The Tragic Vision in Jia Pingwa’s Four Novels of the 1990s

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Abstract

This thesis presents a study of “tragic vision” in four novels of the 1990s by the well known Chinese writer Jia Pingwa. The novels are *The Abandoned Capital* (Feidu 废都), *White Nights* (Baiye 白夜), *The Earthen Gate* (Tumen 土门), and *Old Gao Village* (Gaolaozhuang 高老庄).

After a review of Western theories of tragedy – including Unamuno, Jaspers, Krieger, Frye, and others, with special attention to Raymond Williams, I argue that tragic experience is primary, perennial, and universal, tragic vision is secondary, and tragedy, in whatever religious, philosophical, and artistic form, is a response to and product of tragic experience and tragic vision. By tragic vision I mean a view of the world, a “sense of life in men and peoples” that is tragic. This vision is not necessarily pessimistic because using our head we find despair, but using our heart we are full of hope (Unamuno). In Chinese the idea can be summed up in the Daoist epithet about Confucius—“Is that not the man who knows that striving is without hope and yet goes on?” In short, tragic vision is defiant resistance or resisting defiantly.

Relying on this sense of the term, I flesh out Jia Pingwa’s tragic vision through an analysis of the four novels mentioned above. I demonstrate how Jia expresses a cyclical vision of his individual characters’ lives, of their crossing the rural and urban boundaries, and of traversing various stages of social history. These tragic cycles seem to go on hopelessly, but Jia’s characters resist despair by waging Sisyphian battles. I conclude that modern China has tragic experience, Jia Pingwa has a tragic vision and, although his tragic vision is not as profound as that of some of the literary giants the world has produced, he has successfully forged this vision into art.
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Chapter 1 Introduction

1. Jia Pingwa and His Works

Jia Pingwa was born in 1952 in a village in the Township of Jinpen 金盆乡 instead of his own hometown Dihu 椿花 in Danfeng County 丹凤县 in mountainous Southern Shaanxi. Born into a family of twenty-two people, with his father being the youngest of four siblings and teaching Chinese in another county and his mother often away with his father after Pingwa’s younger siblings were born, he is often left lonely and hungry, with his aunt, a widow in all but name, a sacrificial product of an old marriage without love because her husband lived with another

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1 Interested readers are referred to John Edward Stowe’s dissertation for Jia’s early life and works. Although Stowe corrects the error which states Jia was born in 1953, he follows an error he quotes on page 4 of his dissertation from Ying Bian ed., The Time is Not Yet Ripe: Contemporary China’s Best Writers and Their Stories, (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1991) 99: “His birthplace is Lihua Township 梨花乡, Danfeng County 丹凤县 in Shaanxi Province 陕西省.” While Jia’s real birthplace is in the town of Jinpen 金盆, his official birthplace is in the town of Dihua 椿花, which is a word from the poem named “The Flower of Bush Cherry” 樱桃之华 in Book of Poetry 诗经. On page 7 of Stowe’s dissertation, he quotes Jia’s account of his birth: “父母生我时, 經陰陽先生 推算, 不宜在家” and translates it into: “At the time that my parents were to give birth to me, they wanted to have a geomancer count the number of years that I would live; unfortunately he was not at home.” The Chinese sentence actually means: “When I was about to be born, my parents consulted a geomancer who advised that the birth should better not take place at my own home.” I pointed out these small errors to Stowe through email and he acknowledged them with gratitude. See John Edward Stowe, “The Peasant Intellectual Jia Pingwa: An Historico-Literary Analysis of His Life and Early Works,” dissertation (University of Toronto, 2003) 7.
woman in his work unit far away from home, while the rest of his cousins were taken better care of by their own parents, i.e., Pingwa’s uncles and aunts.²

Although quiet, skinny, and the youngest in his class in primary school, he often did the best in his studies and his compositions were often model ones praised by his teachers. His schooling was disrupted when he was fourteen, just going to the second year in a local junior high school, by the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution. The experience left a lasting memory in young Pingwa’s mind. His father would save a meat sandwich (meat was always short at the time) and bring it home miles away to his son. When he was temporarily detained, branded “a historical counter-revolutionary,”³ and obviously beaten by the Red Guards in a neighboring township, Jia Pingwa brought four packs of cigarettes and some meat in a cup to him. The father accepted the cigarettes, but let his son take the meat back. When he was finally released and dismissed from his teaching post in 1970, the first reaction after he saw


³ 历史 反 革命 (lishi fan geming) is a term created in the Cultural Revolution era to label people who worked in the Guomindang regime or who signed up as a youth corps member, and often people whose names were signed up by others without their knowledge. For example, if someone, like Jia’s father, happened to be a high school student and some people in authority signed up his name as a member of Youth Corps 三民主义 青年团 (Sanmin Zhuyi Qingnian Tuan, or for short, Sanqing Tuan) 三青团, Three Peoplism Youth Corps, was formed based on Dr Sun Yat-sen’s “minzu, minsheng, minququan,” 民族，民生，民权, i.e., Nationhood, People’s livelihood, and People’s rights—three “people” principle later in the Guomindang rule in the Mainland, he would most probably be labeled as “a historical counter-revolutionary.”
his son, who rushed home on hearing that his father was back, was to embrace his son and burst out: “I ruined my son’s future!”

When still a child, Jia Pingwa often had to climb up steep mountains to cut firewood and carry it on his back down along a path with no place to rest. Once when he was twelve, he tripped and rolled down a cliff and was caught half way by some poplar trees growing there. This experience trained his endurance in his later literary endeavor. Jia worked as a peasant for five years. Because he was slender built, he was assigned to work with a group of women and was scolded and scorned by the team leaders and other elder team members. Because his talent and hard propaganda work at a water conservation project for which he single-handed drafted, edited, printed a news circulation to boost up morale, he was recommended to enter Northwest University in April of 1972 as a so-called “peasant-worker-soldier” student.

4 Once branded as a “historical counter-revolutionary,” he would be treated as an enemy of the people and his children would never have a chance to go out to be a worker, or join the army, let alone go to university or become a cadre during that period. See Jia Pingwa, “Ji fu” 祭父 (Elegy to My Father), in Lei Da, Jia Pingwa wenji, vol. 8: 144-53.

5 I notice it is only after Jia Pingwa divorced Han Junfang in November 1991 that his biographer Sun Jianxi began gradually to revise earlier versions of Jia’s life. In the past, neither Sun nor Jia himself acknowledged the fact that it was Jia’s first fiancee who, because of her father’s connection with the township leaders, was recommended for university, but the young woman offered the opportunity to Jia instead. At first, it was Northwest Technology University, and later in consideration of Jia’s junior high education level, the county leaders switched to the Chinese Department of Northwest University. Sun commented, if Jia went to the first university, China would have one more mediocre (普通, biejiao de) scientist but would be short of one talented writer. See Sun Jianxi 孙建喜, Jia Pingwa Qianzhuan 贾平凹前传 (Early Biography of Jia Pingwa) (Guangzhou: Huacheng Chubanshe 广州：花城出版社, 2001) vol. 1. Hereafter, Jia Pingwa Qianzhuan.
Students like him went to the university with a “gunny sack” to fill with knowledge after the reopening of the university which had been shut for five years.\(^6\) He published a poem in the School Journal immediately after he arrived at school and was surprised to discover that he was the only student among the contributors, all others being his professors. Since there were usually six or seven students sharing a small bedroom and the school would turn off the lights at regulated hours, Jia seems to have pretended that he caught hepatitis and was therefore segregated in a small room by himself which provided him with the unlimited freedom to read at all hours.\(^7\) Due to his diligence and talent, he published more than a dozen articles within the three years of his university studies.

He was assigned to Shaanxi People’s Publishing House as an editor after he graduated in 1975. There he continued writing and published numerous poems, stories, and prose essays for five years until he became a professional writer in 1982. Drawing material from the Shangzhou countryside, his stories of this period are “marked by a

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\(^7\) Jia’s friend Feng Youyuan has this suspicion. Feng Youyuan, *Pingwa de fuoshou* 平 凹 的 佛 手 (Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe 上海人民出版社, 1997) 13. Hereafter, Feng Youyuan, *Buddha Hand.* I particularly mention this because Jia has written extensively about his hospitalization for hepatitis, and puts his experience into Cow in *The Abandoned Capital* who dies of liver disease.
pastoral quality, luminous and lingering like a shepherd’s song" and are collected in *Sketches of a Mountain Country* and *New Works of Jia Pingwa.* His story "Two Sisters" won first prize in a nationwide selection in 1978. With boldness and artistic conscience he portrayed various underdogs suffering all forms of abuse in stories like "Apricot in February," "City of Ghosts," and "Late Cry" which "cut through to things that are deeply embedded in the Chinese national character" and provoked some controversy. By 1997, when Feng Youyuan published his *Pingwa’s Buddha Hand,*

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9 *Shandi biji* (Shanghai wényí chūbānshè, 1979)

10 *Jia Pingwa xiaoshuo xinzuo ji* (Beijing: Zhōngguó qīngnián chūbānshè, 1980)

11 Sun Jianxi, “Jia Pingwa and His Fiction,” (102). Some of these stories such as "Apricot in February," landed him into political trouble and Jia was deeply depressed at the time. "Eryue xing" (Apricot in February), in Lei Da, *Jia Pingwa wenji,* vol. 4: 350-87. “Guicheng” (City of Ghosts),
Feng counted that Jia had been criticized four times for political reasons for his creative writings.

According to Sun Jianxi, Jia is well recognized as one who leans towards Chinese national traditions and believes that “the more rooted a work is in the character of one people, the more universal it is” (102). The ten novellas published in 1985 including “First Shangzhou Records,” “Tale of Xiao Yue,” “Last and First Month of the Year,” “Heavenly Hound,” and “The Castle” manifested his broad scope of thinking, and were acclaimed by critics.

The noted critic Ji Hongzhen, writing in *Wenyi Qingkuang* (*Literary and Art Scene*), says, “Jia Pingwa has created his own richly significant, resonant style, and his accomplishments with it have scarcely been rivaled in the past thirty years of Chinese literature” (103-04). Zhu Hong, the well-known scholar of Victorian literature, translated and collected eight stories by six writers, (among them are such

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13 韩州 初录 (*Nanjing: Zhongshan Magazine* 南京：《钟山》，1984)

14 小月 前本 (*Guangdong: Huacheng chubanshe* 广东：花城出版社, 1985)

15 腊月，正 月 (*Beijing shiyue wenyi chubanshe* 北京十月文艺出版社, 1985)

16 天 狗 (*Beijing: Zuojia chubanshe* 北京作家出版社, 1987)

noted writers as Wang Meng and Zhang Xianliang) in her *The Chinese Western*.\(^{18}\) She includes two of Jia Pingwa’s stories: “How Much Can a Man Bear?” and “Family Chronicle of a Wooden Bowl Maker,” and comments that these writers “break away from the romanticized stereotypes and unbridled sentimentality that marred many basically good stories of earlier periods” (x). She and Li Tuo put Jia Pingwa among the leading “root seekers”—nativist writers searching for their local cultural roots.\(^{19}\) According to Feng Youyuan’s count, forty of Jia’s works have won national and international literary prizes. According to Sun Jianxi, by 1994, five of Jia’s stories had been made into films and many others had been turned into television series.

Since 1985, Jia has focused his main energies on writing novels; he published four novels before 1990. Among them, *Fuzao*浮躁, is the best.\(^{20}\) It won the 1988 Pegasus Prize for literature established by Mobil Corporation in the United States. From then on he published on average one novel every two years along with numerous novellas, stories, prose, and poetry, as well as producing paintings and calligraphy.\(^{21}\) His versatility, diligence, productiveness, and his marvelous ability to

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\(^{19}\) Ying Bian ed., *The Time is Not Yet Ripe: Contemporary China’s Best Writers and Their Stories*.


\(^{21}\) Jia Pingwa’s prose essays are widely appreciated even by readers who do not even think highly of his novels. His “Ugly Stone” 石 (chu shi) was compiled into the unified text for primary school students very early in his writing career. Millions of youth who only received primary education remember his name and prose.
compete with popular literature have won him the title of "genius." The Changjiang Art Publishing House in Wuhan published a Jia Pingwa volume, along with that of Wang Zengqi in Beijing, Feng Jicai in Tianjin, and Yi Mingzhu in Nanjing as Today's Books of Genius following the Six Books of Genius edited by Jin Shengtan in the Qing dynasty. His works have been translated into many languages including English, German, French, Japanese, and Korean. There is even a Jia Pingwa Society in Japan.

In June 1993 Beijing Publishing House published Jia Pingwa's *The Abandoned Capital*. The novel immediately created a stir rarely seen for many years. The critical response was a furore. Hundreds of items were published within the first half of the year of its publication. Six collections of critical essays have been published as a result. Negative criticism calls Jia as well as his protagonist "base,"

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22 Jin Shengtan 金圣叹 (1608-1661), an erudite Qing dynasty scholar, edited and commented on six famous classic works which he named *Liú cāizì shū* 六才子书 *Six Books of Genius*, which are Zhuang Zi 庄子, *Li sào* 离骚, *Records of the Grand Historian*, Du Fu’s Poems, *Shihu chuan* 水浒传 (Water Margins or All Are Brothers), and the play *The Story of the West Wing*. His commentary on and abridged edition of *Shihu chuan* and *The Story of the West Wing* were so influential that after their appearance, all the rest of editions were no longer circulated or performed. The Six Books of Genius are by what he called six men of great genius, namely Zhuang Zi 庄子, Qu Yuan 屈原, Sima Qian 司马迁, Du Fu 杜甫, Shi Nai’an 施耐庵, and Wang Shifu 王实甫. See Lu Hsun, *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*, trans. Yang Hsien-yi and Galadys Yang (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1959) 172, 192, 193, 194, 423, 424. See also David Hawkes, *Ch’u Tz’u: Songs of the South* (Boston: Beacon, 1962) and David Rolston L., *Traditional Chinese Fiction and Fiction Commentary: Reading and Writing between the Lines* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

23 Stowe compiles an admirable bibliography in all languages in his appendix.

24 They are 1, Chen Liao 陈辽, Xu Caishi 徐采石 *Feidu ji* *Feidu*UGE28 《废都》及《废都》热, (*The Abandoned Capital and Its Popularity*) (Zhongguo Kuangye daxue chubanshe, November 1993); 2, Duo Wei 多维, *Feidu zìwèi* 废都滋味 (Flavor of *The Abandoned Capital*) (Henan renmin chubanshe, October 1993); 3, Fei Bingxun 费秉勋, *Feidu du ping* 废都大评 (*Great Criticisms on* ...)
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“shameless,” “degenerate,” “a down right rascal.” One university student even thought that Jia should “be shut in the Cowshed again.” The noted scholar and translator Yang Hsien-yi writes a doggerel which, roughly translated, reads like this:

All of a sudden we see bookstalls market *The Abandoned Capital,*

And we hear that Mr. Jia is talented without equal.

The greed in heart makes snakes wish to swallow elephants;

Valley of avarice impossible to fill, ghost draws magic invocations.

Bombasts of news raise an overwhelming atmosphere;

Self-censure turns the simple into mysteries.

Why not delete all your words,

And paint some pictures of sex play of spring palace instead?  

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25 “Cowshed” is a general term for the shabby places where ranking officials and intellectuals were incarcerated during the Cultural Revolution years.

26 牛棚 is a general term for the shabby places where ranking officials and intellectuals were incarcerated during the Cultural Revolution years.
On the other hand, positive critics praise it as one of the most impressive novels in thirty years. Some compare it to *The Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Jin Ping Mei*. Some have done a comparative study of it with Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, and Qian Zhongshu’s *The Fortress Besieged*. All those comparisons are superficial, but they indicate that those critics took Jia’s work seriously and spotted some similarities between Jia’s work and those of his masters.

Writer Chen Jo-hsi, when attending The World Chinese Literature Conference in Lushan in the summer of 1993, said the following in response to a woman entrepreneur who claimed she vomited only reading half of the novel and to another critic’s comment that the sexual description in the novel is absolutely a failure:

- Sex is a subject that cannot be left out in modern literature.
- Especially in the modern society where alienation is ever growing, when people are unable to communicate through normal means, as

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何如文字全除净，
改绘春宫秘戏图。


27 See Fei Bingxun, *Great Criticisms*. 
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one of the primal motive forces of “food, color, and sex,” sex is a
slim chance of survival in the claustrophobic world.\textsuperscript{28}

Chen Jo-hsi went on saying that she only read *Jin Ping Mei* once and disliked its
wordiness. But she could read the five hundred paged *The Abandoned Capital* deep
into night, because it very realistically portrays all walks of life in Mainland China.
She praised Jia’s gifted all-embracing pen: VIPs in the official world, peddlers and
runners, people of all sorts and she thought that Jia’s most penetrating writing is about
the literati. “From their fascination with divination, qigong, the stock exchange, going
into business, entertaining guests, giving gifts, going through the back door, eating,
drinking, drugging, and whoring, frauds and betrayals, all are incisively and vividly
exposed” (ibid.). She went on commending the novel on its humor and mischief, and
particularly expressed her appreciation of the novel of never being garrulous. She said
that she would probably never read *Jin Ping Mei* again, but to revisit life of all sorts of
China’s transitional period, she was willing to read *The Abandoned Capital* again.

Undaunted by the negative criticism and by the ban on *The Abandoned
Capital* issued by the Beijing Municipal Government in January of 1994,\textsuperscript{29} Jia was

\textsuperscript{28} Sun Jianxi, *Zhongguo Wentan Da Dizhen* 中国文坛大地震 (Big Earthquake on the Chinese
Literature Forum), (Zhongguo guangbo dishi chubanshe, 1999) 161.

\textsuperscript{29} On August 7, 1993, the Beijing Media and Publication Bureau notified Beijing Publishing House to
stop printing *The Abandoned Capital* and on January 20, 1994, it notified Media and Publication
Bureaus of all provinces and autonomous regions and municipalities that the novel was banned and
Beijing Publishing House was to be fined double the amount of the profits it earned from the novel. See
busy writing his next novel *White Nights* 白夜 which was published in 1995. In 1996, he published *The Earthen Gate* 土门. In 1998, he published *Old Gao Village* 高老庄, the last novel in this study.

Despite the ban on *The Abandoned Capital*, pirated copies mushroomed throughout the country. It is estimated that over ten million were pirated. This pushed Jia’s popularity to another dizzy height. Jia’s works were sought after in every bookstore. *The Abandoned Capital* phenomenon, as some critics call it, put the authorities in an awkward situation. When the influential *Femina étranger* awarded its 1997 first prize to *The Abandoned Capital*, as a member of the China Writers’

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30 (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe 华夏出版社).

31 (Shenyang: chunfeng weiyi chubanshe 春风文艺出版社).

32 (Xi'an: Taibai wenyi chubanshe 太白文艺出版社).

33 His first popularity may have to do with the fact that the Taiwan woman writer San Mao praised him as a “master writer” and expressed her deep admiration for his writings by various means before her suicide in January 1991.

34 In February 1994, some book dealers connected with China Drama Publishing House and Great Phenomenon Cultural Company Limited published a novel entitled *Feathered Overcoat* 羽裳 (ni shang) under Jia Pingwa’s name which was in fact a collaborative work by such influential writers as Mo Yan, Su Tong, Yu Hua, Ge Fei, Shi Tiesheng, Ye Zhaoyan, Zhu Xiaoping and others, altogether ten writers. To be responsible to his fellow writers, many of them his good friends, Jia Pingwa had to sue the publishers; three years later the court ruled three hundred thousand yuan as compensation in his favor. See Wang Xinmin, *Jia Pingwa daguansi 贾平凹打官司* (Jia Pingwa Goes to the Court) (Shaanxi renmin chubanshe, 1998). Wang Xinmin particularly puts it this way: “Thus each character of Jia Pingwa’s three-character name is worth one hundred thousand yuan.” This can be read as a response to Zhuang Zhidie’s question to Zhao Jingwu who requests him to write an article propagating the peasant entrepreneur Huang Hongbao’s insecticide: “So my name is only worth five thousand yuan?”

35 The last paragraph of the back blurb of my French paperback goes like this: “Cette histoire d’une descente aux enfers, tour à tour satirique et grave, érotique et poignante, œuvre d’une des figures de
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Association and a Deputy Chairman of Shaanxi Writers Association, Jia Pingwa felt obliged to notify the leaders of China Writers Association and asked for their instructions, he received the virtual instruction that they did not know what to do either.  

A rather unusual phenomenon as noted by Xi Huiling is that while the popular criticisms amid a great deal of curses led the government to ban The Abandoned Capital, academic interest in China seemed to gain momentum. This does not escape Sheldon H. Lu’s notice: “Even though its explicit erotic descriptions easily appeal to segments of the readership, only the well-trained reader can discover the subtly crafted allusions and parallels to such classics from the Ming and Qing as Jin proule de la jeune littérature chinoise, a été couronnée en France par le prix Femina étranger 1997.” Jia Pingwa, La Capitale déchue, Roman traduit du chinois par Geneviève Imbot-Bichet, éditions Stock, 1997.  

36 Zhang Qi, Secretary of the Secretariat of the China Writers’ Association, who arranged with Zhai Taifeng, Deputy Minister of Propaganda of the CPC Central Committee, Secretary of the China Writers’ Association, for Jia Pingwa to go to the south to “experience life” in 1994 and 1995 because of The Abandoned Capital, called Jia Pingwa (Zhang told him that it was not good for them to write an answer) to express two points: first congratulation and second that just like Jia they did not know what to do about it either. They asked him to report it to local Party leaders. See Sun Jianxi, Jia Pingwa Qianzhuan, vol. 3, 350.  

37 As Xi Huiling 西慧玲 wrote in 1997, “Although it was criticized and condemned by the popular classes for its explicit sexual description shortly after its publication, from 1994 on literature and art circles have been deepening their exploration, and especially the journals of various universities and colleges have been conducting deep analysis in the novel’s mystic culture, modernist impulse, Fin-de-Siècle images of cultural decline, Jia Pingwa’s gains and losses on the creative road and creative strategy, and comparison of Jia with Yasunari Kawabata in their psychology.” “Zhuang Zhidie xingxiang de tanxi” 庄之蝶 形象 探析 (Exploration and Analysis of Zhuang Zhidie,) Mudanjiang Shifan Xueyuan Xuebao (zhexue shehui kexueban) 牡丹江 师范 学院 学报 （哲学 社会 科学版）Journal of Mudanjiang Normal College (Philosophy and Social Science Edition) (January, 1997): 75-76.
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Ping Mei, Honglou meng, and Rulin waishi (The scholars), and the play Xixiang ji. Numerous symposiums on The Abandoned Capital, White Nights, The Earthen Gate, and Old Gao Village were held in Beijing, Xi’an and other cities. Many essays were published in prestigious journals to analyze them. Several critics have discussed Jia’s tragic vision and modern anguish, disillusion, and frustration. Critics note Jia Pingwa’s tragic vision in his works prior to the four major novels in 1990s.


The language of Ruined Capital [废都, a.k.a., Abandoned Capital] is polyglot and multifaceted, as seen in the vernacular, literary, colloquial, Westernized prose, and standard Mandarin. Hence the seeming contradictions: it was the most popular novel, undoubtedly, based on real or estimated sales figures, yet it was a masterpiece of the modern “literati novel” (wenren xiaoshuo) [文人小说] that only the elite can fully appreciate. (Qtd from Stowe’s Dissertation, 67-68)

However, the majority of critical essays written about Jia’s tragic vision concern four major novels. For example, about *The Abandoned Capital*, there are Lei Da’s “Struggling of the Soul,” He Xilai’s “Bewilderment at the Turn of the Century—On *The Abandoned Capital*,” Zhang Zhizhong’s “Dreams and Their Destructions: Reading of *The Abandoned Capital*,” Xu Zhaohuai’s “Dilemma of Culture and Degeneration of the Cultural People—Tentative Study of the Image of Zhuang Zhidie,” Zhong Benkang’s “Fin-de-Siècle: Anxiety of Existence—The Thematic Consciousness of *The Abandoned Capital*,” Ding Fan’s “Historical Inscription of an Atrophied and Mutated Cultural Mode,” Wen Rumin’s “A Dissection of Modern People’s Cultural Perplexity,” Han Luhua’s “Fin-de-Siècle Complex and Artistic Spirit of the East,” Zhong Liangming’s “We Are All Sinners,” and Ding Shuying’s “Solitude and Lostness,” all collected in *Great Criticisms*.

Besides, there have been numerous essays analyzing either a whole novel as a tragedy or the tragedy of separate characters. For example, Yang Min, Zhang Guangquan, Wang Jiaoping, Chen Xushi, Fei Bingxun, Shi Jiè, Sun Dexi, Fei Tuanjie, Meng Fanhua, Zhong Benkang, Guo Huifang, Lai Daren, and Nie Jin and He Yongsheng all write on some tragic aspects of either one novel, or two, or three together. But no one has yet examined the tragic vision in all the four novels as a

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Analysis of His Life and Early Works” at the University of Toronto in 2003. My dissertation might be the third but the first to study the tragic vision in Jia’s four novels of the 1990s as a whole.

