot binding was a perverse and unnatural sexual fetish. Thus, we can see that the structure of this short passage reinforces the deep sense of ambivalence, the love/hate, admiration/repulsion dialectic established right at the beginning of the text.

In addressing the question of nostalgia in *Red Sorghum*, it would at first glance seem far more logical to look for a linkage between Mo Yan and Shen Congwen (沈从文) based on a shared sense of what David Der-Wei Wang termed “imaginary nostalgia.”¹¹ Certainly, both Mo Yan and Shen Congwen share an affinity for the lives of rural Chinese people, whom they both stand in opposition to China’s “modern” urban population, but Mo Yan’s “imaginary nostalgia” shares none of the romanticism that informs a story such as *Bian cheng* 边城 (Border Town).

As Michael S. Duke pointed out:

[Mo Yan’s] Chinese countryside is a nightmarish world of ignorance, poverty, cruelty, bitterly hard work, suffering, sadness, misery, and broken dreams, the bleakness of which is only

⁹ Clearly the system of foot binding had everything to do with power and gender in China. However, I purposefully elide the issue of gender here to keep my focus on the broader system of power and body-violence in “traditional,” Maoist, and post-Mao China. For anyone interested in a discussion of patriarchy, power, and gender in *Red Sorghum*, see Lu Tonglin’s “Red Sorghum: Limits of Transgression,” in *Misogyny, Cultural Nihilism, and Oppositional Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 51 – 74.

¹⁰ This shift in voice is much more apparent in the Chinese text than in the English translation; it is, in fact, set apart typographically. See 红高粱, p. 111.

¹¹ David Der Wei Wang, “Imaginary Nostalgia: Shen Congwen and Native Soil Fiction,” in *Fictional Realism in 20th Century China*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), pp. 247-279.

infrequently and temporarily relieved by very small doses of simple human kindness, friendship, and love.¹²

Drawing on this characterization, with which I fully agree, I feel safe in asserting that Mo Yan's rural China is located much closer to Lu Xun's than Shen Congwen's. The world of Grandma, Yu Zhan'ao, and Douguan shares a clear discursive affinity with the world of "Wolf Cub Village," "Kong Yiji," and "Xianglin Sao," a world in which power is inscribed through the consistent application of extreme forms of psychological and physical violence. Ultimately, then, it is the shared discourse on power, body, and violence that forges the discursive linkage between Mo Yan and Lu Xun. However, I want to stress that my reading of this linkage is not meant to imply some kind of May Fourth-post-Mao literary continuity; Mo Yan's contribution to the discourse is profoundly different than that of Lu Xun.

There's no way I can examine the formation of a coherent discursive statement in the *Red Sorghum* narrative if I follow the constantly shifting temporal localities of the three principal characters, so I have constructed my own linear narrative around Yu Zhan'ao to serve as a single, experiential referent for discussing the events in the text.

Born into poverty, Yu Zhan'ao had lost his father when he was just a boy. So he and his mother had eked out a living by tending three mu—less than half an acre—of miserable land. His uncle, Big Tooth Yu, who dealt in mules and horses, had occasionally helped mother and son financially, but not all that often.

Then when he was thirteen, his mother began an affair with the abbot at Tianqi Monastery. The well-to-do monk often brought rice and noodles over, and every time he came, Yu Zhan'ao's mother sent the boy outside. Flames of anger raged inside him as sounds of revelry emerged from behind the closed door, and he could barely keep from torching the house. By the time he was sixteen, his mother was seeing the monk so frequently that the village was buzzing. A friend of his, Little Cheng the blacksmith, made him a short sword, with which he murdered the monk one

¹² Michael S. Duke, "Past, Present, and Future in Mo Yan's Fiction in the 1980s," in *From May Fourth to June Fourth: Fiction and Film in Twentieth Century China*, ed. Ellen Widmer and David Der-Wei Wang (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

drizzly spring night beside Pear Blossom Creek, named for the trees that lined it. They were in bloom on the wet night, blanketing the area with their delicate fragrance.¹³

If I've calculated correctly, Yu Zhan'ao was born in 1899, the last year of the century, and from his attitudes and actions it is apparent that his soul is rooted in the traditional social order of dynastic China. This is an important fact to keep in mind when deciphering how Mo Yan contextualizes Yu Zhan'ao's behavior. Born into poverty he is the personification of the late nineteenth century rural Chinese, all of whom were in direct conflict with the changes being forced upon them by the coming of the twentieth century (the tradition/modernity dialectic).¹⁴ From the start of his life Yu Zhan'ao is a victim of circumstances beyond his control. His father dies when he is still a small boy, leaving mother and child to eke out a living on about a quarter acre of land. And so it goes until Yu Zhan'ao is thirteen, when his mother begins an affair with a local Buddhist monk. He endures the shame and humiliation of his mother's behavior for three years, but when he turns sixteen he can endure the situation no longer and murders the monk. It is circumstance that forces Yu Zhan'ao to kill the monk; it is not an act of choice but of desperation.

Mo Yan's narration of the actual event skillfully aestheticizes the violence through the use of a narrative voice approaching the lyrical, yet his ambivalence about the use of physical violence as a legitimate expression of power is carefully embedded in the text, which keeps Yu Zhan'ao's first murder from being completely romanticized.

The monk walked quickly up the road under the yellow oilcloth umbrella that obscured his head. There were tiny water stains on his green cassock. Raising the hem with one hand and holding his umbrella high with the other, he crossed the brook, his rotund

¹³ Goldblatt, *Red Sorghum*, p.103.

¹⁴ One of the best literary representations on the plight of traditional rural Chinese in conflict with the forces of the twentieth century (i.e., the modern) is Mao Dun's trilogy of short stories: "Spring Silkworms," "Autumn Harvest," "Winter Ruin." See Mao Dun, *Spring Silkworms and Other Stories*, trans. Sidney Shapiro (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1956).

figure twisting as he stepped from stone to stone. Now that his pale, puffy face was visible, Yu Zhan'ao gripped the sword and listened to its high-pitched shriek. His wrist ached and began to turn numb, his fingers started to twitch. After fording the brook, the monk let go the hem of his cassock and stomped his feet, splashing his sleeve with mud, which he flicked off with his fingernail.

This fair-skinned monk, who prided himself on always looking tidy and fresh, exuded a pleasant soapy odor, which Yu Zhan'ao could smell as he watched him fold his umbrella and shake off the water before slipping it under his arm. The twelve round burns on his pale scalp sparkled. Yu Zhan'ao recalled seeing his mother caress that scalp with both hands, as though she were stroking a Buddhist treasure, while he laid his head in her lap like a contented infant. By now the monk was so close he could hear his labored breathing. He was barely able to grip the sword handle, which was as slippery as a loach. He was drenched in sweat, his eyes were blurring, and he was getting light headed. He was afraid he was going to faint.

As the monk passed by, he spat a gob of sticky phlegm, which landed on a twig and hung there sickeningly, giving rise to all sorts of nauseating thoughts in Yu Zhan'ao's mind. He inched closer, his head throbbing painfully. His temples felt like mallets pounding on a taut drum inside his head. The sword seemed to enter the monk's rib cage on its own. The monk stumbled a few steps before grabbing the trunk of a pear tree to steady himself, and turned to look at his assailant. There was pain in the monk's pitiful eyes, and a keen sense of regret in his heart. He said nothing as he slid down the tree trunk to the ground.

When Yu Zhan'ao pulled the sword out of the monk's rib cage, a flow of lovely warm blood was released, soft and slippery, like the wing feathers of a bird.... The buildup of water on the pear tree finally gave way and splashed down on the sandy ground, bringing dozens of petals with it. A small whirlwind rose up deep in the pear grove, and he later recalled smelling the delicate fragrance of pear blossoms.¹⁵

Contrary to Lu Xun's totalizing claim that traditional Chinese culture, and by implication the Chinese people, were essentially cannibalistic, Yu Zhan'ao demonstrates no inherent proclivity for violence. It is only when he is subjected to the prolonged humiliation of his

¹⁵ Goldblatt, *Red Sorghum*, pp.108-109.

mother's affair that he decides to kill the monk, and even then the will to such extreme action does not come easily, nor is it an act committed without remorse. In ambush awaiting the monk, Yu Zhan'ao is racked by anxiety, his wrists ache and become numb, his fingers twitch, sweat pours down his face, his eyes blur, he becomes light-headed and fears that he might faint. In sharp contrast to Yu Zhan'ao is the man about to be victimized. He wanders along under his yellow, oilcloth umbrella without a care in the world. It's damp and there are "tiny water stains on his green cassock." He is fastidious, content, fleshy, well-fed and freshly scrubbed. The pear trees are in full bloom and the blossoms give off a delicate scent.

In the above passage Mo Yan demonstrates great skill and control in creating a subtle balance between Yu Zhan'ao's raw will to power, and the monk's effete persona, a balance that is violently shattered by the fastidious monk's act of spitting "a gob of sticky phlegm," that hangs "sickeningly" in front of Yu Zhan'ao's face. The crudely graphic nature of this act creates a sudden rupture in the narration, which effectively strips the monk of his effete (and somewhat protective) persona, exposing him as just another human animal, and thus legitimate prey for the hunter laying in wait. Yu Zhan'ao, overwhelmed by the "mallets pounding on a taut drum inside his head" is only semi-present as "[the] sword seem[s] to enter the monk's rib cage on its own." The true violence of Yu Zhan'ao's murderous act is adroitly contextualized in relation to the lyricism of "lovely warm blood...soft and slippery, like the wing feathers of a bird."

It is in this act that Yu Zhan'ao first experiences his will to power acted-out through the direct inscription of extreme body-violence. Yet the voice and style of the narration, and the careful use of highly detailed imagery, brought forward in a carefully controlled order, tends slightly to mitigate Yu Zhan'ao's violence. In *Red Sorghum*, Mo Yan's critique on power and violence is far less totalizing than Lu Xun's; for Mo Yan context is the most significant factor in determining the legitimacy of a character's will to power. The difference between one context

and another can be quite subtle, so Mo Yan repeatedly juxtaposes differing power-violence contextualizations, which accounts for the constant temporal shifting that characterizes the narrative structure of the text.

Granddad fled the village after the incident, taking odd jobs and finally getting hooked on gambling. Over time his skills improved, until the copper coins that passed through his hands stained his fingers green. Then, when Nine Dreams Cao, whose favorite pastime was nabbing gamblers, became magistrate of Gaomi County, he was arrested for gambling in a graveyard, given two hundred lashes with a shoe sole, forced to wear a pair of pants with one red leg and one black one, and sentenced to sweeping the streets of the county town for two months. When he'd completed his sentence he wandered into Northeast Gaomi Township, where he hired out to the service company. Upon learning that after the death of the monk his mother had hanged herself from the door frame, he went back one night to take a last look around. Sometime later the incident with my grandma occurred.¹⁶

Before I begin to deal with the fateful intersection of grandma's and Yu Zhan'ao's lives, I want to draw attention to the character of Nine Dreams Cao, Magistrate of Gaomi County. As a county magistrate Nine Dreams Cao represents the traditional Chinese regime of power and discipline. Punishment follows directly on the heels of judgment, and is acted out directly upon the body of the adjudged. In Yu Zhan'ao's case, when he is punished for gambling he is given two hundred hard slaps with a cotton shoe sole, one hundred blows on each side of his face—power-body-violence. There is another, more detailed depiction of Nine Dreams Cao's use of officially sanctioned violence that is worth looking at.

Magistrate Cao had a ruddy face, bulging eyes, a square mouth, and a thin mustache. He was decked out in a dark green tunic and a brown wool formal hat. He carried a walking stick.

Caught up in resolving a dispute, he had drawn quite a crowd....

Two men and a woman stood cowering before Magistrate Cao, their faces bathed in sweat. The woman's cheeks were made even wetter by her tears. A fat hen lay on the ground at her feet.

¹⁶ Goldblatt, *Red Sorghum*, pp.103-104.

"Worthy magistrate, your honor, she sobbed, my mother-in-law can't stop menstruating, and we have no money for medicine. That's why we're selling this laying hen... he says the hen is his...."

"The hen is mine. If the magistrate doesn't believe me, ask my neighbor...."

"Worthy magistrate, I am Wu and Third's neighbor, and this hen of his wanders into my yard every day to steal my chicken's food. My wife is always complaining about it...."

"What did you feed your chicken this morning?" [Cao] asked Wu the Third, who rolled his eyes and replied, "Cereal mash mixed with bran husks...."

Magistrate Cao turned to the crying woman. "Don't cry, countrywoman. Tell me what you fed your chicken this morning."

"Sorghum," she said between sobs.

"Little Yan," Magistrate Cao said, "kill the chicken!"

With lightning speed Yan slit the hens crop and squeezed out a gooey mess of sorghum seeds.

With a menacing laugh Magistrate Cao said, "You're a real scoundrel, Wu the Third. Now, since you caused the death of this hen, you can pay for it. Three silver dollars...."

"Wu the Third, you scoundrel," Nine Dreams Cao commanded, "drop your pants."

Wu was too bashful to do as he was told.

"You tried to cheat that good woman in broad daylight," Magistrate Cao rebuked him. "It's pretty late for modesty, isn't it? Do you know what shame is selling for these days? Drop'em!"

Wu the Third dropped his pants.

Nine Dreams Cao took off one of his shoes and handed it to Little Yan. "Two hundred lashes. All cheeks. Ass and face!"

Holding Magistrate Cao's thick-soled shoe in his hand, Little Yan kicked Wu the Third to the ground, took aim at his exposed backside and started in, fifty on each side, until Wu was screaming

for his parents and begging for mercy, his buttocks swelling up in plain sight of everyone. Then it was his face's turn, again fifty on each side, that stopped his screams....

"As for you," Nine Dreams Cao said, pointing to the man who'd served as witness, "an ass-kisser who'd make up a story like that is the scum of the earth. I'm not going to give you a taste of the bottom of my shoe, because your ass would only soil it. Since you prefer something sweet, I'll let you lick the ass of your rich buddy." "Little Yan, go by a pot of honey."

When Little Yan returned with the honey, Nine Dreams Cao pointed to Wu the Third. "Spread it on his ass!"

Little Yan rolled Wu over on his belly, picked up a stick, and spread the potful of honey over his swollen buttocks.

"Start licking," Nine Dreams Cao ordered the false witness.

"You like kissing ass, don't you? Okay, start licking!"

The false witness kept kowtowing loudly....

"Get the shoe ready, Little Yan...."

"Don't hit me," the false witness screamed, "don't hit me! I'll lick it."

He crawled up to Wu the Third, stuck out his tongue, and began lapping up the sticky, transparent threads of honey.

The looks on the hot, sweaty face of the observers can hardly be described.

Sometimes fast, sometimes slowly, the false witness licked on, stopping only to throw up, which turned Wu the Third's buttocks into a mottled mess. Seeing that he'd accomplished his purpose, Nine Dreams Cao roared, "That's enough, you scum!"

The man stopped licking, pulled his jacket up over his head, and lay on the ground refusing to get up.¹⁷

Essentially, Nine Dreams Cao functions as the personification of autocratic justice—swift, violent, and by some logic fitted to the crime in question. His punishment of Wu the Third

¹⁷ Goldblatt, *Red Sorghum*, pp. 116-120. Note, I have taken the liberty of significantly abridging Howard Goldblatt's translation, as well as Mo Yan's original Chinese, pp.143-149.

is enacted as a public spectacle, is violent, and involves a high degree of public humiliation. Juridical culture in Northeast Gaomi Township during the time of Grandma and Yu Zhan'ao, was not about the rule of law, but about the direct application of power, as illustrated in the lengthy passage cited above. Punishment was, and still is, a public spectacle that involves the inscription of power directly on the body of the guilty through the uses of public humiliation and extreme physical violence. This point is central to my thesis on the representations of power and sanctioned violence in post Mao fiction.

Grandma longed to lose her anxieties and loneliness in the arms of a strong and noble young man. Finally, to her relief, her wedding day arrived, and as she was placed inside the sedan chair, carried by four bearers, the horns and woodwinds fore and aft struck up a melancholy tune that brought tears to her eyes. Off they went, floating along as through riding the clouds or sailing through a mist....

"Old Man in heaven, protect me!" Her silent prayer made her delicate lips tremble... She ripped the tart-smelling veil away from her face and laid it on her knees. She was following local wedding customs, which dictated that a bride wear three layers of new clothes, top and bottom, no matter how hot the day. The inside of the sedan chair was badly worn and terribly dirty, like a coffin, it had already embraced countless other brides, now long dead... Succumbing to the oppressiveness in the carriage, Grandma eased on of her bamboo-shoot toes under the curtain and lifted it a crack to sneak a look outside....

The men's bodies emitted the sour smell of seat. Infatuated by the masculine odor, Grandma breathed in deeply—this ancestor of mine must have been nearly bursting with passion.¹⁸

Once again I have significantly abridged the above section of text but have, nonetheless, maintained the essential integrity of the narrative: Grandma's deep well of personal passion; the equation between marriage and death; and the all important intersection of Grandma's and Yu Zhan'ao's lives.

¹⁸ Goldblatt, *Red Sorghum*, pp.40-42.

In the artificial context (mine) of a linear narrative structure, it is in this section of the text that one of Grandma's most interesting and important characteristics, her will to transgress, is first revealed—she removes her “tart” smelling bridal veil, and uses one of her bamboo-shoot toes to part the curtain that separates her not only from the sedan chair bearers, but also from the world beyond marriage. This is only the first, small move in the intensely dramatic game of Grandma's and Yu Zhan'ao's transgressive relationship. It is important to bear in mind that for all the spectacular events that occur throughout the course of the narrative, it is the will to transgress, the will to power that distinguishes this fantastic, and mythical couple. And let there be no mistake, contextually there is a clear demarcation between the world of Grandma and Yu Zhan'ao, and the world inherited (created) by their progeny; even Yu Douguan, just one generation from the original conjunction, already represents a diminution of the cultural, ideological, social, and spiritual mythos for which they sign.

When the sedan chair reached the plains, the bearers began to get a little sloppy, both to make-up time and to torment their passenger. Some brides were bounced around so violently they vomited from motions sickness, soiling their clothing and slippers; the retching sounds from inside the carriage pleased the bearers as though they were giving vent to their own miseries....

One of the four men bearing Grandma's sedan chair that day would eventually become my granddad—it was Commander Yu Zhan'ao. At the time he was a beefy twenty year old, a pallbearer and sedan bearer at the peak of his trade. The young men of his generation were as sturdy as Northeast Gaomi sorghum, which is more than can be said about us weaklings who succeeded them.¹⁹

Mo Yan could not be more clear in illustrating the fundamental dialectic that informs the entire novel; Yu Zhan'ao (and Grandma) are assigned a valorized presence in the text based on their symbolic value as the mythical last generation of rural Chinese who came of age prior to the encroachment of the “modern,” and remained ideologically and spiritually untainted by the

¹⁹ Goldblatt, *Red Sorghum*, pp. 42-43.

new communist (i.e., Maoist) order. Mo Yan's strategy in narrating the dialectic between the values of tradition in opposition to the realities of the "modern," is one he uses repeatedly throughout the text—he draws the reader into the text through elaborate descriptive narration, in this case focused on the sedan bearers who take pleasure in the small sadistic acts aimed at the victim-brides who sit alone and terrified inside their filthy marriage coffin, then the narrative voice abruptly shifts to the temporally distanced perspective of the grandson-narrator. One moment we are present at an event during which Yu Zhan'ao takes pleasure in tormenting Grandma, when suddenly the grandson-narrator intrudes in a highly didactic manner to declare that in spite of granddad's petty sadisms, there was a vital spirit in the life of his generation, and by implication the generations that preceded his, that disappeared in the reordering of the state. The violence remains, but the contextualization of that violence is subtly yet radically different from that of the pre-communist order.

As the bearers become bored with the journey their treatment of Grandma becomes increasingly sadistic.

The sedan chair was like a dinghy tossed about by the waves, and Grandma held on to the wooden seat for dear life. The two eggs she'd eaten for breakfast churned in her stomach, the flies buzzed around her ears; her throat tightened as the taste of the eggs surged up into her mouth. She bit her lip, don't let yourself throw up! She commanded herself. You mustn't let yourself throw up, Fenglian....