2. A Definition of Tragic Vision

I will start with definitions as given by critics like Murray Krieger and Richard B. Sewall who incorporates those by Miguel de Unamuno and Karl Jaspers. Then I will rely on an intensive reading of Raymond Williams’s Modern Tragedy and form my understanding of the term.

In determining the extent to which the meaning of “the tragic vision” is entangled with that of “tragedy,” Murray Krieger marks what he thinks the most obvious difference and a crucial one between the two: “‘tragedy’ refers to an object’s literary form, ‘the tragic vision’ to a subject’s psychology, his view and version of reality. It is more than a difference between two extant approaches to the tragic. Rather, the second has usurped the very possibility of the first after having been born side by side with it. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the tragic vision was born inside tragedy, as a part of it: as a possession of the tragic hero, the vision was a reflection in the realm of thematics of the fully fashioned aesthetic totality which was tragedy. But fearful and even demoniac in its revelations, the tragic vision needed the ultimate soothing power of the aesthetic form which contained it—of tragedy itself—in order to preserve for the world a sanity which the vision itself
Krieger thinks that tragic vision is romantic, Protestant, heretical, demonic, and casuistic, a product of crisis and of shock, an expression of man only in an extreme situation, never in a normal or routine one.

Richard B. Sewall thinks that the tragic vision is not a systematic view of life. It admits wide variations and many degrees. It is a sum of insights, intuitions, feelings, to which the words “vision” or “view” or “sense of life” are readily applicable. It is constant and forges a form, namely, tragedy. He quotes Unamuno’s description of “the tragic sense of life” as a subphilosophy, or a prephilosophy, “more or less formulated, more or less conscious” and his understanding of the different phases of the origins of “the tragic vision” and “tragedy” is probably based on Jaspers’s system: first answer to the questions of condition, situation, and existence in terms of gesture and action which is probably man’s first attempt to deal with pain and fear; later verbalized response in some kind of art form, a dirge or lament after man contemplated and spiritualized the pain and fear; and finally complicated and sophisticated dialectics of man’s contemplation of his thrust and counterthrust against destiny in the form of philosophy and theology.

Unamuno in his The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and in Peoples pursues all channels of man’s exploration of meaning of existence to their ultimate end and

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reveals that there is no exit. As a staunch Catholic himself, he bravely searches for truth about God and finds that there is no God if we want to find scientific proof. There also seems no ultimate meaning or purpose for man’s existence. Heaven or Elysium would be a very boring and unbearable place for man to go to after death. However, this is the result of rational pursuit, the pursuit with the head. He advocates that we need to live and pursue with the heart. We need to create a God so that our soul become immortal and our life will achieve some purpose and meaning. Human beings created God because we want to love and want to be loved. His argument that life is tragic is very convincing if we feel and think. But this “tragic sense of life” which views every life as tragic might render the word “tragic” meaningless because it might wipe out the moral difference between, let’s say, Hitler and his concentration camp victims. That is probably one of the reasons Karl Jaspers says “Tragedy Is Not Enough” and advises to avoid both “the aristocracy of tragedy” and “pan-tragicism.”

Here we already have a difference of opinions between critics. Krieger thinks that “the tragic vision” was born side by side or “inside tragedy” because it needs tragedy as an aesthetic form to contain it. He thinks it is a part of tragedy, as a possession of the tragic hero. And later he simply calls the tragic protagonist a “tragic visionary.” Sewall, Unamuno, and Jaspers, on the other hand, think that “the tragic


vision," or view, or sense of life, or tragic awareness is the possession and property of "primitive" people, artists, religious people, and philosophers. In other words, "the tragic vision"—one of the original visions, tragic consciousness, which in an earlier stage is one language form which later branches out into fine arts, poetry, religion, and philosophy—was long extant before man composed the first tragedy in Greece. I agree with the latter scheme because it includes responses to tragic experience in all forms: arts, religion, and philosophy. Man certainly first had tragic experience and then vision before he found various ways to cope with the experience and the vision. Tragedy, even the first Greek dramatic form, is one of the many ways to deal with tragic experience and vision. Later, Aristotle’s definition, Hegel’s explanation, Schopenhauer’s, Nietzsche’s, Marx’s, and many theories by the numerous critics of tragedy are just different ways of responding to tragic experience, vision, and their product—the art form. To elaborate this point and many other related ones, I will invoke Raymond Williams’s Modern Tragedy at length.

Williams’s book Modern Tragedy addresses several important questions pertinent to my study: 1, modern times have tragedy; 2, it is not convincing to invoke “tradition” to deny modern tragedy, because the so-called “tradition” is often a latter day reconstruction with the ideology of its time very much invested; 3, tragedy is a perennial human experience rather than a one-time phenomenon; 4, different ages have different tragic experiences, their different response to and explanation of these experiences in particular, and different definitions of tragedy in general. He starts his
book with these words: "We come to tragedy by many roads. It is an immediate experience, a body of literature, a conflict of theory, an academic problem." \(^{45}\)

Observing that men, "trained in what is now the academic tradition" who easily become "impatient and even contemptuous of what they regard as loose and vulgar uses of 'tragedy' in ordinary speech and in the newspapers," build up a high wall between "Tragedy, proper, so-called, as known from the tradition" and many forms and pressures of "tragic experience," \(^{46}\) he examines the "tradition," "its actual historical development," and "the relation and connection which this formal separation" between "tragedy" and tragedy hides. \(^{15}\)

The "tradition" often brings with it the sense of "continuity" and there are reasons for it. \(^{47}\) However, he finds, immediately after we study the tradition, we become aware of change. "All we can take quite for granted is the continuity of 'tragedy' as a word" and concludes that "a tradition is not the past, but an interpretation of the past: a selection and valuation of ancestors, rather than a neutral


\(^{46}\) Williams, 14, 16. He notices that whoever discusses modern tragedy with the modern experiences that most people call tragic "can provoke literal amazement, or the simpler and more conventional cry of incompetence," and would be told that he "simply and perhaps viciously misused" the word "tragedy" and that he is being "merely ignorant"(14).

\(^{47}\) First, as Williams writes, "There is a common pressure, in the ordinary verbal contrast between traditional and modern, to compress and unify the various thinking of the past into a single tradition, 'the' tradition" (15). Second, it is convenient and indispensable to assume a common Graeco-Christian tradition of tragedy and it is desirable to teach and propagate it. Third, at particular stages of history, the revival of tragedy has been a strategy determined by this consciousness of a necessary tradition, especially when there has been a widespread sense of civilization being threatened or destroyed by an unruly present.
Because people who deny modern tragedies often invoke Greek tragedy as their ultimate criterion, Williams starts examining the Greek form first and concludes that it is impossible to reproduce or re-create the Greek form, because that particular dramatic form with its chorus, based on its particular "structure of feeling" which "had developed and sustained it as the dramatised tension and resolution of collective and individual experience" is not an isolable metaphysical stance, but a shared and collective experience, "at once indistinguishably metaphysical and social" (18).

Williams links mediaeval to Elizabethan tragedy by pointing out that it is commonplace that "Elizabethan tragedy was rooted in an age of faith inherited from that same mediaeval world" (19). His cites Chaucer's tragic tales as proof. Chaucer gives his definition of tragedy in both the Prologue of the Monk's Tale and Monk's Tale itself. Thus, he concludes: "Only an extraordinarily powerful attachment to an absolute meaning of tragedy could force us overlook the use of the word, in a quite specific sense, in a major historical period. It is not that we lack the evidence, but that we fail to use it because it does not fit our idea of the tradition," (19).

He notes that in the mediaeval tragedies, Fortune is the keyword which often operates on collected examples as a general law or mutability. It strikes the strong and good as well as the weak and bad. It is often arbitrary, though it might be argued that

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48 Williams, 15, 16.
man’s understanding was limited. No origin of change in condition was primarily assigned to what we now call individual character. In other words, tragic heroes were not blamed for their so-called “tragic flaws.” The mediaeval stress on rank under the pressure of what Williams calls the alienation of feudal society moved from the Greek generic and involving quality to an isolated condition. This isolation and consequent exposure of “riche kynges and lordys grete” is a factor in “the emergence of the later and ultimately very different conception of the tragic hero” (23).

Thus, he observes that Renaissance tragedies increasingly connected rather than separated the “famous fall” and the common experience in their emphasis of “affects.” Williams believes, then, that in one sense all drama after the Renaissance is secular, and the only fully religious tragedy we have is the Greek. But he qualifies it by stating that the decisive factor is probably not this immediate context, in institutions, but the wider context, in beliefs. “Elizabethan drama is thoroughly secular in its immediate practice, but undoubtedly retains a Christian consciousness” (30). Therefore, neo-classicism can be said to be the first stage of substantial secularization. “The increasing emphasis on a rational morality affected the tragic action in one important way: that it insisted on relating suffering to moral error, and so required the tragic action to demonstrate a moral scheme” (30-31).

Williams explains that this moral scheme believes in redemption rather than in dignified endurance. “Tragedy, in this view, shows suffering as a consequence of error, and happiness as a consequence of virtue” (31). In this “poetic justice,” “the bad
will suffer and the good will be happy; or rather, much as in the mediaeval emphasis, the bad will do badly in the world, and the good will prosper.... As such, what was intended as a moral emphasis, of a quite traditional kind, became an ideology, to be imposed on experience and to mask the more difficult recognitions of actual living.

That the scheme should have been called ‘poetic justice’ is, ironically, the demonstration of this ideological character” (31-32, emphasis added).49

It is probably in response to this shallow scheme on the one hand and to the increasingly philistine society of his own that Hegel described “poetic justice” as the triumph of ordinary morality, and the work that embodied it as social drama rather than tragedy. For Hegel, “mere suffering” is not important in tragedy. Its causes are. Other kinds of content that are not ethically important and substantive and do not represent the essential powers of life do not require the tragic resolution and, therefore, are not tragic. In tragedy, however, both the individual aims and the consequent conflict are substantive and essential. The tragic resolution is essentially the restoration of “ethical substance and unity in and along with the downfall of the

49 Note: The customary condescension to this shallow moral view is not enough to draw attention to a grave consequence this view entails: it will condemn whoever is defeated and flatter whoever succeeds in this world as if all people deserve whatever they receive. Williams states that this version of consequence might be demonstrated in a fiction and it could not negotiate much actual experience. The word “fiction” is more false than that genre term is ordinarily understood nowadays. It is only natural that people came to observe the distance between such “fiction” and experience, and their consciousness of unexplained and irrational suffering eventually overthrew not only this version of consequence but also its whole moral emphasis. Chu Kuang-Tsien traces “poetic justice” to Aristotle’s idea of harmatia. The Psychology of Tragedy (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co., 1987) 101.
individuality which disturbs its repose." According to Hegel, valid but partial claims come into inevitable conflict; in the tragic resolution, they are reconciled, even at the cost of the destruction of the characters standing for them. Individuals have to surrender their partial and valid ends, under a higher command, or they may achieve wholeness and reconciliation within themselves. Hegel's definition of tragedy "became centred on a specific kind of *spiritual action*, rather than on particular events, and a metaphysic of tragedy replaced both the critical and ordinary moral emphasis" (32, emphasis added). To Williams, this new emphasis marks the major emergence of modern tragic ideas.

According to Williams, Hegel was an influence on Marx, but Marx at once affirmed and transformed the objective character of Hegel's history of spirit. In Marxist history of social development, "Greek tragedy has been seen as the concrete embodiment of the conflict between primitive social forms and a new social order. Renaissance tragedy has been seen as the embodiment of the conflict between a dying feudalism and the new individualism. It is not eternal justice, in Hegel's sense, that is affirmed in the tragic issue, but rather the general movement of history, in a series of decisive transformations of society" (35). If a person embodies "the will of the world-spirit" or history, then he will not be tragic even if he sacrifices his life. This is because, as a representative of the world-historical development, his side will win in

59 Williams, 33.
the end. Thus, for Marxist critics and many others who follow them, there is no significant tragic meaning in so-called "everyday tragedies."

Williams refutes the argument that there is no significant tragic meaning in "everyday tragedies" by locating it in two related beliefs: "that the event itself is not tragedy, but only becomes so through shaped response (with the implication that tragedy is a matter of art, where such responses are embodied, rather than life where they are not); and that significant response depends on the capacity to connect the event with some more general body of facts, so that it is not mere accident but is capable of bearing a general meaning" (46-47). He argues that in the case of "ordinary death and suffering, when we see mourning and lament, when we see men and women breaking under their actual loss, it is at least not self-evident to say that we are not in the presence of tragedy... But where the suffering is felt, where it is taken into the person of another, we are clearly within the possible dimensions of tragedy... But where the suffering is felt, where it is taken into the person of another, we are clearly within the possible dimensions of tragedy" (47, emphasis added). Even no response is a kind of response. We may feel indifferent; we may justify it (as so often in war); we may feel relieved; we may even rejoice over it. But our attitude may be a statement about the suffering, about those involved, and about ourselves.

As for the general meaning, he admits it is evidently possible for some people to hear of "a mining disaster, a burned-out family, a broken career or a smash on the road without feeling these events as tragic in the full sense." The starkness of such a position is qualified by describing such events as accidents which, however painful or
regrettable, do not connect with any general meanings. The central question to be asked is “what kind of general (or universal or permanent) meaning it is which interprets events of the kind referred to as accident. Here at least (if not at a much earlier stage) we can see that the ordinary academic tradition of tragedy is in fact ideology. What is in question is not the process of connecting an event to a general meaning, but the character and quality of the general meaning itself” (47-48).

Williams further argues that the modern distinction between tragedy and accident, and the related distinction between tragedy and suffering are a product of a particular view of the world that gain much of its strength from being unconscious and habitual. “The events which are not seen as tragic are deep in the pattern of our own culture: war, famine, work, traffic, politics. To see no ethical content or human agency in such events, or to say that we cannot connect them with general meanings, and especially with permanent and universal meanings, is to admit a strange and particular bankruptcy, which no rhetoric of tragedy can finally hide” (49).

He explains that the distinction of tragedy from accident depends on some conception of law or order to which certain events are accidental and in which certain other events are significant. However, since law or order is always partial, an actual alienation of some part of human experience is inevitable. The traditional definition of tragedy as dependent on the history of a man of rank was exactly an alienation. When the bourgeois middle class extended the tragic category from the prince to the citizen and in practice to all human beings, the nature of tragic experience was drastically
limited and the general and public character of tragedy was lost. As a result, new
definitions of general and public interest were embodied in new kinds of tragedy.

Williams advises that we should not look for particular kinds of belief as
historical conditions of tragedy, for isolating extreme suffering and reintegrating it
within a continuing sense of life can occur in very different cultures, with very
different fundamental beliefs. It is often argued that tragedy can only happen where
and when there are common and stable beliefs, and it is often asserted that tragedy
was dependent in the past on ages of faith and is impossible now because we have no
faith. Williams answers that we do have our own beliefs and we should not call some
beliefs “faiths” and others not. In other words, our own disbelief or atheism is a kind
of “faith” and therefore we should be capable of producing tragedy.

George Steiner’s *The Death of Tragedy* is often misunderstood as his
pronunciation of the death of tragedy in modern times. But, as Harry T. Moore in his
preface to Charles I. Glicksberg’s *The Tragic Vision in Twentieth-Century Literature*
points out, though Glicksberg sometimes opposes Steiner by stressing that “the new
form of tragedy is not only possible in our time, it has been produced by such men as
Faulkner, Malraux, O’Neill, Sartre, and Camus;” Glicksberg and Steiner are actually
complementary because they treat different historical periods.\(^5\)

\(^5\) Charles I. Glicksberg, *The Tragic Vision in Twentieth-Century Literature* (Carbondale: Southern
tries to say is that tragedy as a dramatic form is dead and he stresses that in modern
times it is more and more to be found in narrative fiction such as novels.

Steiner ends his book on the personal recollection of three incidents rather
than of critical argument. The first incident is that he traveled in a train passing a
gutted ruin of what used to be a monastery used by the Germans to imprison captured
Russian officers in southern Poland. In the last years of war, both the German jailors,
their dogs, and their Russian prisoners were so starved that the Germans set the dogs
on the prisoners and the dogs ate several Russians alive and when the garrison fled
and left the survivors locked in the cellar. Two of the prisoners managed to keep alive
by killing and devouring their companions. Finally when they were found by the
Soviet army they were fed a decent meal and then shot “lest the soldiers see to what
abjection their former officers had been reduced.”

The last incident is his seeing a Chinese documentary of commune members
forming into a large chorus and chanting a song of hatred against China’s foes. A
leader leapt out of rank, performed a violent intricate dance, and acted out in
pantomime the struggle against the imperialists and their defeat by the peasant armies.
The ceremony closed with a recital of the heroic death of one of the founders of the
local Communist Party, killed by the Japanese. Steiner ends his book thus: “Is it not, I
wonder, in some comparable rite of defiance and honor to the dead that tragedy began,

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three thousand years ago, on the plains of Argos?" (355) Whether we wonder with him that the Greek tragedy really began in such a manner three thousand years ago or whether the incident he mentions is the real tragedy experienced and expressed by the Chinese people, we can see that he hints that modern China might have tragedy.

Modern China does indeed have tragedy. Only because, as Williams points out, revolution refuses to admit or intentionally covers up tragedy, tragedy was for a long time neither allowed to be written nor performed. Again I quote Steiner to explain the reason:

The Marxist world view, even more explicitly than the Christian, admits of error, anguish, and temporary defeat, but not of ultimate tragedy. Despair is a mortal sin against Marxism no less than against Christ. Lunacharsky, the first Soviet commissar of education, proclaimed that one of the defining qualities of a communist society would be the absence of tragic drama. Convinced that the powers of reason can master the natural world and give to human life a complete dignity and purpose, a communist can no longer recognize the meaning of tragedy. (342)

Michael S. Duke’s examination of the failure of tragic art in the Maoist era (1949-76) and the early years of the Reform era (sometime called the Deng Xiaoping

53 "The idea of tragedy, in its ordinary form, excludes especially that tragic experience which is social, and the idea of revolution, again in its ordinary form, excludes especially that social experience which is tragic." Williams, 64.
era, from 1980 on) serves as a good example to demonstrate that China did not lack tragic experience but the right conditions for the production of tragic art. Hu Yaobang, the head of the Propaganda Bureau, soon to become Secretary General of the Party Secretariat and later Chairman of the Party, gave a speech at a Drama Forum in 1980 in which he told writers and artists that even “tragedies” can be written, “but what we want to prevent is the writing of tragedies that just go on being tragic forever without any future, giving people a feeling of destruction . . . . This kind of tragedy is not in accord with the development of history, is not realistic.” Hu’s dictum conforms to Georg Lukács’s identification of the “world-historical individual” with the “tragic hero” which Raymond Williams doubts is Marxist.

What Hu was saying is that writers were allowed to write only “tragedies” of the Cultural Revolution or the contemporary scene if they somehow make it clear that the situation has now changed or will soon change for the better, which, according to Duke, is not tragedy at all in the generally accepted sense of something unavoidable due to the nature of social reality, fate, or personal character. With the external political control over how to write tragedy, writers’ hands are bound and therefore


56 Raymond Williams, 35.

they are unable to write tragedies. It is not because their tragedies are social or topical. Comparing Lu Xinhua’s “The Wound” with Lu Xun’s “New Year’s Sacrifice,” the former being written under the influence of the latter, Duke concludes that Lu Xinhua is neither able to probe “to the heart of darkness in Chinese society nor to the root cause of the spiritual tragedy. Unlike Lu Xun, he cannot (at least not in print) suspend judgment, nor can he avoid going along with the two basic characteristics of the ‘literature of the wounded’: criticism of the Gang of Four alone and loyalty to the current Party leadership.”

Modern Chinese literature did have tragedies during the “May Fourth Era” (1917-27) with writers like Lu Xun and Lao She, but its life was cut short with Mao’s “Yan’an Talks,” after which both the form and meaning of all Chinese literature reverted to the traditional style on the one hand and became more dogmatic and sterile with the communist ideology and propaganda on the other. All plays had a happy ending or an ending which suggested some hope of later success or poetic justice. Even Lu Xun’s utterly bleak “New Year’s Sacrifice” was adapted by Xia Yan so as to suggest some positive character traits among ordinary people. Xia Yan added a character Huo the Sixth, Xianglin Sao’s second husband and let him have a long


conversation with her after she was forced by her former husband’s family to marry him. He told her if she did not wish to marry him, she was welcome to leave, because he is always roaming in the mountains hunting and is hardly ever home. He says although he is poor, he will not force anybody against his or her will to do anything. This is a big change in tone, feeling, and world view, for in Lu Xun’s original story, hardly anyone is capable of understanding, sympathizing with, or helping Xianglin Sao and the poor woman is driven to death by both impersonal material and spiritual forces.

Let me take one incident in Lu Xun’s story as an example to see how the theory of tragedy works with literary experience. Xianglin’s Sao’s son is eaten by a wolf. The poor woman is half-insane with grief. She blames herself endlessly: “I was stupid, really. I only knew that when it snows the wild beasts in the glen have nothing to eat and may come to the villages; I didn’t know that in spring they came too.”60 We know it is a lamentation and her natural instinct is to grope for an explanation, which unwittingly to her is a psychological reflex to relieve the inner pressure to cope with the extreme grief of her tragedy.61

60 Unamuno cites this incident from the ancient sage Solon: When a pedant asked Solon who was weeping for his son’s death, “Why do you weep thus, if weeping avails nothing?” Solon answered him, “Precisely for that reason—because it does not avail.”
When she repeats her tragedy to the people she meets, the first few times they show sympathy and some in town who have not heard even come to seek her out to hear her story and shed a few tears, which must be consoling to her. But when she repeats her sad tale ad nauseam, "even in the eyes of the most kindly, Buddha-fearing ladies not a trace of tears could be seen," and some would promptly cut her short by repeating her own words: "Yes, you only knew that in snowy weather the wild beasts in the mountains had nothing to eat and might come down to the villages." (24) The grief-stricken woman is driven to silent despair.

Some Aristotelians would exclude this story from the category of tragedy because it is not about kings or their families, or it is not caused by hubris. In other words, it is a mere accident. Hegel would perhaps reject it for being "mere suffering." If by chance he condescended to consider the event, he would probably interpret it as a case of valid but partial claims coming into inevitable conflict and being reconciled in the tragic resolution even at the cost of the destruction of the characters standing for them.

Schopenhauer would probably interpret the tragedy of the wolf eating a human child as the consequence of the conflict of the will of the child and that of the wolf which both have a right to assert themselves, the only reasonable solution being to get rid of the will of both creatures. Nietzsche would advise us to imagine ourselves as artists like God who creates and enjoys life to please himself or like a child making
sand castles on the beach and treat the incident of the wolf eating the child as just a play in which we will achieve an esthetic consolation.

No matter how the authors of the various theories—mythological, theological, religious, metaphysical, moral, or esthetic—are convinced of, or are reconciled to, their respective solutions, none of these explanation is ultimately satisfactory. This is, I believe, because tragedy itself has no ultimately satisfactory answers.

Lu Xun is generally regarded as the most tragically tormented of modern Chinese writers. Leo Lee cites Lu Xun’s favorite metaphors for the pettiness of the crowd: the ant and the fly such as at the execution scene in “The True Story of Ah Q” where Ah Q is being paraded in a cart with “people swarming like ants” around him in the streets; in Lu Xun’s dream poem “After Death,” where the dead poet feels an ant crawling up his spine and a fly licking his nose; in his essay “The Warrior and the Fly,” he describes that when the warrior dies, “the flies first discover his defects and wounds. Licking, buzzing, smirking with glee, they think they are more heroic than the warrior;”62 and concludes that these numerous examples give evidence to what amounts to an obsession with the negative qualities of the Chinese national character, against which the lone individualist stands alienated and powerless. “Together they constitute, indeed, a deeply tragic vision of China—and of Lu Xun’s place in it.”63

63 Leo Ou-fan Lee, Voices, 108.
Lee demonstrates a certain tragic sense of life in Lu Xun despite Lu Xun's overt commitment to the revolutionary cause.

Those who think and feel deeply say that Lu Xun's story is a tragedy, and those who do not feel intensely and think deeply think it is a comedy. This brings us to my task of definition: what is tragedy and what is tragic vision?

Tragic vision is, I believe, finding the world and life full of suffering but taking on the suffering defiantly. It is meeting with injustice of all kinds and knowing that one cannot win but fighting defiantly against it till death.\(^\text{64}\) It is, in a nutshell, the traditional phrase: "know that it cannot be done but do it anyway," which Michael S. Duke uses to describe Lu Xun's "existential" repudiation of nihilism and the "tradition of genuinely tragic committed intellectuals."\(^\text{65}\) This phrase is originally a description of Confucius by a hermit in his time: "Is that not the man who knows that striving is without hope and yet goes on?"\(^\text{66}\) It sounds like the tragic spirit that I am describing rather than the tragic vision. However, I read the phrase into two essential parts: 1, knowing that striving is without hope and 2, going on anyway. It fits my two-element scheme: suffering and defiance. I think this short phrase can be made into a measurement of all tragedies.