The bearers' banter turned coarse. One of them reviled my great-granddad for being a money grubber, another said something about a pretty flower stuck into a pile of cowshit, a third called Shan Bianlang a scruffy leper who oozed pus and excreted yellow fluids. He said the stench of rotten flesh drifted beyond the Shan compound, which swarmed with horse flies....

As the horns and woodwinds blared and tooted, the taste of eggs grew stronger, forcing Grandma to bite down on her lip. But to no avail. She opened her mouth and spewed a stream of filth, soiling the curtain, toward which the five flies dashed as though shot from a gun.

"Elder brothers... spare me...." Grandma pleaded desperately between agonizing retches. Then she burst into tears. She felt humiliated; she could sense the perils of her future, knowing she'd spend the rest of her life drowning in a sea of bitterness....

Grandma's piteous wails made the sorghum quake. The bearers stopped rocking the chair and calmed the raging sea.²⁰

When one considers the harsh realities of marriage for females in traditional Neo-Confucian culture, the willful behavior of the sedan chair bearers seems to reinforce Lu Xun's assertion that sado-masochism is characteristic of the Chinese people's deep illness of spirit. But Mo Yan counters Lu Xun's discursive position by reordering the context of Grandma's "funereal" journey to the Shan family compound.

My grandfather, the bearer directly in front of Grandma's foot, felt a strange premonition blazing inside him and illuminating the path his life would take. The sounds of Grandma's weeping had awakened seeds of affection that had lain dormant deep in his heart.

It was time to rest, so the bearers lowered the sedan chair to the ground. Grandma, having cried herself into a daze, didn't realize that one of her tiny feet was peeking out from beneath the curtain; the sight of that incomparably delicate, lovely thing nearly drove the souls out of the bearers' bodies. Yu Zhan'ao walked up, leaned over, and gently—very gently—held Grandma's foot in his hand, as though it were a fledgling whose feathers weren't yet dry, then eased it back inside the carriage. She was so moved by the gentleness of the deed she could barely keep from throwing back the curtain to see what sort of man this bearer was, with his large, warm, youthful hand.

I've always believed that marriages are made in heaven and that people fated to be together are connected by an invisible thread. The act of grasping Grandma's foot triggered a powerful drive in Yu Zhan'ao to forge a new life for himself, and constituted the turning point in his life—and the turning point in hers as well.²¹

²⁰ Goldblatt, *Red Sorghum*, pp. 44-45.

²¹ Goldblatt, *Red Sorghum*, p. 46.

Caught up in the drama of petty sadism — Grandma, alone, terrified, vomiting, wailing, and reeking of filth — the last thing the reader expects is a moment of deep feeling, of compassion and tenderness, yet this is exactly what Mo Yan delivers. When one of Grandma's "incomparably delicate" feet is accidentally exposed, the bearers are driven into frenzies of lust. And then, in an act of reverence and compassion Zhan'ao's hand takes Grandma's perfect "three inch golden lotus," holds it tenderly, then "gently—very gently..." slips it back beneath the curtain that conceals her. Improbable as it might seem this act of fetishistic reverence is the symbolic act that establishes the lasting spiritual bond between Dai Fenglian and Yu Zhan'ao.

Following his strategy of shifting temporal, spatial, and narrative modalities, the grace-filled ambiance of this event, the single most intimate moment between Grandma and Yu Zhan'ao in the entire text, is suddenly shattered by a distanced narrative voice which reduces the rapture of the particular into the sterility of meaningless generalities. We must ask ourselves why a writer of such breadth and command of his language inserts such an abrupt modal rupture at a moment of such intense lyricism. I would hazard to suggest that this particular narrative layering greatly informs us about the basis of Fenglian and Zhan'ao relationship, yet it says, perhaps, more about the narrator who is located at a great distance from his grandparents' life spirit. Yes, life was harsh and yes, it was brutal—power, dominance, violence, body, pain—but there were moments of intense passion, at times violent passion, that served as acts of redemption, moments of individual transgression that reordered the context of how particular events were to be read, and how individual actions were to be judged.

The *Red Sorghum* narrative is the story of Grandma and Yu Zhan'ao, as told fourth hand by Douguan's youngest child, and unnamed grandson who receives his information from a woman in her nineties who recounts the epic story in the time honored oral tradition of rhythmic singing accompanied by bamboo clappers. As I have already indicated, the moral and spiritual

distance between gandparents and grandson-narrator far exceeds the temporal distance of two generations. The factor that accounts for this distance is the valorization of Grandma and Zhan'ao, the significance of which is that it establishes a standard and contextualization against which all the other characters and events in the narrative are to be measured. Due to the importance of Mo Yan's highly nostalgic and profoundly ambivalent valorization of Grandma and Granddad, I must discuss the quick series of events that solidify Grandma's and Zhan'ao's valorized position in the narrative: Yu Zhan'ao's savings Grandma from the highwayman in Toad Hollow, his rape of Grandma in the sorghum field, and his murder of Shan Tingxiu and Shan Bianlang.

Northeast Gaomi Township was aswarm with bandits who operated in the sorghum fields like fish in water, forming gangs to rob, pillage, and kidnap, yet balancing their evil deeds with charitable ones.²²

Note the way Mo Yan romanticizes the image of the bandits by balancing their anti-social behavior with charitable acts, hence locating them closer to the romantic ideal of the *haohan* 好汉 (true man) from traditional vernacular fiction, such as *Shuihuzhuan* 水浒传 (Water Margin), than to out and out criminals.²³ Establishing this allusive association allows Mo Yan to elevate the status of the bandits of Northeast Gaomi county by implying that they uphold some code of honor and valor. Thus, when Yu Zhan'ao takes to the sorghum fields as a bandit he will be read in the context of a romanticized code of conduct.

Following their brief rest the sedan bearers set off once again to deliver Dai Fenglian to the Shan family compound. However, they'd not been long on the road when they were accosted by a highwayman.

“Nobody passes without paying a toll!” the man bellowed....

²² Goldblatt, *Red Sorghum*, p. 47.

²³ Shi Nai'an, *Outlaws of the Marsh*, trans. Sidney Shapiro, 4 vols. (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1988)

"Get behind the sedan chair, all of you. I'll pop if you don't!" He thumped the object tucked into his belt.

The bearers moved slowly behind the sedan chair. Yu Zhan'ao, bringing up the rear, spun around and glared. A change came over the highwayman's face, and he gripped the object more tightly....

With his hand resting on his belt he shuffled up to the sedan chair, reached out, and pinched Grandma's foot. A smile creased her face, and the man pulled his hand away as though it had been scalded.

"Climb down and come with me!" he ordered her.²⁴

Given the high fetish value of bound feet in general, and of Grandma's feet in particular, in pinching her foot the highwayman might as well have shoved his hand down between her legs. The crudeness of this gesture, in sharp contrast to Yu Zhan'ao's tender and intimate touch, immediately excludes this particular highwayman from the romanticized brotherhood of Northeast Gaomi bandits. More immediate and significant is the fact that his act is a direct transgression against Yu Zhan'ao.

"Into the sorghum field!" the highwayman said, his hand still resting on the red-bundled object at his belt.

Grandma stood confidently, lightning crackled in the clouds overhead and shattered her radiant smile into a million shifting shards. The highwayman began pushing her into the sorghum field, his hand never leaving the object at his belt. She stared at Yu Zhan'ao with a feverish look in her eyes.

Yu Zhan'ao approached the highwayman, his thin lips curled resolutely, up at one end and down at the other.

"Hold it right there!" the highwayman commanded feebly. "I'll shoot you if you take another step!"

Yu Zhan'ao walked calmly up to the man, who began backing up. Green flames seemed to shoot from his eyes, and crystalline beads of sweat scurried down his terrified face. When Yu Zhan'ao had drawn to within three paces of him, a shameful sound burst from his mouth, and he turned and ran. Yu Zhan'ao was on his tail in a

²⁴ Goldblatt, *Red Sorghum*, pp. 47-48.

flash, kicking him expertly in the rear. He sailed through the air over the cornflowers, thrashing his arms and legs like an innocent babe, until he landed in the sorghum field.²⁵

Mo Yan uses this event to create an epic-like spectacle. Lightning crackles across the sky, Grandma's feverish gaze burns into Yu Zhan'ao's eyes willing him to act, and act he does, calmly stepping forward he overpowers the highwayman with an intense strength of will, and saves Grandma from being raped by a stranger. And while this romantic drama of spiritual bonding is taking place between Grandma and Zhan'ao, the other sedan bearers beat the helpless highwayman to death in a counter spectacle of graphic violence. It is just this technique of embedding the violent spectacle of power within a larger, epic-romantic narrative that allows Mo Yan to valorize Grandma's and Zhan'ao's acts of violence, to valorize the individual will to power.

Yu Zhan'ao looked wordlessly first at the dead, then at the living. With a handful of leaves from a sorghum stalk, he cleaned up Grandma's mess in the carriage, then held up the tree knot (the highwayman's fake gun), wrapped it in the piece of red cloth, and tossed the bundle as far as he could; the gnarled knot broke free in flight and separated from the piece of cloth, which fluttered to the ground in the field like a big red butterfly....

Grandma ripped the curtain from the front of the carriage and stuffed it behind the seat. As she breathed the free air she studied Yu Zhan'ao's broad shoulders and narrow waist. He was so near she could have touched the pale, taut skin of his shaved head with her toe.²⁶

The "epic" of *Toad Hollow* masterfully intertwines power, body, violence and sexuality into a spectacle that is both lyrical and graphically violent, the outcome of which ennobles both Grandma and Yu Zhan'ao. Thus, the grandson-narrator looks back on his grandparents' lives and they are larger than life, particularly larger than life as he has experienced it during the Maoist era.

²⁵ Goldblatt, *Red Sorghum*, p 48.

²⁶ Goldblatt, *Red Sorghum*, pp. 49-50.

The entire episode beginning with Grandma's desolate arrival at the Shan family compound is like some Rabelaisian grotesquery. It is not enough that she has endured the petty sadisms of the sedan chair bearers, and the highwayman's attempted rape, but within the walls of the compound the deep ambiance of the environment has about it a rank, pestilential reek, wholly befitting the creature to whom she has been betrothed.

A man with a facial tic sat curled up on a stool next to her. The bottom half of his flat, elongated face was red and festering. He stood up and stuck out a claw-like hand toward Grandma, who screamed in horror and reached into her bodice for the scissors....²⁷

The sheer horror of Dai Fenglian's reality is staggering; for a few pieces of silver this sixteen year old girl's been sold into a realm of the macabre, into a regime of power characterized by quotidian violence and unspeakable acts. Once again I am forced to ask, what it is about the mythic age of his grandparents that causes the grandson-narrator to avow, on a periodic but regular basis, the superiority of their spirits, (i.e., "Grandma, compared to you, I am like a shriveled insect that has gone hungry for three long years.")²⁸ The violence and grotesque do not disappear with Grandma's death, or Granddad's long years of conscription in a coal mine on Hokkaido. It continues on without interruption, but as we follow the narrative towards the "modern," the closer we approach the temporal locus of the grandson-narrator, the life spirit of the Chinese people diminishes accordingly.

It is their individual wills to power that distinguish Grandma and Yu Zhan'ao from the grandson's generation. It is the individual will to act that is valorized. Though brutally violent, deadly, and at times blood-chillingly macabre, in the mythologized age of Fenglian and Zhan'ao, power-body-violence relations were transacted on a personal basis. Modern concepts such as "Class," and "Mass Line" were unknown to them, but with the coming reorganization of country

²⁷ Goldblatt, *Red Sorghum*, p. 68.

²⁸ Goldblatt, *Red Sorghum*, p. 132.

in the interests of "National Identity," the individual will to power was rapidly subsumed by the "National" will to power—first to fight the Japanese, and later to reshape the ideological, political, and social consciousness of the Chinese people. The grandson-narrator grieves for the individual's lost spirit and freedom to act, and it is this that gives rise to his sense of ambivalent nostalgia.

On the morning of the third day, my maternal great-granddad led a donkey up to the house to take Grandma home.; it was a Northeast Gaomi Township custom for a bride to return to her parents' home three days after her wedding. Great-Granddad spent the morning drinking with Shan Tingxiu, then set out for home shortly after noon....

Great-Granddad, drunk as a lord, kept vomiting into the weeds by the side of the road. The filth and bile set Grandma's stomach churning, and she felt nothing but loathing for him....

Since it knew the way home, [the donkey] carried Grandma at a carefree saunter. Up ahead was a bend in the road, and as the donkey negotiated the turn, Grandma tipped backward, leaving the security of the animal's back. A muscular arm swept her off and carried her into the sorghum field.

Grandma fought halfheartedly. She really didn't feel like struggling. The three days she had just gotten through were nightmarish. Certain individuals become great leaders in an instant, Grandma unlocked the mysteries of life in three days. She even wrapped her arms around his neck to make it easier for him to carry her. Sorghum leaves rustled....

The man placed Grandma on the ground, where she lay as limp as a ribbon of dough, her eyes narrowed like those of a lamb. He ripped away the black mask, revealing his face to her. It's him! A silent prayer to heaven. A powerful feeling of pure joy rocked her, filling her eyes with hot tears.

Yu Zhan'ao removed his rain cape and tramped out a clearing in the sorghum then spread his cape over the sorghum corpses. He lifted Grandma onto the cape. Her soul fluttered as she gazed at his bare torso. A light mist rose from the tips of the sorghum, and all around she could hear the sounds of growth... The passion in Grandma's heart, built up over sixteen years, suddenly erupted. She squirmed and twisted on the cape. Yu Zhan'ao, getting smaller and smaller, fell loudly to his knees at her side. She was

trembling from head to toe; a redolent yellow ball of fire crackled and sizzled before her eyes. Yu Zhan'ao roughly tore open her jacket, exposing the white mounds of chilled, tense flesh to the sunlight. Answering his force, she cried out in a muted, hoarse voice, "My God....," and swooned.

Grandma and Granddad exchanged their love surrounded by the vitality of the sorghum field: two unbridled souls, refusing to knuckle under to worldly conventions, were fused together more closely than their ecstatic bodies. They plowed the clouds and scattered the rain in the field, adding a patina of lustrous red to the rich and varied history of northeast Gaomi Township. My father was conceived with the essence of heaven and earth, the crystallization of suffering and wild joy.²⁹

The meeting and union between Dai Fenglian and Yu Zhan'ao, while only a small part of the overall narrative, is the defining event of the entire text: "two unbridled souls, refusing to knuckle under to worldly conventions...." Here is the locus of Grandma's and Granddad's power, the context for their valorization, and the source of the narrator's sense of nostalgia; the individual will to power that was incrementally subsumed by the emergence of the "modern" Chinese state. Fenglian and Zhan'ao exist at the pinnacle of a descending hierarchy of heroic individuality that works its way down through other Northeast Gaomi Township bandits, such as Spotted Neck, and Black Eye, and further down to the likes of Pocky Cheng, and Little Foot Jiang (leaders of rag-tag peasant gangs being loosely organized by the Republicans and Communists in the War of Resistance against Japan), and on down to the lowest strata, the contemporary, faceless cadre/bureaucrats who regularly act with great inhumanity, yet are protected as functionaries of the State's will to power.

It is difficult for me to read the coupling between Fenglian and Zhan'ao as rape, but the spectacle of power-dominance-body-violence acted out in the sorghum field is clearly regarded as rape by Lu Tonglin and others. However, in the context of the experiences Grandma is forced to undergo prior to coupling with Zhan'ao, not the least of which is having been sold as a bride

²⁹ Goldblatt, *Red Sorghum*, pp. 68-71.

to a leper, Yu Zhan'ao's intervention, while admittedly an act of power dominance in a sexual sense, can also be seen as an act, in a series of acts, that create the context for the emergence of Grandma's individual will to power.

In some significant aspects, heroes are born not made. Heroic qualities flow through a person's veins like an undercurrent, ready to be translated into action. During her first sixteen years, Grandma's days had been devoted to embroidery, needlework, paper cutouts, foot binding, the endless glossing of her hair, and all other manner of domestic things in the company of neighbor girls. What then, was the source of her ability and courage to deal with the events she encountered in her adult years? How was she able to temper herself to the point where even in the face of danger she could conquer her fears and force herself to act heroically? I'm not sure I know.³⁰

Following his sexual/spiritual union with Grandma in the Sorghum field, Zhan'ao instructs her emphatically to return to the Shan family distillery at the end of her three days visit with her parents. Grandma, who would rather kill herself than be subjected to a life with the leper Shan Bianlang, is naturally hesitant to do what Zhan'ao suggests, but he is adamant that she return.

Three days later, the little donkey carried Grandma back, and when she entered the village she learned that the Shans, father and son, had been murdered and tossed into the inlet at the western edge of the village.³¹

Yu Zhan'ao's murder of Shan Tingxiu and Shan Bianlang is a graphically brutal spectacle in keeping both with the general discourse on body-violence, and with the macabre atmosphere of the Shan family compound. Father and son have been represented as such thoroughly odious creatures that Yu Zhan'ao's elimination of them is easily read as an act of mercy—saving Grandma from being entombed in the horror of a living-death—thus two brutal murders are valorized as heroic; *context is everything*. But Zhan'ao's murder of the Shans does

³⁰ Goldblatt, *Red Sorghum*, p. 89.

³¹ Goldblatt, *Red Sorghum*, p. 89.

more than free Grandma from an unspeakable marriage, it also has the effect of making her the sole inheritor of the Shan family distillery. In a stroke, so to speak, Yu Zhan'ao not only frees Fenglian from the formal, oppressive conventions of marriage, but provides her with economic independence as well. Grandma, as she will prove, is indeed a most unusual woman.

In what has been a cursory look at just this small portion of the narrative (i.e., the intersection of Grandma's and Granddad's lives), there is a wealth of detail that I've had to omit for economy's sake. If, to this point, I've said a great deal about very little, it's because the personal characteristics of Dai Fenglian and Yu Zhan'ao, both as individuals and in unison, set the standard of "being" by which all the other characters and events are to be measured. I repeat myself in saying this, but it is critical to keep in mind when reading the narrative as a whole, and more importantly, in understanding the grandson-narrator's nostalgia, as well as his slightly more problematic sense of ambivalence.

In beginning to map the topography of power, body and violence in *Red Sorghum* through a very broad discussion of Grandma and Yu Zhan'ao, I have repeatedly had to gloss over highly graphic depictions of power translated directly into body violence, such as Zhan'ao's completely remorseless murder of the notorious outlaw Spotted neck and his entire gang of bandits.³² There is, however, one particular character, and one particular event that I cannot leave unrecorded because it is the most infamous example of inscribing power through the use of violence against the body. I am referring to the skinning alive of Liu Luohan (Uncle Arhat).

Uncle Arhat is a somewhat enigmatic character. As manager of the distillery, Grandma inherited him with the Shan estate. Because Yu Zhan'ao murdered the Shan's he had to make himself scarce, and it was Uncle Arhat who ran the distillery while Grandma was laid up with her pregnancy, and it was Uncle Arhat who became like a father to Grandma's son, Douguan,

³² *HGL*, pp. 209-211; Goldblatt, *Red Sorghum*, pp. 161-164.

and thus he became a surrogate member of the family. At the distillery there were two black mules used to grind the sorghum into mash. These two mules were Uncle Arhat's pride and joy, and he felt a deep affection for them. When the occupying forces of the Japanese Army decided to build a proper stone bridge over the Black Water River, Uncle Arhat and his two black mules were conscripted as slave labor. From the outset of his conscription Uncle Arhat's thoughts turned to the idea of escape, and as fate would have he managed to escape during his first night in captivity.

It took Uncle Arhat a moment to realize what had happened. The middle-aged man had shown him the way to escape!

Cautiously, he crawled out through the opening. The dead Jap lay on the ground, face up, one leg still twitching.