\(^{64}\) F. L. Lucas puts it vividly: "Tragedy, in fine, is man's answer to this universe that crushes him so pitilessly. Destiny scowls upon him: his answer is to sit down and paint her where she stands." F. L. Lucas, 78.


The crucial thing is "suffering,"—my scheme involves two elements: suffering and defiance can be easily collapsed into one "persisting in suffering," or "suffering defiantly," or "defying suffering." That, therefore, is my definition of "tragic vision."

I will include as much as possible in and exclude as little as possible from the concept of tragedy. Anything even remotely related to tragic suffering, whether it might be a possible cause, or a particular manner in which the tragic hero endures or resists the suffering, or its consequence, or even the context in which the tragic action is played out, can be considered as within the scope or compass of the tragedy.

I have gone to some length in this discussion of "tragedy" and "the tragic vision" so that I might include many elements of both — tragic cause, tragic suffering, tragic spirit, tragic experience, tragic view and tragic sense of life — in my examination of four novels by a contemporary Chinese writer. Just as critics might study the "tragedy" of certain episodes in War and Peace or Anna Karenina without making a claim that the whole novel is a tragedy, I will focus on whatever elements I think are related to, or a representation of, a "tragic vision" of suffering and resistance in Jia Pingwa's novels.

Chapter 2 provides a brief synopsis of each novel and applies my understanding of the interpretation of theories on plot by scholars like Frye and Lucas to analyze briefly how Jia Pingwa structures incidents to produce a tragic effect. Chapter 3 discusses the historical, geographical, and ideological backgrounds which influence and even cause the tragic heroes and heroines to meet and confront their
tragedy and against which their tragic actions are carried out. Chapter 4 analyzes the thinking, deeds, words, and personality of the tragic heroes and heroines to further explore the causes and effects of their tragic experience. Chapter 5 discusses the techniques and resources Jia uses to bring out and heighten the tragic effect and express his tragic vision of the people and the society. Chapter 6 analyzes the various efforts and methods both the tragic characters and their audience explore and employ to achieve some kind of tragic relief. My conclusion will briefly summarize what causes Jia to have a tragic vision and evaluate how effectively Jia forges it into artistic forms, and his strong points and weak points, and what position he should occupy in the history of modern Chinese literature in general.
Chapter 2 Tragic Plots

Many volumes have been produced on tragic plots. Northrop Frye in the third essay ("Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths") in his book *Anatomy of Criticism* has a whole chapter entitled "Theory of Mythos" in which he uses the metaphors of spring, summer, autumn, and winter to represent the four genres of comedy, romance, tragedy, and irony and satire. Mythos, we know, is the Greek word Aristotle uses to mean plot. As I agree with and I rely heavily on Frye's interpretation throughout my dissertation, and, to avoid repetition, I will skip to other critics' interpretation of the term. Dorothea Krook, basing her whole book *Elements of Tragedy* on the scheme of "shame-suffering-knowledge-affirmation," takes it as a true interpretation of Aristotle's definition of tragedy as well as the word "mythos." But as a typical Neo-Aristotelian, who is blind to Aristotle's own confusion about such crucial words as *hamartia* and *peripeteia* (i.e., "Tragic Error" and "Tragedy of Errors"), she is bogged down in various confusions herself. For example, she cannot be consistent whether "knowledge" ("anagnorisis" is Aristotle's original word) should arise in the protagonist, other minor characters, or the audience.

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In a way, Murray Krieger, another staunch Neo-Aristotelian, believes his scheme of aesthetic form containing the demonic tragic vision is a true interpretation of Aristotle’s definition. He is contemptuous towards “our John Deweys”: those he calls “men of little hearts.” This seems to have prompted Sidney Hook to react strongly in defense of Dewey and his pragmatism in his “Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life.” I think Hegel and Hegelians including Marx are in line with Krieger with whom I feel it difficult to agree. They tend to overemphasize on the aesthetic part of Aristotle’s confusion of ethic and aesthetic. Even though they advocate “ethical substance” or “world-historical spirit,” their idea of the permanent “nature of things” is too general to be considered as really ethical. I agree with Sidney Hook, Dewey, Williams, Jaspers, Frye, W. MacNeille Dixon, Chu Kuang-tsien, and F. L. Lucas who pay due respect to Aristotle on the one hand and do not hesitate to point out his confusion on the other. Because F. L. Lucas devotes a whole chapter on plot in his *Tragedy: Serious Drama in Relation to Aristotle’s Poetics*, providing us with a very clear and convincing interpretation of Aristotle’s poetics, I will mainly base my analysis of tragic plots on his interpretation.

According to Lucas, for the Greeks, *tragoidia* need not end in disaster. It must include scenes of pain and sorrow, but it need not close with one; though it usually

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The essence of "tragedy" was that it handled serious actions by serious characters, whereas comedy dealt grotesquely with the grotesque. The ideal of this noble seriousness is so essential that Plato extended tragoidia to cover non-dramatic poetry like Homer's (whose Odyssey also ends happily). In the middle ages, "tragedy" did not need to be staged and in Byzantine Greek τραγῳδία, like the Modern Greek τραγοδία, signified simply "song."

But gradually the unhappy ending became essential. For Chaucer, "tragedy" is "a dite of a prosperite for a tyme, that endeth in wrecchednesse." According to Dante an unhappy tale was called a "tragedy" or "goat-song" because goats are noisome. In the Renaissance, the word's connection with drama revived; but its association with a sad ending has remained. In modern drama and fiction of tragic vision, the ending is often sad. Jia Pingwa's four novels, as the following synopses of their plots show, are serious actions by serious characters and all end unhappily.

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72 Lucas, 24.

73 Lucas, 25.

74 According to Dante's still more ingenious commentator da Buti, because a he-goat, proudly horned and bearded before, is bare and squalid behind. Lucas notes here that the real source of the term is still disputed—whether it was that a goat was sacrificed, or a goat was the prize, or the original choric dancers dressed in goatskins, or like goats. Lucas, 25. Note 1.
1. The Abandoned Capital

Zhuang Zhidie, a writer and one of the “four big celebrities” of Xijing (Western Capital, Jia’s name for Xi’an, the du of Feidu), is sued by his former schoolmate and girlfriend Jing Xueyin, a cultural bureaucrat, on a defamation charge for providing material to Zhou Min who writes and publishes an account of their romance in *Xijing Magazine*, although Zhuang has nothing to do with it. While the court proceeds, Zhuang has affairs with Zhou Min’s mistress Tang Wan’er, his maid Liu Yue, and a woman worker, Ah Can. In the mean time, Zhuang writes fake love letters to his former colleague and boss Zhong Weixian, editor-in-chief of *Xijing Magazine*, in the name of the latter’s former girlfriend (who might have died years ago) because he cannot bear to see the old man waiting in vain; and argues with the leaders in charge of cultural affairs who refuse to grant the old editor an academic title after the editor faints in court because of his liver cancer. By bribing judges with precious paintings tricked from Gong Xiaoyi, the son of the calligrapher Gong Jingyuan, another celebrity among the four, and Zhuang’s friend, and by publishing his own works in the name of another judge’s son who hopes to be promoted in the military by creative writing, Zhuang wins the court case in an intermediate court.

However, unable to see Jing Xueyin being ridiculed by all the people in the cultural bureau, Zhuang writes a letter to console her, but she uses it as new evidence and, with her sister-in-law sleeping with one of the judges, appeals to the supreme court and wins the case there. His friend Gong Jingyuan commits suicide after he is
released from the prison and finds that all his collection of precious art works have been swindled. Ruan Zhifei, the third celebrity in local entertainment circles, and a close friend of Zhuang’s, is mugged and blinded in both eyes. Wang Ximian, a painter and the fourth celebrity, another close friend of Zhuang’s, makes a fortune by forging famous art works, and becomes a fugitive pursued by the police.

The women Zhuang is involved with all suffer a bad end. Ah Can conceives his child, disfigures her face, and goes into hiding. Tang Wan’er is kidnapped from his side in a cinema by her husband and is sadistically tortured at home. His wife Niu Yueqing decides to divorce him after she finds him still cheating on her despite her earlier forgiveness. In the end Zhuang goes half-mad, gives up writing, decides to go south, and runs into Zhou Min at the railway station. Zhou who has tried to rescue Tang but has been wounded in the head by men hired by Tang’s husband also plans to flee south after he has broken Jing Xueyin’s husband’s leg for revenge. However, after Zhou Min returns from fetching some juice for Zhuang, he finds Zhuang slumped in his seat, having suffered a stroke.

2. White Nights

Ye Lang, a country lad from Suide County, Northern Shaanxi, comes to Xijing as a migrant worker, and introduced by Nan Dingshan, the manager of a ghost drama troupe, to the Mayor’s Secretary Zhu Yihe, who arranges for him to work as an assistant to Gong Changxing, the Head Librarian of the Provincial Library, becomes
friends with people of various circles. When the Mayor’s faction loses in a power struggle, Zhu Yihe goes back to his former teaching post, and further disgraced by the colleagues in the school, suffers a stroke. Ye Lang, dismissed by Gong despite Gong’s promise to Zhu that he would grant Ye Lang a tenured position within half a year, “gnashes his teeth until one crumbles into pieces” and resolves on revenge.75 He

75 This is straight from Jia’s novel:

Ah...” Yan Ming, frightened, tried all means to console him, while he, silent for a long while, gnashed one of his teeth into pieces, spat them out with blood, and went to the drama troupe and was not to be seen for days. Baiye 白夜 (White Night) (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 1995), 9.

The gnashing of one’s teeth into pieces to resolve to revenge seems unbelievable, but it is a tradition of literary exaggeration that Jia is following here which can be traced to Sima Guang’s recording of Tang imperial general Zhang Xun who fought the An Lushan and Shi Taiming rebel (安史之乱 An Shi zhi luan) forces until the fall of the City of Suiyang 城阳. When Zhang was captured, Yin Ziqi interrogated him: “I hear that each time you fought us your eyes stared so hard that they burst and you gnashed your teeth into pieces. Why is it so?” Yin pried Zhang’s mouth open with his sword and saw there were indeed only three or four teeth left.

“癸丑，贼登城，将士病，不能战。巡西向再拜曰：‘臣力竭矣，不能全城，生无以报陛下，死当为厉鬼以杀贼!’ 城遂陷，巡，远俱被执。子奇问巡曰：‘闻君每战，眦裂齿碎，何也? ’ 巡曰：‘吾志击逆贼，但力不能耳。’ 子奇以刀抉其口视之，所余才三四。” (The rebels climbed up to the city wall. All government soldiers and generals were sick and could not resist. Zhang Xun bowed westward. “Your humble subject is exhausted and cannot preserve the city. In his life, he is unable to repay his gratitude to your majesty but after his death he will turn into a ghost and kill the rebels!” The city was fallen and Zhang Xun and Xu Yuan were arrested.) Sima Guang 司马光, Zizhi tongjian 资治通鉴 卷 220 唐 纪 36 唐肃宗至德二载 757 年 (北京: 古籍出版社, 1956) 7038. See Also, Tong Dide 童第德, ed., “Zhang Zhongcheng Zhan Houxu Fulu,” 张 中 丞 传 后 续 附 录 (An Appendix to the Sequel to the Biography of Minister Zhang) Hanyu Wenxuan 韩愈 文选 (Selected Works of Hanyu) (Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1980) 95: 眼角破裂，鈦齿粉碎 (yanjiao polie, jiaochi fensui) “The corners of his eyes burst and he chewed his teeth into fine pieces.”

As Sima Qian describes the wandering knights who would rather be killed than insulted 士 可杀而不可辱 (shi ke sha er buke ru), Ye Lang must have deemed Gong’s insult worse than death and, like the protagonists in Lu Xun’s “Forging the Swords,” resolves to revenge at whatever cost. Ye Lang’s words “I’m not even afraid of living. Do you think I fear death?” even shame the ghost away. (21) Instead of turning into a ghost to revenge like Zhang Xun after death, Ye Lang plays ghost drama and wreaks havoc for his corrupt enemy. Jia Pingwa has always this romantic touch. If judged by
arranges for a girl named Yan Ming, who later becomes a fashion model, to take care of Zhu Yihe, and starts to work in Nan Dingshan’s ghost drama troupe himself.

His policeman friend Kuan Ge, a living Lei Feng,\(^7^6\) takes serving the people as his sole mission, but, tolerated neither by both his bosses nor his wife, is dismissed for a minor error from the post at which he worked for thirty years. Having lost his job, wife, and home, and seriously afflicted with a skin condition that turns him into “a beetle,” he resolves to walk to another province to find a cure for his skin disease and vows to raise funds to build a temple dedicated to Lei Feng.

Ye Lang has in his possession a key Kuan Ge picked up from the tar left behind by a “regenerated man” who set himself alight on the city square, and attracts the attention of an archeologist Wu Qingpu who introduces Ye Lang to his cousin Yu Bai, a well-educated modern urban “aristocrat.” Attracted to Yu Bai who also has an unexplainable attachment to him, Ye Lang has a hard time deciding whether to marry Yu Bai or Yan Ming, a beauty who is whole-heartedly devoted to him. Ye Lang has suspicions about Yan Ming’s chastity and fidelity, but, urged by Kuan Ge and his wife Kuan Sao, Ye Lang agrees to marry Yan Ming. After they have a daughter who is very ugly, he feels that his suspicion is confirmed. In the end, she divorces him and realistic standards, the incident of so-called “regenerated man”  \(\text{再生人, the man who has been dead for more than twenty years and resurrected to live with his wife, an old woman Qi whose son is now older than the regenerated man, in this present novel would be even more incredible.}\)

\(^7^6\) A soldier from Hunan Province stationed in the City of Shenyang who always did good deeds such as carrying water and coal for the old people until he was killed driving a truck into a fallen electric wire. On March 5, 1963, Mao Zedong called on the whole nation to emulate Lei Feng. Mao and other CCP leaders such as Zhu De, Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping, and Lin Biao all wrote to commemorate the semi-mythicized model soldier.
disappears with her baby vowing to earn enough money for plastic surgery for her child.

Meanwhile, Wu Qingpu resigns from his post to open a restaurant as urged by his girl friend Zou Yun. However, before the restaurant opens, she runs away with a gold miner named Ning Hongxiang. Ning is a bully in the mines and has enemies who design various ways to take their revenge. One day after Zou Yun injures accidentally a man’s leg with Ning’s car, Ning tells her that it is less troublesome and costly to deal with a dead than an injured person and takes over the wheel and backs into the injured man over and over again until the man dies. One day when Ning rides his motorcycle on his usual route, he races into a steel wire set up across the road by his enemy. His head rolls off an embankment while his body still races with the motorcycle for more than two hundred meters. Zou Yun becomes mentally ill. Wu Qingpu, no longer able to bear the bullying of Zou Yun’s two brothers, goes back to his archeologist post in the mountain area west of Shaanxi and is stung to death by a swarm of wasps. Ye Lang tries all means to take revenge on Gong Changxing, who is promoted to the Director of the Cultural Bureau. In the end, Ye Lang is arrested during the performance of Seabird Jing Wei—the sea bird being a symbol of unrequited love.
3. The Earthen Gate

In a district called Earthen Gate in the southeast part of Xijing, there still remains one village named Renhou (Benevolent and Honest) encroached upon from all sides by rapid urban development. The villagers elect Cheng Yi in absentia to replace their old village head who is about to give in to the pressures of the developers. Cheng Yi was a foundling picked up by an old executioner from beside a she wolf in an alfalfa field. He is clever at learning things but cannot stay at any one profession for long. For two years the villagers have no idea where he has gone to, but they elect him anyway. Cheng Yi is overjoyed to hear of his election and, to preserve the village from being developed he tries all means, such as rebuilding the village cemetery, to attract tourists, building a Stone Archway engraved with the Mayor’s calligraphy which he manages to obtain from the Mayor without telling him what he would do with it, performing a drum show in the city’s Cultural Festival, building a medicinal herbs shop, and using Grandpa Yunlin’s skill to treat hepatitis patients from all over the country.

He is said to have been to the site of an ancient Tibetan Kingdom, Guge, where he was enlightened and cut his own hand off in his resolve not to steal any more. The methods he uses to rule the village are a hotchpotch of the First Emperor of Qin’s despotism, Tibetan autocracy, Zeng Guofan’s family rules, Chiang Kai-shek’s “New Life Movement,” Mao Zedong’s people’s commune policy, class struggle, and the ultra-leftism of the Cultural Revolution era. He is willing to cooperate with
anyone but the developers. In the end, in order to raise funds for the village, he goes back to his old profession of burglary and smuggling antiques, steals and sells a terra-cotta warrior’s head from the First Emperor of Qin’s Tomb for a million yuan, is arrested and executed. But before his execution, he repeatedly requests the government to donate his body to a hospital and send the proceeds to his village, which is demolished shortly after he is shot.

4. Old Gao Village

Gao Zilu, a professor of Chinese in a university in the provincial capital, Xijing, brings his new wife, Xi Xia, an urban artist, to his hometown to commemorate the third anniversary of his father’s death. There he witnesses his ex-wife Juwa being courted by his fellow villager, Cai Laohei, a bankrupt peasant entrepreneur, and Wang Wenlong from Xijing, president of the Floor Lath Mill in Old Gao Village. Gao Zilu and Juwa still miss each other. Su Hong, a girl from the village, who went to Xijing and earned money through prostitution, is the deputy president of the mill. Acting on the villagers’ contempt for Su Hong’s bad reputation and their and his own petty egalitarian thinking, Cai Laohei organizes a series of actions, such as beating the neighboring villagers who sell wood to the mill, cutting the forest which has been preserved for years, smashing, looting, and setting the mill on fire, to create trouble for Wang, Su, and the Township Head Wu. While Xi Xia, naïve idealist, actively tries to befriend all parties and heroically protects Su Hong from the mob’s molestation,
Zilu can only observe from a distance and make a pathetic gesture when things go too far. His attitude arouses his new wife’s unconcealed contempt. In the end, after Cai kidnaps Zilu and Juwa’s son, Stone, demands a huge sum from Wang and still defiantly returns to Juwa, the act that reaffirms Juwa’s lingering love for him, and is arrested, Xi Xia decides to stay behind to defend Cai in court when Zilu cries farewell at his father’s grave and heads for the city.

From the above synopses we can see that all four novels have a predominantly somber mood forming part of the unity of the tragic structure. But as Northrop Frye, following Aristotle, points out, concentrating on mood does not intensify the tragic effect, the source of which must be sought in “the tragic mythos or plot-structure.” Frye extensively compares tragedy with comedy. He notes that in comedy the erotic and social affinities of the hero are combined and unified in the final scene; tragedy usually makes love and the social structure irreconcilable and contending forces, a conflict that reduces love to passion and social activity to a forbidding and imperative duty. “Comedy is much concerned with integrating the family and adjusting the family to society as a whole; tragedy is much concerned with breaking up the family and opposing it to the rest of the society.... Again, just as the heroine of comedy often

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ties together the action, so it is obvious that the central female figure of a tragic action will often polarize the tragic conflict.  

Thus in the four novels, we do not only see all the tragic characters ending tragically, but also families breaking up, often with central female characters polarizing the tragic conflict. Zhuang Zhidie’s family is broken in the end. Tang Wan’er leaves her husband, goes to Xijing with Zhou Min where she falls in love with Zhuang Zhidie. In the end, she is kidnapped and returned to her original husband who sadistically tortures and rapes her. Ah Can divorces her husband and leaves her son by him behind. Yan Ming divorces Ye Lang who is arrested in front of Yu Bai. Kuan Ge is divorced by his wife of more than thirty years. Zou Yun becomes mad and Wu Qingpu is killed by a swarm of wasps. Cheng Yi is executed and leaves Meimei who loves only him after she completely cuts off her relationship with Old Ran, her long-term fiancé. Meizi becomes mad and her relation with her husband is ended there. Zilu not only loses his ex-wife to Cai Laohei, but is also in clear danger of losing his second wife Xi Xia to Cai. The ambiguous ending with regards to Juwa and Cai’s relation intimates that Manager Wang Wenlong who has spent a fortune on Juwa might be stranded. Su Hong chooses or is destined to have no husband or family. On this level, the four novels deal with some tragedies that fit most of the criteria generally required of tragedy.

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78 Fyre, 218-19.
Jia Pingwa’s four novels are typical “slices of life.” Similar to the Greek tragedies that were not act-divided, none of Jia’s four novels is chapter-divided. Jia makes it clear that he wishes his novels to be a running record of actual life that has neither beginning nor end. They all start right in the middle of the action. Due to influences from both Western modernism and Chinese classic novels and due to social political necessity, Jia refrains from directly mentioning various causes of the tragic actions, yet his readers, sharing both the author and his characters’ experience, know almost all the causes. Take The Abandoned Capital for example. Right at the beginning with Zhuang Zhidie’s odd incident with the rare flower, readers are informed of his ennui and subsequent degeneration. The very word “degenerate,” like “fall,” presupposes a “height” from which a person tumbles down. Yet the novel neither begins from that beginning nor informs the readers directly in large chunks what kind of person Zhuang was before. But most readers have little difficulty understanding throughout the work that in the past he was kind, honest, diligent, and talented.

Besides, Jia resorts to flashbacks (a memory, a revery, or a confession) analogy, metaphor, symbol, and myth for necessary exposition. For example, Zhuang Zhidie’s reminiscence of his life when he visits the editorial office of Xijing Magazine not only gives us a rare chance to look at his past, but it also parallels with Zhou Min in the present. As for suspense and surprise, Jia does not like to contrive too much of it due to his dislike of dramatic events and coincidences that traditional tales seemed
to thrive on. Even a surprise such as Tang Wan’er’s being kidnapped from Zhuang Zhidie’s side in a cinema seems to be grounded long before it happens in the incident when Tang Wan’er remembers her son’s birthday and sends him a telegraphed wish, for which Zhou Min slaps her across the face because, he explains to her, it will add nothing to the child’s well being while only exposing their own hideout.

With a modernistic touch, Jia refrains from portraying direct conflicts between his protagonists and antagonists, and the majority of his novels do not even have personal antagonists. Although he is “obsessed” (to use C. T. Hsia’s term for modern Chinese writers) with realistic problems such as politics, history, gaps and conflicts existing between rural and urban society, polarization, and corruption, he seldom personalizes them into characters. The antagonists are often in the form of circumstances that stand between the protagonists and their goal. Often because of the complexity of the novels, Jia lets these conflicts operate in his self-divided heroes and heroines in the form of ambivalence and dilemma. These conflicts are often between opposing desires and values in the protagonists’ temperament. For example, Zhuang Zhidie’s difficulty and indecision as to whether to follow the Confucian active engagement or Daoist passive non-action take a toll on him. It is this kind of constant wavering that paralyzes him in the end.

Many characters in this novel suffer a bad end, but what is special about Zhuang Zhidie is that he, like Jia Baoyu, the protagonist of *The Dream of the Red*
Chapter 2 Tragic Plots

*Chamber*, is the most conscious of the tragic atmosphere. Unlike his celebrity friends who plunge into the commercial torrents headlong and enjoy promiscuous sex like brutes, he constantly questions himself for fear that he may degenerate into a base person.

One crucial factor in causing Zhuang to degenerate is his discovery that his “noble” career actually helps a system that did and does not truly serve the people but harms them. This *anagnorisis* disorients him and he loses his spiritual pillar—the faith that he cherished all his life. In his personal life, he has been as strict with himself as a puritan in a suffocating marriage that seems never to enable him to taste the true pleasure of sex until he meets with Tang Wan’er. He has been worshiping women like Bodhisattvas and always portrays them as such in his fictions. But once he starts to relax and to enjoy extramarital affairs, he loses control and harms those he loves most in the course of his self-abandonment. This is the function of tragic irony that plays a major role in this novel, as in the other three novels.

The end of the novel is that after Zhuang degenerates, has sex with a few women, betrays his friends, and even ruthlessly participates in swindling Gong Jingyuan out of his life time collection, he awakes to good conscience, resolves to turn over a new leaf, and attempts to venture south, but he collapses. That seems to be a legitimate ending, but if we readers are still concerned about what will happen to

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79 “Tragedy over-shadows the family’s splendour, but Pao-yu is the only one conscious of this.” Lu Hsun, *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*, 304. And earlier, Lu Xun writes this about Baoyu: “Because he is open-hearted and sensitive, he is constantly being distressed” (301).
him afterwards and that he has not walked out of his dilemma, then this story does not have an end—an exact “slice of life.”