After crawling into the sorghum field, Uncle Arhat straightened up and followed the furrows, taking care not to bump the stalks and get them rustling... The crisp air of freedom, filtered through the juices of the sorghum plants, entered his nostrils, his lungs, and his intestines... Astonished at having gotten away so easily, he strode onto the rickety wooden bridge, above splashing fish and rippling water, as a shooting star split the heavens. It was as though nothing had happened. He was free to return to his village to let his wounds mend and to go on living. But as he was crossing the bridge, he heard the plaintive braying of a mule on the southern bank. He turned back for Grandma's mules. This decision would lead to a grand tragedy.³³

The spectacle that ensues is indeed tragic, but to call it grand (*zhuanglie* 壮烈—heroic) is ironic at the very least. After just one day of labor Uncle Arhat is left bruised and bleeding, and his chances of surviving are very slim, indeed. And then, as if by magic, a noble stranger opens the way for his escape, and he is free, free to breathe, to return home, free to heal his wounds, free to go on living—but for the braying of the mules.

Horses and mules had been tied to a dozen or more tethering posts not far from the enclosure.... Uncle Arhat stumbling three times for every step, stole in among them, where he smelled the welcome

³³ Goldblatt, *Red Sorghum*, pp. 21-22.

odor of our two big black mules and spotted their familiar shapes. Time to free his comrades in suffering. But the mules, strangers to the world of reason, greeted him with flying hooves.

"Black mules," Uncle Arhat mumbled, "black mules, we can run away together!" The irate mules pawed the earth to protect their territory from their master, who was unaware that the smell of his dried blood and new wounds had changed his identity to them. Confused and upset, he stepped forward, and was knocked down by a flying hoof.... Uncle Arhat's hip swelled up painfully. He clambered to his feet, but fell back. As soon as he hit the ground he struggled back up....

"Damned beasts!"

With anger rising in his heart, he stumbled around the area looking for a weapon. At the construction site...he found a sharp metal hoe. Now armed, he walked and cursed loudly, forgetting all about the men and their dog no more than a hundred paces distant. He felt free—fear is all that stands in the way of freedom.

A red solar halo crumbled as the sun rose in the east, and in the predawn light the sorghum was so still it seemed ready to burst. Uncle Arhat walked up to the mules, the rosy color of dawn in his eyes and bitter loathing in his heart. The mules stood calmly, motionlessly. Uncle Arhat raised his hoe, took aim on the hind leg of one of them, and swung with all his might. The mule swayed sideways a couple of times, then straightened up, as a brutish, violent, stupefying, wrathful bray erupted from its head. The wounded animal then arched its rump, sending a shower of hot blood splashing down on Uncle Arhat's face....

The second mule stood stupidly, eyeing its fallen comrade and braying piteously, as though pleading for its life....

"Scared? You damned beast! Where's your arrogance now? You evil, ungrateful, parasitic bastard! You ass-kissing, treacherous son of a bitch!"

... Uncle Arhat took careful aim at the animal's face—crack—the hoe landed smack on its broad forehead, emitting a resounding clang as metal struck bone, the reverberation passing through the wooden handle and stinging Uncle Arhat's arms. Not a sound emerged from the black mule's closed mouth. Its legs and hooves jerked and twitched furiously before it crashed to the ground like a capsized wall.... Uncle Arhat watched quietly, his arms at his side. The shiny wooden handle buried in the mule's head pointed to heaven at a jaunty angle.

A barking dog, human shouts, dawn. The curved outline of a blood-red sun rose above the sorghum field to the east, its rays shining down on the black hole of Uncle Arhat's open mouth.³⁴

The sheer irrationality of Uncle Arhat's action underscores the fundamental irrationality of human emotions. Moved by affection for Grandma's black mules he risks his own newly won freedom to save them. Yet, in the blink of an eye Uncle Arhat's affection is transformed into a psychotic rage which leads him to kill the very objects he is attempting to save.³⁵ As the titular elder of the Red Sorghum Clan, Uncle Arhat is the one most deeply embedded in the historical past, the one most representative of the traditional order and mentality. Significantly, his actions and the fate that befalls him would not seem out of place in Lu Xun's fictionalized China, and it is here that Mo Yan's discourse on power, violence, and body converges with that of Lu Xun. I would not argue that through *Red Sorghum*, Mo Yan consciously establishes a dialogic relationship with Lu Xun, but the very substantial difference between their positions presents a very interesting contrapuntal relationship; Mo Yan finds meaning in the very irrational violence that Lu Xun so vehemently rejected.³⁶

Two Chinese in black uniforms stripped uncle Arhat naked and tied him to the rack. The Jap officer waved his arm, and two more black-clad men dragged and pushed sun Five, the most accomplished hog-butcher in our village...out of the enclosure.... He held a butcher knife in his left hand and a pail of water in his right as he shuffled up to Uncle Arhat.

The interpreter spoke: "the commander say to skin him alive. If you don't do a good job of it, he'll have his dog tear your heart out."

³⁴ Goldblatt, *Red Sorghum*, pp. 22-24.

³⁵ As Lu Tonglin and others correctly point out, at one particular discursive level *Red Sorghum* is Mo Yan's deconstruction of Socialist Realism. At this discursive level, the incident with Uncle Arhat and the mules can be read as a biting satiric re-writing of the Lei Fen narrative in which a young communist cadre is killed by a falling utility pole, and it is later discovered he has diary recording his life of selfless deeds.

³⁶ M.M.Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992).

... Holding the knife in his mouth, he picked up the pail and poured water over Uncle Arhat's scalp. Uncle Arhat's head jerked upward when the cold water hit him. Bloody water coursed down his face and neck, forming filthy puddles at his feet....

"Brother," Uncle Arhat said, "finish me off quickly. I won't forget your kindness down in the Yellow Springs....

Father [Douguan] saw Sun Five's knife cut the skin above the ear with a sawing motion. Uncle Arhat screeched in agony as sprays of yellow piss shot out from between his legs... A Japanese soldier walked up to Sun Five with a white ceramic platter, into which Sun put Uncle Arhat's large, fleshy ear. He cut off the other and laid it on the platter alongside the first one. Father watched the ears twitch, making thumping sounds.

"Hey," the interpreter yelled at Sun Five. "Keep going."

Sun Five bent over and sliced off Uncle Arhat's genitals with a single stroke, then put them into the platter held by the Japanese soldier.

Uncle Arhat was screaming in agony, his bony frame twitching violently on the rack.

Father told me once that even after Uncle Arhat's face had been peeled away, shouts and gurgles continued to emerge from his shapeless mouth, while endless rivulets of bright red blood dripped from his pasty scalp. Sun Five no longer seemed human as his flawless knife-work produced a perfect pelt. After Uncle Arhat have been turned into a mass of meaty pulp, his innards churned and roiled, attracting swarms of dancing green flies. The women were on their knees wailing piteously. That night a heavy rain fell, washing the tethering square clean of every drop of blood, and of Uncle Arhat's corpse and skin that had covered it. Word that his corpse had disappeared spread through the village, from one person to ten, to a hundred, from his generation to the next, until it became a beautiful legend.³⁷

The skinning alive of Uncle Arhat is an extraordinary event at both the level of the surface narrative, and in terms of Mo Yan's discourse on regimes of power. Just in terms of sheer, graphic violence there is no other event in the text that equals it, not even the brutal rape of Passion (Yu Zhan'ao's concubine) and the unspeakable murder of her innocent daughter by a

³⁷ Goldblatt, *Red Sorghum*, pp. 35-37.

young Japanese soldier. Among other issues, this incident raises the question of the role of the Japanese in Mo Yan's text. At the level of the historical "real" the representation of the Japanese is generally accurate; their occupation of China was extremely brutal and extremely violent, and the enmity that still exists among the Chinese people is often quite tangible.³⁸ Yet, at a deeper level of discourse the actions of the Japanese in China represent the new technologies power and violence characteristic of the twentieth century. Thus, beyond their purely narrative value in the text, the Japanese represent the emergence of the "modern" totalitarian regime of power—brutal, efficient, and inhuman in ways unimaginable in the context of the "traditional" world.

As critical readers we must keep in mind that the principal narrative voice is that of Dai Fenglian's and Yu Zhan'ao's grandson, who is historically located in the mid-1980s, well after the death of Mao and the fall of the Gang of Four. From his perspective he is looking at events in progress, and at characters and events that extend backwards more than eighty years. In this distinctly telescopic narrative trajectory, which is cleverly viewed from both ends seemingly simultaneously, the Japanese must be read beyond their historical reality. From the perspective of the grandson-narrator the Japanese were defeated but the war continued: the Civil War between Republicans and Communists, then the revolution itself—another war, class war, The Great Leap Forward—war, The Cultural Revolution—war, and all of it conducted by adopting and adapting the same incomprehensible brutality, physical violence, and psychopathic inhumanity represented in the text by the Japanese.³⁹

³⁸ See recent demonstrations in Nanjing to mark the anniversary of the Nanjing Massacre. Also the law suit laid in New York by Chinese for reparations for their forced slave labor during the War of Resistance Against Japan.

³⁹ See Michael S. Duke, "The Unchanging Image of the Japanese in Modern Chinese Literature," in Kinya Tsuruta, ed., *The Walls Within: Images of Westerners in Japan and Images of the Japanese Abroad, Selected Proceedings* (Vancouver: The Institute of Asian Research, University of British Columbia, 1989) pp. 313-346.

Is it not this, then, that leads the grandson to valorize his grandparents' history as a time when violence held a value based on personal passions, and the individual will to power? In China the emergence of the "modern" brought with it the depersonalization of the individual (a universal condition of the modern), coupled with the most well organized and personally invasive totalitarian state in the twentieth century. It is not at all surprising, then, that the narrator looks back with a sense of nostalgia on the adventurous and heroic lives of Grandma, Yu Zhan'ao, Douguan, and Uncle Arhat; and imagined history that had to have been better than the lifeless state to which the modern has brought China and the Chinese people. Nor is it surprising that the grandson sighs (metaphorically) with ambivalence; there has been so much violence.

It is, of course, impossible to present a full analytical reading of an entire novel in the space of a single chapter, particularly when that novel has the discursive, narrative, and structural complexities of *Red Sorghum*; hence I've been forced to omit a great deal of rich material. The single most significant omission is a detailed, analytical reading of Grandma (Dai Fenglian), whose life, despite her "heroic" death early in the narrative, animates the entire novel.⁴⁰ In the context of the *will to power/docile body* dialectic, Grandma personifies the individual will to transgress, the individual will to power. With the arrival of the Japanese, that is, with the arrival of the "modern," she is the first victim, the first one killed at the battle of the Black Water River Bridge. In death her singular character becomes forever inviolate, encapsulated in the second-hand memories of her grandson.

Grandma lies on the ground, the warmth of her breast slowly dissipating. She is dimly aware that her son is undoing her jacket, that he is covering the wound over her breasts with his hand, then the wound beneath her breast.... Bullets have pierced her noble

⁴⁰ For an interesting reading of Grandma's significance in the *Red Sorghum* narrative, see Lu Tong Lin, "Red Sorghum: Limits of Transgression," in *Misogyny, Cultural Nihilism, and Oppositional Politics*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) pp.51-74.

breast, exposing the pink honeycomb beneath it, and Father is in agony as he looks down at it. He cannot staunch the flow of blood, and as he watches it flow he can see her face pale. He body grows so light it might float up into the air.

Grandma looks contentedly at Father's exquisite face. She and Commander Yu had joined to create him in the shadows of the sorghum field; lively images of the irretrievable past streaked past her eyes like racehorses.⁴¹

Yu Zhan'ao, on the other hand, is the character most tragically caught between tradition and modernity, and for that very reason I've focused my reading on him to the exclusion not only of Grandma, but a host of other colorful and meaningful secondary characters and events, as well. To illustrate this point I will give you a quick sketch of Adjutant Ren.

The prettiest girl in the village, Lingzi was seventeen at the time. When commander Yu was recruiting troops, he assembled fifty or so men, one of whom was a gaunt young man with a pale face and long black hair, dressed in black except for a pair of white shoes.... He spoke with a beautiful Beijing dialect, and never smiled, his brow was forever creased in a frown, with three vertical furrows above the nose. Everyone called him Adjutant Ren. Lingzi felt that beneath Adjutant Ren's cold, hard, exterior raged a fire, and it put her on edge.⁴²

Readers familiar with Chinese Socialist-Realist fiction from the 1950s will have no difficulty recognizing Adjutant Ren, the young, urban intellectual, Communist Party cadre who's come to the countryside to organize the peasants in the War of Resistance against Japan, and to evangelize the "gospel" of Maoist revolution. He is a stock character in Socialist Realist fiction of the 1950s.⁴³ Using a typical dialectical technique, working from the general case to the specific, Adjutant Ren traps Commander Yu Zhan'ao into having to execute his own uncle, Big Tooth Yu, who breached Party discipline by raping a young girl in the village. Zhan'ao complies

⁴¹ Goldblatt, *Red Sorghum*, p. 67; *HGL*, p.84.

⁴² Goldblatt, *Red Sorghum*, pp. 52-53; *HGL*, pp. 65-66.

⁴³ For example see: Ding Ling *Taiyang zhao zai Sangganhe shang* 太阳照在桑干河上, (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1979); Zhou libo, *Baofeng zhou yu* 暴风骤雨, (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1949).

with Adjutant Ren's demand, and executes his uncle, who, despite his crime, dies a dignified and heroic death.

They dragged Big Tooth Yu up to the edge of the inlet and stood him there, then looked at Mute, who unslung his rifle and cocked it; a bullet snapped into the chamber.

Big Tooth Yu turned to face Mute and smiled. To Father's eyes, it was a kindly, heartfelt smile, like the miserable dying rays of a setting sun.

"Unite me, Mute. I shouldn't die all trussed up."

Mute...rifle in hand, a man at the point of death suddenly commands the respect of all other men. Big Tooth Yu was, after all, the seed of Northeast Gaomi Township. He had committed a grave offense that even death would not expiate, yet, as he prepared to die, he displayed the airs of a true hero;

Father was so moved at that moment that he felt like leaping in the air....

Father looked on dispassionately, without shedding a tear, as the procession formed a ring around the willow tree, and sixteen young robust men slowly lowered the coffin into the yawning grave with eight thick ropes...Commander Yu fired three shots into the air above the willow trees.... Adjutant Ren took out his Browning and pulled off three shots.... Commander Yu and Adjutant Ren faced each other, smoking guns in their hands. Adjutant Ren nodded. "He did himself proud." He stuck his pistol into his belt and strode into the village.

Father watched commander Yu slowly raise his weapon and aim it at Adjutant Ren's retreating back.... Adjutant Ren, unaware of what was happening, strode confidently into the village.... Father saw the pistol jerk once, but the explosion was so weak and so distant he wasn't sure he heard it. He watched the bullet's low trajectory as it parted Adjutant Ren's shiny black hair before moving on. Without so much as turning his head or breaking stride, Adjutant Ren continued on into the village....

Father [Douguan] told me that Adjutant Ren was a rarity, a true hero; unfortunately, heroes are fated to die young. Three months after he had walked so proudly away from the heroic gathering, his Browning pistol went off while he was cleaning it and killed him. The bullet entered his right eye and exited through his right ear, leaving half of his face covered with a metallic blue powder. A

mere three or four drops of blood seeped out of his right ear, and by the time the people who heard the shot had rushed over, he was already lying dead on the ground.

Wordlessly, Commander Yu picked up Adjutant Ren's Browning pistol.⁴⁴

It is, I think, highly significant that it is Douguan, not Zhan'ao, who declares Adjutant Ren a "true hero." In point of fact, commander Yu despised Adjutant Ren as an evangelist of a new sociopolitical order which signaled the end of Grandma's and Yu Zhao's historical moment. And even Douguan's characterization of him as a hero is problematized by the fact that he does not even die with the "dignified heroics" of the rapist Big Tooth Yu, but instead dies accidentally by his own hand while cleaning his weapon. The irony of having the urban intellectual, revolutionary evangelist die by his own hand reinforces the narrator's deep sense of ambivalence about the "new order" that runs throughout the text.

For me this is a difficult chapter to end because there is so much important textual material that I've had to omit. Nonetheless, I've tried to illustrate that both the grandson narrator and the implied author of *Red Sorghum* appear to accept the violence inherent in human nature. Mo Yan appears to be making the case that when violence occurs, as it inevitably does within every social systems and regime of power, how that violence is contextualized ultimately defines how it is to be judged. In the course of this masterfully written text there is every type of violence conceivable from the graphic, to the gruesome, to the grotesquely macabre.⁴⁵ Yet, how we read and interpret this text is skillfully controlled by how Mo Yan contextualizes the spectacle of body-violence.

In reassembling the *Red Sorghum* text into a chronologically ordered narrative I discovered that the novel begins and ends with a murder. The first murder was the young Yu

⁴⁴ Goldblatt, *Red Sorghum*, pp 56-57.

⁴⁵ See Grandma's weighing of dead babies in Dead Baby Hollow to predict the winning flower in a local lottery. *Red Sorghum*, pp. 334-336; *HGL*, pp. 460-461.

Zhan'ao's killing of the Buddhist monk who was sleeping with his mother. The final murder is that of Eighteen Stabs Geng, a native of the village where Yu Zhan'ao's concubine lived.

Eighteen Stab earned his *nom de guerre* during the Japanese reprisals following their loss at the battle of the Black Water River bridge.

...Old Geng had no peers among hunters in Saltwater Gap, where he bagged wild geese, hares, wild ducks, weasels, foxes, and when there was nothing else around, sparrows....

Father had eaten some of Old Geng's sparrows when he was young.... Old Geng, who was already over seventy by then and lived alone as a pensioner, was one of our most revered villagers. Asked to speak at meetings to air grievances against the old order, he invariably stripped to the waist on stage to show his scars. "The Japs bayoneted me eighteen times," he'd say, "until you couldn't see my skin for all the blood. But I didn't die, and you know why? Because I was protected by a fox fairy....

In his home Old Geng—Eighteen Stabs Geng—kept a fox fairy memorial tablet, which some Red Guards decided to smash during the Cultural Revolution. They changed their minds and got out of there fast when they saw him kneel in front of the tablet wielding a cleaver.⁴⁶

* * *

On the twenty-third day of the twelfth month in 1973, Eighteen Stabs Geng celebrated his eightieth birthday....

Eighteen Stabs Geng strained to sit up by resting his hands on the icy mat.

... His stomach had not been visited by food for two days now, and his useless old intestines twitched and twisted.... Although his belly was empty and he was shivering from the cold, he knew that getting grain out of the hardhearted branch secretary was not going to be easy....

Although he was sure that his miraculous salvation portended good fortune in his future, it somehow never came. Eventually he became a pensioner, protected by the "five guarantees" of food, clothing, medical aid, housing, and burial, and knew that his good fortune had finally arrived. But even that soon vanished, as he was neglected by everyone, including... the current branch secretary,

⁴⁶ Goldblatt, *Red Sorghum*, p. 308.

who would probably be provincial secretary by now had he not been responsible for the death of nine people during the Great Leap Forward. The little bastard had canceled his eligibility for the "five guarantees."⁴⁷

Old Geng freezing and starving drags himself to the Branch Secretary's house to beg for food, where he's told that the Branch Secretary is attending a meeting at the commune.

Although it takes him nearly the whole day, Old Geng drags himself to the commune.

It was nearly dusk by the time he reached the commune gate... People in new clothes and new caps, with large heads, fleshy ears, and greasy mouths, were scuttling back and forth. Some carried debristled pigs' head... others carried silvery ribbon fish, and still others carried recently slaughtered chickens and ducks.... He shouted angrily, tearfully, "Your honor... leader.... I've been treated unjustly.... I'm starving."

A young man with three fountain pens in his coat pocket walked over and said coolly, "What's all the racket about, old timer?"

Seeing all those pens in the young man's pocket, he assumed he'd caught the attention of a ranking official, so he knelt down in the snow, grabbed hold of two metal ribs in the gate, and said tearfully, "Eminent leader, the production brigade branch secretary has held back my grain rations. I haven't eaten for three days, I'm starving, eighteen stabs by the Japs didn't kill me, now I am going to starve to death...."

"What village are you from?" the young man asked.

"Don't you know me, eminent leader?" he asked. "I'm Eighteen Stabs Geng."

The young man laughed. "How am I supposed to know you're Eighteen Stabs Geng? Go home and see your brigade leader. The commune organizations are holiday."⁴⁸

* * *

The young man with the pens in his pocket came out early the next morning to shovel snow. When he casually raised his head and glanced at the gate, his face paled with fright. What he saw was the old man from last night who'd called himself Eighteen Stabs

⁴⁷ Goldblatt, *Red Sorghum*, pp.339-341.

⁴⁸ Goldblatt, *Red Sorghum*, pp 344-345.

Geng, stark naked, his hands stuck to the gate, like the crucified Jesus. His face had turned purple, his limbs were spread out, his staring eyes were fixed on the commune compound; hard to believe he was a lonely old man who had died of starvation. The young man made a careful count of the scars on his body. There were eighteen, no more, no less.⁴⁹

Old Geng's death is murder by callous indifference, which stands in chillingly stark contrast to Yu Zhan'ao's passionate murder of the monk, and, I would suggest, these two acts of violence represent the fundamental binary between the individual and the state. The death of Old Geng typifies the brutal indifference of the new order, the new bureaucracy, and the unspeakable inhumanity that came to characterize the Maoist revolution, and continues to characterize China's totalitarian regime.

In picturing Eighteen Stabs Geng lying dead in the snow, I cannot help but recall the image of Xianglin Sao's death in Lu Xun's story *Zhufu* 祝福 (New Year's Sacrifice). Ultimately both Xianglin Sao's and Eighteen Stabs Geng's deaths are attributable to social indifference, but in Lu Xun's narrative landscape indifference was still a personal matter, everyone in town knew Xianglin Sao's pitiful tale and chose to become indifferent to her. In the case of Eighteen Stabs Geng, Mo Yan has replaced individual indifference with the more inhuman indifference of the state, and indifference so deep and pervasive as to strip him of his very identity. As I noted in my Introduction, Lu Xun's madman decries that everywhere between the lines of the Confucian classics can be found the phrase *chi ren* 吃人 (eat people), but as we are graphically shown in Mo Yan's epic novel *Red Sorghum*, Lu Xun had no conception of the scale or ferocity of the spectacle violence that was to become a primary technology of power in modern China. The value that Mo Yan assigns to the founders of the Red Sorghum clan and, rightly or wrongly, his valorization of the pre-communist (i.e., pre-

⁴⁹ Goldblatt, *Red Sorghum*, pp 344-345

modern) order has everything to do with the contextualization of regimes of power, and how those regimes allow for the individual will to act, allow for the individual will to power. In reading *Red Sorghum*, context is everything.

Chapter Four

Yu Hua and the Deconstruction of the Body

Yu Hua, the last writer to be examined in this dissertation is, for me, the most challenging and enigmatic. I do not like or enjoy reading his short stories written during the late 1980s and early '90s; they are an assault on the readers' most deeply held aesthetic, ideological, and philosophical sensibilities, the most inviolate of which is the status and cohesion of the physical body itself. In his textual assault on the body, mutilation, dismemberment, and cannibalism are represented in graphic detail. Why? What is it that Yu Hua is doing? Why does he find it necessary to deconstruct, or more accurately, to annihilate the body, the last remaining site of cohesion and meaning in a China that is reinventing itself from moment to moment in a bizarre sociocultural pastiche of tradition, socialist statism, and *laissez-faire* capitalism? It is questions such as these that demanded Yu Hua's inclusion in my dissertation.

As has been amply demonstrated in previous chapters Yu Hua is not the only post-Mao writer to represent the body as a discursive site for exploring the relationship between power and violence during the Maoist era., but it is Yu Hua who pushes the spectacle body to its discursive limits by deconstructing it as a physically cohesive site, and as a site of meaning. One interpretation of Yu Hua's early short fiction posits that his graphically violent and deconstructive texts reflect the utter disillusionment of Chinese intellectuals in post-Mao China. His work has often been characterized as nihilistic; which is an easily justifiable reading. However, the way I read Yu Hua he is fundamentally more fatalistic than nihilistic, and that he serves up his fatalism with a thoroughly sardonic twist. I will elucidate by discussing "Classical Love" (*Gudian aiqing* 古典爱情).¹ As I will demonstrate, at a deep discursive level this

¹"Classical Love" first appeared in 北京文学, 1988, prior to the death of Hu Yaobang, and the "Beijing Spring" of 1989.

narrative functions both as a historical allegory, and on a personal level reveals Yu Hua's profound empathy for the "human condition."

"Classical Love" is a difficult text to classify in terms of genre. In certain respects it is characteristic of a traditional *caizi jiaren* 才子佳人 (scholar/beauty) tale, yet Yu Hua subverts this convention right from the outset.² There is a touch of the *zhiguai* in the ghostly, dream-like sections of the narrative, in the strange temporal displacements and hints of transmogrification. There are clear intertextual linkages with the late Ming *huaben* 话本, particularly Fen Menglong's *Sanyan* 三言, as well as a host of other literary allusions from sources as diverse as the Tang poet Bai Juyi 白居易 to the Qing vernacular novelist Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹.³ And then there is the graphic depiction of physical violence and cannibalism.

In combining this range of elements Yu Hua has created a text that defies generic classification. By his own remarks we know that he was influenced in his early work by the French writer Alain Robbes-Gillet's concept of the "roman nouveau,"⁴ from which he borrowed the interplay of multiple surfaces and opacity of interiorities. Interestingly, through his extensive use of pre-modern Chinese intertextual linkages Yu Hua created what is essentially a post-structuralist text; he rummages around in the storeroom of pre-modern Chinese cultural/literary memorabilia, picking up a piece of something here and a piece of something there. In his article "The Violence of the Text: Reading Yu Hua and Shi Zhicun," Andrew F. Jones suggests that "Classical Love" is a "pastiche," which indeed it is, with Yu Hua borrowing freely from a wide

² See Andrew F. Jones, "The Violence of the Text: Reading Yu Hua and Shi Zhicun." *Positions* 2:3, 1994, p.573.

³ Andrew F. Jones, "The Violence of the Text: Reading Yu Hua and Shi Zhicun." Note 23, p.599. Also see Feng Menglong, *Sanyan* (Beijing: Renmin jiaoyi chubanshi, 1956). Also Bai Juyi, "Changhen ge," and "Pipa xing." Also, Cao Xueqin, *Honglou meng*.

⁴ Yu Hua, "Hypocritical writings" (Xuwei zuopin 虚伪作品), preface to *Shishi ru yan* 世事如烟 (Taibie: Yuanliu chubanshi, 1991).

range of classical and vernacular sources. It must be kept in mind, however, that the idea of pastiche as used by Jones is taken from the lexicon of the postmodern critique, which means structural, linguistic, thematic, and narrative forms will be reassembled, or juxtaposed in unconventional configurations meant to articulate an ironic critique of modernity.⁵ While I fully agree with Andrew Jones' characterization of "Classical Love" as a pastiche, I suggest that this particular text transcends the sophisticated play of "postmodern" *bricolage* to achieve the status of a textual simulacrum—the copy of an original that never existed.⁶ Yu Hua, in fact, layers irony upon irony by using a simulated classical genre to allegorize the very "act of being" in Mao's China.

It is not my intention to write a lengthy exegesis on the highly eclectic linguistic style Yu Hua used in constructing this text, but I do want to record the following observations. Given a story titled, "Classical Love" one would expect it to be written in a traditional vernacular narrative style; this is and is not the case with Yu Hua's text. The structural language of the narrative is contemporary, yet the text is rife with classical allusions and four character phrases, or *chengyu*,⁷ which are prominent features in both classical literature and pre-modern vernacular fiction.⁸ Yu Hua's extensive admixture of the classical and the contemporary serves many threads of discourse, one of which is an ironic critique of the tradition/modernity dialectic that has been a central feature of Chinese intellectual life since the latter part of the 19th century.

⁵ See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, mass.: Blackwell, 1995).

⁶ See Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations," *Selected Writings*, ed. & trans. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), pp. 166-184.

⁷ The meaning of *chengyu* 成语 is set phrase, or idiom. An example in English might be "a stitch in time saves nine." In traditional Chinese intellectual culture, both written and spoken, the range and subtlety of a scholar's ability to use *chengyu* was as a sign of his erudition.

⁸ The extensive use of four character phrases says a great deal about Yu Hua's intended readership. In today's China the people who can relate the various phrases to their original sources is limited to a small group of highly educated intellectuals. If one looks at a later work, such as *Huo zhe* 活着 (To Live) one finds a much more accessible and discernibly humanist narrative.

The juxtapositional irony established by combining contemporary language with the extensive use of *chengyu* 成言 (idiom) is yet another way in which Yu Hua writes radically against the grain of the narrative, disrupting the readers' connection to the well established system of desires and expectations associated with the traditional scholar/beauty genre. This is, without question, one of the things that makes "Classical Love" such an interesting and enigmatic text. Below I will demonstrate what I mean about Yu Hua's clever and well thought out use of *chengyu* by tracing a particularly interesting four character phrase that is brilliantly placed to foreshadow events and guide readers to a deeper understanding of the text.

The narrative begins as Liu, an impoverished young scholar, sets out from home for the capital to sit the imperial civil service examinations.

Liu walked down a yellow highway on his way.... He wore a dark green cotton robe over coarsely woven pants, a faded cap, and a dark green silk belt strung around his waist. He looked like an emerald green tree walking down the yellow highway. It was the height of spring, and stands of peaches and willows flourished amid the mulberry and hemp fields as far as the eye could see.... The sun hung high above, its innumerable rays like golden filaments threading through a silk loom.⁹

What is interesting about this otherwise quite typical idyll is that Yu Hua embeds his protagonist in the landscape in such a way that his representational value is equal to that of every other object in the natural landscape: peaches, mulberry, hemp, willows, etc. Liu, whose name means willow, is indistinguishable from the rest of the landscape, and "emerald green tree" moving along amid a sea of greens. By embedding Willow in the text this way Yu Hua greatly reduces his potentiality for agency, that is, his value as a clearly individualized agent capable of effective action, a fact that becomes increasingly important as the narrative progresses.

⁹ Other than where indicated, for my English translation of *Gudian aiqing* I am using Andrew F. Jones, "Classical Love," in *Yu Hua: The Past and the Punishments* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1996), pp. 12-61.

Several days earlier, when he first left his village home and stepped onto the yellow highway, desolation had welled up in his heart. The clatter of his mother's cloth loom had continued to pursue him long after he had left their thatched hut, searing his back like a burn. And his father's eyes in the moments before his death bore vividly down on him. He had stepped onto the yellow highway to win glory for his ancestors. The brilliant colors of spring unfolded before him like a scroll, but he had no eyes for the scenery. He saw what seemed to be the fluttering leaves of late autumn, and the road under his feet was clearly illusory, without substance.¹⁰

We see in these opening passages that right from the start the text Yu Hua is subverting the *caizi-jiaren* formula by writing against the grain of the traditional narrative.¹¹ Far from setting out for the examinations filled with confidence and hope, Willow, in sharp contrast to his apparent oneness with the bounty of springtime, looks out at the world and sees a sere autumn landscape. The apparent and unapparent, the external and internal landscapes represented in the text are out of sync, which problematizes Willow as a character, and further alerts readers to the heterodox nature of the text.

I have already pointed out that Yu Hua's text is peppered with literary allusions, some quite obvious, others much more subtle. In reading "Classical Love" I was reminded (not unintentionally, I'm sure) of another rather unorthodox *caizi jiaren* text in which an impoverished young scholar is also named Willow (*Liu* 柳). I am, of course, referring to Tang Xiangzu's late Ming opera The Peony Pavilion (*Mudan ting* 牡丹亭). I'm not suggesting any significant intertextual linkage between the two texts, the bits and pieces are all just part of Yu Hua's "pastiche," but drawing attention to this particular link allows me to use Tang Xianzu's

¹⁰ Yu Hua, "Classical Love," pp. 12-13.

¹¹ See, C.T. Hsia, *The Classic Chinese Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968); Wai-Yee Li, *Enchantment and Disenchantment: Love and Illusion in Chinese Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); David Rolston, *Traditional Chinese Fiction and Fiction Commentary* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); David Rolston, *How to Read the Chinese Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Andrew Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

depiction of *Liu Mengmei* 柳梦梅 (Willow dreaming of plum) as an apt counter-representation to

Yu Hua's characterization of Willow. I will begin with the earlier character, Liu Mengmei.

The house Liu preeminent of old clans East of the River, ruled by
the constellation Zhang, for Letters, adjoining Gui, whose meaning
is Ghosts. But leaves of Liu the Willow buffeted by the storm
suffered many a fall before the generation of this poor wintry
scholar. In books like fame and fortune, they say—then tell me,
where are the jade smooth cheeks, the rooms of yellow gold?
Ashen from need and hardship I maintain my overflowing breath.

The successful scholar “rises the giant turtle” but I have merely
scraped frost from its back. My winter poverty warmed by the
fiery south, and blessed to some slight extent by the Creator, I
inherited fragrance for classic books. Drilling the wall for light,
hair tied to beam for fear of drowsing, I wrest from nature
excellence in letters....¹²

And now, Yu Hua's Willow.

Willow was hardly the scion of an aristocratic clan—his dead
father was just a poor scholar who had never passed the civil
service examinations.... When he was still a small boy, Willow
had begun to read poetry and prose under his father's supervision.
As the years went by he had inherited his father's disposition. He
took to reading off-color books, and although he could write a
pretty hand and paint flowers tolerably well, he still neglected the
all-important art of the eight legged essay. And so it was that,
even as he stepped onto the yellow highway on his way to the civil
service examination in the capital, he was enveloped by the specter
of a father who had languished in poverty after repeatedly failing
the examinations.¹³

Traditionally, the impoverished scholar in a *caizi-jiaren* narrative has a “lettered”
pedigree going back generations. The family, having fallen on hard times, will have its name
and honor restored by a new scholar. At a purely representational level Yu Hua and Tang
Xianzu create very different systems of desires and expectations that manipulate the reader's

¹² Cyril Birch, *The Peony Pavilion* (*Mudan ting* 牡丹亭), (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p.3. See Tang Xianzu, *Mudan ting* (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1993).

¹³ Yu Hua, “Classical Love,” p. 13.

relationship to the text—unlike Liu Mengmei, who is blessed with an affinity for the “classics” and exudes an aura of future success based on pedigree and diligent study, Willow, like his father before him, is drawn to unorthodox, or “off-color” literature, has no historical, family pedigree, and thus, as an examination candidate he is enveloped in an aura of failure. This difference is critical to how one reads Yu Hua’s text. *Peony Pavilion* is, in the Aristotelean sense, a comic opera, “Classical Love,” on the other hand, is a text that employs many of the tropes of a tragedy, yet is wholly lacking in the interiority and retrospection necessary to the tragic.¹⁴ Who, then, is Willow, neither a comic nor tragic figure, and how does he function so that the text can be read as a coherent and comprehensible narrative?

After many days on the road Willow comes upon a thriving, prosperous town.

As he neared the wall, he heard a clamor of voices. Countless porters, bearing merchandise on carrying poles, poured in and out of the city gate. Once inside the gate, he saw that the town was brimming with two- and three-story shops, towers, and pavilions. The houses were packed tightly together, and the people from the town were prosperous. Willow walked through an unending stream of pedestrians and hawkers that filled the main street. The street was lined by innumerable teahouses and wine shops. Fat slabs of lamb hung outside several of the wine shops, and plates stacked with pig’s trotters, jellied duck, and fresh fish were neatly arranged atop street-side counters. In front of the teahouses were counters laden with platters of tangerine cakes, flat cakes, lotus-wrapped rice, and fritters.¹⁵

Mirroring the richness of the natural landscape, the town is an expression of bounty; wherever the eye is drawn sensual delights around, from food stuffs to personal finery this first section of the text is filled with the richly textured objects of desire.

In his article “The Violence of the Text,” Andrew F. Jones argues that:

Yu Hua... is less interested in the subjective working of desire than in desire as an objective, elemental force.¹⁶

¹⁴ Here I am using the terms comedy and tragedy as defined by Aristotle.

¹⁵ Yu Hua, “Classical Love,” p. 15.

¹⁶ Jones, “Violence,” p.572.

While Andrew Jones is correct in characterizing “Classical Love” as a discourse on human desire, and desire as a state of being, Yu Hua’s inclusion of cannibalism in the second narrative cycle of the text elevates the discourse to the level of allegory. What is particularly germane to my thesis is that the primary informing metaphor in Yu Hua’s allegorical discourse is not some poststructuralist linguistic play, but the most famous metaphor in modern Chinese literature—“*chi ren*” 吃人 (eat people)—cannibalism.

In modern times, the problem of cannibalism is concerned less with actual practice than with the construction of the “other.” ... “cannibalism” is a term that has no application outside the discourse of European colonialism: it is never available as a “neutral word.” For cannibalism means “the image of ferocious consumption of human flesh frequently used to mark the boundary between one community and its others,” and thus “no other word, except perhaps “sex,” is so fraught with our fears and desires. [Peter] Hulme’s conclusion needs to be qualified, of course. The term does have a profound application to the colonized when the discourse of colonialism travels to modern China and is internalized by Lu Xun as a master metaphor for the old China.¹⁷

I will return to this subject when discussing the second narrative cycle of the text, but now I return to Willow, whom I left visualizing (i.e., indirectly narrating) a seemingly endless manifestation of prosperity and wealth. Passing through the town he comes upon a temple, “glittering gold and green.” In the courtyard stands a “noble and ancient cypress.” The space is large and empty so he sets out his paper, brush and ink-stone.

He copied out a few Song dynasty quatrains—things like “Dawn wind, lingering moonlight, willows on the banks”—and painted a few flowers to sell to passersby. In a short while the entrance to the temple was thronged with people. Everyone in town seemed to have some money, and with money came a fondness for the touch of elegance that only poetry and painting can provide. After quite a long spell of work Willow had earned a few strings of cash.¹⁸

¹⁷ Gang Yue, *The Mouth that Begs: Hunger, Cannibalism, and the Politics of Eating in Modern China*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999). P.23.

¹⁸ Yu Hua, “Classical Love,” p.15.

In this land of abundance Willow dines on the most simple fare—a bowl of tea and a few griddle cakes he buys from a street vendor. The language Yu Hua uses to describe Willow's hunger (*fu zhong ji-e nanren* 腹中饥饿难忍) characterizes it as a purely a physical need. There is no reference to his appetite (*weikou* 胃口), no sense that of all the delicacies available not one or another of the foods holds any special attraction for Willow. He eats because there is an unendurable feeling of hunger in his belly (*fu* 腹); it has nothing to do with gratifying a gastronomic desire, or indulging in the aesthetic and physical pleasure of eating. Willow is opaque, he looks out at the world, yet the external world, which includes the reader, is unable to look back in. This lack of internal presence is a characteristic of what Jones identifies as Robbe-Grillet's influence, but the opaque interior of a Robbe-Grillet protagonist has to do with a rejection of the Freudian metanarrative of the structure of the human psyche. Although the child of a Marxist revolution I would suggest that Yu Hua is, intellectually, more in tune with the traditional Chinese correlative model of existence, than he is a rebellious product of the Freudian model.¹⁹

Willow finishes his simple meal, then wanders off aimlessly through the town. No longer hungry he recalls that he's spoken to no one since leaving home and "[feels] a surge of loneliness well up inside his chest." Yet, even this hint of emotion does not give the reader any real access to Willow's internal state; his loneliness is generic, that of a stranger in a strange land. He

¹⁹ An argument can be made that Capitalism and Marxism are imbued with Freudian notions of the internal, psychological structure of human beings. Hence, when Marxism was imported into China it over-wrote the traditional correlative model of existence. Yet, I don't believe that Yu Hua's attraction to Robbe-Grillet's work, specifically the opacity, and hence ambiguity, of the protagonist is about an attack on the Freudian metanarrative. I would suggest, rather, that it has to do with his attempt to establish a discourse beyond the limits of subjective desire, the ephemerality of appearances, and natural ebb and flow of events and human fortunes. I will address this issue in greater detail at the end of this chapter, and in the conclusion.

continues his aimless wandering and before long finds himself at the front doors of a large, walled estate.