However, we have something of a sequel in *White Nights*, for the deposed and paralyzed Zhu Yihe can be read as a carry-over figure of both Zhuang Zhidie and the Mayor’s secretary Huang Defu while Ye Lang can be a carry-over of Zhou Min. Yan Ming seems to be a combination of Ah Can and Liu Yue. This I will argue at length in the chapter about characters. For now I will return to the discussion of the beginning and ending of the novel. Ye Lang, the protagonist, is dismissed from his librarian post and further insulted by Gong Changqing and others and he gnashes his teeth to resolve to take revenge. So the story again begins right in the thick of the action. As with Zhuang Zhidie and Zhou Min, the anagnorisis, or the discovery, according to Lucas (Krook terms it knowledge in her scheme), actually starts Ye Lang’s tragic action instead of its result. What Ye Lang discovers is the gross inequality between rural and urban society and the greater polarization in urban than in rural society. From the experience of the Old Clown who escaped the prison compound during the Korean war only to be persecuted by his own government numerous times, Ye Lang sees the absurdity and the cruel joke history plays on one of the many actual heroes. From Ye Lang’s short period near the power circles and his expulsion from it, he sees the cold inconsistencies of human relationship.

Ye Lang wants to succeed. His ambivalence towards the city, as reflected in his relation to Yu Bai and Yan Ming, not only puts him in self-contradiction but also
Chapter 2 Tragic Plots

causes great suffering to both women. The tragic irony is also revealed in the fact that he acts like a Seabird Jingwei very much in the style of Sisyphus to expose corruption, but his letters to the complaints commissioner are used as a bargaining device for the commissioner to gather favor from the one complained about. Ye Lang ends up being arrested for gathering evidence of corruption. Kuan Ge’s righteous deed of reporting the corruption in the police bureau which ends up in him being dismissed from the post on which he has worked for more than thirty years is another manifestation of such tragic irony. The novel ends there, but if we want to know what happens to Ye Lang or Kuan Ge, Yan Ming, and Yu Bai, it is our own guess.

In *The Earthen Gate*, Cheng Yi’s striving and his measures to protect and preserve the village only end up hastening its annihilation, and this too is tragic irony. Superficially, this novel seems to have a normal beginning and ending. It starts with the massacre of homeless dogs on the square developed from the village’s land symbolizing the doom of the villagers who will soon become homeless like the dogs and it ends with the wiping out of village with a lone old man howling among the debris. However, the utopian “Spirited Crop Heights” Fan Jingquan, Meimei’s tutor, advocates does not exist in reality. If the villagers are allowed to preserve everything including their ancestral tombs in this Heights thirty miles south of Xijing, which is described to be a combination of both the advantages of the city and the countryside, why should they bother to move there in the first place? If that place can be successful
Gao Zilu in *Old Gao Village* proudly “returning home in brocaded coat” but leaving his home village crying is one more minor tragic irony. Again superficially, it seems to have a legitimate beginning and ending, but we have to remember, the novel is not mainly about Zilu and his new wife’s experiences in his old hometown, but about the tragic struggles of Su Hong and Cai Laohei. It is about both the recent tragic and absurd history of revolution and Reform and the remote history of the Song and Jin dynasties earlier and before, and about Chinese culture in general which seems to run in such absurd and tragic cycles round and round. Just like the history that will go on repeating itself, the story does not have an end: people strive to become rich and they are beaten and their wealth divided and some are encouraged to become rich again, and again face a future redistribution.

Everything seems logical and inevitable, but this does not mean it is just or justified or right. Some critics even read *The Abandoned Capital* as a work of resentment like Sima Qian’s letter to Ren An, all the four novels are such and raise

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80 For example, Xu Zhao Huai 徐兆淮, in his “Wenhua de ganga yu wenhuaren de duo luo—Zhuang Zhidie xingxiang chutan” 文化的尴尬与文化人的堕落—庄之蝶形象初探 (Dilemma of Culture and Degeneration of Men of the Cultural Sphere—A Tentative Study of Image of Zhuang Zhidie) calls the novel “a book of resentment.” *Great Criticisms*, 83-102. Sima Qian’s reply to Ren An 报任安书 which Ban Gu 班固 compiled into his *Records of Han* 汉书 cites *Spring and Autumn Chronicles*, *Yi Jing* 易经(Book of Changes), *Li sao* 离骚, *Guoyu* 国语(Discourse of the States), *Sunzi hingfa* 孙子兵法 (Strategies of War), etc., as works by their authors who all fell into adversity and who wrote to express their resentment. See Ban Gu 班固, *Records of Han* 汉书, vol. 6 (Zhonghua Shuju 中华书局, 1982) 2725-36. 8 vols.
some protest. In their protest we see a clear defiance against fate, reality, circumstance, and environment. In the following chapters I will demonstrate how such an ethic and logic work in Jia’s four novels.
Northrop Frye observes that the tragic hero is great when compared with us, but there is something else compared to which he is small. “This something else may be called God, gods, fate, accident, fortune, necessity, circumstance, or any combination of these, but whatever it is the tragic hero is our mediator with it.” This something is constant, “an epiphany of law, of that which is and must be” (208). The tragic heroes are wrapped in the mystery of their communion with this something beyond which we can only see through them, “and which is the source of their strength and their fate alike” (208). This something might be an ideal either inherited or realized by the heroes. For example, Zhuang Zhidie, Ye Lang, Kuan Ge, Cheng Yi, Cai Laohei, and Gao Zilu all protest against the situation they are in because they cherish a certain ideal which they believe should be the norm or law, of which they think their situation or condition is a violation and which they are willing to sacrifice all to regain, protect, and maintain.

In all the four novels, the historical background, the tragic characters’ conception of what the world should be, and their geographical environment act in

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81 Frye, 207.
part as the previous condition to which the tragedy of the heroes is consequence. These tragic characters aspire to overcome a disorder as opposed to men of pride who set themselves against the nature of things. The tragic characters' cultural conception of what the world should be, their geographical location, and historical background often play an important role in their tragic action.

I. Traditional Thoughts and Modern Ideology

All three main strands of Chinese thought i.e., Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, believe that the cosmos is a self-contained, self-operating organism in which all beings arose as parts in a hierarchy of wholes obeying “the internal dictates of their own natures.”

The Confucian concept of social order is that of harmony. Society consists of a large number of small social units, each of which in turn consists of individuals varying greatly in their intellectual and physical capabilities and it is inevitable that all differences should exist. “The social order, in other words, is a rationalization of

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82 Frye writes: “Often, as in revenge-tragedy, it is an event previous to the action of which the tragedy itself is the consequence” (216). Much more convincing than the dogmatic Aristotelians or Neo-Aristotelians who insist a hamartia on the tragic hero, scholars like Dixon, F. L. Lucas, Chu Kuang-tien, Williams, and Frye who respect the literary facts including the Attic and Elizabethan tragedies find that often a tragic hero and oftener a tragic victim is put in a situation totally independent of their own responsibility like Hamlet whose father is murdered and whose state is usurped entirely innocent of any blame, being attached to him.

existing human inequalities." It does not follow that class conflict should ensue, for the welfare of the social organism as a whole depends upon harmonious co-operation among all of its units and of the individuals who comprise these units. The idealist rule is that of a sage-king who "differentiates between upper and lower (classes), permitting the rich to have enough to display their noble position, but not to the point of arrogance, and the poor to have enough to support life, but not to reach the point of anxiety" (48).

The seeming conflict between the emphasis on social stability with its recognition of unequal classes and the firm belief in social mobility, implied in a belief in the perfectibility of all men, is reconciled by upholding the sanctity of the class structure and at the same time recognizing the possibility of social movement for particular individuals. The Chinese examination system gives substance to this compromise on the practical level.

In modern Chinese history, with the onslaught of Western ideas such as equality, liberty, fraternity, and democracy, and Marxist and Leninist communist ideals, many people believed that everybody should be equal and it was to achieve that ideal that many participated in revolution. However, since everybody is never equal, dogmatic believers in absolute equality as a rule suffer from the consequence of their beliefs in practice. In the communist capital Yan’an before the CCP took over

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84 Derk Bodde, 46.
the whole country,\textsuperscript{85} writer Wang Shiwei naively believed in the ideal of equality and published some criticisms of the gross inequality between the communist leaders and rank and file soldiers existing in the revolutionary base in an essay titled “Wild Lilies.” He was persecuted for years until he was conveniently executed in 1947.\textsuperscript{86} Actually Wang’s complaints in the revolutionary capital were only an echo of Lu Xun’s criticisms of the hierarchy of Chinese society that he thought divided people into ten classes.\textsuperscript{87} 人分十等 (renfen shi deng)

The pronounced aims and slogans of the Communists to wipe out inequality not only do not square with reality, but also do not square with their own practice. People, who sincerely believe in the CCP’s aims and slogans, judge and react towards society with such a criterion, and conclude there is a disorder to overcome. Thus we have in \textit{The Abandoned Capital} such ballads as “ten classes of people,”\textsuperscript{88} “five rates

\textsuperscript{85} Wang Yiyan in her dissertation particularly mentions the connection of the “Defunct Capital,” as she translates it, with Yan’an.


\textsuperscript{87} Lu Xun, “Random Thoughts under a Lamp,” 灯下漫笔 (deng xia manbi) \textit{Grave} 故 (fen).

\textsuperscript{88} People of the first class are public servants, who sit high and enjoy peace and wealth; People of the second class are bureaucrat-businessmen, who seize business opportunities and are well-protected; People of the third class are business contractors, who are reimbursed for eating, drinking, gambling, and prostitution; People of the fourth class are creditors, who reap profits while sitting at home; People of the fifth class are judges, who swindle money from both plaintiffs and defendants; People of the sixth class are surgeons, whose pockets are filled with red envelopes of money;
of writers,"89 etc., composed and sung by the odd madman, as well as descriptions of the street scenes as pedestrians, bikers, bus and mini-bus passengers, taxi riders, car riders, and dignitaries from Beijing who accompany foreign dignitaries escorted by police motorcades with loud sirens howling and lights flashing so that all traffic stops to let them pass. In White Nights, we see passengers push each other and jostle their own way into the bus. Those inside shout: “What are you pushing with your snout for? In a hurry to go back to Old Gao Village?”90 Those who are unsuccessful climbing into the bus, whose clothes are muddied in the shoving, curse their poverty and lack of enough status to be able to ride in a car or a taxi.

People of the seventh class are actors and actresses, who make easy bucks by swinging their butts;
People of the eighth class are propagandists, who satiate their palates at banquets now and then;
People of the ninth class are teachers, who do not know the taste of delicious dishes;
People of the tenth class are the do-gooders, who are docile emulators of Lei Feng.


89 “First-rate writers go in for politics, sucking up to politicians to become advisors;
Second-rate writers dash for others’ cash, helping business with their ads;
Third-rate writers turn into gangsters, reprinting porn for bank notes;
Fourth-rate writers turn out manuscripts, pretending to be dignified with empty stomachs;
Fifth-rate writers, you’re damned, wiping your bums and fucking yourselves.


92 Old Gao Village is the Gao Farm or Hamlet Pigsey marries into when he accompanies Tripitaka, Monkey, and Sandy on their way to India for the Buddhist scriptures in Journey to the West.
Jia Pingwa sincerely believes in equality. The ballad of “ten classes of people” indicates that the Communist Revolution failed just as did the Republican Revolution led by Sun Yat-sen in 1911. The ballad of “five rates of writers” links Jia Pingwa to Wu Jingzi, the author of *The Scholars*, who is critical of the literati of his time. Apart from exposing the inequality among people in the urban streets, and between different ranks of officials and intellectuals, and between the rural and urban people, Jia Pingwa is also attacking the mentality of “official worship.” A typical example is Ye Lang’s on his bike accidentally running into Manager Miao, who used to treat him and Zhu Yihe to banquets in his restaurant and give Ye Lang a bottle of liquor to bring home each time. Miao pretends not to know him any more and scolds him: “If you aren’t able to ride in your own car, at least learn how to ride a bike well! On such a shabby bike, don’t you put on some airs! Are you a hero from the Vietnam War? Or did you father a grandson for someone? Or are you rushing to the crematorium?” (28) Ye Lang’s hurt can be easily imagined, for he often rode in the mayor’s car with Zhu Yihe before Zhu’s faction was defeated. Later, on another occasion when he sees the special section of a hospital for high ranking officials and thinks of people like his father who would never dream of a such a place and who seem to have never lived a life, Ye Lang angrily crushes ants one after another at the foot of the wall outside the hospital.

In *Old Gao Village*, nearly everybody’s mentality is this “absolute egalitarianism.” Cai Laohei, when he was successful and enjoyed wealth—“people
saw eggshells being thrown out everyday outside his gate”—forgot about equality. But when he becomes bankrupt, he capitalizes on this “absolute egalitarianism” mentality by organizing the villagers to sabotage, loot, smash, and set fire to the Floor Lath Mill run by Su Hong and Wang Wenlong—a symbol of the *nouveau riche*.

### 2. Rural and Urban Boundaries

Ever since Tang Taizong (reigned 627-49) made the civil service examination a permanent system, social success depended more on individual merit than on family status, and in principle, the humble and poor were able to enjoy the social mobility to move to high status on their merit.\(^91\) This increased mobility and broadened “social composition of the ruling bureaucracy” after the Tang and Song is one of the important factors that created a situation in which there were no sharp boundaries between rural and urban societies, but rather “an urban-rural continuum” in physical form, in “urban and rural attitudes in elite (and perhaps in popular) psychology, in cultural activities and economic life.”\(^92\)

The cities were flat, i.e., developing horizontally instead of vertically as in the West, and extending to include the surrounding countryside. The cultural life did not fall into “two widely divergent spheres that we can label the urban and the rural” (46).

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The rural ideal of the upper classes permeated the whole society and tended to cause them to live "ambivalently in both town and country" (46). Unlike old European societies, Chinese cultural and religious activities involved both the cities and the countryside and were indistinguishably "urban" or "rural." Most Buddhist and Daoist churches, libraries and private academies were located in rural settings. Scholars, poets, thinkers, writers, and artists customarily were in public life for a portion of their lives in cities, "but their productive years often were the years of their private life when, in China, they not only were not concentrated in one or two great cities of the realm, but were widely dispersed and very apt to be residing in rural places" (47).

But this urban-rural continuum experienced a big break in modern times, and especially under Communist rule there grew a tension and enmity between the urban and rural populations never experienced before.

Despite the Communist armies' reportedly being "peasant armies," and despite their slogan of wiping out what they called "Three Big Differences"—the difference between mental work and physical labor, between the countryside and the city, and between men and women—ever since they succeeded in taking over the country and the majority of the cadres settled down comfortably in the cities, they made many favorable policies for the urban people whom, with the exception of capitalists, they regarded as "proletariat"—the real "working class"—"the most generous, most
unselfish, most far-sighted, and most revolutionary.” In 1955, when Luo Ruiqing was the Minister of Public Security, the “household registration system” was established that set up an almost impenetrable and ever-thickening wall between the city and the countryside, which protects the urban interests at the expense of the rural people, until in reality the rural people became second rate citizens. Rural people without urban household certificates were not allowed to live or work in the city. They had to have permission and letters of introduction from their local cadres to be able to be allowed to stay in an inn on their business errands or a tour in the city.

Apart from such modern facilities as hospitals, department stores, libraries, cinemas, theaters, parks, stadiums and gymnasiuims, and all kinds of transportation means to which the rural people had no access, the urban population earned salaries and enjoyed weekends and national holidays while the rural population had to work seven days per week all year round and handed in to the state whatever they produced in the name of taxes or “surplus” and often went hungry. According to an article in Zheng Ming 争鸣, a Hong Kong based magazine, the income ratio between urban and rural populations changed from 1.4:1 in 1949 to 8:1 in the late 1970s. It has been estimated thirty million people starved to death during the so-called “the three-

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93 The Chinese term “working class” 工人阶级 (gongren jeiji) with its word 工人 (workers) often excludes rural people. The white-collar workers in the Western sense of the words and intellectuals in Chinese sense were also excluded as if they could live without “working.” The quoted words are Chairman Mao’s own.
year natural calamities” (1960-1962) after the Great Leap Forward, and the majority of them were in the countryside.

The constant propaganda to encourage the urban youth to go to live and work in the countryside only inadvertently exposed the huge gap existing between urban and countryside conditions. The movement of educated youth settling down in the countryside, while opening the eyes of some conscientious urban young people to harsh reality and thereby exposing the lie the Party often told them, bred distrust and enmity in others and their relatives.

Jia Pingwa, in his autobiography titled *I Am a Peasant*, explained why he did not write any “Literature of the Scarred” (*Woshi nongmin* 我是农民). He was recalling that the educated youth in his village could enjoy vacations (which were denied to the rural youth and their relatives) during which they went home and came back with various goodies and they wore neat clothes and attracted the attention of rural girls. Whenever there were opportunities for recruiting workers or teachers, the urban youth were considered first. Even such a light job as recording work points was assigned to the urban youth. Jia asked what about the rural youth who were originally born in the countryside when the urban youth whined about their suffering in the countryside. Do the rural youth deserve to suffer only because of the origin of their birth?

94 *Woshi nongmin* 我是农民: 在乡下的五年记忆 (I am a peasant: memories of the five years in the countryside), (Changchun: Jilin renmin chubanshe, 1998).
This urban and rural difference is a significant tragic cause in all four novels. Although with the Reform, rural people could go to the cities as migrant workers, they were still denied household registration. As a result, they could only work as laborers in construction sites or as nannies, working hard and earning less, as Zou Yun comments to Yu Bai and Ding Lin about Ye Lang. Zhou Min at first worked at the construction site in a nunnery under Hui Ming’s supervision. Tang Wan’er, in her prime, cannot find a job in the city. Liu Yue, as pretty as the movie star Chen Chong and as clever as many city girls, can only work as a nanny and maid. Ye Lang also works as a construction laborer at the Pingze Hotel in the beginning. Yan Ming works as a nanny and then a waitress in a hotel before she becomes a fashion model. When Ye Lang feels secure in Yan Ming’s devoted love and aspires to a modern urban “aristocrat” Yu Bai’s love, he is instantly cooled down by his next door’s neighbor’s cough at midnight which reminds him of his living in the lowest quarters in Xijing with vegetable peddlers, chicken processors, and garbage collectors—all migrants from the countryside like him.

So we see on the Ghost Festival, June 17 of the Lunar Calendar, Ye Lang particularly goes up to the city wall and burns sacrificial paper and presents liquor.

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95 Interestingly, neither critics praising Jia by comparing *The Abandoned Capital* to *The Dream of Red Chamber* nor readers who disparaged Jia’s work as a pastiche of *The Dream of Red Chamber* notice that Zhou Min at the construction site is an imitation of Jia Yun in charge of tree planting in the Grand View Garden under the direct supervision of Wang Xifeng, while Zhou Min’s later taking gifts to Meng Yunfang and his glib reply to Meng’s wife Xia Jie is almost a replica of the first conversation between Jia Yun and Wang Xifeng that leads to her assigning the job to him.

96 Joan Chen who played Puyi’s wife in *The Last Emperor* and the first person narrator in *The Joy Luck Club* and many other movies.
invoking his father’s spirit to partake: “Father, this city is theirs. Your son can only invoke you on the city wall. Please take this money and spend at your will. This liquor your son will drink on your behalf!” 爹，城是人家的城，儿子只能招你到城市上来，钱你就收去花吧，酒还是我喝了。97 In *The Earthen Gate*, when Cheng Yi is stopped and fined by the police for driving a tractor into the city street, Cheng Yi’s words are similar to Ye Lang’s: “The city is yours. I will be fined if you say so.” The resignation and resentment in the words speak volumes of the enmity between the rural and urban populations.

The city wall is a significant symbol of the rural-urban boundary because it separates urbanites from outsiders. Jia Pingwa, the author, and Zhuang Zhidie, Zhou Min, Ye Lang, Kuan Ge, and Gao Zilu, the characters, are all preoccupied with gaining and maintaining a foothold in urban society. For example, a migrant and a wanderer, always insecure, Ye Lang acutely feels his marginal existence. Like Zhou Min from *The Abandoned Capital*, he is often seen and heard playing xun music on the city wall.98 One midnight, a liminal point in time, he comes down and inscribes the

97 Jia Pingwa, *Baiye* 白夜 (White Night) (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 1995) 104. Jia Pingwa invests his true feelings into his protagonist. He is recorded by his friends like Sun Jianxi and Feng Youyuan as often going out to the cross roads to burn paper money for his father on festival days. See, *Ghost Genius*, 2 vols., 457-58. See also Feng Youyuan, *Buddha’s Hand*, 49-50.

98 Xun 坠 has a history of seven thousand years. The terra-cotta music instrument discovered in Hemudu site is the earliest to date. In all the historical sites such the Neolithic Banpo Village east of Xi’an, in Shanxi, Gansu, and Henan, archeologists excavated these pear-shaped instruments with seven or nine holes in them. The sound is sorrowful and soft and Jia Pingwa has a particular fascination with it. See Sun Jianxi, *Ghost Genius*, 692.
city streets in urine with the words: “I am staying in Xijing. I will stay in Xijing.” 要
在 西京, 就 要 在 西 京. (16) This comic gesture of resolution to stay on in the
city on the one hand and “profane” it by urinating and spitting onto it again speaks
volumes of the ambivalence of these ruralites in the city. The more they hate it the
more they resolve to stay in it as if just to spite it.

The city wall constantly reminds them of their marginal existence and the
difference between them and the urbanites, but they like to frequent it in their
nostalgia for their rural life and in their hatred of the corrupt urban life. For example,
in The Abandoned Capital, we not only hear Zhou Min’s xun music from the city wall,
but also see Zhuang Zhidie taking strolls on the wall whenever he feels bored. He also
takes Tang Wan’er along. In White Nights, Ye Lang, Kuan Ge, Yu Bai, and Wu
Qingpu regularly hold their music club meetings on the wall. As recorded by Jia’s
biographer Sun Jianxi, Jia’s real life music club includes Jia, Fei Bingxun, Sun Jianxi,
and Liu Kuanren, an expert on xun music, from the Xian Music College.100 In White
Nights, Jia not only conveys the geographical but also the temporal boundary through
Ye Lang’s acute feelings after he finishes playing xun music on the city wall and
comes down right at midnight—a liminal point in space as well as in time:

99 要 yao (want) here rhymes with 尿 niao (urinating). Many characters that are “yi,” “yin,” “yao,” or
“yang” in Mandarin are pronounced “ni,” “nin,” “niao,” or “niang” in Shaanxi dialect. Inscribing the
city with his urine, like his spitting intentionally outside the spittoon onto the red carpet and printing
his footprints very high on the pure white wall after he sees Director Yi, conveys a special psychology
of the frustrated people who wish to stain everything pure in sight.

100 Sun Jianxi, Ghost Genius, vol. 2, 691-95.
On the narrow street, half of which was covered by the shadow of the wall and the other half lit by the moon, Ye Lang trod on the line that separated the shade from the moonlight, and felt the edge of light like a glass edge cutting painfully into his body.

The time as I will demonstrate later in detail is the Reform era, which affects him just as deeply as rural and urban boundary.

3. Historical Background

All four novels were written in the 1990s and some, for example The Abandoned Capital, are professedly about the 1980s, the early Reform era which not only provided a new social environment but also pressured people to interrogate directly Chinese history and reality. As Richard B. Sewall argues, historically, literary tragedy has always appeared at a mature period of a culture. “Often these critical periods, or ‘moments,’ come after a long period of relative stability, when a dominant myth or religious orthodoxy or philosophic view has provided a coherent and sustaining way of life. Suddenly the original terror looms close and the old formulations cannot dispel it. The conflict between man and his destiny assumes once
more the ultimate magnitude.... The whole society is involved, and the stake is survival.”

Reform was primarily a rectification of past errors of the Party and State policies. Economically, the “land-contracting system,” “privatization,” and “encouraging some people to become rich first” all went against the past revolutionary purposes and actions. This induced people to question what went wrong in the past and whether the Revolution was necessary or altogether wrong. Before 1949, the year the CCP took over the country, people who had worked hard to purchase land and open factories were branded as landlords and members of the capitalist exploiting class and were either killed or sent to labor camps during Land Reform, their land and property distributed to the poor most of whom were needy, but some of whom were improvident like the opium-smoking anti-hero of Yu Hua’s novel *To Live*.

In *Old Gao Village*, we have the characters Su Hong and Cai Laohei constantly at each other’s throats. However, Su Hong’s name 无不 unmistakably suggests 无区 (suqu, “Soviet Area”) or 无区 (hongqu, “Red Area”) where the

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101 Sewall, 7. Raymond Williams also agrees with this opinion. “Important tragedy seems to occur, neither in periods of real stability, nor in periods of open and decisive conflict. Its most common historical setting is the period of preceding the substantial breakdown and transformation of an important culture. Its condition is the real tension between old and new: between received beliefs, embodied in institutions and responses, and newly and vividly experienced contradictions and possibilities.” Williams, 54.

102 Yu Hua, *Huo zhe* (To Live) (Xianggang: Bo yi chu ban ji tuan you xian gong si, 1994).
Chapter 3 Tragic Backgrounds

Communists like Mao Zedong and Zhu De, and later Zhou Enlai and all the Central Committee of the CCP went after the Nanchang Uprising on the eve of August 1, 1927 and established the first Chinese Soviet Republic. The main activity and slogan then was “Beat the landlords and redistribute the land” 打土豪，分田地 (da tuhao, fen tiandi). Cai Laohei is exactly like a peasant movement activist of the early CCP. What Su Hong’s name reminds us of is what Cai Laohei does. The Land Reform movement and the nationalization and collectivization movements were carried out soon after 1949. Then wave after wave of radical political, social, and ideological movements including the Great Leap Forward, the People’s Communes, the Socialist Education Movement, and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution made the rich peasants, landlords, and capitalists and their offspring targets.