The pavilions and secluded courtyards that lay beyond the gate were terribly impressive. Stone lions, fangs bared and claws brandished, sat to either side of a majestic vermilion gate, which was bolted shut. Peering above the walls Willow could see birds flying to and fro between the tops of innumerable towering trees. Curving eaves soared among the trees. Willow gazed in silence for a tie and then slowly began to make his way down a path that ran along the perimeter of the white-washed palace walls. The path was paved with spotless blue tiles. Leafy branches brushed gently down over the top of the wall. Presently, he caught sight of a side gate. Hearing the muffled sound of laughter from inside the wall, Willow paused for a moment and then continued walking along the path. Just as the wall curved and seemed to disappear, he noticed another gate. This door was open. At that moment someone emerged from within and hurriedly strode away. Willow waited until the man was no longer in sight and then moved toward the gate, through which he was able to gaze into a small and exquisitely tended garden. He thought to himself that this must be the kind of pleasure garden for aristocratic young ladies that he had read about but never actually laid eyes on. Willow hesitated for a moment and then walked into the garden.²⁰

The encounter between Willow and the young maiden, Hui, that follows establishes the core elements in Yu Hua's discourse on desire, and for that reason I must cite certain passages at length. As we move through the text I would like readers to keep in mind that there are two distinct, yet mutually dependent streams of discourse that Yu Hua is developing—the ontology of desire, and a national allegory to contextualize the extreme violence that is defining characteristic of modern Chinese history.

Willow's entry into the garden is an act of transgression. There is a clear sense that he has wandered into a space where he does not belong, and the ill-fated nature of his adventure is signed in the following lines of text:

By the bank of the pool lay a little open-air pavilion, flanked by two lofty maple trees whose leaves intertwined above the roof.

²⁰ Yu Hua, "Classical Love," pp. 16-17.

Autumn was still far away, but the maple leaves were almost imperceptibly tinged with red.²¹

The intertwined branches of maple trees are a classic signifier for the bond between lovers, but in this instance, although still the height of summer, the maple leaves are already imperceptibly tinged with red. Seemingly insignificant, this small detail loops back to the beginning of the text where Willow sets off amid the lush growth of summer, but senses instead a fading autumn landscape. Even as he is setting off on his journey Yu Hua signals his readers that Willow's enterprise is doomed to failure. The appearance of autumn amid the lush splendors of summer, however overtly or subtly embedded in the text, articulates the critical fact that Willow is "out of season," that is, in the quotidian realm of subjective desires and expectations he arrives on the scene too late to play either the comic or tragic hero; it follows, therefore, that there is yet another role that he is playing. I do not want to overstate the following hypothesis when I suggest that Willow, as neither a comic nor tragic figure stands as the everyman/spectator of revolutionary China, not in the sense of *mei yi ge ren* 每一个人, but in the sense of the masses (*qunzhong* 群众) who survived into the post-Mao, post-Beijing Spring, business boom China of the mid-1990s.

When I first introduced Yu Hua's protagonist, Willow, I suggested that he exists as a relatively action/value neutral agent through whom the reader, viz-a-viz Yu Hua's narration, apprehends everything there is to be seen of the external landscape. As a character his physical senses (visual, auditory, olfactory) are used to apprehend and narrate this landscape, but Willow himself does not articulate a personal response, nor does he reveal an internal psychological world; to the reader Willow remains essentially opaque. It is chance (i.e., the twists and turns of the "yellow road") that brings him to the unnamed town, chance that leads him wandering to the

²¹ Yu Hua, "Classical Love," p. 17.

grand vermilion doors of a wealthy estate, and chance that leads to his first overt act of transgression as he willfully crosses through the walled boundary between mass and elite sociopolitical realities.

With the exception of the quick prefiguring of love's fading (i.e., the red tinted maple leaves) everything in the garden "was as it should be."²² Willow observes all the elements of a classical Chinese garden reminiscent, on a much lesser scale, of the *Da Guan Yuan* 大观园, in the Qing dynasty vernacular novel *Honglou meng* 红楼梦. You will soon see why I have chosen this particular reference.

[Unwittingly], Willow passed in front of a wooden tower so intricately carved and brightly decorated that it looked as if it were constructed of brocade. The path under his feet suddenly came to an end, and Willow looked up to see that the latticed window frames of the tower had been thrown open on all four sides. A sight breeze from the opposite side blew through the tower and out the window toward Willow. He was enveloped by wave after wave of sweet fragrance. Sunset was approaching, the sky glowed with dusky hues, and the sound of chanted poetry drifted down from the windows. It was a sound like a zither being plucked or like pearls drizzling drop by drop onto a plate,²³ a sound that was as delicate and drawn out as the murmuring of flowing water. As the fragrant breeze continued to waft down from the window, the dusky glow began to disperse, and the sky grew slowly darker. Rather than trying to distinguish the words of the poem, Willow merely floated within the magical intoxication of its sound....²⁴

The chanting sound slowly grew louder, drew nearer, and a brief moment later a woman as beautiful as jade and as lovely as a flower appeared at the window. The woman's face was flushed pink with delight, and her small, cherry-red lips, from which poetry continued to pour, were pursed in the beginnings of a smile. Her eyes, overflowing with ripples of feeling, played across the garden, as if she longed to divest herself of some secret yearning. After a moment she caught sight of Willow, cried out in surprise, and, her face quickly coloring with shame, turned and

²² Yu Hua, "Classical Love," p. 17.

²³ See Bai Juyi, "Pipa xing" 琵琶行 (Song of the Pipa)

²⁴ Yu Hua, "Classical Love," p18.

retreated inside. Her eyes had squarely met Willow's, but now she was hidden somewhere deep inside the tower. Dizzied by this encounter with a cloistered young maiden, Willow felt as leaden as a sleeper falling into a dream. Her cry had been like the snap of a broken zither string, bringing the sound of her chanting to a sudden conclusion.²⁵

Desire, as a condition of being, knows no reason and has no bounds—it speaks to the senses directly. Willow stands gazing at the tower long after the maiden has disappeared from view. He stands scenting the air for the unseen object of his desire, he stands feeling the subtle warmth of her body in the soft evening breeze, he stands “utterly unable to tear himself away.” A single reading of “Classical Love” fails to reveal all the subtle complexities of Yu Hua's narrative strategy, so for this reading I would like to call attention to the fact that Willow's beguilement in the maiden's garden initiates a second thread of discourse regarding the inherent bond between desire and power, an issue I will take up in more detail when I discuss the second narrative cycle of the text.

A maid leans out the window and tells him to leave. He remains. Night descends. The maid challenges him a second time but Willow refuses (is unable) to move. His eyes remain fixed on the shadow of the maiden moving about in the flickering candle light.

Although a few drops of rain had already fallen onto Willow's face, he did not notice the imminent arrival of a summer shower. Soon the sky opened and his head and shoulders were pelted with rain. It was only then that he finally became aware of the rain, but despite its arrival he remained obstinately rooted in place.

The maid appeared once more at the window, silently gaped at Willow, and finally shut the window. The young lady's shadow was snuffed out. The candlelight also receded behind the window's oiled paper panels.

The rain slanted violently down, failing to dislodge Willow from his place. His cap was knocked to the ground and his hair was beaten over to one side of his head. The rainwater slammed into

²⁵ Yu Hua, “Classical Love,” p.19.

Willow's body, curved, and slid to the ground. Through the noise of the wind and the rain Willow could hear the distinct sound of water dripping from his body. Willow paid the storm no heed. Instead he stared up at the candlelight dancing and leaping behind the window panel, and although he could not see the young lady's shadow, its very absence rendered it all the more vivid in his mind.²⁶

In the above scene Willow's steadfastness is not an heroic act. He stands rooted to the spot because at some point the object of desire, in this case the young maiden, is superceded by the very act of desiring itself. Desire achieves its peak of intensity not at the moment of fulfillment, but in the exquisitely painful and pleasurable moments of expectation. Yu Hua draws specific attention to this reality when the narrator (not Willow) pointedly observes that: "... although he could not see the young lady's shadow, it's very absence rendered it all the more vivid in his mind." Power, therefore, resides not within the object of desire, but within the mind of the one who desires. In the small, insignificant world of an impoverished young scholar and a beautiful young maiden the implications of desire, power, and transgression are of little consequence. On the larger stage of national politics the manufacture and manipulation of desire to harness the masses "will to power," has implications of a much graver nature, as we shall see.

Eventually, the maiden lowers a rope so Willow can climb into the tower. Her name is Hui (惠),²⁷ and she invites Willow to stay until the rain lets up. As she retires for the evening behind a silk curtain decorated with a plum (*mei* 梅) motif Hui,

could not restrain herself from turning her head to steal a glance behind her at Willow. The maiden's eyes were suffused with such undeniable longing that Willow was left nearly beside himself with joy.²⁸

²⁶ Yu Hua, "Classical Love," pp. 20-21.

²⁷ This character *hui* (惠), can be read simply as a family name, but it can also be read as favor, kindness and grace as in *enhui* (恩惠).

²⁸ Yu Hua, "Classical Love," p. 22.

While Hui sleeps Willow sits at a desk studying by lamplight—the perfect picture of the chaste maiden and honorable scholar, yet given the intense mutuality of their desire it comes as no surprise that before dawn breaks they complete their act of transgression:

... the candle suddenly went out. Willow responded by pulling the pale, soft, fragrant, warm maiden into an embrace. The maiden cried out softly once before falling silent. She trembled in Willow's arms. Willow was transported. Nothing existed save the melting together of their bodies. In the midst of the endless caresses that ensued, Willow heard the sound of jagged breathing, but could not tell if it was his or that of the maiden. The lonely scholar and the cloistered maiden locked together in an embrace so tight that they were nearly indivisible.²⁹

As I've already pointed out, the encounter between Willow and Hui is an act of mutual transgression, and I specifically want to draw attention here to the idea of mutuality; for Hui, seen only in the context of her cloister, and for Willow who is adrift and alone in the world, their feelings of loneliness and mutual alienation are momentarily forgotten in the arms of Eros. When dawn comes Hui sends Willow on his way with a lock of her hair and two silver ingots wrapped in a cloth decorated with a pair of mandarin ducks—a traditional Chinese symbol for love and fidelity.

Like his father before him, Willow fails the imperial examinations. Several months later he arrives back in the unnamed but still prosperous town. Upon his leaving months before Hui had reassured Willow that their bond of love did not depend on his examinations success, and he immediately sets off to find her. What he finds instead is the once grand estate in total ruin, and all trace of Hui vanished from the landscape. Willow searches for her in vain. When his hope of finding her is all but gone he is directed to a former steward on the estate, now a filthy drunkard in tattered clothes. Demanding a bowl of wine for information, the drunkard gulps down his wine, in return for which he blurts out the rather cryptic phrase, "*xiri de ronghua fugui ah* [Ah,

²⁹ Yu Hua, "Classical Love," p. 24.

the splendor and glory of the past....].³⁰ A second bowl of wine elicits the same response, and thus the phrase is repeated twice.

I referred earlier to Yu Hua's use of traditional four character phrases, which he uses both to simulate a pre-modern narrative style, and also to add texture, depth, and nuance to his simulation—the four character phrase *ronghua fugui* 荣华富贵 serves as a perfect example. Upon closer investigation, what appears to be the ordinary jabbering of an old drunk, turns out, instead, to be a phrase used by Bao Yu in a conversation with Bao Chai near the very end (Ch. 118) of *Honglou meng* 红楼梦 (Dream of the Red Chamber). Bao Chai is attempting to reason with Bao Yu that he must take his study of the classics more seriously. In the context that Bao Yu's uses the phrase it is meant to express the idea that honor, fame, glory, and fortune are all as ephemeral as smoke. In the end what's left is desire itself, which is what Bao Yu walks away from at the end of the novel.³¹ Yu Hua's use (and manner of use) of this particular four character phrase at this specific point in his narrative is quite brilliant in a number of ways.

Taken in its entirety *Honglou meng* is a narrative of desire, of opulence, indulgence, excess, and dissolution—a discourse on the ultimate ephemerality of the objects of desire. In both Cao Xueqin's and Yu Hua's texts the authors play with the complex ambiguity between the objects of desire, and desire itself. In a curious way Willow's journey through the first narrative cycle of the text, which includes his experience with Hui, recapitulates, in a radically different historical, ideological, and linguistic context, a seemingly similar discourse on desire as that written by Cao Xueqin. However, what occurs over generations in *Honglou meng* occurs over a

³⁰ Yu Hua, "Gudian aiqing 古典爱情" in *Yu Hua Zuopinji* 余华作品集 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehuikexue chubanshe, 1995), p.173.

³¹ See Cao Xueqin, *Honglou meng* 红楼梦 (Taipei: Fenhua chubanshiyegongsi, 1991) Chapter 118, p.1255.

few months and a few pages of text in "Classical Love," and is only one section in a larger, more complex text.

What I find so brilliant in this particular section of the text is Yu Hua's speaking Bao Yu's words from the mouth of a filthy drunkard. At the end of *Honglou meng*, Bao Yu disappears without a trace, and like most other readers of the novel I choose to believe what is foretold in the text, that after becoming human to experience the intense power of desire, Bao Yu, the stone, returned to the base of "Greensickness Peak in the Incredible Crag of the Great Fable Mountains."³² However, if fate is as capricious as Yu Hua seemingly suggests, what happened to Bao Yu after his disappearance from the "Grand View Garden," is anybody's guess. But Yu Hua is not speculating about Bao Yu's fate, rather he is challenging the limits of meaning by radically recontextualizing Bao Yu's privileged insights into illusion and reality, of desire and the objects that trigger desire. By speaking his words through the mouth of a common drunkard Yu Hua brings the elite discourse on desire down to the level of the common folk.

The first narrative cycle ends with Willow's return home empty-handed. Far more impressive is the fact that Yu Hua had created a simulated vernacular narrative that draws on a carefully constructed web of intertextual linkages with a variety of pre-modern (and pre-revolutionary) texts to initiate a discourse on the nature and power of desire. In this ill-fated, stitched together narrative about Man, Woman, and desire, Yu Hua quite subtly establishes a distinction between the objects of desire and desire as an experience. In the second narrative cycle he broadens the scope of the discourse from a cleverly constructed scholar/beauty narrative, to a national allegory about desire, power, indulgence, and excess not in the elite world

³² Cao Xueqin, *The Story of the Stone* also known as *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, trans. David Hawkes, 5 volumes, (New York: Penguin Books, 1973), vol. 1., p.48. Also see Jing Wang, *The Story of Stone* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992)

of the ruling class, but from the perspective of the masses on whose bodies were inscribed the rules of the new, revolutionary social order.

Lu Xun, who is credited with establishing the “master (*chi ren*) metaphor,” could never in his deepest fits of depression have imagined the scope nor the ferocity of the “human feast” that was to follow the victory of the new social order. As Ann Anagnost so correctly points out, the new social order (i.e., Maoism) was “literally inscribed on the bodies of its victims,”³³ inscribed in a form of discourse so brutally violent that bodies by the thousands, and millions, and tens of millions were annihilated by the power of desire without limits. How does one encapsulate and represent in language such an epically violent national conflagration?

Three years later Willow traveled once again down the yellow highway on his way to the civil service examinations in the capital. It was the height of spring, just as before, but this time the landscape had been transformed. There weren't any flourishing stands of peaches and willows. The mulberry and hemp fields were nowhere in sight. Withered trees and yellow dusty fields stretched as far as the eye could see.... The spring scenery was as desolate as winter....

When he left his thatched cottage, he was pursued no longer by the heavy clatter of his mother's cloth loom. His mother had gone to her eternal rest under the Nine Springs. In the days after her death, Willow had managed to support himself only by dint of the two ingots of silver the maiden had given him three years earlier.³⁴

The second narrative cycle opens with the curious irony, aside from the fact that Willow is setting off once again to sit the imperial examinations, that he has survived his mother's death (i.e., lack of income from her spinning) by using the silver given to him three years earlier by Hui. When one reflects upon their encounter it seems far more phantasmagoric than real; they meet, have sex, pledge undying love, yet upon Willow's return just months later all trace of Hui has been erased from the world—all but the enduring reality and value of her gift, the silver.

³³ Ann Anagnost, *National Pastimes*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), p.18.

³⁴ Yu Hua, “Classical Love,” pp. 30-31.

Willow walked for several days. He saw neither government couriers nor young aristocratic gentlemen on their way to the examination in the capital. The yellow highway underfoot was worn and uneven, stretching interminably through a season of famine. He had seen a man sitting on the ground, gnawing on a dirt-encrusted root, his face covered with mud. The man's clothes were in tatters, but Willow could tell that he had once been clad in silks. If an aristocrat had sunk so low, the plight of the poor was unimaginable. A rush of feeling surged through Willow's heart.³⁵

We see quite a different Willow in the second narrative cycle, one who has a greater degree of synchronicity with the "new realities." When he first set off down the yellow highway "the road under his feet was clearly illusory, without substance." In sharp contrast to the illusory and insubstantial, this time the yellow highway has the feel of hard reality, "worn and uneven." From the opening paragraphs of the second narrative cycle (text section III) Yu Hua signals the reader that the nature of his discourse is broadening and expanding in complexity—the substantiality of the "yellow highway" and the hard season of famine are elements of a discourse that is far more serious than the elite system of desires and expectations common to the traditional scholar/beauty narrative.

Willow himself takes on a greater air of substantiality in this section of the text. He does not necessarily become less opaque to the reader, but he expresses a class consciousness not represented in his initial characterization. With Willow's observation that the plight of the poor must be "unimaginable" if aristocrats have been reduced to gnawing on "dirt-encrusted" roots, Yu Hua begins to reveal a distinctly humanist ideological orientation; the fate of the elite is of no

³⁵ It seems evident that the devastation depicted by Yu Hua represents the catastrophic devastation brought on by Mao's "Great Leap Forward," during which somewhere between twenty and thirty million Chinese (particularly in rural China) died of starvation.

Yu Hua, "Classical Love," p. 31.

real concern to him, rather the focus of his discourse concerns the brutal “acts of inscription” that befall the peasant population (i.e., the mass spectacle that characterized the Mao dynasty).³⁶

All along the way, the bark of the trees by the side of the road had been notched and scarred by hungry refugees. Sometimes he saw teeth sticking out the bark, teeth that had been embedded there when refugees had gnawed too greedily on the bark. Corpses were scattered all along the road. With every passing mile Willow saw three or four rotting and dismembered bodies. There were men, women, old and young alike, but each corpse had been stripped of its remaining possessions, left naked and exposed to the elements.³⁷

As terrible as this scene of mass starvation, death, and rotting corpses is, Yu Hua’s inclusion of dismemberment foreshadows an even more terrible reality to come—the “cannibalism” of the Cultural Revolution. As I mentioned earlier, when Yu Hua accesses this particular stream discourse he is accessing the “master narrative” for the Chinese condition—*chi ren*—established by Lu Xun seventy-five years before. Like Han Shaogong and Mo Yan before him, Yu Hua must, at some point, revert to the “master narrative” as axiomatic in any serious discourse on people’s lives in Mao’s China. While Lu Xun intended the “eat people” master metaphor to essentialize and critique two thousand years of Confucian tradition, the Communist revolution was built on the spectacle of “cannibalism”³⁸ that eliminated Confucianism as the probable source for what is perceived as an ongoing national social disorder. All three of the contemporary writers discussed in this dissertation, in one text or another, attempted to come to

³⁶ Given that “Classical Love” was written and published after the Tiananmen Massacre, it is reasonably safe to assume that Yu Hua views the Deng Xiaoping age of modernization and reform as Maoist authoritarianism recontextualized as economic liberalization: a process now being carried on by Jiang Zemin and Zhu Rongji that is causing massive social and economic dislocations across China, and it is on the bodies of the masses that the new social order is being inscribed in ways that are equally brutal as the technologies of power employed by Mao Zedong.

³⁷ Yu Hua, “Classical Love,” p. 32.

³⁸ Here I am clearly using the term in its metaphorical sense, although there were recorded cases of actual cannibalism that occurred on a very limited scale during the Cultural Revolution. See Zheng Yi, *The Scarlet Memorial*, trans. T.P. Sym. (Bolder: Westview Press, 1996).

terms with this apparent reality: If it was not Confucianism that created the society that eats itself, then what is the source, the ongoing cause, that sustains a society that consumes itself?