Gao Zilu’s distant cousin, Uncle Confused, a half mad man, whom some critics, following editor Sun Jianxi’s comment, think the most clear-minded historical old man, boasts to Zilu and Xi Xia about the wealth of his own family when his own grandfather was alive, and blames his younger brother, Shunshan’s father, for being lazy, smoking opium, and squandering all the family property. This makes Su Hong interject: “Thanks to Shunshan’s father. Otherwise, if you were branded as a landlord

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103 Sun Jianxi, “Wenhua pinpan de shenceng yiwei—Gaolaozhuang bianji shouji” 文化批判的深层意味—《高老庄》编辑手记 (Deep Implication of Cultural Criticism: Editor’s Notes to Old Gao Village), Xiaoshuo pinglun (Xi’an) 小说评论 (西安) Fiction Review (Xi’an, June, 1986) 43-46.
you probably would have been tossed into the river with a mill stone on your back.” Uncle Confused has to agree: “Yes! Shuanzi’s grandfather was rich. During the Land Reform, they tied a pack of dynamite on his back, lit it and let him run in the ‘eighteen acre field’ until it exploded. He was left with only one hand intact, the one with six fingers.”

What is tragic about revolution is that it aims to end one form of human alienation, but produces its own new kinds of alienation. As the first of these many forms of alienation, its open enemies are easily seen as “not men.” “The tyrant, as he is killed, seems not a man but an object, and his brutality draws an answering brutality, which can become falsely associated with liberation itself.” Such a false association was made in Mao’s China just as in Franz Fanon’s *The Damned of the Earth*. What is absurd about the Chinese revolution is that the men who were seen as tyrants were not necessarily tyrants at all. Many, though not all of them, were ordinary, honest, hard-working, and frugal living persons.

After forty years’ experiment in socialism which starved tens of millions of people to death and brought the national economy to the brink of bankruptcy, the PRC

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104 *Gao Lao Zhuang* 高老庄 (Old Gao Village), 349.

105 Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, 82. Earlier he observes: “The idea of tragedy, in its ordinary form, excludes especially that tragic experience which is social, and the idea of revolution, again in its ordinary form, excludes especially that social experience which is tragic” (64). At the time of revolution, violence, dislocation, and extended suffering make it natural to feel it as tragedy, in the everyday sense, but after the event it is often differently regarded: as epic, as the era of creation of the life which is now most precious, as the origin of a people and of its valued way of life. When the suffering is remembered, it is both honoured and justified as a necessary condition of a new life.
under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping had to switch to a market economy and encourage a few people to become rich first so as to be able to open factories and other enterprises to create employment opportunities for others.

Pascal laments the absurdity of the concept of justice decided by a few degrees of latitude. If we change the spatial difference into a temporal one, it exactly fits the Chinese case. A person rich during the Land Reform would be mobbed or bombed, and yet to be rich during the Deng Reform era is "glorious." The absurd history of hardworking people being punished or even executed during the Land Reform for accumulating some meager wealth, and the frequent political and ideological movements that aimed to eradicate traditional values and virtues nearly eradicated the Chinese people's conscience and sense of justice. This sense of the absurdity of history affects all Jia Pingwa's characters.

In the past, millions of people crowded the only political road and jostled each other off it as best they could in order to survive. Although the CCP is supposed to be guided by Marxism and believe in historical materialism, Maoist voluntarists from the Yan'an era on never seemed to believe in the power of the economic base and forever stressed the importance of ideology and political thinking. Wave after wave of political, social, and ideological movements pushed the nation to the brink of collapse.

106 "We should see it [true justice] established in every country and in every century, whereas in fact we see nothing just or unjust that does not change its quality as it changes its climate. Three degrees of latitude upset the whole system of jurisprudence, and truth depends upon a degree of longitude" (fr. 294, E. 108). Lucien Goldmann, *The Hidden God: A Study of Tragic Vision in the Pensées of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine*, translated from the French by Philip Thody (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: The Humanities Press, 1964) 272-73.
Now, during the Reform era, people can accumulate wealth, cultivate beauty, and gain fame, and trade them for other goods of value. Many things inaccessible to ordinary people now seem within reach, and people compete to become rich fast by all means regardless of virtues, norms, morality, or law.

Therefore, in the world of *The Abandoned Capital*, all bizarre, immoral, and illegal things take place “nakedly” (赤裸裸地) in broad daylight. Everybody is grumbling but everybody participates. For example, the Mayor complains that nowadays one has to pay tens of thousands of yuan to publish an article in the Party’s provincial newspaper, but he requests Zhuang’s help because of the latter’s connection with media circles to buy the front page to publish an article praising him, which helps him to tide over his crisis and to be re-elected. Bread makers use fertilizer as an ingredient to make the bread plump and white. Milk deliverers put detergent and water into the milk. Persimmon cake sellers put lime on their product to make it more attractive. Peasant model entrepreneur Huang Hongbao makes false pesticides that are sure to ruin thousands of peasants’ crops. Even the drug addict Gong Xiaoyi complains that the drug dealers sell counterfeit drugs that make the addicts grow boils all over and asks Zhuang to publicize it.

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107 Perry Link records in his *Evening Chats in Beijing* (New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 1992): “In Wuhan, people were caught selling ‘powdered milk’ that wasn’t milk at all and that in fact contained poisonous ingredients” (72). Similar stories abound throughout the 1990s up to the present.
The judicial system is supposed to be free of corruption, but Zhuang Zhidie has to give “cultural objects” to Judge Sima Gong, who seems honest and incorruptible, and publish his own stories in the name of Judge Bai Yuzhu’s son in the army who hopes to be awarded “merit” by publishing creative writings. “Cultural objects”—gifts such as famous paintings or calligraphy—although valuable in monetary terms are not considered as bribes, and they flatter the receiver as a “cultured” connoisseur of arts.

Reform facilitates the interrogation of a deeper and deeper past. At first, it was the faults or crimes of the “Gang of Four” and Lin Biao who supposedly disobeyed and betrayed Chairman Mao and started the “Cultural Revolution.” Then, it was the “dirty tricks” of Mao and the Party who planned the “Blooming and Contending Movement” and the immediately consequent “Anti-Rightists Movement” that should be blamed. With more and more Party and State leaders (such as President Liu Shaoqi who was persecuted to death in 1968 in Kaifeng, Henan Province) and cadres being rehabilitated, the evil was traced back even to the Yan’an era and even as early as in Jinggang Shan era, then even the pious believers of the Party and Mao and their

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*108 Chen Zhongshi 陈忠实, Jia Pingwa’s fellow provincial writer, the Chairman of the Shaanxi Writers Association of which Jia himself is one of the Deputy Chairmen, published his novel entitled *Bai Lu Yuan 白鹿原 (White Deer Plain) early in 1993, the year when Jia’s *The Abandoned Capital was published. In the novel, Chen described the gruesome incident of the communists in early Yan’an period burying their own comrades alive to save bullets in their factional strifes. The heroine named Bai Ling suffered such a fate. Jinggang shan (Mount Jinggang) is the mountainous area in the border of Jiangxi and Hunan and Guangdong where Mao Zedong and Zhu De first started their first Red Army base and later the Chinese Soviet Republic. In December 1930 in Futian Mao and Zhu crushed an intraparty rebellion and killed off five thousand red army soldiers. See Kai-yu Hsu, *Chou En-lai: China’s Gray Eminence (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1968) 104. Raymond Williams in the*
ideology suffered a crisis that so bewildered and shocked them that they underwent a spiritual collapse. Jia Pingwa believes, as many other contemporary writers do, that when people find themselves cheated and when they lose faith, they feel disoriented and many engage in all kinds of activities that might harm themselves as well as others. Some of his heroes might manage to keep a cool head but feel helpless, and others feel the trend is heading in the wrong direction, wish to protest, and stop it, but can only fight disorder by disordered means.

Without Reform, rural people like Ye Lang would always have been tied to the land where they were born and would never have had the freedom to work in a city. But Reform also gives them an opportunity to observe and experience the privileges of the urbanites, especially of those in power. In the society of White Nights, as a continuation of Jia’s concern with topic of Reform in the ancient capital city, 109 “the red sun in the sky is no longer Mao Zedong and there are only three kinds of stars left: movies stars, sports stars, and singing stars.” 110 People defy laws both human and divine: “Nowadays, people dare to say what should not be said, wear what should not

chapter of “Tragedy and Revolution” of his Book Modern Tragedy describes several aspects of revolutionary tragedy, among which the “imposition of an idea of revolution” and the need to impose this abstracted idea “converts friends into enemies, and actual life into the ruthlessly moulded material of an idea…. In such ways, the most active agents of revolution can become its factual enemies, even while to others, and even to themselves, they seem its most perfect embodiment” (82-83).

109 Jia Pingwa originally planned to name the novel which was finally to become The Abandoned Capital, “White Nights,” according to his biographer Sun Jianxi. He had named a novella “The Abandoned Capital” earlier.

110 White Nights, 5.
be worn, and do what should not be done. Once people become rich, they become afraid of neither wolves nor tigers” (7).

Those in power attend endless banquets in big hotels and call them work meetings. That Ye Lang can pass off as an official and attend banquets one after another for twenty days without being found out is a small example. Li Gui, the Director of a bank credit office, who was formerly unwanted by all units because of his unlucky (ugly) physiognomy, is now treated to numerous banquets, marries a second young wife, buys land and a three-storied house—another example of corruption and lack of social equality. He is heard to reprimand his female neighbor: “Why can’t you take care of your cat. My Mimi is Persian. How can I allow a bastard to mix with her?” (19)

Ye Lang jokes that Li Gui should set aside a fund to widen the lane they are sharing so that all those who come with gifts can drive their cars directly under Li’s building. Li says what Ye Lang does not know is that all those leaders of factories or mines big or small, “all civil officials and military officers must dismount here!” (文 武 大臣 到 此 下 马, 103) When Ye Lang exclaims what a life Li leads with those factory presidents coming daily to seek an audience, Li answers: “Xi! They have to behave before me even though they are emperors in their own factories. What is the
manager responsibility system? It should be the manager responsibility system under the leadership of the Director of the Credit Office!” (103)

Those in power use their power to its exhaustion and the masses become as callous as they can be. Law enforcers pervert the laws in a way that surpasses the underground criminal society. An urban young man cheated three peasants out of their precious medicinal herbs and is captured by them and sent to a police station only to be released by policeman Huang who sleeps with the girl the young man sends for him. In the compound where Ye Lang lives, there lives a secret prostitute. The police station summoned her and released her in no time. Afterward, the policeman with an officer’s cap came regularly and even brought others along. According to Xiao Wu, another tenant, “Oral. Quick and won’t spread disease…. The landlord never minds it now. The compound is very secure because we have police coming regularly” (109).

That Gong Changxing, a former librarian, and newly promoted director of the Cultural Bureau, could have received hundreds of thousand of yuan in bribes tells how corrupt officials can be. Ye Lang makes trouble but only causes the corrupt official Gong to be promoted faster. He collects signatures and writes letters exposing Gong’s corruption to the Complaints Commissioner’s Office 信访局. Because there

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111 This is also an indirect sarcastic comment on the slogan prevalent in the late 1980s when Zhao Ziyang started to weaken the Party leadership and advocated that in factories and various work units, the Party should let the managers, general managers, and presidents instead of the Party Secretary be the main leaders. But the hardliners stressed that “It should be the manager responsibility system under the leadership of the Party.”
are complaints against all leaders of all departments and bureaus, the Complaints Commissioner becomes very powerful. The Commissioner's son's fiancée is a cashier in the model troupe where Yan Ming works. She wishes to transfer to the Cultural Bureau. The Commissioner calls Gong over and shows him the letters of complaints, among which there must be Ye Lang's. The next day, the Commissioner's son goes to Gong, who immediately transfers the girl to the Cultural Bureau. (307-08) The irony is that an office that is originally set up as a watch dog against corruption now turns into a powerful organ of corruption while those who expose corruption are punished.

It is these backgrounds that induce the tragic actions or against which the tragic actions are protests. On the one hand they are the conditions in which the actions are carried out; on the other they are often the causes, even though partial, of the actions. In the next chapter I will discuss the tragic heroes and illuminate these points further.
Chapter 4 Tragic Heroes

Frye writes of tragic heroes as being so much the highest points in their human landscape that they are conductors of the power about them. As great trees are more likely to be struck by lightening than a clump of grass, conductors may be instruments as well as victims of lightening. They usually have an “inscrutable reserve” behind whatever eloquence or affability they may have and they are not amiable backslappers. “Those who attract most devotion from others are those who are best able to suggest in their manner that they have no need of it.”

Zhuang Zhidie, Ye Lang, Cheng Yi, and Cai Laohei, if not so much the highest points in their landscape, are special in their various ways. They all seem to exert a kind of charisma over their admirers, especially female ones, whose devotion they seem to have full share of but do not particularly seem to treasure.

\[\text{112} \text{ Frye, 208.}\]

Murray Krieger thinks that “the tragic vision” is a product of crisis and of shock, an expression of man only in an extreme situation, never in a normal or routine one. “Literature dealing with it frequently dwells on the exceptional man; and when it does choose a normal man it does so only to convert him, by way of the extremity he lives through, into the exceptional man. The tragic vision is, by definition, a vision of extreme cases, a distillate of the rebellion, the godlessness which, once induced by crisis, purifies itself by rejecting all palliatives,” Krieger, 20.
Chapter 4 Tragic Heroes

When studying tragic heroes, we should heed Frye’s warning of the two contradictory reductive formulas representing extreme or limiting views of tragedy which are almost but not quite good enough: fatalistic reduction and the sinning hero theory. Whether we call it “Fate,” or “God, gods, accident, fortune, necessity, circumstance, or any combination of these” which is bigger than the tragic hero, it does not decide the action of the tragic heroes. The decisive factor is the tragic hero himself.

Although it is true that “the great majority of tragic heroes do possess hybris, a proud, passionate, obsessed or soaring mind which brings a morally intelligible downfall” and precipitates a catastrophe, in the majority of cases there is always “a sense of some far-reaching mystery of which this morally intelligible process is only a part,” and it is not convincing to try to provide crucial moral flaws for innocent sufferers in such tragedies.¹¹⁴ “Tragedy, in short, seems to elude the antithesis of moral responsibility and arbitrary fate, just as it eludes the antithesis of good and evil” (211).

Citing Milton’s argument that God made man, “[s]ufficient to have stood, though free to fall” as an example of existential projection, Frye thinks that “the real basis of the relation of Milton’s God to Adam is the relation of the tragic poet to his hero” (211). The tragic poet knows that his hero will fall into a tragic situation, but he particularly avoids manipulating the situation to ease it for his hero. “If the hero was

¹¹⁴ Frye, 210-11.
not sufficient to have stood, the mode is purely ironic; if he was not free to fall, the mode is purely romantic, the story of an invincible hero who will conquer all his antagonists as long as the story is about him” (211-12).

This can be used as an answer to many critics who lump together Jia Pingwa and Zhuang Zhidie, the author and his protagonist, and curse the author for being a rogue due to his creation of such a “rogue” character. In their minds, the concept and criteria of literary creation are still those of the pre- and mid-Cultural Revolution eras which prescribed that all heroes should be “Tall, Grand, and Perfect” and no middle characters should be allowed to be protagonists, let alone characters with some moral failings. What they do not realize is that it is exactly Jia Pingwa who exposes Zhuang’s hidden soul and sordid life and hypocrisy for readers to gain a realistic picture of intellectuals like Zhuang. Whether the readers criticize, appreciate, or sympathize with him is up to them. In order to create good works, writers have an obligation to follow the laws of literary creation, something similar to “the natural law” Frye and other critics use.

The tragic hero, like Adam, forfeits the destiny of being with the gods on top of the wheel of fortune in a way that suggests moral responsibility to some and a

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115 As scholars and critics in the field of modern Chinese literature well know, “tall, grand, and perfect” refers by homophony to Gao Daquan 高大全, hero of Hao Ran’s 浩然 Cultural Revolution novel Jinguang dadao 金光大道 (The Golden Road), deriding after the Cultural Revolution for its artificiality.

116 If Shakespeare can create such characters as Macbeth and Iago and Dostoevsky can create Brothers Karamazov, why should we censure Jia Pingwa for creating Zhuang Zhidie? Frye likens the Machiavellian villain to the comic vice and thinks he is something of an architectus or projection of the author’s will. “I limned this night-piece,” Frye quotes Webster’s Lodovico, “and it was my best” (216).
conspiracy of fate to others. “What he does is to exchange a fortune of unlimited freedom for the fate involved in the consequence of the act of exchange, just as, for a man who deliberately jumps off a precipice, the law of gravitation acts as fate for the brief remainder of his life” (212). Zhuang Zhidie, Ye Lang, Kuan Ge, Cheng Yi, and Cai Laohei all choose to “use freedom to lose freedom.” Zhuang could go on living a celebrity’s life enjoying all kinds of privileges and favors. Ye Lang could also enjoy the love of Yan Ming and Yu Bai and all the facilities urban life offers him. Cheng Yi could have become a millionaire if he agreed to cooperate with the developers. Cai Laohei could still be a peasant leader enjoying prestige, power, and profits. However, Zhuang would rather fall and be romantically involved with several women, refuse to write, and decide to give up the literary base he built up all his lifetime, and leave for the south. Ye Lang cherishes the idea of absolute equality and wreaks havoc for those corrupted in power. Cheng Yi leads the villagers in the fight against the developers as if against the Japanese invasion. All end badly, but they all act out of their own volition.

The tragic hero is sometimes self-deceived or made dizzy by hubris. Ye Lang, Cheng Yi, and Cai Laohei often exhibit self-grandeur, something like megalomania. For example, like the role of the Seabird Ye Lang creates and plays who thinks she really can fill the sea up by carrying pebbles and tree branches with her beak, Ye Lang is fighting a losing battle against corruption, and both the inequality of social hierarchy and that between the city and the countryside. Cheng Yi often thinks and
acts like a dictator, a king, or an emperor. Cai Laohei envisions himself taking big strides crossing the tops of mountains with Xi Xia on his back. Sometimes these characters may be pathetic. For example, when Su Hong and Manager Wang defeat Cai Laohei in rival shows, Cai gets drunk, pees his pants, falls into a cesspool. Kuan Ge falls into a sewage well at midnight after hiding in a bike shed for a whole day, burns his face when he tries to fight a fire, is hit with a brick by a scoundrel on a bus, dismissed from his police post after he serves on it for more than thirty years just for a minor mistake of helping the wrong woman, is driven out of his home by his wife, and his skin is afflicted with ringworm until he smells and is loathed by all around him. Gao Zilu becomes impotent and helpless to deal with the affairs of his old home village.

In the following I will take a close look at the tragic hero from each novel.

1. Zhuang Zhidie

A country lad, Zhuang Zhidie went to university by luck as well as by merit and so excelled in studies as to be able to be assigned to the editorial board of the Xijing Magazine. Diligence combined with talent enables him to write creatively and become at last a celebrity writer in Xijing, a historical and cultural city. The Confucian ideal of “self-cultivation, equalization of family, serving the state, and bringing peace to all under heaven” teaches people that only by benefit to others can a person realize his worth. The “three imperishable features of a man”: “establish one’s
virtue, merit, and words” are the Chinese ideals to immortalize oneself. The age of the first two merits has gone. A man can only establish words so that his books will, as we say, be “preserved in the famous mountains and read by generations of people.” Before and during the Cultural Revolution era, these ideals were targeted as “feudal” thinking only of trying to be “famous” as an individual. Those who secretly cherished them could only pretend that all they cared about and strove to do was to “serve the people.”

Stalin called writers “engineers of the human soul,” and creative writing is always political in socialist countries. Writing has been a noble cause in both the traditional sense and the revolutionary sense, but a writer’s work under Communism is like the job of a “tight-rope walker,” an image the younger writer Su Tong preserves for himself in his novel *My Life as an Emperor*, a dangerous business. Thousands of established writers were silenced and batch after batch of new writers were downed as soon as they appeared on the stage by wave after wave of political, social, and cultural movements. The situation reached its extreme during the Cultural Revolution with only a few writers able to write and publish. That Zhuang Zhidie could reach the top of the cultural circle in this cultural and historical city within such a difficult situation and time is a miracle, but he decides to give up writing, and this is like suicide.

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Chapter 4 Tragic Heroes

The catalyst for his decision is Reform, as I discussed in the previous chapter. Turning on himself and observing what he is and what meaning his life and work entail, Zhuang not only finds a stranger that makes him feel a Sartrean “nausea,” but also discovers that instead of helping “all those under Heaven” to gain peace and happiness, he has all along actually been “helping the tiger to capture the people,” 为虎作伥 (wei hu zuo chang) as the Chinese saying goes. This discovery is no less shocking than when Lu Xun’s madman in “The Diary of a Madman” realizes that he might have unknowingly participated with his family members in eating his sister. The absurdity of one’s work going directly against one’s intention is too much for him to keep his sanity.\(^\text{118}\)

After this rude awakening to this tragic irony, looking around and seeing his friends, including the rest of the “four big celebrities,” enjoying life rather than suffering ennui and nausea as he is, Zhuang stops seeking perfection and starts to seek imperfection.

One tragic factor is cultural and ideological. As Williams points out, men always suffer the consequences of their beliefs. The Tang Poet Bai Juyi (772-846)

\(^{118}\) F. L. Lucas quotes Aristotle’s own lucid explanation: “A peripeteia occurs when a course of action intended to produce a result \(x\), produces the reverse of \(x\),” and points out that the rendering of “peripeteia and anagnorisis” into “reversal and recognition” is misleading. He goes on: “In the peripeteia, rightly understood, is implied a whole tragic philosophy of life; and in the practice of tragedy, once we see the true meaning of the term, we shall discover with what amazing frequency the thing itself recurs. For the deepest tragedy is not when men are struck down by the blow of chance or fate, like Job...but when their destruction is the work of those that wish them well, or of their own unwitting hands. For it is the perpetual tragic irony of the Tragedy of Life that again and again men do thus laboriously contrive their own annihilation, to kill the thing they love” (111-12).
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advocates: "If one is successful, one should think of benefiting all under heaven; if one is not successful, one should consider self-cultivation." The Confucian belief in perfectibility urged literati for millennia to search for perfection and live a stringent life. From Zeng Zi’s “thrice per day self-reflection” 吾日三省吾身 (wu ri san xing wu shen) to examine where one might make errors, to a man of letters in the late Qing novel Zhejiang Chao 浙江湖 (Zhejiang Tides) who records with deep guilt that he: “fulfilled my conjugal duties x times,” and from generations of scholar-officials who thought it their duty to remonstrate with their emperors to intellectuals of “May Fourth” era who took it as their duty to strengthen the nation and enrich the people—all of them suffer from either their total devotion to Confucian belief or the Confucian style persistence, as encapsulated in the Song Scholar-Official Fan Zhongyan’s (989-1052) famous words: “The shi [literati] must be the first to worry about the troubles of the world but the last to enjoy its pleasures” 先天下之忧而忧，后天下之乐而乐 (xian tianxia zhi you er you, hou tianxia zhi le er le).

Zhuang was like this for too long until he suffered sexual repression in his private life. When he sees the absurdity of his life, he announces that he will “seek

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121 Lin Yu-sheng, The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness: Radical Antitradiotional in the May Fourth Era (University of Wisconsin Press, 1979) argues that the radical antitraditionalists of the May Fourth are in fact very Confucian.
imperfection” — 破 缺 (poque). He later even names the house the mayor gives him in return for his service in the mayor's reelection “Seeking Imperfection House” 求 缺 屋 (qiu que wu).

Critic Lei Da quotes Zhou Min’s question to Zhuang— “I don’t understand. You’re a celebrity. Whatever you want you will have and whatever you think will materialize. Why do you love this xun music?” — and asserts that if one does not understand Zhuang's annoyance, one cannot understand The Abandoned Capital. Lei Da proposes that Zhuang’s annoyance can be understood on three levels: social, existential, and metaphysical, and his core problem is his continual loss of authenticity of selfhood. Lei Da consigns Zhuang’s feeling of enslavement to “name—fame” (in Chinese the two words are expressed by the same character 名 “ming”) to his social annoyance; his writing nothing good but fake love letters, ghost theses, advertisements, and reportage to his existential annoyance; and “care” or “ennui” to his metaphysical annoyance. He thinks that Zhuang is hypersensitive because he often questions himself: “Who am I?” “Where is my real self?” To Zhuang, existence is like a prison where the self goes and never returns, and even “sex” cannot save his soul. As a result, he becomes more and more decadent. His frequent sex has

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122 Social annoyance: Not wishing to be treated as a celebrity, he himself realizes he is one and often follows other people's expectations and restricts himself on that ground. He at last comes to know that he is a slave to his “name.” Existential annoyance: As a writer, he produces nothing except a reportage that is paid for, false love letters, a false thesis, elegies, and stories he writes in the judge's son's name. Metaphysical annoyance: Human beings are born with care. But not all people have a clear consciousness of it. They can only feel worldly annoyances, and not the spiritual ones, nor the metaphysical ones. Lei Da, “The Struggle of the Soul,” in Great Criticisms, 14.
turned from original sexual love into animalistic relief, from confirming oneself into experiencing death. (14-15)

Critic Zhang Zhizhong consigns Zhuang’s tragedy to the tradition of the literati’s dream of polygamy and their lack of power and strength, due to Confucian teaching, to pursue their love, like Don Juan in the European romantic tradition. The destruction of Zhuang Zhidie’s dream is also due to his anachronistic error, to the conflict of ancient literati ideals with the modern life style of the twentieth century, and to Zhuang being neither a powerful official nor a wanton Ximen Qing, the protagonist of Jin Ping Mei. Zhang Zhizhong notes the irony, created by Confucian teaching, that in a patriarchal society, men are not at all manly in gender relations; they lack adventurous, aggressive, or autonomous spirits or superiority. They can only dream like a thief, but do not have a thief’s courage, and they are terribly afraid of hearing a no from women, so they only wait for women to fall into their arms.\footnote{Zhang Zhizhong, “Dream and Its Destruction,” \textit{Great Criticisms}, 61-82.}

In fact, Zhuang Zhidie’s name “Master Zhuang’s Butterfly” expresses a wish to be free from this care. It comes from the “Qiwu lun” 齐物论 chapter (Discussion on Making Things Equal) in the inner Chapters of \textit{Zhuangzi}. Lin Yutang translates it thus:

\begin{quote}
Once upon a time, I, Chuang Chou, dreamt I was a butterfly, fluttering hither and thither, to all intents and purposes a butterfly. I
\end{quote}
was conscious only of my happiness as a butterfly, unaware that I was Chou. Soon I awaked, and there I was, veritably myself again. Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly, dreaming that I am a man. Between a man and a butterfly there is necessarily a distinction. The transition is called the transformation of material things.\textsuperscript{124}

According to Lei Da, the Zhuangzi passage was not originally sad or desolate. Instead, it describes a happy and carefree dream. Also a metamorphosis, but changing into a butterfly is certainly more pleasant than into a beetle.\textsuperscript{125} Lei Da thinks that after Zhuang Zhidie finds himself very much like a horse wearing red and green cloth at tourist spots for tourists to play and take pictures with, his name becomes an irony. In fact, exactly because Zhuang feels too burdened with worldly care, he gives himself a name “Zhuang Zi’s Butterfly” and wishes to be one.

However, instead of being carefree as a butterfly, he becomes perplexed. As a sensitive writer in a time of social transition, he hates the annoyances his fame brings him, but he cannot bear to lose it and profits from it whenever he can; he wants to seek a quiet place to write far away from the noisy city, but cannot leave his mistresses behind; he seems to love Tang Wan’er, but has no courage to abandon his wife; he is good-natured, but also hypocritical and ruthless; he hates those in power,

\textsuperscript{124} Lin Yutang, 238.

\textsuperscript{125} Both Jia Pingwa and his critic Lei Da are deeply influenced by Kafka’s “Metamorphosis.” Kuan Ge in the next novel \textit{White Nights} figuratively indeed changes into a “beetle.”
but fawns on them and seeks their help; he wishes to be pure and aloof from the mundane, but writes advertisements for five thousand yuan, and even swindles his friend’s life-long precious art collection when he is in difficulty; he does not love money, but opens a bookstore and an art gallery to sell pornographic materials. One moment, he has sex with Tang in a hotel room and inscribes the words “Carefree Hall” on her thigh, and the next he sits in the front row with mayors and other dignitaries in the Municipal People’s Representative Conference live broadcast on television.

Like the caterpillar who keeps questioning Alice with contempt in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*: “Who are you?” and “Explain yourself,” which the poor little girl is unable to do after having changed sizes so many times within a short time, Zhuang Zhidie keeps asking the same question and does not have an answer. He keeps cursing his fame and tells himself that he has become a base, sordid, and hypocritical little man. He asks: “I’m surprised by myself. Am I adapting to society or becoming degenerate?”

His name suggests that he wishes to be a Daoist. Thus we see him sitting in a pub watching an old man drinking a cup of wine and eating a few beans; he cannot help admiring him and sighs that he has been living too burdensomely, but is unable to renounce the world. Jia says that Tao Yuanming (365-427) renounced the official world because he had first experienced the official world. Tao suffered both acutely before and after he resigned from his official post. Meng Haoran (689-740), the Tang
hermit poet, was in seclusion in Shangzhou for forty years and was finally no longer able to endure the solitude and decided to take the examination to become an official. Modern times do not allow people who wish to renounce the world to live like Tao or Meng.

Disillusioned, ill-adapted, and abandoning himself to sex very much the same way Jia Baoyu enjoys self-abandonment with a group of his maids in a period immediately after he grieves the death of Skybright, and degenerating rapidly, Zhuang is almost out of control and harms the people he loves the most. Here, Schopenhauer’s opinion that the general human fate is tragic, as quoted by Williams, seems to be true. He sees “an inevitable normality of suffering.” We see “the greatest sufferings brought about by entanglements that our fate might also partake of, and through actions that perhaps we also are capable of performing, and so could not complain of injustice; then shuddering we feel ourselves already in the midst of hell.”

Zhuang Zhidie’s tragedy is as much in the suffering he causes to others as he experiences himself. To refuse to cooperate with those in power and to insist on looking for his authentic self, he cheats his wife who has undergone three abortions in order to support him in his career and who is kind to the unfortunate just as he himself would be. He cheats Zhou Min, a lad like him who comes from the same county trying to gain a foothold in the city. He loves Tang Wan’er and promises her that he will marry her, but after she is kidnapped from his side in a cinema, he dares not even

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126 Williams, 38.
attempt to rescue her; he even hypocritically scolds Zhou Min after the latter fails to rescue her from her husband's sadistic hand. He swindles his friend Gong Jingyuan's lifetime collection of art treasures while Gong is in difficulty and is directly responsible for Gong's suicide. He promises Liu Yue to his friend Zhao Jingwu after already having affairs with her, and later he marries her off to the mayor's son. Even on the eve of the wedding, he exercises his so-called "droit du seigneur."

Schopenhauer's solution to "the tragic human nature" is resignation, the surrender not merely of life but of the will to live. As in the Biblical usage, knowledge and death suggest sex, Zhuang Zhidie's abandonment to sex and even his last sex with Tang Wan'er while funeral music plays in the background, as Critic Lei Da suggests, are like that of the protagonist of the Japanese novel and film *The Rite of Love and Death* (by Yukio Mishima, 1961) who says farewell to the world with sexual intercourse before he commits suicide by seppuku.  

Albert Camus in his *The Myth of Sisyphus* finds that there are at least two trinities operating in the absurd. First, the absurd is born of a confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world. "The irrational, the human nostalgia, and the absurd that is born of their encounter—these are the three characters in the drama that must necessarily end with all the logic of which an existence is possible."(29) No character is dispensable. Second, one must know that life is

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meaningless and still live it, and these two terms then form a third term which is revolt and which is their relationship.

It now becomes clear on the contrary that it will be lived all the better if it has no meaning. Living an experience, a particular fate, is accepting it fully. Now no one will live this fate, knowing it to be absurd, unless he does everything to keep before him that absurd brought to light by consciousness. Negating one of the terms of the opposition on which he lives amounts to escaping it. To banish revolt is to elude the problem. The theme of permanent revolution is thus carried into individual experience. Living is keeping the absurd alive. Keeping it alive is above all contemplating it. (47)

This logically excludes suicide.

Zhuang Zhidie does not commit suicide. He becomes half mad, thrashes about the town on his Mulan brand motor cycle, finally wakes up, and resolves, like the ancient Gou Jian, King of Yue, to turn over a new leaf by trying to buy a pig’s gall bladder in a butcher shop near the Bell Tower. His attempt to travel to the South he knows is absurd because he will do nothing but write to keep living even after giving

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129 After his tragic defeat by Fu Chai, the King of Wu 吴王 夫差, Gou Jian 越王 句践 sent expensive gifts along with the famous beauty Xi Shi 西施 as tribute to Fu Chai while secretly hanging a gall bladder from the beam of the room in which he was sleeping on straw instead of a bed and tasted each day the bitterness of the gall vowing to avenge his defeat until ten years later he succeeded in killing Fu Chai and took back his state, thus the idiom of woxin changdan 卧薪尝胆 (sleep on straw and taste gall).
it up in the abandoned capital, but his living his experience and accepting it fully is a kind of revolt. In this revolt he keeps the absurd alive and contemplates it all the time. Although Zhuang Zhidie collapses before he even boards the train to the south, he collapses in defiance, as a rebel. In keeping the absurd alive he defies it. This is another reason I see the novel as a modern tragedy.

2. Ye Lang

Ye Lang's tragedy is realized on several levels. First, by origin he is a young man from the countryside and by location he is a migrant worker in a city. The very situation makes him ambivalent: attracted to and hating the city simultaneously. Second, Reform made it possible for rural people like him to go to the city to make a living. However, it not only gives him a chance to observe or even enjoy modern urban facilities, but also makes him realize how deprived people in the countryside are. Third, in the urban setting, the polarity between the poor and the rich and powerful is much sharper, which causes a thinking person like him to feel indignant. Fourth, coming from the countryside where traditional culture and its influence are more obvious, he feels an acute sense of obligation to "carry out the Way on behalf of Heaven," i.e., to carry out justice. Fifth, he aspires to spiritual superiority as represented by the well-educated urban "aristocrat" Yu Bai, but is unable to live with her harmoniously because of the great differences between them. He sympathizes with Yan Ming but her origin and situation only remind him of his own low origin.
and status. Finally, the Reform creates some new problems and exposes many old problems that cause Ye Lang to welcome and reject it at the same time, as symbolized by the Seabird Jing Wei, to the point that he wishes he had not come to the city or there had not been a reform for him to come to know the truth.

Ye Lang’s rural origin and urban location are a fundamental source of the sufferings he experiences. When he is lucky as to get to know Nan Dingshan and through him Zhu Yihe who arranged for him to work in the Provincial Library and further to know more powerful cadres of various levels, he cannot forget the people in his home village like his father who seem never to have lived in comparison with the urbanites. When he is unlucky as a small pawn in a factional struggle being sacrificed and insulted ignominiously, he is made even more indignant by linking his powerless status to his rural origin. In other words, lucky or unlucky, he has reason to feel unhappy.

Ye Lang, from Suide County, alleged birthplace of Lü Bu 吕 in *The Romance of Three Kingdoms*, as opposed to Liu Yue, from Mizhi County, alleged birth place of Diao Chan 貂禅 in the same classic novel, can be thought of as a carry-over of Zhou Min from the previous novel. Jia Pingwa makes liberal use of classical sources. Yet, as a deliberate contrast, instead of describing Ye Lang as resembling the most handsome hero Lü Bu with unsurpassed martial machismo, he portrays him as a

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130 As if fearing that we might miss the allusion, Jia Pingwa arranges for another girl, Ah Chan 阿婵, who bears the same name as Diao Chan, to help Ye Lang and Yan Ming look after Zhu Yihe.
countryman with very dark complexion, ugly, rugged, and with a long horse-like face. Ding Lin’s lover comments to her that Ye Lang is the most ugly and most solitary person in the world. (91)

In contrast to Zhuang suffering from disillusionment due to a general and societal change, Ye Lang’s suffering is in addition a more direct consequence of some events over which he has no control whatsoever. I mentioned his scorn at Gong’s hands, which makes him resolve to seek revenge. I also mentioned his insults at the hands of Manager Miao after his benefactor Zhu Yihe is downed. Another instance is his experience in the District Director Yi’s office for Zou Yun’s business license. In the previous summer, Yi arranged for Zhu and him to go fishing in the state farm outside the city where Yi scuttled to arrange the chair, fix the umbrella, buy ice cream, and play chess with Ye Lang (Yi, 弈, literally means “chess” or “playing chess”) while Zhu took a nap after lunch. At that time Yi tells Ye Lang to come and see him whenever he needs him. Yi was insinuating himself into Zhu Yihe’s favor through Ye Lang then. But after the Mayor and Zhu’s faction was defeated, Yi is afraid of being seen in Ye Lang’s company. As Ye Lang goes down the staircase, he intentionally spits on the red carpet despite the warning sign on the wall to spit into the spittoon. He jumps up and leaves a footprint high on the pure white wall. This penchant for staining the pure is repeatedly described in the novel. In such insignificant details Jia inscribes the psychology of the frustrated and the cynical.
This culture of when you are in power, people are all obsequious and eager to serve you and when you are out of power, nobody seems to notice you and many even shun you makes those in and out of power very cynical; they treat others like dirt. This is called in Chinese 官本位制 (guanbenwei zhi). Because I cannot find a ready translation, I call it “official ontology,” meaning being an official here and now. This seems to fit the Chinese popular saying: “If you don’t use your power now, it will turn into waste after its expiry date.” 有权不用，过期作废 That attitude makes those in power use their power for their own benefit to its exhaustion and hold on to it as long as possible, and those out of power risk their life to acquire it.

Ye Lang is arrested for sending a master thief to steal Gong’s money to expose him when he is performing the role of Seabird Jing Wei. The Chinese myth is a counterpart of the Greek myth of Sisyphus. While Sisyphus is punished by Zeus to push uphill a rolling stone that keeps rolling down, the Seabird voluntarily engages in a more frustrating, more hopeless, and more absurd enterprise: filling up the sea by carrying pebbles and branches with her beak, the sea which gave her birth, food, and water:

Mulian\textsuperscript{131}: Jingwei, answer me. Where do the fish that you eat come

\textsuperscript{131} Mulian 目连 is a short form for 目犍连 which is the Chinese partial transliteration of the Sanskrit word “Mahamudgalyayana”摩诃目连, i.e., 大目连, one of the Buddha’s ten greatest disciples. After his story of rescuing his mother from “Hell” spread into China and was adapted neatly to the Confucian “filial piety” concept, it greatly helped to advance the Chinese drama in both subject matter
from?

Jingwei: (Keeps throwing dry branches into the sea) From the sea.

Mulian: Where is the water that you drink from?

Jingwei: From the sea.

Mulian: (Angry) Can you live without the sea? You hateful ungrateful avenger, stop your folly right now.

Jingwei: (Hesitant, two large tears drop) Had it not drowned my female body,

I would still enjoy the joys and sorrows of a human. But it changed me into this non-human non-bird shape! (383-84)

Reform changes Ye Lang into a half-peasant half-worker, non-peasant non-worker. He knows his rebellion and resistance will bear no fruit, but he goes on and even risks all anyway. The Seabird Jing Wei myth brings Ye Lang’s tragic struggle to a mythological climax, a climax that has no dénouement or tragic relief.132

Ye Lang’s tragedy is that of a modern knight-errant who inevitably gets into trouble with the law. His struggle is one between different teachings inherited from

and form. It is a very popular form among folk dramas even today. Since its content involving characters who can go to Heaven, Earth, and Hell, it always involves ghost characters. Thus it gains its name Ghost Drama. Ye Lang in Jia’s novel is writing and performing ghost dramas with a Ghost Drama Troupe and Mulian is a character that well fits into both the mini-play and Ye Lang’s filial piety towards his father. See Liu Zhen 刘祯, Zhongguo minjian Mulian wenhua (Folk Mulian Culture in China) 中国文化民间文化 (Chengdu 成都: Mashu shushe 巴蜀书社, 1997).

132 In his “Afterword,” Jia thanks a Zhang Sanfa from the City of Jiayu Pass whom he never met for writing him a letter, which describes the letter-writer’s depression and helplessness and which ends with Zhang’s adaptation of the myth of Jing Wei. See page 387-88.
tradition. For example, his character, actions, and beliefs demonstrate that he is a successor to both the peasant rebel tradition and the Mohist knight-errantry tradition very much in line with the early Communist faith.

He does not come to the city to become rich but to develop or have spiritual adventures. He wishes to roam free in a time of disorder and to be the equal of urbanites. The critic Fei Bingxun divides peasants into two types: one submissive, humble, and content to live on a self-sustaining level like Ye Lang's father; the other daring, hating the rich and powerful, and aspiring to equalizing all under heaven like Ye Lang himself. This analysis links Ye Lang to a tradition from Chen Sheng and Wu Guang, peasant rebel leaders in the late Qin dynasty to Mao Zedong and Communists of the twentieth century.

His name and his character link him directly to the tradition of knight-errantry which Zhang Taiyan traced to Mo Zi (Master Moh), the founder of Mohism—a major school of thought—in the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States periods, who advocates brotherly love and chivalry. His surname Ye, as he tells Ah Chan to call him Brother Black (Hei Ge, 黑 哥), can be interchangeable with Hei and Mo (墨).

When his friend tells Liu Yishan, a modern shaman, that his surname is Hei, Liu


134 David Wang points out: “Zhang Taiyan traced the origin of chivalry to the texts of the Mohists and campaigned for the new ideal of ‘scholarly knight-errant’—someone endowed with both Confucian training and chivalric nonconformism—as opposed to the traditional one-sided image of the scholar.” David Der-wei Wang, *Fin-de-Siècle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1849-1911*. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997) 165.
immediately says it should be Ye or Mo, which directly links Ye Lang to Mo Zi.\textsuperscript{135} However, as typical of Jia Pingwa in the 1990s, who often erases what he reveals and betrays what he erases, he lets Liu Yishan immediately erase, or rather, obscure, the allusive connotation by simply saying that some of Ye Lang’s ancestors must be good at writing or painting.\textsuperscript{136}

To show that linking of Ye Lang to Mo Zi because of the similarity of their surnames is no idle speculation, I draw another piece of evidence from the name of Yan Ming. I read her as a carry-over of both Liu Yue and Ah Can from 	extit{The Abandoned Capital} because, first, she takes as good care of Zhu Yihe as Liu Yue did of Zhuang Zhidie; and second, she has had plastic surgery done to her face, and her name reminds us of what Ah Can does to her face. Ah Can is considered by critics as

\textsuperscript{135}夜 ye (night) is 黒 heí (black) and 黒 heí (black) is 墨 mo (ink).

\textsuperscript{136}墨 Mo “black ink” often represents calligraphy or painting or writing in general. 夜 ye means “night” and with Yu Bai’s 易白 first name, which means “daytime” and “white,” it forms a contrast in color and time. Both the male and female protagonists’ names are contained in the title of the novel “White Nights.” It is not simply that I have a penchant to detect Jia’s choice of words in naming his characters. Yu Bai’s family name is the last name of Lady Yu who accompanied Xiang Yu, “the lord of all lords” until they reach River Wu in a place named Gaixia. In order to free Xiang Yu of burden to flee Liu Bang’s armies, she committed suicide there and was followed shortly by Xiang Yu who cut off his own head to present to his fellow county man for the latter to claim Liu Bang’s award. I don’t think it is a coincidence that Jia named the wife of the “regenerated man” Lady Qi 刘. Lady Qi was Liu Bang’s wife and became empress after Liu conquered the whole country. Both Yu and Qi are rare surnames, so we can sense Jia’s deliberateness here. This period of history clings to Jia’s mind also because the editor of Jia’s complete works, Cao Gang, decided to name each volume with one character from Liu Bang’s “Song to Great Wind” 大风歌 (dafeng ge): 大风起兮云飞扬, 威加海内兮归故乡, 安得猛士兮守四方 “Dafeng qi xi, yun feiyang, wei jia haine xi gui guxiang, ande mengshi xi shou sifang” (Great wind rises and the clouds soar; / After my authorities are established within the four seas, I will return to my hometown; / But where can I find heroes to defend the four borders? ), altogether twenty-three characters, which set Jia into believing that he will live to finish twenty-three volumes of works. Old Gao Village is his sixteenth volume. See “Afterword” to 	extit{Old Gao Village}, 411.
a female knight-errant. She cuts her face with a brooch and pours ink into the cut; Yan Ming in *White Nights* has a name 面鉄 that literally means “tattooed face.”137 Her name links her directly to Mo Zi according to the following introduction of Mo Zi given by Burton Watson who translates the text of *Mo Zi*:

[Mo Zi] seems to have been a passionately sincere ... man who, observing the social and moral ills of his time and the suffering which they brought to so many of the common people, felt personally called upon to attempt a cure. One way of accomplishing his aim, he believed, was to attack the abuse of the feudal aristocrats and literati. So deep is his compassion for the common people, and so outspoken his criticism of their rulers that some scholars have recently been led to speculate that Mo, which means ‘tattoo,’ may not be a surname at all, but an appellation indicating that Master Mo was an ex-convict who had undergone the punishment of being tattooed, and flouted the fact in the face of society by adopting the name of his penalty.138

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137 Fei Bingxun is the first critic who reads *White Nights* as a modern tragedy in his “Sadness of Seeking,” but he makes an error in putting Yan Ming’s name as 面鉄 铜 and thus misses not only this possible Mohist connection but also the connection to Ah Can’s female knight’s deeds.

Watson and many others think the suggestion, albeit interesting, is highly dubious, but it must have caught the attention of writers like Jia Pingwa who read widely. For example, he not only names his protagonists Ye Lang and Cai Laohei in *Old Gao Village*, by ye or 'hei which suggest their dark complexions, but also portrays them as called upon to attack and address those who abuse power.

The matter became more interesting, as Watson notes, when scholars of the twentieth century began once more to study Mo Zi’s philosophy: “they found his religious views so radically ‘un-Chinese’ that they were led to postulate a foreign origin for them. With more conviction than scholarship, they variously asserted that Mo Tzu was an Indian Buddhist, a Brahmin, or a Moslem from Arabia (!)"  

With names and features of Tang Wan’er, Yan Ming, and Xi Xia in *Old Gao Village*, and Jia’s unreserved penchant for foreigners, the similarities between the scholars and the writer are striking.  

Ye Lang does not do much except lead the three peasants who have been cheated by a young urban con artist and make a series of insignificant and laughable

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140 Tang Wan’er’s surname recalls the Tang dynasty, of which Jia thinks very highly. Wan’er can be understood as a beauty from the small tribal state named Dawan northwest of the Tang Empire. Liu Yue is compared to a Tang imperial palace maid and there is even a sculpture of a Tang imperial palace maid on Zhuang’s desk, of which Liu Yue believes she herself is a replica. Ye Lang asks Yan Ming: “In the past only your eyes were deeply set, nose straight, and cheek bones high. Now with your manner, you look like a European. Did you find out if your ancestors were Han Chinese?” She tells him that her ancestral home is in Northern Shanxi, and Ye Lang conjectures that her ancestors were either Huns or mixed blood with foreign invaders. (163) In *Old Gao Village*, Jia Pingwa straightforwardly lets Gao Zilu calls Xi Xia a “Dawan horse.” Xi Xia 西夏 (West Xia) is again a northern tribe which warred on and off with Tang and Song for centuries.
troubles for Gong Changxing. Ye Lang and Zhou Min greatly resemble idlers or “Flaneurs,” the modern version of knights-errant. Jia Pingwa published a prose piece a few years earlier entitled “Flaneurs” similar to Sima Qian’s “Biographies of the Wandering Knights.” Jia praises their virtues and also jabs at them in good humor. “These idlers are not necessarily handsome... but they generally have a very good build.” “They are not rich... but they do not think money is precious.” “They have many friends” and are ready to take stabs on both sides of the chest for friends’ sake.

Ye Lang’s suffering is mainly spiritual anguish caused by his “spiritual pursuit” in Fei Bingxun’s term. As already discussed above, his ambivalence towards the city and Reform is a primary source of his suffering. It is a tragic stalemate. He has a full claim to Yan Ming’s love, but he is forever distrustful of her chastity and tells her: “I have been cheated many times. I can understand others cheating me, but I will not accept that you could be deceiving me as well” (65). We have no evidence

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142 Jia goes on: “They look down upon hooligans, pickpockets, Johns, prostitutes, and rapists.” “They like girls but what excites them most is not girls” but fights. “They are straightforward.” “They have no respect for authority.” “They are usually clever and cultured.” “They are neither afraid of hardship nor death” but are afraid of marriage and solitude. When couples are estranged, these idlers will not spend time to get them reconciled. Instead, they advise them to break up and promise to find a new girl for the man. But some couples reconcile after a quarrel and the wife somehow gets to know the idlers’ advice to her husband and will not respond to them when they address the wife as “sister-in-law.” “So be it,” they say to themselves. Jia Pingwa, Tree Buddha (shu fo) (Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1993) 21.
that he has been cheated by many city people except Gong Changxing, but it is his innate hatred and distrust of city people that makes him cynical.