Willow continues on down the yellow highway amid scenes of utter devastation, drought, and famine, eventually arriving at the crossroad where he'd stopped three years earlier to shade himself beneath a willow tree beside a clear flowing stream. Stopping there once again his mind drifts off and fills with thoughts of Hui. Willow wonders whether she is alive or dead. He stares off into the empty sky, but there are no answers.

By the time Willow stepped once again onto the yellow highway he could already see the city wall. The closer he got to the city, the more insistently memories of the past welled up in his heart. The maiden's shadow seemed to flutter by his side, now close, now far away. Images of aristocratic pavilions and secluded courtyards appeared in his mind, followed by a vista of crumbling buildings littered across a barren wasteland. These images began to pile on top of one another, to blur together into a vast jumble....³⁹

As Willow walked, he thought back to the prosperity and bustle of the past—all a dream. The world is like a mist, spiraling though the air only to vanish....⁴⁰

Remembering once more the prosperity of the town as it had once been, he was rocked by a wave of feeling, a wave that emanated from the maiden's brocade tower and her aristocratic pavilions and secluded courtyards. He thought of the destitution of the city and the ruin of the brocade tower. No more was the ache he felt in his heart reserved for the maiden alone. He began to sorrow for everything that is transitory, for all that is fleeting and ephemeral.⁴¹

While I have greatly condensed the above narrative, the above text illustrates the multiple threads of discourse Yu Hua weaves together in the second narrative cycle. (1) By juxtaposing the image of the "brocade tower" against that of "crumbling buildings littered across a barren wasteland" he introduces a dialectic between past and present, (2) he forcefully reiterates one of his central themes, which is the transitory nature of human existence, and (3) he subtly broadens

³⁹ Yu Hua, "Classical Love," p.33.

⁴⁰ This is the same thought expressed by Bao Yu in the phrase: *ronghua fugui* 荣华富贵

⁴¹ Yu Hua, "Classical Love," p.34.

Willow's consciousness, as illustrated in the passage: "no more was the ache he felt in his heart reserved for the maiden alone." He is forced by historical circumstance to acknowledge the world beyond his own private realm of desire.

In each of the texts discussed in the preceding chapters the tradition/modern dialectic is an axial feature, but this is not the case with Yu Hua's work; in "Classical Love" the historical context of his critique extends from Liberation in 1949 through to the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward in the early 1960s. The only way I could think to characterize this very specific temporal frame was in terms of the recent past and its historical present. Compared to the narratives in "Ba Ba Ba" and *Red Sorghum*, Yu Hua's narrative is very immediate, as is his critique. The fact that he locates his graphic indictment of the Great Leap Forward within the narrative framework of a simulated scholar-beauty romance demonstrates a very keen sense of irony. Artfully and cleverly constructed, the overtly allegorical narrative critiques not only the Great Leap Forward, but the presence of the official literary establishment as well.

Willow wanders through the town, but its once fine buildings are desolate and in disrepair. He continues on to the ruins of the once grand estate, but even the ruins have been swept away as though they never existed.

Willow stood for a while then turned to go. As he moved away he was suddenly aware of a peculiar sensation of freedom. Unaccountably, the solemn burden of recollection had lightened. He left the ruins far behind, his memories of the maiden crumbling away with each step he took, until they were gone, until it was as if he had never been enchanted by their spell.⁴²

Accepting that the traditional culture of pavilions, courtyards, and brocade towers are gone, marks a significant shift in Willow's consciousness, a redrawing of his "cognitive map"⁴³ of the Maoist sociopolitical landscape, which allows him to put aside the burden of memory and,

⁴² Yu Hua, "Classical Love," p.35.

⁴³ See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

if not accept, then acquiesce to the “real politik” of the age. And, indeed, was this not exactly what was required of the citizens of the “New China,” that they accept the new social order, or mutely acquiesce? In the end, of course, the vindictive peasant emperor had his revenge; the ultimate victory for Mao Xedong was having the power to systematically destroy China’s cultural/intellectual elite from which he was forever excluded. He began his campaign in the spring of 1942 with the first zheng feng 整风 (rectification) movement.⁴⁴ It was a watershed event that marked the beginning of an orgy of “cannibalism,” that raged unabated for thirty-four years.

Having reached the end of [an] alley, Willow came to a little square.... A little further on, Willow saw a little shack, open at the front. There were two men inside who looked like butchers and a few people waiting outside. Before he had realized that this was a market for human flesh, Willow had already drawn close enough to see what was happening inside.⁴⁵

When he realizes what he’s about to witness Willow is transfixed, unable to turn away, just as the Chinese people themselves were unable to turn away from the horror that was being visited upon them. By the end of 1957 there was no choice left about participating in the revolution, and no public space left for hiding away in a private life. For the Great Leap Forward the Chinese people were mobilized, and even those who bore witness were forced to do so enthusiastically lest they too become victims of “revolutionary” spectacle. Urban intellectuals were forced to bear witness as their family members, friends, and colleagues were exiled to the countryside. And in the countryside the peasants were forced to bear witness as tens of millions of people died of starvation. For Yu Hua, questions about tradition versus the modern are muted by the immediacy and immensity of the catastrophe of the in the Maoist regime.

⁴⁴ David E. Apter and Tony Saich, *Revolutionary Discourse in Mao’s Republic* (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1994); Dai Qing, *Wang Shiwei and Wild Lilies* (Armonk: M.E. Sharp, 1994).

⁴⁵ Yu Hua, “Classical Love,” p.35.

Willow moved closer. He saw three people approaching from the other end of the square. At their head was a man whose tattered clothes barely covered his torso. He was followed by a woman and child.... The man gestured to the woman and the child outside the shack. The proprietor glanced over toward them and held up three fingers. The man did not haggle. Accepting his three strings of cash he promptly went on his way... as fast as his feet would take him, without so much as a backward glance, and quickly disappeared....

It soon became evident that most of the customers were interested in the little girl, because many complained that the older woman's flesh was no longer quite so fresh as the young girls....

The negotiations continued until an agreement was reached. Only then did the woman speak, "She goes first."
The woman's voice was blurry and indistinct.
The proprietor, nodding, took hold of the little girl's arm and led her into the shack.
The woman spoke again, "Do a good job of it. Kill her with the first stroke."
The proprietor said, "That I won't do. The meat wouldn't be as fresh."....

Willow watched the proprietor's ax blade bear swiftly down, heard the "ka-cha" sound of splitting bone. Blood spattered in all directions, covering the proprietor's face.

The girl's body convulsed in time with the "ka-cha" sound. She turned to see what had happened and, catching sight of her own arm resting on the tree stump, was quietly transfixed. Only after a long pause did she let out a long scream and collapse. Crumbled on the ground, she began to cry in earnest. The sound was ear piercing....

Not daring to watch anymore, Willow turned and made his way down an alley. But he was pursued by the dull sound of the proprietor's ax cutting into the woman's flesh, by the woman's lacerating shriek. He shook uncontrollably, and it was only when he had rushed out of the alley and into another part of town that the sounds began to recede behind him. But, try as he might he was unable to expel the scene he had just witnessed from his mind. It would linger, stubborn, wretched, fluttering across his field of vision. Wherever he might go, the image would be implacable follow.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Yu Hua, "Classical Love," pp.36-38.

Lu Xun the “revolutionary traditionalist,” cautioned against the dangerous power of spectacle,⁴⁷ but Mao, the brash peasant, “*how han*,” 好汉 the Song Jian of the modern revolutionary age, embraced spectacle, utilized it, encouraged its ritualization, expanded it, making it even more spectacular by offering up greater and greater numbers of bodies: back-sliders, recalcitrants, poisonous weeds, and always intellectuals. Yu Hua captures so perfectly the vindictiveness of Mao’s particular “regime of power”—the mother begs that her daughter be killed with a single stroke, but is refused on the practical grounds of keeping the flesh alive as long as possible.⁴⁸ Here is a regime of power that very calculatedly narrated the masses “hunger” for revenge, gradually transforming the speaking narrative of *suku* 诉苦 (speak bitterness) into an eating narrative *chiku* 吃苦 (eat bitterness). In the early 1950s thousands of the rural landlord class, men and women, young and old, were quite literally torn limb from limb,⁴⁹ and that was just the beginning of Mao Zedong’s carefully choreographed *dans macabre* that has yet to fully play itself out.

Given the historical period in which Yu Hua became a writer, where else could he have turned to “speak the unspeakable” but to Lu Xun’s “master metaphor.” The new social order was built on the unending spectacle of inscribing bodies: daily, hourly, minute by minute, second by second the entire population of China lived with the unrelenting pressure to participate in the spectacle either as a victim, victimizer, or spectator. Willow critiques the effectiveness of this “regime of power” by reflecting that, “wherever he might go, the image [of dismemberment]

⁴⁷ Lu Xun, “What Happens after Nora Leaves Home?” in *Lu Xun Selected Works*, trans. Yang vol.2, pp.85-92.

⁴⁸ One cannot help but think of the 200,000 plus urban intellectuals who were sent off to twenty years of exile in rural China, their lives consumed by time and anonymous obscurity.

⁴⁹ See William Hinton, *Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village* (New York: vintage Books, 1966).

would implacably follow.” Here I am referring, of course, to the Cultural Revolution, which Yu Hua writes about in the story 1986 (一九八六年).

Up to this point in the text Willow has moved through the narrative landscape as a recorder of details, like a cartographer mapping the topography. But it is not just his own map that Willow is compiling, it is the cognitive map of an entire people who, seemingly overnight, awoke to a radically different cultural, political, and social terrain. If we take October 1, 1949 as the “day the Chinese world changed,” it was the presence of one man whose name rose above all others, and whose object of desire was the actualization of his own “will to power.”⁵⁰ With Willow and Hui their desire was bound by simplicity, with Mao desire was unbound, desire was virtually limitless, and the object of this desire was the entire population of China, hundreds of millions of Chinese, each one moving in concert with his will to power, each one a properly functioning part in the new social order. Ultimately, how can one approach a literary discourse on the Maoist era without, at the very least, calling to mind Lu Xun’s “master narrative.”

The night before, after he left town, Willow had walked by moonlight until just before dawn, finally rolling himself up like a bedroll.... He had arisen with the first dim light of dawn and continued his journey. Now, standing at the threshold of the tavern his body began to tremble, and his eyelids fluttered with fatigue. He hadn’t had a bite to eat or a drop to drink for almost two days.... This kind of pace would be difficult to maintain. The proprietor beamed and gestured for him to come in. “What is it you’d like?”

Willow walked into the shop, sat down at a table, and ordered a bowl of tea and a few griddle cakes.⁵¹

As an interesting aside, note that Willow once again orders a bowl of tea and a few griddle cakes. Of course, this can be attributed to the fact that he is too poor to afford meat, even

⁵⁰ See Friedrich Nietzsche, “Book Four, Discipline and Breeding,” in *The Will to Power*, trans. Kaufmann and Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968).

⁵¹ Yu Hua, “Classical Love,” pp.39-40.

when he earns a few strings of cash selling paintings, yet it also leaves him free of any direct taint of meat eating (i.e., cannibalism).

At this point a man who looked like a merchant came into the shop. The merchant, clad in brocades, was quite clearly a man of some distinction. Two servants bearing carrying poles followed behind him.... The merchant took a seat at a table and the proprietor furnished him with a cup of good wine.... The merchant drained his first cup in one draught, extracted a few ingots of silver... and slapped them down on the tabletop saying "I want some meat."

The waiters rushed over to his table bearing two plates of white, boiled meat. The merchant glanced at the plates, pushed them toward his two servants, and added, "I want mine fresh."....

Willow stood up, threw his bundle on his back, and made his way toward the door. A gut-wrenching, heartrending scream erupted from the other room. The sound was suffused with such unbearable pain that it was as if a sharp sword had penetrated Willow's chest....

Cold shivers ran down Willow's spine. But the three men sitting at the table seemed not to have heard the screams for they sat nonchalantly drinking their wine....

The sound in the next room began to taper off, and Willow heard a woman moaning. The moans had already lost most of their intensity. They sounded almost calm, so calm that they hardly resembled moans at all, for they were as tranquil as the sound of a zither drifting through the air, as serene as chanted poetry heard from afar. The sound drizzled down like drop of rain.⁵²

Yu Hua does two significant things in the above section of the text, which I have liberally abridged. First he subtly manipulates the sign value of brocade to signify a radical change in class structure. In the first narrative cycle, the brocade tower (*xiu lou* 绣楼)—Hui's cloister—signifies the totality of "traditional" China's vast and complex socio-ideological garden.⁵³ It is highly significant, therefore, that the man who enters the wine shop has appropriated the signing

⁵² Yu Hua, "Classical Love," pp. 40-41.

⁵³ Yu Hua, "Gudian Aiqing 古典爱情," p.165, "*Bu zhi bu juejian, liu lai dao xiulou qian.*" 不知不觉间,柳来到绣楼前.

value of “brocade.” Where it was once an exclusive signifier of elite class status, protected within the walled sanctuary of tradition, the man of apparent distinction, whom Willow takes for a wealthy merchant, appears resplendent in his brocade (*jin yi xiu duan* 锦衣绣缎),⁵⁴ singing that the “merchant of revolution” appropriated the power to create meaning, transforming himself into the author and embodiment of the new social order.⁵⁵

The second point I want to note in regard to the above cited text is the utterly fantastic (in the tradition of *zhiguai*) way Yu Hua reintroduces Hui’s spirit-presence into the narrative stream without any direct reference to her. In the kitchen of the wine shop where a woman screams in agony while being butchered for the merchant’s “fresh meat,” her screams subside into moans, then the sound of a zither on the air, like chanted poetry—and the sound “drizzled down like drops of rain,” which is a play on the earlier reference to Bai Juyi’s “Pipa xing.”

Without knowing exactly why, Willow suddenly began to suspect that was the maiden’s voice and began to tremble.

Willow instinctively moved toward the door that led to the other room. Just as he reached the door, the proprietor and the two waiters emerged from the room. One of the waiters was holding a blood-spattered ax, and the other was holding someone’s leg. The leg was still bleeding....

Inside the room Willow saw a woman prone on the floor, her hair in disarray. The leg that had been left intact was held bent slightly to the side. The other leg was gone.... Willow went to her side, kneeled down, and delicately brushed a lock of hair away from her

⁵⁴ Yu Hua, “*Gudian Aiqing* 古典爱情,” p. 180.

⁵⁵ Yu Hua articulates a bitterly ironic critique of the new “emperor” by placing him in all his “brocade” finery amid the gruesome, cannibalistic landscape that is a manifestation of his obsessive desire for absolute power. By using the character (*jin* 锦) which means brocade, but can in other contexts, such as *qian cheng shi jin* 前程似锦, convey the meaning of bright prospects. Thus the merchant’s (Mao’s) claim to authority, his appropriation of the “brocade” culture, of power is an abhorrence, an abomination, and act of desire indulged virtually unchecked, creating a social system based on the calculated manipulation of “mass behavior” through the staging and restaging of violent spectacle.

face.... Willow carefully probed her face. Thus, he soon ascertained, she was indeed the maiden Hui.⁵⁶

In shock, Hui is unable to recognize Willow until he produced the lock of hair she gave him along with the silver years before. Through her pain she pleads with Willow to buy back her leg so that her body is whole at death, and to kill her swiftly with a knife. Using what's left of the maiden's silver Willow buys back Hui's leg, minus a hefty slab that's been served to the hungry merchant. Having restored what was left of Hui's legs, Willow, is no longer a mere observer, he acts, and once again it is an act of transgression.

The blade bore swiftly down. The body underneath him recoiled violently.... When her body stopped moving, Willow began to shake uncontrollably....

After a long pause, Willow opened his eyes. The maiden's eyes had closed, and her face was no longer distorted. Instead, it had become inexpressibly serene.⁵⁷

The very structure of the power regime within Willow now exists does not allow for the space of a neutral spectator or observer, everyone, each individual is eventually forced to make the choice between "eating or being eaten." Gang Yue points out that:

Modernity, with its specular opposition between the West and China, furnished an epistemological distance that allowed Lu Xun and his generation of intellectuals to take up a position as spectators of the old China.⁵⁸

But no such space was afforded to Han Shaogong, Mo Yan, or Yu Hua. The Maoist regime turned China in upon itself, and Chinese intellectuals were never "furnished [the] epistemological distance," in which to establish a theoretical space outside the victim/victimizer dialectic. Eventually Willow is forced to act; like the mother in town who rushed forward and

⁵⁶ Yu Hua, "Classical Love," pp. 41-42.

⁵⁷ Yu Hua, "Classical Love," pp. 43-44.

⁵⁸ Gang Yue, *The Mouth That Begs*, p.71.

killed her own child to spare it further agonies, Willow is forced to plunge the knife into Hui's chest for the same reason.

Why does Yu Hua reintroduce Hui into the narrative at this point in the text? Certainly, if he had not Willow would have accepted the butchering of human beings just as he had accepted it when he'd witnessed it in town. Because the victim is Hui, the sole object of Willow's desire, he must pay the price of having possessed her. On a more purely philosophical level of discourse Yu Hua appears to be saying that it is the force of our own desires that draws us into the spectacle of life, or rather that it was the collective force of the Chinese people's desires that drew them into supporting and sustaining the spectacle of butchery which in retrospect, appears to have ultimately been the object of Mao's desire.

Willow picked up the maiden's body and cradled it in his arms.... He walked out of the room and into the tavern, without noticing the elation of the merchant as he gnawed on meat cut from the maiden's leg. He walked out of the wine shop and stepped onto the yellow highway. The fields were enveloped in yellow as far as the eye could see. It was the height of spring and not a patch of green could be seen, let alone a field of brilliant flowers.⁵⁹

In this brief paragraph Yu Hua critiques an entire era with brilliant concision. It is embarrassing facile to point out that the "merchant" who consumes Hui's thigh meat with such "elation" (*xingzhi bobo* 兴致勃勃) is, symbolically, none other than Chairman Mao himself. But for Yu Hua this is much more than a thinly contrived allegorical critique of Mao the individual, rather it speaks to the deep nature of the socio-political structure of post-Liberation China.

In the interest of clarity I want to summarize the various threads of discourse Yu Hua has woven into the text. At the absolute surface there is the simple through quixotic scholar/beauty narrative involving Willow and Hui. Closely linked to this narrative is a slightly more complex thread of discourse on the nature of desire, in which Yu Hua suggests that in the relationship

⁵⁹ Yu Hua, "Classical Love," p.44. Yu Hua, "*Gudian Aiqing* 古典爱情," p.183.

between an individual and an object of desire, the force of desire derives not from the object itself but from the mind of the individual. In the second narrative cycle Yu Hua allegorizes the Mao "dynasty" by employing Lu Xun's "master metaphor" of cannibalism, but in so doing very adroitly refocuses the object of signification. In what I read as a radical (and astute) critique of the Maoist regime, Yu Hua argues that rather than marking the advent of an ideologically modern nation state, Liberation marked the establishment of an ideologically anti-modern state.⁶⁰

When Willow, with the dismembered body of Hui in his arms, steps from the tavern onto the "yellow highway," the imperial yellow of the "revolutionary" regime has come to dominate the entire landscape "as far as the eye can see." Yu Hua's critique of Mao is further reinforced by the obvious reference to the "Hundred Flowers Campaign," that was immediately followed by the virulent Anti-rightist Campaign begun in 1957. Keeping in mind that the nature of desire is a major thread of discourse in "Classical Love," the reader is forced to question the relationship between personal, individual desire (Willow and Hui), "national" desire (i.e., what the peasant masses desired), and Mao's desire to control and lead the revolution.

In "Making History Speak," Ann Anagnost argues that the May Fourth literary movement's failure to translate written words into direct revolutionary action was successfully completed by transforming the voice of revolution from a written to a spoken narrative.⁶¹ And the "spoken narrative" gave voice to the voiceless, and the "speaking" became action that was usurped, manipulated, and redirected to act out a narrative written by an individual whose will to power proved voraciously immense. Hence, in the era of the "brocade" Merchant there was no

⁶⁰ It is very tempting here to refer to the Maoist era as a pre-modern dynastic autocracy, but the post-Liberation regime of power incorporated aspects of the modern to expand the idea (desire) of absolute control to unimagined degrees of finitude. Because of this I have chosen to characterize this regime of power as anti-modern.