Why is he so exacting to her? Because he does not only expect love from her, but, more importantly, truth. Yet is she good, beautiful, and true? From textual evidence she definitely is. Yet, his stubborn suspicion drives her away. Although Ye Lang regrets this deeply, at the time his suspicion, resentment, and distrust are persistent. The more she feels hurt and protests, the more convinced he becomes of her guilt. After their daughter is born as ugly as Yan says she used to be, his suspicion seems to be confirmed. As his name in the idiom *yelang zida* 夜郎自大 (“Ye Lang is self-important”) suggests, he does not realize how ugly his own face is. Critic Chen Xushi thinks that Ye Lang abandons Yan Ming, a migrant worker, because he dislikes being constantly reminded of his own migrant worker status. This would be all the more reason for regarding their story as a tragedy. Abandoning people who are like himself is a form of self-loathing or self-hatred, the first step towards self-destruction.

It seems to be within human nature to disvalue what they have in hand, no matter how valuable it is and aspire to what they do not have or will never be able to acquire. Ye Lang is drawn towards Yu Bai, a modern urban aristocrat, despite the

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143 The King of the State of Yelang, a tiny state deep in the mountains, ludicrously believed that his state was the biggest in the world; thus, literally, “Yelang is itself large.”

warning from Kuan Ge that he will not have a happy life if he marries her. He himself at times feels the same, but he is like a moth inevitably attracted to the flame.

Out of an inferiority complex, he is attracted to Yu Bai. Yet his aspiration makes him feel all the more inferior. Who is he that he should pick and choose? He questions himself. He loves Yu Bai, but does she love him? Talented, beautiful, a descendant of an aristocratic family, she may have made his acquaintance out of good manners, out of ennui, or just out of ordinary friendship. Even if she has affection for him and marries him, how can he guarantee her happiness? Wandering with him and being scoffed at by all? Will their living habits and hobbies be compatible? In addition, she is rich in imagination, refined in feeling, and sensitive and changeable. Can he match her and make her happy? (175) He admits to Ding Lin, Yu Bai’s close friend that he aspires to Yu Bai’s life, yet he is afraid that that kind of life is not his and therefore he is reluctant to let go of Yan Ming. He dares not face reality and wishes secretly that this undecided state of things would last forever. (228)

Fei Bingxun suggests that Yu Bai’s attraction for him is that by nature he comes to the city to conquer and she will be his trophy in a love conquest which will give him a burglar’s delight, like intruding into an aristocrat’s compound, as well as the first step in raising his status in this urban environment. Fei concludes that love between them is bound to be a tragedy because we can see no legitimate reason why she should love him. She loves him because she is already past her prime and because she wants to show that she is unique in daring to love a peasant. On his part, he will
not be happy because he cannot adapt to this hypersensitive woman whose sensibility will be too subtle for him to bear. On her part, she will never be able to ride such an unruly horse that no one can rein in.

Fei Bingxun calls their love a mistaken love, a tragedy played out against the half a century of history and reality of the Revolution and Reform. Without Yu Bai’s loss of her aristocratic superiority during the establishment of the PRC in 1949 and the series of socialist transformations of industrialists and merchants from 1950 onwards, she would not be so romantic as to notice Ye Lang. Without the Reform which fixes him with a pair of wings to soar and venture into the urban world, he would never have the courage to love her.

However, the real tragedy does not lie in this historical condition, which certainly has its function, but in these characters who seem to court spiritual tragedy in that they know that what they are pursuing will turn out to be tragedy but go on trying it anyway.

3. Cheng Yi

Jia Pingwa’s mature tragic vision lies in the fact that he is on the one hand sympathetic to his tragic hero Cheng Yi in *The Earthen Gate* and on the other he suggests that if Cheng Yi succeeds, the disaster for the village as well as the state if he becomes a head of state will also be great.
Cheng Yi is probably Jia Pingwa’s most successful knight-errant, with a marvelous light *gongfu*, miraculously enlightened at the site of the palace of an ancient Tibetan Kingdom, chopping off his right hand in his resolve never to steal again. This lost hand is later replaced by a young woman’s hand, and therefore he is “self-efficient” and never interested in women. His altruism of sacrificing his life for the sake of the village and his devilish, insightful, and clever personality demonstrate his complex character. True to the wandering knight ideal, Cheng Yi can be said to have sacrificed his life totally for others. Zhuge Liang in his memorial to Liu Chan expresses his determination to “give his all until his heart stops beating” 鞠躬尽瘁，死而后已. Cheng Yi goes one step further by repeatedly requesting to donate his body to a hospital so that the proceeds can go to his village. (311)

Following Aristotle, P. K. Guha thinks that to achieve a tragic relief while at the same time inducing horror at his suffering, a tragic hero is invested with a trait or feature, a flaw or frailty to match his heroic aspects or superhuman qualities so that he may doubly impress us: he strikes us as at once far off and near, as being far above us and at the same time as our very kith and kin.145 Cheng Yi is exactly such a heroic and often comic protagonist.

As an indication of the villagers’ desperation, they elect Cheng Yi as their head despite their ignorance of his whereabouts. Lianben remarks: “Dog f—ed Cheng

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Chapter 4 Tragic Heroes

Yi has all the defects, but he is capable! The bastard has now turned into a somebody. We have an official post ready for him, yet he is nowhere to be found in the world.”

As the first-person narrator Meimei recalls, Cheng Yi’s knowledge of antique furniture draws admiring looks from the pretty girls in the market, but he is interested in none of them. He is a mystery. He obviously simultaneously baits and pushes away Meimei as if only to use her as deputy head. Stories circulate among villagers about how wicked, rascally, and mischievous he is. He once chopped off a snake’s head, stuck its neck in his mouth, started to suck its blood and frightened away two gangs and a group of spectators; on the same occasion he ordered the cheapest cigarettes (as a cheating bribe) from a peddler for a policeman who stopped to fine him for driving a tractor into the city. (38-39)

As an exemplary of Arthur Miller’s definition of tragedy as the consequence of a man’s total compulsion to evaluate himself justly where “the tragic right is a condition of life in which the human personality is able to flower and realize itself,” Cheng Yi explains his acceptance of the role of village head in the style of Zhuge Liang’s “Former Memorial Concerning the Dispatchment of Troops” (qian chushi biao): “I Cheng Yi am willing to be the head not because I want to

146 Miller, 4, 5.
become rich but because I want to take good care of our village. I become its head at a critical moment in its existence and my mandate is to resist its annihilation!” (157). Cheng Yi’s former wandering experience all over the country provided him with unrestrained freedom, but he says: “I agree to be the village head because I want to have absolute power in the village. This absolute power is not for my personal interest. What I want is to do something big” (178).

Once elected as head, the villagers give him his absolute power. Bernard Knox explains the Greek word “tyrannos” as “an absolute ruler, who may be a bad ruler, or a good one (as Oedipus clearly is), but in either case he is a ruler who has seized power, not inherited it. He is not a king, for a king succeeds only by birth; the tyrannos succeeds by brains, force, influence.” A foundling, Cheng Yi’s parents do not even belong to the village. He is elected for his capability.

Like Zhou Min and Ye Lang before him, he uses legal and illegal means, righteous and evil methods to achieve good ends. For example, bribing the mayor with a maid paid out of the village’s funds, going through the “back door,” building tombs and archways and temples which were considered superstitious activities and criticized in the Mao era, and building theme parks propagandizing twenty-four filial sons and daughters which May Fourth iconoclasts took as their main targets, and flattering Deng Xiaoping by sculpting a cat to lead the twelve animal zodiac images.

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His actions are such a hotchpotch that makes you want to cry and laugh at the same time.  

To protect the village, Cheng Yi also suffers, although we rarely see it. Here is his own description of his struggle:

The district government leaders called me to talk with them twice with harsh orders and soft persuasions... I swore at them and banged my hand on the table. See here, my wrist is still black and blue. I also played soft with them, begged them, played rascal, and even shed tears... The district head called me “a jerk,” “a dead dog.” I am a jerk and a dead dog of the Renhou Village. Even if you beat me bloody all over, I’ll throw myself at you and bite you as long as I’m still alive. (160)

He is determined to turn Renhou Village into the most unique village in all China, not only maintaining a pure village land in today’s urbanizing China, but also becoming a united, healthy, particularly combatant and wealthy model (264). His tone is the militant one of the radical Maoists during the Cultural Revolution. Conceited, he proclaims that some day the future Renhou Village will produce certain ‘isms’: Curism (i.e., curing hepatitis) or Rehou Villagism.

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148 The cat does not belong to the twelve animals of the years, but Deng Xiaoping’s words: “White cat or black cat, it is a good cat that catches the rat” makes the animal seem more important than any of the twelve animals.
By way of ideological work and to establish his authority, Cheng Yi drafts village regulations with the following incongruous references: “Peach Blossom Spring,” *The Collected Documents of Yan’an Rectification Movements*, *The Handbook for People’s Commune Members*, *Family Rules of Zeng Guofan*, and he hangs up the “New Style Placard” 新 风 牌 to the families that obey the fifteen rules (Chiang Kai-shek also promoted a “New Life Movement” 新 生 活 运 动 in his rule on mainland China). If any family fails three times to abide by the regulations, their supply of water and electricity will be cut off, their welfare will be stopped, their medical insurance and educational funding will be cut, they will be fined, and their village household registration will be revoked. 149

Making Grandpa Yunlin into the image of a god, and building his abode—the former village ancestral hall—as his temple, Cheng Yi becomes his “golden boy” and Meimei his “jade girl,” as Meizi jokes. Despite his wondrous treatment of the patients with liver disease after his mad fit, this “living god” used to make piglets instead of people! He used to raise a white male Ukrainian stud pig that provided seed for the sows of the area. Like Han Shaogong who uses the image of the idiot Bing Zai in “Ba, Ba, Ba,” to caricature the Cultural Revolution when both the people and the Party deified Mao, deification seems to be necessary for both the ruled and the rulers.

149 *Tu Men*, 210. Jia Pingwa describes all the above, including even the characters above the front gate of the families, ironically in the novel, but records them truthfully in the *Diary of the Trip South*. See diary entry for January 19, 1996 when Jia visits the city of Zhangjia Gang.
Meimei satirizes Cheng Yi: “You must be trying to build a landlord’s plantation?” (167-68)

Using Maoist methods of class struggle and perpetual revolution, Cheng Yi especially creates some targets. He leads the village drum performing team in front of the real estate company where Meizi is working in shouting: “Shame on you, Traitor! Shame on you, Traitor!” He seals her door and his excommunication of the girl contributes to driving her crazy. Cheng Yi tells Meimei: “Even if Meizi is not as bad as this, I will be a Zhuge Liang who borrows Ma Su’s head to pacify all those under Heaven!” (252) In many such cases, politicians kill people not because some of them are guilty, but because they need to make a public example of them to warn others.

Humoring and attacking the old village head at the same time, Cheng Yi, on hearing Lianben and others drinking with the old head at night, not only rejects Lianben’s and his friends’ application to work in the big herbal medicine shop, but also calls him to stand in front of the whole village to reprimand him, lets the villagers criticize him, and arranges Gao Feng to beat him. Three days later when the old village head becomes sick, Cheng Yi brings fruit and other presents to visit him.

Jia Pingwa became suspicious of “landlord plantations” while “experiencing life” in Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces. This clear-headedness is rare especially when everybody is admiring the wealth and prosperity of the south and sees no flaws in those models. Yu Zuomin, head of Daqiu Zhuang in Tianjin, Deng Xiaoping’s model village, is such a landlord who turned into a tyrant and let his followers lynch a couple of employees. It took Tianjin municipal police force and armed policemen, with the consent of Party Central, to break the village’s blockade to arrest Yu and sentence him. *Dongfang Shibao* 《东方时报》 *Oriental Times*, May 11, 2000, B 13.
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taking Meimei along and humors Lianben by inviting him to drink with them when they meet him on their way. That is Cheng Yi’s Machiavellian talent.

Cheng Yi uses the inflammatory terms of the Cultural Revolution era that the Gang of Four used against the old cadres. He instructs Meimei: “These few days the old head has been very active and many people gather at his home drinking. What movement is this?” (271) During Mao’s later rule, he periodically cautioned CCP members to watch the class enemy’s new movements. This is court intrigue on a village scale. Mao Zedong used similar methods to deal with his Defense Minister Peng Dehuai, President Liu Shaoqi, and his personally appointed successor Lin Biao. This implies that if Cheng Yi achieves all he aspires to, he will become a new dictator on a larger scale.

Jia Pingwa knows the danger of his tragic hero, if he succeeds in becoming a “king,” his tendency to try to achieve his ends by whatever evil means will be disastrous to “the kingdom he rules.” Meimei’s nightmare of entering a city-state is an indirect sarcastic reference to a future Renhou Village headed by Cheng Yi. On the gate of the fortress is inscribed the city-state’s regulations which stipulate that those who steal will have their hands cut off, those who quarrel and fist-fight will have their eyes gouged out. Someone stops her and requires her to recite the quotations and Mandarin is forbidden. Suddenly the King riding a horse passes by and gazes at

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151 During the Cultural Revolution, everywhere you went there would be a frame cut in the wall with the “quotations” or “most recent instructions” or the “supreme instructions” from Chairman Mao, and
her. By instinct, she covers her tail with a hand and stands with her back against the wall.\textsuperscript{152} The King turns his face coldly in another direction and goes up to a house and hangs his whip on the door ring. A woman near Meimei says: “Pox-faced Wang has reared a beautiful daughter and the King will spend his night in her bed.” And as she says so she pinches her daughter in her arms. (266-67) Meimei feels ashamed at not being pretty enough for the King’s choice. Subconsciously, she thinks that Cheng Yi is not accepting her. When Meimei, “our intellectual” in Grandpa Yunlin’s words, has such a state of mind, the ordinary villagers need no mention.\textsuperscript{153}

One thing that is certain in this modern tragedy is that it is not the tragic hero’s tragedy alone but the tragedy of all the people involved. As Karl W. Deutsch writes of Karl Jaspers’s \textit{Tragedy Is Not Enough}, the question is a collective guilt and responsibility. Renhou Village is a metaphor for China whose people, under the people were stopped at the crossroads and village entrances to recite Chairman Mao’s instructions first before they were allowed to proceed on their way.

\textsuperscript{152} It is my speculation that Jia uses the image to insinuate the trouble that \textit{The Abandoned Capital} landed him in, and his trip to the south as its consequence. Meimei’s fear of not being appreciated by the King is a parody of Jia’s own fear. Mao Zedong reportedly had a saying as late as in Yan’an era: 夹着尾巴做人 (jia zhe weiba zuo ren, “hide one’s tail between one’s leg”) cautioning himself and friends to keep a low profile and be very prudent as if oneself had committed some sin and were afraid that it might be discovered. It fits well Jia’s mood and deeds in his trip south, of which \textit{The Earthen Gate} is a result.

\textsuperscript{153} Jia Pingwa told me in my 1998 interview that a bandit King in Northern Shaanxi in the local chronicles ruled the area so well that people felt a deep gratitude and a sense of awe towards him. The Bandit King toured his territory regularly and hung up his whip at the door of a girl whom he deemed pretty and the girl’s parents would decorate the girl and send her to wherever the King stayed for the night. In \textit{One Hundred Years of Solitude}, Gabriel García Márquez also writes of mothers sending their virgin daughters to Colonel Aureliano Buendia’s tent “to improve the breed.” Gabriel García Márquez, \textit{One Hundred Years of Solitude}, trans. Gregory Rabassa, (New York: Avon Books, 1970) 123-24.
pressure of urbanization, and presumably the recent communist past, globalization, modernization, and development, have been frightened out of their wits like the dog Ah Bing, Old Ran, Meimei, and Meizi.

For the last two centuries China has been, like Renhou Village, bullied and constantly threatened to extinction by the Western powers that seemed to represent the general trend of world historical development. Then its people conceded their power to all kinds of gamblers of power: first a warlord and opportunist Yuan Shikai, then a group of warlords that chased each other off the stage like clowns, then Chiang Kai-shek, then Mao Zedong and the Communists. When they were in power, people worshiped them, idolized them, obeyed them, and deified them while renouncing their own independence and responsibility, like the Renhou Villagers who exhaust whatever material and cultural comfort is left for them.

Cheng Yi's hotchpotch of various ideologies and political systems is a telescopic picture of the thousands of years of Chinese history. In his short rule and ideology, there is the shadow of the First Emperor of Qin, ancient Tibetan rulers, Chiang Kai-shek, Mao Zedong, stale Confucian ideas of filial piety such as the notorious twenty-four filial children, sworn brotherhoods like the Three Kingdom heroes Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei, as well as the radical Maoist proletarian dictatorship of the Cultural Revolution. The people's responsibility is that they are lazy in thinking and in action. Their squalor, pettiness, ignorance, and backwardness seem to make their rulers resort to dictatorial means.
4. Cai Laohei

In *Old Gao Village*, Cai Laohei by name and conduct is a corrupted version of a Mohist or a knight-errant. In *Analects* XV there is mention of Confucius and his disciples running out of provisions during their travels. But the Mohists elaborated and fictionalized the incident into a very embarrassing situation for the followers of Confucianism. In “Against Confucians,” *Mo Tzu*, the story goes like this:

Once when Confucius was in trouble between Ts’ai [Cai] and Ch’en, he lived for ten days on soups made of greens without any rice mixed in. His disciple Tzu-lu [Zilu] boiled a pig for him, and Confucius ate the meat without asking where it had come from. Tzu-lu also robbed someone of his robe and exchanged it for wine, and Confucius drank it without asking where it came from. But when he was received by Duke Ai of Lu, Confucius refused to sit down unless his mat was straight, and refused to eat unless the food was cut up properly. Tzu-lu came forward and asked, “Why do you do the opposite of what you did when we were between Ch’en and Ts’ai?”
Confucius said, “Come here, and I will tell you. At that time we were intent upon staying alive. Now we are intent upon acting rightly.”  

As Burton Watson points out, the story is apocryphal and is intended to make the Confucians look bad; later generations really take it as a sore point for Confucius and are uneasy about it. Cai is a place name in that story but since most Chinese surnames are from names of states and places, Jia adopts this surname for Cai Laohei; his presence or the mention of his name often makes Zilu uneasy.

Although Mohism as a school of thought survived for only a few centuries (most scholars believe that Mo Zi must have lived between the death of Confucius in 479 B.C. and the birth of Mencius in 372 B.C., flourishing probably in the latter half of the fifth century B.C, and Mohism died out in the Western Han), the Chinese literary tradition, particularly in “wandering knights” or “chivalric” fiction, as David Mo Tzu: Basic Writings, trans. Burton Watson, New York: Columbia University Press, 1963. 134-35.

In Lüshi Chunqiu 吕氏春秋 (Chronicles Compiled by Lü Buwei), another incident about Confucius in dire straits in Chen and Cai is recorded. After having starved for seven days, Yan Hui begged some rice for his teacher and cooked it, but Confucius saw Yan Hui grasp some cooked rice from the pot and put it into his mouth and pretended he saw nothing. When Yan Hui served the rice with all due respect, Confucius told him that he had dreamt of his father in the previous night and to show respect to his dead father, he decided he should eat clean rice. Yan Hui immediately realized that his teacher misunderstood him and explained that he just now found some ash fall on the rice and he ate the bit of rice with the ash on it because it would be a pity to throw it away. Confucius was moved and used it as an example to teach all his disciples that although seeing is believing, it is not always reliable. Jia Pingwa lets Xi Xia see by chance a black hand stretching from the side to grasp some noodles from a bowl which Zilu’s aunt prepares for Zilu and Xi Xia. Xi Xia gives bath bowls of noodles to Zilu who immediately has a stomachache, because the hand Xi Xia sees is that of his aunt’s mother who has been bed ridden for years.

Wang calls it, seems to suggest there is a connection between the Mohist school and the wandering knights tradition.

Cai Laohei’s penchant for chivalry and banditry is given free reign in *Old Gao Village*. Unsuccessful at winning Zilu’s ex-wife Juwa’s hand in marriage, he boldly provokes Zilu’s new wife Xi Xia when the latter comes to help him find business partners. Exclaiming: “This is a method, a really good method,” Cai picks up her hands and kisses them quickly. (306) He tells Xi Xia that he is looking forward to a war and expresses to her his envy of Zilu that Zilu could have married Juwa first and now married her. Then he tells her a story about his father who, on hearing that a girl student from the provincial capital was passing by, “going on a shortcut to hide behind the willow tree in Rock Edge Valley in the scorching June weather. Seeing the girl coming, he ran up and dragged her into a cave under the cliff…” (306)

Cai can also be a moral wretch if occasion requires it. At the beginning of the novel when Beiliang, Juwa’s elder brother, locates Cai in a pub and tells him that the bank is spreading the word that Cai is dodging them due to his debt, Cai roars: “Who dodges them at all? Dare I, Cai Laohei, standing between heaven and earth, daring even to enter Zhongnanhai, not face the bank?”157 Dressed up neatly, a package of rat poison in his hand, Cai asks Director He if the Floor Lath Mill has returned their loan. On being told that the loan to the factory was vouchsafed by Head Wu and with the permission of the county mayor, Cai answers: “When I bribe them [the leaders] with

157 *Gao Lao Zhuang*, 22, Zhongnanhai is the part of the Forbidden City where the leaders of CCP Party Central live and work.
grapes, they don’t want them. I, Cai Laohei, am a man and cannot make a cunt by sticking a knife in my leg and let them f---” (23). Taking the teapot from Director He, unwrapping the package, Cai threatens to drink the poison right there. Director He’s face becomes ashen; he takes away the teapot, wraps the rat poison up, sticks it into Cai’s chest pocket, and tells him: “Cai Laohei, I’m timid. Don’t frighten me. Go home and drink it if you wish!” (23-24).

Cai is also a peasant movement activist. Capitalizing on the villagers’ petty egalitarianism, he first plots the beating of the White Clouds Fortress villagers, then gets Uncle Confused, the forest ranger, drunk at home, and incites the villagers to loot and level the forest that has been a preserve for years. Seeing the detained woodcutters released with only a fine so that the incident will not hamper Head Wu’s chances of running for deputy mayor, Cai gathers his cronies, like a former Communist Party underground cell, and speaks to them thus:

“Ever since the opening of the Floor Lath Mill, the ecology of Old Gao Village has been continuously destroyed.... All they did was punish people of Old Gao Village, and that is what caused this competition and the annihilation of the forest.” (338)

His propaganda and incitement have dramatic results, for at this juncture one of Cai’s cronies grips a glass in his hand so hard out of indignation that it shatters and, with his hand bleeding, shouts: “Wang Wenlong and Su Hong are the main culprits. Why didn’t the police detain them?” The scene easily reminds readers of fictional account
of early Communist underground organization and of political meetings before and during the Cultural Revolution.

But comically, Cai’s cronies are not, however, as trained or as smart as Communist Party cell members. One man betrays Cai on the spot: “Laohei, you fanned the fires to cut the forest. Now please organize and fan the fires to drive out the mill.” Cai’s expression turns angry: “Shut up! Who fanned the fires to cut the forest? Someone saw it was you who did it. Xi Xia will go and report and the police will come to arrest you SOB.” (338) A riot to loot, smash, and burn the factory is indeed started as they planned, when Director Zhu of the police substation is out of town. As I mentioned above, the Communist mentality of “beating the rich to help the poor” combined with the Mohist “Robin Hood chivalry” are the ideological basis of Cai’s activities.

Building the White Tower is a decisive act that enables him to beat Wang Wenlong and Su Hong. Very good at public relations stunts, Cai goes to the streets, greeted by everyone, answering one man that the construction will be complete the following day and the man should carry his grandfather to the site. The grandfather, sitting leaning against a wall, “coughing himself into a bent shrimp, as skinny as a piece of firewood,” suffers from lung cancer, and his grandson tells Cai that he totally relies on Cai to save his grandfather’s life. This dialogue rings like a line in the song
“East Is Red”: “He is a great savior of the people.”\textsuperscript{158} Someone remarked loudly: “Look at Laohei’s stature. If he wears long hair, his silhouette is exactly that of Chairman Mao!” (274-75)

Seizing every opportunity to attack his political opponents, Cai tells the people that if his vineyard had been successful, he would have paved the road, but now he can only rebuild the tower. Agreeing that the Mill is too miserly to be concerned with other people’s welfare and predicting that Wang and Su will be mugged, his audiences think that the White Tower should be named Black Tower, Old Black’s Tower ("Laohei" means “old black”). Laughing heartily that they were making fun of his black complexion and certainly he is not as fair as the girl named Baobao (Babe) who, with short fat legs but a fair and pretty face, chuckles: “Your face is certainly not as white as my behind.” Teasing her as to why it is so, he is told that it is because he always runs about in the sun with his clean-shaven head. He then answers: “But I have one member always hidden from the sun that is also very dark” (274).