⁶¹ Anagnost, *National Past-Times*, p.17.

space for neutral observation or chronicling, and everyone finally was forced to choose between victimizing or being victimized.

After traveling a short distance, Willow came to a desolate little stream, flanked by a few withered willow trees...

He began to examine the maiden. She was splattered with dried blood and mud.... Willow carefully wiped away the blood and mud from her body with water from the stream. When he arrived at the severed leg he was forced to once again shut his eyes, for it was fiddled with holes....

Opening his eyes, he was dazzled by the place from which the leg had been severed. He could still discern where the ax had cut messily and repeatedly into the flesh, like the stump of a felled tree that has been hastily hacked to the ground. Random stands of skin and flesh hung from the stump in a pulpy mass. Extending his fingers toward this mass, he found it incomparably soft, but his fingers were flustered by the sharp edge of shattered bone that lay within. Willow stared for a long time, until an image of crumbling ruins came vaguely to mind.⁶²

Having established his thinly veiled allegory about the cannibalistic nature of the Maoist regime of power, Yu Hua immediately brings the narrative back to the level of the individual, to the body as the site where the new ideological order was physically and violently inscribed.⁶³ At the same time, that Yu Hua reintroduces the Willow-Hui narrative, or more specifically Willow and Hui as symbolic of the hundreds of millions of individual Chinese who suffered, and the tens of millions who died, he expands the philosophical implications of his discourse by drawing an equation between Hui's shattered and dismembered body, and the shattered ruins of the revolutionary dream.

⁶² Yu Hua, "Classical Love," pp. 44-45.

⁶³ "The physical body itself became the medium for registering the collision of material forces in history. The old order was narrativized as a violence that seizes hold of the body. What was spoken became identified with the release of bodily anguish, a speaking that carried narrative to the very limits of language and beyond—to the materiality of the body and the immediacy of tears and blood." Anagnost, *National Past-Times*, p.19.

Yu Hua establishes an interesting binary at this point in the text. On a philosophical (decidedly Chinese) level he suggests that the rise and fall of all forms of materiality, from human bodies to grand estates, are of essentially equal value—*ronghua fugui*—the world of materiality is as ephemeral as smoke. Yet, at the level of individual experience, what is ephemeral philosophically seems terribly concrete in the “real” world.

He soon came to a stream of dried blood on her chest. Willow carefully wiped away the stain. The skin and flesh that had been displaced by the knife as it had stabbed into the chest had curled out around the puncture, deep red, like a peach flower in bloom. Recalling that it was he himself who had done the stabbing, Willow's body trembled. Three years of longing had culminated in a stroke of a knife. Willow didn't dare believe that such a thing had come to pass.

Having removed all the blood and dirt, Willow re-examined the body.... In death the maiden lived on. And Willow sat by her side, insensible, uncomprehending, desolate. Willow survived, but was half dead.⁶⁴

Here, in a beautifully concise scene, Yu Hua encapsulates the experience of the survivors of the spectacle, all of whom as solitary individuals, had both to grieve the loss of loved ones, colleagues, ideals, and confront their own complicity in the *danse macabre* that characterized (and continues to characterize) “modern” Chinese social life. Willow has survived but remains only half alive; it is a sentiment expressed again and again in the “Scar” literature (*shanghen wenxue* 伤痕文学) written at the very end of the 1970s and early 1980s. But the dialectic constructed by Yu Hua that simultaneously places the ephemeral and concrete within the same discursive framework highlights the profoundly ambiguous nature of human existence. It is, without question, this aspect of the text's discursive trajectory that gives us the measure of its intellectual depth and complexity.

⁶⁴ Yu Hua, “Classical Love,” p. 45.

Willow buries Hui beside the “murmuring” stream thinking the sound of the water will make her burial site less lonely, then walks off onto the “moonlight highway.” His experience in the “new order” has left him feeling hollow and, “[w]ith every step he heard the lone sound of the writing brush in his bundle tapping against the inkstone.”⁶⁵

Here I must address the issue of Yu Hua’s highly graphic representations of physical dismemberment and disfigured anatomies. Is this level of gruesome detail necessary? Are these representations of violent spectacle gratuitous, meant only to sensationalize and shock? Clearly, like Mo Yan before him, Yu Hua use illicit sex, graphic violence, and cannibalism to shock, titillate, and to entertain, and that aspect of his work must not be dismissed. However, on a more serious discursive level (and to a limited degree) the graphic violence does serve a serious and necessary function. I refer back to Ann Aganost’s observation that the “speaking narrative” of the Maoist revolution lead directly to dismemberment as a method of death for thousands of rural landlords and their families. And each subsequent campaign became larger, more spectacular, and more self-consuming: Land Reform, Hundred Flowers, Anti-Rightist Campaign, Great Leap Forward, Lushan Conference, Cultural Revolution, Gang of Four.⁶⁶ The mechanisms of extreme violence were *the* fundamental tool of the new regime, emerging as such as early as the first *zheng feng* 整风 (rectification) movement in the spring of 1942.⁶⁷

How better for Yu Hua to write that which cannot be written than by turning to Lu Xun’s “master metaphor” of cannibalism, arguably the most firmly established literary topos in modern Chinese fiction. Lu Xun invoked spectacle through its absence of representation, Yu Hua employs it in a radically different way. Lu Xun’s world was textual, the world of Yu Hua and his contemporaries was based on the “spoken word” materialized through the re-enactment of

⁶⁵ Yu Hua, “Classical Love,” p.46.

⁶⁶ I would add to this list such events as the Four Modernizations, Special Economic Zones, the Tiananmen Square Massacre, and the booming economy of the Eastern seaboard.

⁶⁷ Seldon, *Yenan Way*, pp.188-207.

violent ritualized spectacle. In the new order State violence is a fact of life. What does this mean in the psychic lives of people who live in constant fear of victimization, specifically, victimization not by some alien "other," but by one's own: one's own family, one's own neighbors, one's associates and colleagues. As Willow illustrates in his having to stab Hui in the chest, everyone was forced to participate in one way or another.

The third narrative cycle of "Classical Love" begins, as do the other two, with Willow, several years later, stepping out onto the yellow highway

He still wore a bundle on his back, but he was not on his way to the examinations in the capital. After he had buried the maiden, he had continued on to the capital, but any desire for worldly success he might once have possessed had by then already disappeared. So it was that he had failed the exam once more. Rather than shame, he had felt a kind of tranquility as he had stepped onto the highway that brought him home.

When Willow had returned to the stream beside which he had buried the maiden on his way home from the capital, ten or twenty other equally desolate grave mounds had been dug in the same spot, so that Willow had no longer been able to tell which grave belonged to the maiden. Willow stood by the river for a long time, transfixed by the realization that his was not the only heart that had been broken. And this thought was strangely comforting. Willow plucked the weeds growing out of each of the untended mounds and finally covered each grave with a fresh layer of soil. He gazed at his handiwork, and failing once again to distinguish which of the graves belonged to the maiden, he sighed and left.⁶⁸

Two important pieces of information are given in the above passage. First, not surprisingly, we learn that following the spectacle of Hui's dismemberment and death Willow becomes disillusioned with the examination system and idea of worldly success.⁶⁹ Second, and much more significant in terms of the deeper philosophical discourse embedded in the text, is the

⁶⁸ Yu Hua, "Classical Love," p.46.

⁶⁹ The Willow-Hui narrative is clearly to be read generically at the level of national allegory. Hence, in the context of this reading Willow's disillusionment with the examination system and idea of success signifies the national disillusionment in Maoism and the Maoist regime of power.

fact of Willow's epiphany when he realizes that he has not been alone in his desire, suffering, pain, loss, grief, and disillusionment. In attending to all "ten or twenty" graves, among which Hui's grave is anonymous, Willow pays homage to all those who died in the Great Leap Forward. Willow's actions reveal Yu Hua's profound sympathy for the Chinese people, and equally profound sense of the nature of the "human condition."

In the aftermath of the anti-modern, anti-humanist spectacle of Liberation, Willow, like so many of his fellow survivors, wandered like a displaced soul, begging and seeking alms; the years had past and his life [their lives] had been irreparably damaged. Even the thatched hut and loom that marked his place of origin had been obliterated.

It was only much later, when the times took a turn for the better that Willow secured a position watching over the graveyard of an aristocratic clan. Willow took up residence in a thatched hut by the graveyard. His duties were light—weeding, piling fresh soil on the mounds—so he had ample time in which to recite and paint pictures. He was poor but these activities imparted a touch of elegance to his life. Every so often he would start to dwell on the past, and vivid recollections of the dead maiden's face would resurface in his mind for a spell. Each time this happened, Willow's thoughts clouded over until his reveries were finally dispelled with a deep sigh. Several years passed in this manner.⁷⁰

At the discursive level where "Classical Love" is national allegory, it is not an elitist, top down narrative, rather it is bottom up; from Willow's perspective it is about the people (*renmin* 人民), the masses (*qunzhong* 群众) who were made to suffer and die to satisfy the desire of a single individual who perceived the masses (*qunzhong* 群众) as a singularity, and thus the singular object of his desire. The way Yu Hua has constructed his text, desire is always the central thread of discourse, which, among other things, allows for the bitter irony that is embedded in the difference between Willow's desire for Hui, and that of the "Brocade merchant." In a still greater irony Yu Hua appears to be saying that Willow's construction of

⁷⁰ Yu Hua, "Classical Love," p.47.

Hui as the object of his desire and that of the Merchant share the same state of being in desire; both men want to “consume” Hui, the difference between them being only a matter of degree, where degree is measured in the greater “appetite” of the merchant, in his greater desire to consume on a national scale.

But in the aftermath of Hui’s victimization Willow’s relationship to desire is significantly altered, and it is no longer a driving force in his life. On occasion memories of Hui arise unbidden, exist briefly, and are then “dispelled with a deep sigh.” In relative poverty Willow lives in a thatched hut attending to the grave sites of an aristocratic clan. He maintains “a touch of elegance in practicing the ‘classical’ arts” (reading classical poetry and painting). Thus Yu Hua offers two views of Willow: the survivor attending the ghosts of the past, and the hermit living simply and quietly in nature.

From Yu Hua’s initial representation of Willow in the first narrative cycle, up to this point in the text he has undergone, near seamlessly, a significant representational and spiritual transformation. The first time Willow steps out onto the yellow highway his temporal displacement (i.e., the hint of autumn in the lush, fullness of spring) affords him the critical distance to act as an emotionally uninvolved chronicler of Yu Hua’s narrative landscape. However, his narrative being (opaque and temporally displaced) is forever altered by the acts of entering the garden and physically possessing (consuming) the maiden (virginity). These acts operate at three distinct yet inter-connected levels of signification. The first and most obvious is the surface narrative, Yu Hua’s cleverly constructed play on the traditional scholar-beauty narrative. At a second level of signification, which becomes fully apparent in the second narrative cycle, Yu Hua Uses Willow and Hui as signifiers in a national allegory about the Chinese people from Liberation through the Great Leap Forward. The first act in this national allegory is Willow’s essentially inadvertent, yet highly transgressive entry into the garden,

followed by Mao's consumption of the "cloistered maiden," Hui. (Clearly a case of "the toad wanting to eat swan meat." 癞蛤蟆想吃天鹅肉) At a third, more broadly philosophical level of discourse Yu Hua employs an unidentified narrative voice to speculate on the nature of human desire. It is through the voice of this unidentified narrator that Yu Hua reveals (articulates) his own deeply philosophical, and profoundly humanist sensibility for the fate of the Chinese people; a sensibility expressed in a more traditionally linear narrative in his later novel, *Huozhe* 活着.

When Willow steps out onto the yellow highway for the third time, beginning the third narrative cycle, the decade of spectacle is over, prosperity has returned, and the narrative landscape is filled with the rich bounty of nature. But for Willow, a survivor of the "Age of Spectacle," this seemingly simple and bountiful landscape has a highly complex philosophical/spiritual topography.

Willow traveled for several days through a lovely spring landscape full of happy and colorful scenes.... The desolation of the past was nowhere in evidence, and Willow found himself thinking of the prosperity he had seen on the occasion of his first journey down the yellow highway. Images of desolation and prosperity cycled in turns through his mind, shuttling back and forth so that the yellow highway under his feet came to seem real one minute and entirely insubstantial the next. Even as these delightful spring visions leapt before his eyes, the desolation of the past lingered like a shadow cast on the roadside by the bright sun over head. Willow wondered how long the prosperity could last....

Contemplating the twists and turns his own life had taken..., Willow sighed. This world, with all its sudden and inexplicable changes, is truly heartless.... In a world of infinite, ceaseless change, what good are honor and glory anyway?⁷¹

This highly abridged section of text is meant to reveal the foundation of Yu Hua's philosophical orientation, which is clearly informed by the esoteric belief in the ephemerality of

⁷¹ Yu Hua, "Classical Love," pp.48-49.

forms. I would further characterize Yu Hua as being deeply humanist. His representation of the fundamental ambiguity of the human condition, rather than being dark and nihilistic, acknowledges the universal reality that the fortunes of individuals rise and fall, as do the fortunes of dynasties and nations states.

At the discursive level of national allegory "Classical Love" is not about opposing ideologies as in, say, the socialist-realist genre, rather it allegorizes ideology itself as an object of desire. At a more philosophical level the unidentified narrative voice which accompanies Willow throughout the text continually reiterates the theme that all objects of desire—glory, fame, fortune, love, power—are both real and illusory, substantial and insubstantial depending on one's contextual/temporal framework.

All along the road serving boys from the taverns warmly beckoned Willow to come in and enjoy a cup of wine. All was as it had been ten years earlier. Willow, flustered, felt as if he had never passed through the vicissitudes of the past.⁷²

Who's to say what's real and not real? The town, prosperous when first visited by Willow ten years previously, was transformed into a charnel house for the peddling of human flesh, yet on his third visit the buildings which had fallen into decrepitude where restored, street life was bustling, and the teahouses and wine shops were once again filled with a wide range of delicacies. Just as before Willow set out his ink stone, brush and paper in the temple courtyard, and in no time at all earned a few strings of cash, collected his belongings and wandered off.

Unthinkingly, Willow came to the place where the pavilions and secluded courtyards of an aristocratic estate had once lain. Nearing the estate, Willow could not help but be startled, for neither the ruins of the mansion nor the vast empty field he had seen on his last journey were anywhere to be found. Instead, what appeared before him were the pavilions and secluded courtyards of an elegant estate. Shocked, Willow began to suspect that what lay before his eyes was simply illusion.⁷³

⁷² Yu Hua, "Classical Love," p.50.

⁷³ Yu Hua, "Classical Love," p.51.

As he did the first time, Willow wanders down the path along the estate wall. He comes to a side gate, which is closed as it had been before. He continues along the path, arriving at a second gate which stands open. He enters, ambling through the ornate garden until he arrives finally at the brocade tower. The lattice windows are thrown open and the sound of a zither wafts through the spring air.

Willow's forward movement came to a halt, he looked up at the brocade tower. He gazed around the garden once again. All was as it had been on his first journey to the capital....

The trials and troubles of ten years' time began to fade, to swirl like so much dust, and Willow was left standing below the window of the maiden's brocade tower for the very first time. And, though he was aware of the sequence of events that were about to happen, this knowledge failed to distract him, because the past and present had become one in his mind.⁷⁴

But all is not the same as it was the first time Willow entered the garden, and this is a critical point. The general look of things is the same, but Yu Hua embeds a series of small, seemingly insignificant material differences to signify that this estate, this time, this reality is distinct from the "reality" of Willow's memory. The reader notes these differences, as does Willow, but his desire for Hui blinds him to their significance. Willow's "suspension of disbelief" does not, however, extend to the reader, and it is in the space of this perceptual displacement that Yu Hua lays the foundation for a moment of great poignancy, and one that is arguably the *dénouement* of the narrative.

Willow stands at the base of the brocade towers as he did before. The sound of a zither wafts down to him, a serving girl comes to the window and tells him to leave. In a thoroughly bemused state Willow allows memory to displace reality, believing that history is repeating

⁷⁴ Yu Hua, "Classical Love," pp.52-53.

itself. He is brought to a rude awakening when the serving girl douses him with a basin full of cold water, and threatens to have him thrown out of the garden.

Willow, his daydream evaporated like mist into the air, could not help but be overcome by sorrow. The tower was as before, but this was clearly a different sort of maiden. He sighed and turned to leave. Outside the wall, he turned back to gaze at the pavilions of the estate and realized that this, finally, was just not the same mansion as before. He took the lock of hair the maiden hand given him on parting many years earlier and carefully examined it. All the dead maiden's wonderful qualities arrayed themselves in his mind, and Willow began to cry.⁷⁵

In the scholar-beauty narrative Willow's tears mark the moment when he is forced, finally, to accept the finality of Hui's death. It is a sad but not tragic moment; read in the context of a national allegory Willow's personal catharsis becomes the catharsis of a nation, his tears the tears of a nation. What is extraordinary here is the way Yu Hua uses Willow as a sign for national polity, not in the sense of representing the masses, but as representing the millions upon untold millions of individuals, each one a survivor, and each one alone in his/her personal experience of grief, guilt, pain acceptance, and tears. It is a bitter irony that the survivors of the "Age of Spectacle" were forced to mourn alone in a society that was apparently restoring itself, yet was forever profoundly changed.

The sixth section of the text brings to a close the third narrative cycle, as well as the narrative as a whole. Of all the six sections in "Classical Love" this last one is the most enigmatic, and the enigma has to do with Hui. I will return to this issue directly, but first I want to follow Willow as he sets back out along the yellow highway.

After Willow left town, he walked for a few more days until he came to the place where he had buried the maiden.

The riverbank was green and luxuriantly covered with plants, among which sway a constellation of different wild flowers.

⁷⁵ Yu Hua, "Classical Love," p.54.

Willow branches cast countless jade-green shadows on the rippling stream.

As Willow stood by the bank, the water yielded up the reflected image of an aging, careworn face, of hair that was unmistakably growing gray. Lovely scenes can disappear in a twinkling and regain their former beauty just as quickly. But youth once lost, is gone forever. And this glow of lovely memories, once lost, is also gone forever, as transient as wild flowers in bloom.⁷⁶

I have cited this passage because of its rather interesting split construction. One moment Willow is noting in his reflection that he has aged, when Yu Hua abruptly shifts voice to that of the omniscient narrator who succinctly articulates the dialectical tension between the material “reality” of being human and the timelessness of the phenomenological world. It is this dialectic that supports the great irony of the human condition—the objects of desire have not changed since the dawn of human time; it is we who age, die, and are forgotten. In the end it is we who are the ephemera of the phenomenological world, “transient as wild flowers in bloom.”⁷⁷

Willow returns to Hui’s grave site, now able to identify it among the many graves due to its singularly desolate condition. He lovingly cleans and restores Hui’s grave mound, then sits beside her throughout the night.

Willow did not close his eyes the whole night through. Instead, he sat absorbed in hazy fantasies of reunion with the maiden. It was only when the sky in the east began to lighten that he regained his senses. Although these were but fantasies, he was loath to leave. If he could only pass his days accompanied by these fantasies, life would be lovely indeed.⁷⁸

When day breaks Willow sets back out on the yellow highway, but before long realizes he has no place to go. He no longer exists; the only meaning left in his life is based on desire, that is, his fantasy of a reunion of with Hui, a fantasy that supposes Hui’s resurrection.

⁷⁶ Yu Hua, “Classical Love,” pp. 54-55.

⁷⁷ Yu Hua, “Classical Love,” p.55.

⁷⁸ Yu Hua, “Classical Love,” p.56.

Gradually, a full moon rose in the sky above. The moon light splashed onto the surface of the stream, and the water softly glimmered. Even the weeds and the willow branches began to sparkle with light. Willow could not repress a sort of amazement at this sight. He had never realized before that pure moonlight could render a landscape so strange and so luminous.

Suddenly, Willow sensed billow after bellow of a strange fragrance, a fragrance that seemed to be carried toward him by the night breeze from behind the place he was sitting. When Willow turned around to look, he was engulfed by shock. Candlelight glimmered inside his hut by the side of the road. Willow unthinkingly (*bu you* 不由) rose to his feet and moved toward the hut. When he arrived at the threshold, he saw a woman sitting on the earthen floor and reading by lantern light....

When Willow gazed attentively in her direction, he was thrown into a state of utter bewilderment. The woman was none other than the maiden Hui. The maiden stood straight as a jade column, her gauzy silk skirts just brushing the floor. The skirts were pale, silvery white, strangely luminescent. It was as if she were clad not in silk but in moonlight.⁷⁹

There are numerous examples of resurrections in pre-modern Chinese literature, one of the most famous being that of Du Liniang in Tang Xianzu's opera *Mudan ting* 牡丹亭 (The Peony Pavilion), and certainly this scene is reminiscent of the one in which the ghost of Du Liniang spends the night with Liu Mengmei. But in the manner of all the other literary borrowings Yu Hua has used to construct this text, he skews the event by writing against the grain of the tradition. Yu Hua establishes a clear causal linkage between the full moon and Hui's resurrection, through which he invokes the powerful cultural signifiers—moon, *yin*, white and death.

Willow gazed at the maiden, her hair was elaborately coiled above her forehead, curling like tendrils of cloud, and her cheeks were flushed with the hue of peach flowers. Her eyes rippled with little waves of longing, and she held her small, cherry-red lips slightly open....⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Yu Hua, "Classical Love," pp. 57-58.

⁸⁰ Yu Hua, "Classical Love," p.58.

In contrast to her silk clothing which is oddly luminous as if made of moonlight, Hui's ghost body has a very strong physical presence, which creates a disjunction between the sign and its represented value in the text. The materiality of Hui's ghost is realized through the details of her coiffure, skin hue, and "cherry-red" lips. Unlike Du Lianiang's ghost who appears as real but retains a distinct quality of the ethereal, Hui exudes a physical materiality that belies her status as a ghost. Even though it is his fantasy become real, Willow himself is filled with "suspicion and doubt," about the quality of Hui's presence, and asks outright if she is human or ghost. Hui's reply does nothing to clear up the question of his physical status in the text.

The maiden's eyes clouded over with gleaming tears.
"The gentleman is mistaken."⁸¹

Hui's answer to Willow's very direct question gives no information what-so-ever, in fact, it further problematizes the narrative. What is it that Willow is mistaken about—that Hui is resurrected and physically alive, or that she is a ghost with peach blossom hued skin and cherry-red lips? This deep ambiguity of Hui's "being" is carried through into their "physical" contact.⁸²

With a wave of the maiden's silken sleeve, the candle light was
extinguished, and she fell into Willow's embrace. He skin was
chill to willow's touch....⁸³

Though this entire last section of the text Yu Hua builds on a series of small details that skew the tone of the narrative. The fact that Hui's skin is chill (*shifen yinleng* 十分阴凉)⁸⁴ to the touch gives her a corpse-like quality, which raises the issue of necrophilia, which itself is a form of consuming the dead.

⁸¹ Yu Hua, "Classical Love," p.58.

⁸² I have put the word "physicall" in quotation marks because there is no way of knowing Hui's status of being (i.e., human or ghost).

⁸³ Yu Hua, "Classical Love," p.59.

⁸⁴ As a note, it is curious that Yu Hua uses the term *yinleng* to describe the temperature of Hui's skin. The primary meaning of the compound is related to the weather and means gloomy, cold, and raw. In this context Hui's body is cold and raw, that is corpse-like.

The following day, when Willow awakens the maiden is gone, yet there is solid physical evidence that her presence had a certain material reality, such as the impression of her physical body on his sleeping mat, and a strand of her hair that was left behind. But Willow, racked by doubt, could not believe that he might finally possess Hui, the decade long object of his desire. But the ambiguity of her status of “being”: (*ni shi ren, shi gui?* 你是人,是鬼?) drives Willow to her grave site, where he uncovers her body to determine whether she is dead or alive, which once again brings him into contact with a corpse. What he discovers is that her body is rejuvenating itself, Willow quickly covers her body with earth, happily convinced that Hui is being resurrected. Unhappily, he soon is told that his “discovery” made her resurrection impossible.

The key to the thoroughly enigmatic sixth section is, and to the entire narrative is Hui. Who is she? How has she functioned in the text? To what discovery of Willow’s is she referring? Andrew Jones suggests that Willow’s discovery of Hui’s rejuvenation is the discovery she refers to, but his seems a rather meaningless ending to what is a very carefully constructed text. In a narrative that has been viewed exclusively from the view points of Willow and the omniscient narrator, the fact that it is Hui’s voice that brings the narrative to a close, is, at the very least, highly ironic.

In this analysis of “Classical Love” I have argued that Yu Hua establishes three distinct, though interwoven, layers of discourse: (1) a highly unorthodox classical-style scholar/beauty narrative; (2) an historical allegory about power and violence in Mao’s China; and (3) a philosophical discourse on the nature of being and desire. In my conclusion I will revisit these themes in the broader context of the other writers discussed in my dissertation, to illustrate how Yu Hua ultimately deconstructs the master metaphor of cannibalism first established by Lu Xun in “Diary of Madman.”

Conclusion

I began the introduction to my dissertation by stating that traveling through the narrative landscapes of post-Mao fiction is often like stepping into the hellish world of Pieter Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death*, and I arrive at the end of my critique reiterating the same thought. One is hard pressed to find a more physically odious character than Bing Zai anywhere in Chinese literature. Yet, this chicken-shit-eating, runny-snot-nosed, hydrocephalic, atavistic monstrosity signifies a far deeper, darker, and more complex being than at first suggested by Han Shaogong's semi-ethnographic, allegorical critique of the Mao dynasty. Liu Zaifu characterizes Bing Zai as a prototype of Chinese "psychological sickness,"¹ a phrase that reverberates with echoes of Lu Xun's masterful creation, Ah Q. And indeed, Bing Zai is linked with Ah Q, or more accurately Han Shaogong is linked to Lu Xun, a linkage based on their shared obsession with China, "as a nation afflicted with a spiritual disease and therefore unable to strengthen itself or change its set ways of inhumanity."²

What I find significant in this linkage is that it is based on a paradigm conceptualized in early Twentieth-Century China by a group of radical anti-traditionalist intellectuals who are separated from Han Shaogong, Mo Yan, and Yu Hua by sixty years of war, revolution, famine, and catastrophic death. After countless ideological campaigns, purges, the depredations of Great Leap Forward, and the murderous anarchy of the Cultural Revolution, is not surprising that Han Shaogong, Mo Yan, and Yu Hua should ask: Who are we as a nation and as a people that we continue to do these things to ourselves? What is surprising, however, is the fact that so many post-Mao intellectuals contextualized the question in terms of "national character" (国民性), a conceptual hold-over from the May Fourth period. It is somewhat disheartening that the words

¹ As quoted in Joseph Lau, "Han Shaogong," p. 32.

² C.T. Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971),

Lu Xun's mad diarist declaimed in the 1916 (吃人) should still resonate so loudly in the late Twentieth-Century.

My dissertation is only a first step in the exploration of "textual bodies" in modern Chinese fiction, and as such suggests many more questions than it answers. Nevertheless, my reading of the body in "Ba Ba Ba," *Red Sorghum*, and "Classical Love" reveals that for all their scar-healing, root-seeking, experimentation, avant-gardism, and claims on the postmodern, the writers of the immediate post-Mao era were still trapped in an outmoded modernist ideological paradigm. The linkage, then, between Lu Xun, Han Shaogong, Mo Yan, and Yu Hua is not based on the inheritance of some lofty May Fourth intellectual tradition, but on the inheritance of a century old national identity crisis. Understanding this fact goes a long way in explaining why questions about "national identity," "national character" and the inherent "psychological sickness" of the Chinese people re-emerged in the literature of the mid to late 1980s.

The "worlds" represented in each of the post-Mao texts discussed in the preceding dissertation are characterized by graphic violence and highly disturbing narratives that are peopled by the deformed, the demented, the depraved, the dying and the dead. Graphic violence is nothing new in Chinese literature; *Water Margin*, the Ming vernacular novel referred to in Chapter Three is filled with graphic images of wanton violence, unrestrained depravity, and acts of cannibalism. The *Jinpingmei* (金瓶梅) generously offers the reader all the prurient pleasures of voyeurism. These images are meant to titillate and to entertain, and the same holds true for the meticulously represented acts of violence the reader encounters in "Ba Ba Ba," *Red Sorghum*, and "Classical Love." Taking into consideration the historical context within which these texts were produced, as well as the ages of the authors involved, I can understand their liberal use of gratuitous violence. Han Shaogong was born in 1953, Mo Yan in 1954, and Yu Hua in 1960.

All three writers came of age during a period of catastrophic violence, widespread death, and the disintegration of idealized revolutionary values. For these writers reality was the violence of famine and political campaigns, and their narratives mirror the horror of life in China under the totalitarian rule of Mao and his cohorts.

However, to say that I can understand the liberal use of graphic violence in post-Mao fiction is not to say that I laud it or take enjoyment from it. Nonetheless, beyond the dubious entertainment value of macabre violence, all three post-Mao writers are seriously engaged in the questions of identity and nation. From the age of Confucian orthodoxy down to the present, literature in China has always had a didactic function. The purpose of serious modern literature, as defined by the May Fourth literati, was to inform, instruct, and to inspire; entertainment fiction of the Mandarin Duck or Butterfly variety was classified as a bourgeois self-indulgence. This idea about the function of "serious" literature became dogma and was ruthlessly enforced as Socialist Realist orthodoxy during the Maoist era. Significantly, the texts discussed in the preceding dissertation also carry a didactic function, however; they do not instruct and they do not inspire, they inform readers that there is little, if anything left with which to construct an intellectually coherent and meaningful social vision for Chinese society.

It is little wonder that, writing in an age in which heroes can only "mourn the past," contemporary Chinese novelists should hark back to past ages when telling a story with chivalric bearings. Mo Yan's *Hong gaoliang jiazu* (Red Sorghum, 1987), for example, is set in rural northeastern Shandong in mid-Republican days. Its heroes and heroines are neither revolutionaries nor warriors but a group of strong, self-reliant peasants. Amid the adversities of natural disasters, internal wars, and Japanese attacks, these peasants live and even thrive by walking the fine line between banditry and observance of the laws. They establish their own legal and moral codes, for which they would willingly sacrifice their lives. Through his exuberant language and rich symbolism, Mo Yan describes these peasants as larger-than-life figures, their adventures and romances having already become legends. Gone are the days of these last chivalric heroes, and the legendary tone of the narration emphasizes the inaccessible pastness or even

mythicality of the heroism. As the narrator, the sole descendent of the red sorghum family, relates his family's legends, he does so only as someone too young to have seen or done the deeds, except in imagination.³

Thus we are left with characters like Bing Zai, the antithesis of the chivalric hero, or the narrator in *Red Sorghum*, who, through his almost total lack of presence (the point David Der-wei Wang makes), speaks volumes about Mo Yan's critique of the (mainland) Chinese people at the end of the Twentieth-Century.⁴ And then there is Han Shaogong's narrator in "Woman Woman Woman," who, at the very end of the text articulates the same directionless, visionless, spiritless existence as Dai Fenglian's grandson.

I swept by a young man who, laughing and shouting, was pedaling a pedicab loaded with fruit and a young woman. His bulging muscles were so tanned and so beautifully flexed that I couldn't help but turn around and look at his face. I felt that this body so full of life and vitality was a good omen for me— perhaps I could speak more eloquently at the meeting this afternoon; or perhaps I would, after turning at the junction ahead, meet a certain person, one whom I'd never met but had long been waiting for.

I was getting nearer the junction.

What would I see? What had I been waiting for?

In the end I didn't take the turning and I didn't backtrack, I just drove on. I didn't have much time. When I got home I'd get something to eat, then I'd do the dishes, then I'd ring Yuan for an appointment....

There really was no point thinking too much about things. The days had to be spent like this, should be spent like this— after you've eaten, you do the dishes; when you've done the dishes you make a phone call Get that and you've got the simplest and most profound truth about life. I remember that Aunt Yao had mumbled something about a bowl of yam before she died, as if she

³ David Der-wei Wang, *Fin-de-Siècle Splendor : Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1849-1911*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp.326-327.

⁴ When I characterize the *Red Sorghum* narrator as having a lack of presence I am not referring to anything like the genius of James Joyce's "invisible narrator," in the novel *Ulysses*; rather by lack of presence I am referring to presence in the sense that Dai Fenglian had a strong presence of spirit. The grandson narrator articulates a dispirited voice.

was trying to come to grips with some knotty problem. For a long time her words had made me feel as though there was a block in my mind. But now I'd finally seen the light, I'd found the answer:

When you've eaten, you do the dishes.

That's all.⁵

If we situate the narratives of Han Shaogong, Mo Yan, and Yu Hua in the context of Lu Xun's "Iron House," we find Bing Zai and his clan of survivors falling back to sleep singing "jian," in the distant mountain mist. And in Grandma's grandson we discover a sleepwalker wandering past his ancestors, peeking in (rather enviously) at their dreams. What is most intriguing in this situation is the fact that Yu Hua appears to have stepped outside of the box, that is, outside of the iron house, and has done so by deconstructing the very idea of totalities, be they based on pre-Confucian, Confucian, Maoist, or post-Maoist sociopolitical ideology.

I will return to this point, but first I want to examine two points I've raised directly or indirectly in the preceding dissertation: (1) the correspondence (if any) between the Confucian and Maoist regimes of power; (2) the fact that all of the post-Mao narratives contain a subtext that address the issue of the Chinese "national character." In regard to the first point, there is clearly no direct correlation between Confucianism and Maoism; what we so lightly refer to as orthodox Confucian culture was based on an Imperial Autocracy, whereas the Maoist regime was a quasi-autocratic form of Totalitarianism. The reason this issue is important has to do with the radical iconoclasm of the May Fourth literati. Inherent in their intellectual position was the implication that the destruction of traditional Chinese (read Confucian) culture would free the people from the "spiritual" flaw that sustained an endless cycle of national self-consumption. But the destruction of the old culture and the old regime of power did not bring any lessening in

⁵ Han Shaogong, "Woman Woman Woman" in *Homecoming? And Other Stories*, trans. Martha Cheung (Hong Kong: Renditions Paperback, 1992), pp. 160-161.

the mindless cruelty that so troubled Lu Xun. In fact, during the Maoist era the spectacle of state sanctioned violence reached an intensity of volume that Lu Xun could never have imagined.

If the elimination of Imperial Confucian culture did not exercise the demons of the Chinese people's deep "psychological sickness," what then accounts for this self-destructive behavior that we as a people continue to do this to ourselves. This is the thorny question that confronted post-Mao intellectuals. What is interesting to note here is that in asking this question, essentially the same one asked by Lu Xun, the post-Mao writers do not have the critical distance available to Lu Xun. I mentioned earlier that post-Mao narratives are written in close and dirty; everyone including Han Shaogong, Mo Yan, and Yu Hua were forced to participate in the spectacle of modern Chinese political violence; even to be merely a witness required enthusiastic participation.

Coming to grips with life in China during the latter half of the Twentieth-century led to much soul-searching among the post-Mao generation of Chinese intellectuals. Su Xiaokang's six part television series *River Elegy* (河殇) is a clear testament to the spiritual vacuum that arose in the wake of the collapse of Maoist revolutionary ideology. Significantly, both May Fourth and post-Mao intellectuals suffered deep crises of faith, for both groups the violence and corruption of the "old" orders had to be exposed and destroyed, but for post-Mao intellectuals there is no promise of a socialist utopia to reach for. Where are they to turn, and from what are they to draw their sense of social cohesion? What makes their quest so very difficult is the horrifying brutality, and scale of violent public spectacle during the Maoist regime. The sheer number of bodies that were publicly sacrificed in campaigns, movements, purges, and class warfare is beyond imagining.

Which brings me to the issue of allegorical fiction. All four of the writers discussed in the preceding dissertation have created allegorical narratives which address the question of the

Chinese “national identity,” and the Chinese “national character.” With the exception of Yu Hua, to whom I will return shortly, Lu Xun, Han Shaogong, and Mo Yan all approach the issue of Chineseness as a totality. For Lu Xun, Chineseness is the building material of the Iron House, for Han Shaogong, Chineseness is the building material for the atavistic world of Bing Zai and Chicken Head Village, and for Mo Yan, Chineseness is the building material for the historical romance of Northeast Gaomi Township. Even in Yu Hua’s story “Classical Love” Chineseness is offered-up as a totality, and thus in all of the texts Chineseness must be read as a metanarrative. The texts discussed in the preceding pages are all of necessity allegorical because they address questions and issues the nature of which far exceeds depiction with the approximate tools of language. All the “great” metanarratives, then, are themselves allegories; this includes such notions as the nation, national identity, and national character.

As Benedict Anderson so aptly points out:

... since World War II every successful revolution has defined itself in *national* terms – the People’s Republic of China, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, and so forth – and, in so doing, has grounded itself firmly in a territorial and social space inherited from the pre-Revolutionary past.⁶

One can say the same thing for Lu Xun’s revolution where the fall of the Qing (theoretically) marked the end to dynastic China and the emergence of a modern nation state, which brings me back to Yu Hua. Of the three post-Mao writers I have discussed, Yu Hua is by far the most intriguing and the most significant because he brings to a close Lu Xun’s paradigmatic discourse on the “psychological sickness” of the Chinese people. Simply put, Yu Hua’s brilliantly conceived narrative deconstructs the totalizing paradigm of Lu Xun’s Iron House by employing the traditional Chinese paradigm of a correlative universe: the “yellow highway” is; empires rise and fall; there is no totalizing Iron House because that which is

⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1983), p. 2.

material is of its very nature impermanent. Bing Zai and his clan wander off into forgetfulness, and Mo Yan's narrator, seduced and repulsed by the mythopoeic past, bemoans the spiritual diminution of his generation. It is only Willow whose fate is unknown. Yet from all that has preceded Hui's final appearance and last enigmatic pronouncement, it is fairly safe to conjecture that Willow resigns himself to the life fate has given him, which consists of tending Hui's gravesite and serving tea to passers-by who are traveling along the "yellow highway."

And so we come to the end of a very particular thread of modern Chinese literary discourse. It is interesting to note that Lu Xun began the discourse by keying on the role of the spectator, and employed the highly inventive, counter-intuitive narrative strategy of erasing all but the faint traces of the spectacle body from his texts. In contrast to Lu Xun's narrative erasure of the spectacle body, Yu Hua foregrounds and aestheticizes the spectacle body through the use of highly graphic violence, and in so doing erases the space for Lu Xun's distanced spectator. Even we as readers are forced into a much closer relationship with the text than we are with Lu Xun's narratives. This reduction of critical distance also forces the reader into a situation of complicity. We choose to read about (i.e., to watch) Dai Fenglian, beloved Grandmother of Douguan, and patriotic hero of the Battle of the Black Water Bridge, force a large hook under the rotting skin of a dead baby to weigh the corpse as part of a divination scheme. What is so startling and so utterly horrifying about these narratives is that they reflect a scale of brutality and violent public spectacle that defies all reason.

Significantly, while Yu Hua's short story "Classical Love" is the most graphically violent and overtly cannibalistic, his protagonist, Willow, arrives at the end of his narrative achieving a sense of quiet resignation. And it is here, with Yu Hua's early stories that we come to the end of a literary era, or perhaps more accurately the end of a particular intellectual context for defining self and nation in early Twenty-first century China. As the writers of the *zhijing* (知青)

generation take their places as literary elders, a whole new generation of urban writers has emerged. Authors such as Wei Hui, Mian Mian, and Han Han, members of the '70s generation, are not concerned with the questions of national identity and national character, but with the pressures of day to day life in the city—sex, drugs, self-indulgence, and a ticket out of the ranks of the unwashed masses. The new young writers reclaim their bodies as sites of free discourse, which, in China is always an illusion. The massacre in Beijing (1989), the continuing persecution of the members of Falun gong movement, and the staggering number of executions now taking place during the ongoing “strike hard.” campaign, reminds us all that the use of violent public spectacle is still a fundamental feature in the Chinese Communist Party’s regime of power.

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