Cai is able to integrate with the masses like the successful Communist leaders who can talk to different people on different levels in different languages and even crack obscene jokes to suit the occasion. To reinforce Cai’s likeness to the image of

\textsuperscript{158} The first few lines of this song that threatened to become the national anthem during the Cultural Revolution and its music broadcast through China’s first man-made satellite run thus: “The east is red; the sun rises. China has brought forth a Mao Zedong. He strives to seek happiness for the people. He is a great savior of the people.”
Mao Zedong, Jia has Cai give a typical Maospeak speech at the completion of the White Tower:

“In the construction of the tower, the people of Old Gao Village are united. Those who have strength gave their strength and those who have money gave money. This spirit is precious. In its history, Old Gao Village, relying on its unity and its own strength, was able to preserve itself. We have neither been driven away by outsiders, nor corrupted by them. And we will remain more united and stronger in the future.” (287)

Later when Cai Laohei suggests that people carry Beiliang's corpse to the gate of the factory, dozens respond. When the crowd gathers, the core members become more impassioned. The masses are quickly excited and aroused. This makes Shunshan, the Party Secretary, comment: “This is like the armed fights in the Cultural Revolution during which everyone became hot-headed and nobody could control himself. The year before last our county had a master of qigong lecturing about some qigong field that I did not comprehend. But now I do. In those years when Chairman Mao waved his hand above Tiananmen, millions of people cried and shouted as if they were mad. That is how the big qigong field did its job.” (373) The parallel is clear.

Jia’s caricature of both Mao Zedong and his characters (in this novel, Cai; in The Abandoned Capital, President Huang) by listing the comparisons is more daring
than that of his contemporary writers like Han Shaogong and Mo Yan. Han’s everlasting image Bing Zai in “Ba Ba Ba” (Father Father Father) who is an idiot made into a God can be read as a caricature of Chairman Mao, and by this image, Han, Chairman Mao’s fellow provincial, is flogging both the god and the god-making masses. Mo Yan’s *The Grass Eaters* has a scoundrel Commander Pi whom Vivian Lee convincingly reads as Chairman Mao.\(^{159}\) Su Tong, the youngest of them all, calls Mao’s name right out in his “1934 Escape”:

> The year I was eighteen, pouring over the classics of Mao Zedong in my family’s attic, I immediately associated his *Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan* with the residents of Maple Village burning down the Chen family granary. Looking way back in time to my grandmother Jiang’s 1934 transformation into a Fire Goddess, I believe Grandmother Jiang’s revolution against the rich landlord Chen Wenzhi will one day become a glorious page in the history of my family. Like Grandmother Jiang, I, too, miss that mysterious magnificent black-robbed sorcerer. Who was he? Where is he now? (149)\(^{160}\)

\(^{159}\) “Pi, which also means ‘skin,’ might just as well be Chairman ‘Mao’ (literally meaning ‘hair’). . . . Thus it is possible that this scary dreamscape is intended to be a political allegory: if Pi caricatures Mao, the red-haired Green Puppy and the Little Talking Wolfies who ‘parrot human speech’ are arguably the Little Red Guards mobilized by Pi (Mao) to destroy the ‘old world’ and its ‘webbed’ descendants.” Vivian Lee, “The Representation of History in Contemporary Chinese Fiction: Han Shaogong, Mo Yan, Su Tong,” diss. (University of British Columbia, 2001) 222.

\(^{160}\) Vivian Lee, 295.
The "black-robed sorcerer" is Chairman Mao. Students from Mainland China during the Cultural Revolution years would not forget the famous creation of the picture titled "Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan." Anyuan is a coalmine in Hunan Province. Before Liu Shaoqi was downed, it was well known that he led the Anyuan Strike. But after his downfall, he was labeled a "scab," a traitor who tried to sabotage the strike. One opportunist painter "created" a picture of Mao on his way to Anyuan wearing a long black robe, an umbrella in hand, walking towards us on a grassy and bushy slope. Near his foot the top of an electric pole can be seen. He is as grand as a god, and art critics after the Cultural Revolution criticized the painting as very much in the style of god images in religious paintings. As it happened, an appreciation essay of the painting was compiled in the unified Chinese textbook for junior high schools and the painting was replicated on statues built in many villages and working units in the Cultural Revolution years.

I demonstrate Cai’s character and deeds in order to prove that the troubles he has constantly made for the nouveau riche like Su Hong and Wang are not allowable in the Reform era, but would have been revolutionary in the old days. Cai’s deeds are what Su Hong’s name suggests. These two opposing sides actually form a unique critique of the absurdity of modern Chinese history and politics. Their cultural and social base is Chinese peasants’ absolute egalitarianism. As Jia’s tragic vision matures, he tends to see more and more absurdity in reality and history, which is a palpable sign of modernistic influence from Western philosophical writers like Joyce, Kafka,
Chapter 4 Tragic Heroes

Faulkner, Márquez, and Camus. In the next chapter, I will discuss the techniques Jia uses to bring his vision into form.
Chapter 5 Techniques

In his "Afterword" to The Abandoned Capital, Jia Pingwa writes:

At the age of forty, I realize that if creative writing belongs to the realm of eternity—it cannot be produced as you like—it should be a story that the universe has long possessed and it all depends whether one is destined to harvest it. Without bothering about foreign examples, take such Chinese classics as The Story of the West Wing and The Dream of the Red Chamber for instance, who could feel they are the fabrications by their authors when he reads them? We feel like we have experienced or have dreamt about them before. Good writing is a whole range of natural mountains which need no polishing or ingeniously planting a poplar here or an orchid there. (519)

161 And again in "Afterword" to White Nights, he starts with this reflection:
When fiction becomes a subject studied by many researchers and instructed to thousands of writers, it begins to lose more and more of its true nature, just like a cup of tea on your desk that you can no longer call ‘Yangtze River’.... What is fiction? It is a kind of talk, telling a tale. The various great efforts we have made—there are already many writers and works in the world, how could we pass by them—are in fact attempts at new ways of talking.... The crux of the matter for fiction now is that it is too like fiction. Even those who strive to be unlike fiction still betray the fact that they are making fiction. Fiction has come to a dilemma and it might as well be different from anything except telling about something that happened long ago to one’s relatives and friends.... If fiction betrays its author’s efforts at technique, it must then be bad fiction. We need no special technique to talk about ordinary life. Life is a story and it has its own techniques. Thus the more some people attempt to break the rules of fiction and the more they try new tangled forms, the more their fiction looks the same. Therefore, the success of fiction depends neither on its subject nor on its so-called structure. The reason why
Despite Jia’s claim of disinterest in strange and tortuous plots and precious newfangled techniques, he learns from masters of both traditional Chinese classics and the West and experiments successfully with what he learns. The traditional Chinese painting technique of multi-perspectives or multi-focuses he uses in characterization not only make his characters come out life-like, but also effortlessly bring out the subtle similarities and contrasts among them. The interaction between the characters created in such a way enriches and magnifies different aspects of his tragic heroes and heroines and their internal conflicts. “Pairing” is another such traditional technique that Jia cleverly uses to achieve an artistic effect. In addition, he uses myths and metaphors which not only help to convey his philosophical vision, structure his plots, and fine-tune his characters, but also adumbrate a tragic atmosphere that envelopes the tragic action throughout each of the novels and lingers even after reading it.

1. Characterization

(1) “Multi-Perspective Technique”

Critics like He Xilai and Dong Zizhu notice Jia Pingwa’s use of a “method of splitting oneself” 分身法 or a “method of making oneself invisible” 隐身法 very...
much like Monkey's trickery in *The Journey to the West* when they analyze the characterizations in *The Abandoned Capital*. The method is also what critics like Fei Bingxun and Jia Pingwa's biographer Sun Jianxi mean by a "technique of multifocal perspectives of traditional Chinese paintings." I have not been able to find a clear definition of this method's use in fiction. Jia Pingwa's observation of a picture of a house inscribed on a stone tablet he saw in Sichuan might shed some light. The courtyard was drawn in a few blocks in their respective perspectives different from the Western oil paintings organized on the principle of one focus. The chicken, goat, different sides of walls, the top, and bottom of the house all have to be viewed in their own perspective. Inspired by this, he wrote "Gestation" with multi-focal perspectives.

Recalling all my writings, strictly speaking, the early works are thin and shallow. They are developed around an event or something that happened to occupy my mind. I was then structuring works around what you critics call a focus. Later I would not do it that way. As I've been writing a novel [*The Abandoned Capital*] these days, I've

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162 Monkey Sun 孙悟空 can in a critical moment pull a few hairs from his body and blow into them some breath and those hairs instantly change into replica of himself that fight his enemy simultaneously so that the enemy cannot recognize who is the real Monkey. He can also change into different sizes, shapes, and objects.
completely set aside my former outline and do not bother to use it at all.\textsuperscript{163}

Critics are right to call *The Abandoned Capital* a literati novel in both senses of the term as defined by Martin Huang: a novel written about and by literati.\textsuperscript{164} Some call it a new *Rulin Waishi* (An Unofficial History of the Scholars, or just *The Scholars*), because the novel is about a group of modern day literati and people engaged in cultural work. This is the real operation of a “multi-perspective”: each character, each alter ego, is the author in a different time, locale, or circumstance. In other words, they are images of the author looked at from different angles or perspectives, just like *The Scholars* and *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, whose authors write their “self” into many characters as their alter egos. Although Martin Huang does not refer to it as the technique of multi-perspective, I think what he describes is in essence this method. Analyzing *The Scholars*, he notes that “the roles a literatus is supposed to play or the alternatives he can choose are carefully paraded forth one by one”: examination candidate, official, recluse, wenren, and even knight-errant. Huang says that all those roles the author, Wu Jingzi, himself had tried or would try in his life. (Ibid.)

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Zhuang Zhidie is Jia’s autobiographical protagonist and Jia splits both himself and Zhuang and writes parts of them into many characters with the help of the “multi-perspective technique.” On the one hand, the rest of the “four big celebrities” and Zhuang Zhidie’s friend Meng Yunfang might be himself and their roles might be his. They not only reflect part of him but also act out the parts that he might want to but has not yet. On the other hand, there are the unsuccessful “men of letters,” or “men of culture” such as the old madman, Zhou Min, and Zhong Weixian whose fate might be his if he was as unlucky or born a few years earlier.

For example, the old madman used to be a village teacher for years, but when the time came for him to be promoted to the state payroll, his superiors usurped the opportunity. He appealed to higher authorities, came to the provincial capital, and met with no help until he became demented. He “contracts himself out” collecting recyclable junk. The ballads he improvises are critical comments on contemporary society and they are ballads circulating in real life.

He Xilai says that Jia puts some of himself into this character and stands with him in the position of a spectator to observe calmly the relational and emotional

165 For Wenren 文人, we have the term of “men of letters,” “literary men,” or “literati,” but for Wenhuaren 文化人, we do not have a ready equivalent in English. It means “men engaged in cultural work” and “men who have achieved some culture,” or to be exact, “men who have received some education.” It depends on the education people around him have received. For example a junior high school graduate might be considered as a “man of culture” among villagers who have had no schooling.

166 The old madman’s shout “Contracted to collect junk” is a sarcastic reminder of the early reform era. As relatives of officials had the privilege to contract out small factories and shops, people with no privilege to contract out anything do not need to make a contract with anybody to collect junk.
tangle that involves him, giving him so much misery that he does not know if he wants to live or die. Therefore, every appearance of this odd man has the “alienation effect” that Brecht advocates. The sarcasm and ridicule contains his criticism of contemporary world. Therefore, the junk he collects is not only material waste but also spiritual waste produced by those in power. On this level, Jia endows junk and the junk collector with a general symbolic significance and links them with the general themes of *The Abandoned Capital*. *The Abandoned Capital*废都feidu, it must be stressed, contains the character废fei in its name.废fei can mean “waste, ruined, or impotent,” and therefore, critics write quite a bit about the significance of the name of the novel. Some people, Wang Yiyan for one, render the name of the novel as *Ruined Capital* or *Defunct Capital*. The parallel is that while the odd Madman collects waste both material and spiritual in his ballads, Jia collects it in his novel.

According to village standards, the old teacher is a man of culture at the lowest rung of the cultural ladder. Jia’s sympathy with him is obvious. Jia lets the old teacher reach a kind of renunciation after he becomes mad. Like the mad Daoist and scabby Monk in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, the old teacher lives a detached life and never seems to be worried about people’s insults; and, like an enlightened person, he frequently mouths some strange remarks which make perfect Daoist and Buddhist

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sense. For example, he tells Niu Yueqing and Liu Yue that the imported mattress and bed they sleep on is a straw mat while the straw mat he sleeps on is an imported bed and mattress. In other words, if a person has many worries, a deluxe bed is just like a straw mat. While he is carefree, he can sleep as soundly as if he were in a deluxe bed. He makes this remark to the two women as he lies under a lamppost puffing up smoke which circles around the flying mosquitoes. Those mosquitoes, he says, are cranes flying among the clouds. It is this detached attitude that parallels Zhuang’s tendency to renounce the world.

The tragedy of Zhong Weixian might very easily be that of Zhuang Zhidie if he were born only a few years earlier. Zhong Weixian (钟维贤, literally “protect the worthy”) met with the Hundred Flowers Movement and the subsequent Anti-Rightist Campaign that broke up his relationship with his university sweetheart and exiled him to a labor camp for twenty years. He could only marry a peasant woman who scratched his face right in front of his colleagues. Still cherishing his university love and dreaming that they might reunite, he eagerly checks if he has mail and hides himself in the washroom cubicle to cry his heart out over the letters. The love letters are fake ones written out of sympathy by Zhuang Zhidie to comfort Zhong.

Zhong’s two chances to obtain a senior academic title slip out of his hands and he suffers from late stage liver cancer. After Zhuang goes to the house of the directors of the Cultural Bureau and bangs his fists on their table arguing with them till midnight, the certificate for the title arrives only in time for Zhong’s body to jump
the queue to be cremated in the crematorium because it has a policy of “giving favorable treatment to senior intellectuals.” A person’s life is rendered absurd by the absurdity of history. Jia’s black humor signals the acute suffering of a whole generation of intellectuals.

Jia’s novel can be compared with *The Scholars* and Lu Xun’s “Kong Yiji.” Zhuang who is a successful man of letters enjoys all kinds of privileges and sleeps simultaneously with several pretty young women, while Zhong has to endure his shrewish wife and shuts himself in a washroom cubicle crying over false love letters. The old madman can only roam about the street collecting recyclable stuff and composing ballads while enduring insults and ridicule of all around him. Kong Yiji can only work as a scribe copying books for the Master Zhao (a provincial examination candidate) who has Kong’s leg broken when the latter is caught stealing books.

C. T. Hsia in his *The Classic Chinese Novel* notes an incident in *The Scholars* about Zhou Jin before he passes the provincial examination and Wang Hui, a successful provincial graduate.168 Wang Hui stops by Xue Market and Zhou Jin is asked to accompany him. Wang Hui falls to wine, rice, chicken, fish, duck and pork, without inviting Zhou Jin to join him; and it is only after Wang finishes eating that a monk sends up Zhou Jin’s rice with one dish of cabbage and a jug of hot water. The

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next day, Wang Hui gets up and leaves with the schoolroom floor so littered with
chiken, duck and fish bones, and melon-seed shells, that it takes Zou Jin a whole
morning to clear them all away.\textsuperscript{169} That explains why when Zhou Jin visits the
examination hall in the capital with his brother-in-law and a group of businessmen, he
hits his head on a corner of a desk to kill himself there and then.

A similar example can be found in the relation between Zhuang Zhidie and
Zhou Min. Zhou Min’s surname is Zhuang Zi’s first name. Zhuang Zi, the ancient
term for “Master Zhuang,” is a Daoist master. Zhuang Zhidie and Zhou Min, Zhuang
Zhou, are one and the same person. Zhou’s life is Zhuang’s own earlier life and
Zhuang is what Zhou will later turn into.\textsuperscript{170} This reveals Jia’s pessimism—a cyclical
vision—because he seems to suggest that human beings are incorrigible and that
when a person is not yet successful he will be humble, but once he becomes
successful he will harm those like his former self. It also unmistakably illuminates the
point that man inevitably engages in self-destruction.

Jia makes specific parallels between Zhuang and Zhou. Zhou Min’s status at
the \textit{Xijing Magazine} is exactly that of Zhuang twelve years earlier. As a new comer
without a \textit{hukou}, he has to be subservient to everybody. He cannot even keep the


\textsuperscript{170} Dong Zizhu is probably among the first critics who read Zhuang and Zhou into one person. See his
“Zhuang Zhou’s Dreaming of a Butterfly Is All-Empty—On \textit{The Abandoned Capital},” \textit{Great
Criticisms}, 180-211.
woman he loves. When Zhuang revisits the editorial office of *Xijing Magazine*, he recalls his own sufferings. People in the office took advantage of Zhuang because of their various connections. He was the one to go to the fields to help the peasants get in the harvest and join a rescue team after an earthquake. In the morning it was his duty to fetch hot water and sweep the room and in the evening it was his job to fasten all the windows. All five years here, he was reduced to tears and curses many times by their contempt and insults. (66)

Both Zhou and Zhuang are country boys from the same Tongguan County, both struggle to gain and maintain a foothold in urban cultural circles, both suffer from contempt, insults, or betrayal; both share the same hatred of it but are irresistibly drawn towards the city. Related to this situation is an anecdote about the poet Bai Juyi’s name whose poem about Emperor Xuanzong of Tang and Imperial Concubine Yang Yuhuan serves as the starting point of Jia’s novel, which I will discuss in detail shortly. The three characters 白 居 易 (bai ju yi) can be construed as “It is easy to live without paying rent.” According to Wang Dingbao’s *Tang Zhiyan*, 唐 擤 言, when Bai Juyi went to the capital Chang’an (present-day Xi’an, Xijing in Jia’s novel) to sit for the imperial examination and brought a collection of his poems to show to the big scholar-official Gu Kuang 顾 况 (725-814), the latter joked with him: “Everything in
the capital is pricey. It is not at all easy to live here rent-free?" (长安百物贵，居大不易。)\textsuperscript{171}

Both Zhuang and Zhou love \textit{xun} music. Zhuang asks Zhou one day if he has ever noticed that there is a person playing \textit{xun} music morning and evening on the wall, which Zhuang secretly records from a distance and plays to Zhou. Zhuang did not know that the player was Zhou himself. The critic Zhang Zhizhong observes that Zhou Min not only taught himself to play \textit{xun} music, but also, much more enlightened than anybody else beside Zhuang Zhidie, he is conscious of the lethargy and decline of traditional culture and the abandoned capital. It takes Zhou no time to gain the critical consciousness of the abandoned capital that it takes Zhuang more than ten years of experience, intoxication in success, and setbacks in life to achieve: “Coming from a shabby county town and arriving in a prosperous city, the people I meet are all old men who keep talking about nothing but ‘anecdotage.’ Mother, you gave birth to

\textsuperscript{171} See note 13, p. 35 in Wang Shiyi in his \textit{Biography of Bai Juyi} (Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 1983): 见《唐摭言》卷七：“白乐天初举，名未振，以歌诗谒顾况。况谑之曰：长安百物贵，居大不易。及读至〈赋得原上草送友人〉诗曰：野火烧不尽，春风吹又生。况叹之曰：有句如此，居天下有甚难，老夫前言戏之耳。Wang Shiyi believes that the anecdote is apocryphal for several reasons: 1, before Bai went to the capital in the year of 788, Gu Kuang had already left the capital for Suzhou. 2, Gu Kuang’s bad reputation and philandering often made him an object of insult and ridicule among the officials. Therefore, Bai would not go to see him even if he was in the capital. 3, Bai is not a person who would seek favor through personal connections. See Wang, 21.
me, your new son, but when on earth will your son be able to have some real new thoughts?” This criticism is penetrating.172

Outwardly, Zhuang is aloof and shows contempt for Zhou’s thinking and behavior, while inwardly he wishes secretly to do or fantasizes being able to do what Zhou Min does. For example, if Zhuang followed Zhou’s strategy by insisting that what Zhou wrote was true, Jing Xueyin’s suit would have been defeated from the outset. The unscrupulous Li Hongwen suggests that Jing Xueyin probably hates the fact that Zhuang did not rape her when they were involved romantically. That the couple did not succeed in getting sexually involved was due to Zhuang’s timidity and her flighty and shallow haughtiness.

After Zhuang rejects Zhou’s suggestion off-hand, another strategy is suggested by Zhou Min’s friend Laohu (Tiger), which, if carried out, would also put the whole court in disarray and make Jing want to cry and laugh at the same time. This Tiger is a lawyer. He tells Zhou Min: “Even if Zhuang did not want to admit that what you wrote is true, you have another way to deal with the whole matter. You let another woman go to court insisting that she herself, not Jing, is the person that is described in the story” (445). The court would never be able to prove who is right and who is telling the truth and would certainly admit its defeat and stupidity in taking up the case. After the higher court decides in favor of Jing, Zhou Min shows his knight-

errant character by pretending to be another person who mistook Jing’s husband for a debtor and broke his leg. As I remarked earlier, while Zhuang fantasizes about violence, Zhou carries it out in action. Zhou is a foil to the effete Zhuang and he carries Zhuang’s wishes into action. This might be a way of relieving the literati’s anguish and frustration over the injustice of the so-called normal legal process.

By contrasting Zhou and Zhuang, Jia seems to suggest that in Zhuang’s tragic defeat in the court case, his effete personality is to blame. The extent of his frustration is proven by his fantasized revenge on Jing Xueyin. However, while he might avoid frustration and rage by being like Zhou, he cannot avoid suffering like Zhou as Zhou himself does in the end. As a tragic hero who often has to reconcile with, if not submit to, overwhelming adversarial force by adopting a different perspective, Zhou appears with a bandaged head in Meng Yunfang’s home, sees that they are playing mah-jongg and says he wants to join too. After he relates what happened in Tongguan, they all grow silent. Zhou Min says, probably expressing everyone’s frustration, helplessness, hopelessness, and resignation: “Why all this silence? Tang Wan’er is my woman, for whom I’ve even stopped feeling sad, why are you sad? Worldly affairs are like a dream, so let this dream be over. We have to go on living” (501).

Despite the contrast between them, which differences are two sides of the same coin complementing each other or two directions the same person wishes to go simultaneously, their similarities are much stronger in that, as I list above, they are both from the countryside, much bullied by urban people, both engage in literary work
to eke out a living and gain and maintain a foothold in a city which it is not easy to live in, both discover the decline and decrepitude of the urban culture and civilization, and both are victims of the powerful in political, judicial, and cultural circles. They form a very curious "human tangle," as W. MacNeile Dixon might say.\(^{173}\)

The tangle is more intricate because of Jia’s design of writing two persons into one or splitting one person into two who are similar and different simultaneously and who suffer the same fate in some respects but are adversarial in other respects. Zhou writes a story about Zhuang, which drags Zhuang into a lawsuit. Since they are both sued, they become allies. Zhou the younger writer writing about the celebrity writer to establish himself, suggests to us what the celebrity writer might have done in the past and what and the value of what he writes about in the present. That Zhuang the celebrity cheats Zhou by sleeping with his woman also suggests Zhuang’s own humiliation in the past at other more powerful and more successful people’s hands. Since they are both writers and both have an acute consciousness of their situation, surroundings, and of other people’s and their own foibles and liabilities, the harm they do to each other is to be expected by themselves. The knowledge they gain of themselves and of each other and other people, and the dark recesses of their own

\(^{173}\) "Here we exchange the outer conflict of man with circumstances for the direct collision with others or the inner collision with himself, a divided self, since he is at once a person seeking his own proper ends and the member of a community in whose texture the ends of others are incorporated. This is that wide region of the problems of conduct and the tragedies which spring from the everlasting clash of divergent aims and interests, the human tangle." W. Macneile Dixon, *Tragedy*. Second Ed. (London: Edward Arnold & Co., 1925) 104. (Emphasis original)
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souls as they venture into this God-forsaken “abandoned capital” might so disillusion them that they will not want to live there or anywhere else any longer. This is their spiritual tragedy.

Besides Zhou Min, Cow is another of Jia/Zhuang’s alter egos, Jia/Zhuang seen in another perspective. Her contempt of urbanites’ excessive desires and treachery and her nostalgia and homesickness are Jia/Zhuang’s. Cow’s life is tragic and her vision of human life is even more tragic. He Xilai thinks if Zhuang Zhidie represents his author’s bitter, burdensome, involved, trammeled, unhappy, and unenlightened side, the “philosopher” Cow represents the side of his attempts to be rid of various worldly entanglements and bewilderments. It is on Zhuang’s suggestion that Liu Sao brought Cow from the Zhongnan Mountains to sell milk directly from the cow’s teats so that everybody can see that the milk is real. Zhuang is also the only person that Cow allows to directly suckle from her teats. Others who try it are either kicked or urinated on.

Symbolically, Cow is Zhuang’s mother and also his spokesperson. She laments the degeneration of human beings and insists that human beings evolved from cows instead of apes and thinks they are the most ungrateful animals in the world. Cow contemplates her life in the city, perceiving nothing but a pile of concrete. She

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175 Cow stands for peasants while “human beings” represent urbanites who, according to Jia Pingwa, are mostly second or third generation descendants of rural people and yet they look down upon rural people.
laments the fact that humans constructed the city, but the city causes their species to degenerate. She wishes that in one night she could rape all the women of the city and improve their breeds. Cow must be so mad that she forgets she is a female and is unable to rape women. She recalls that when she was chosen to come to the city many of her fellow cows were filled with admiration and envy. But now she misses the rough, simple, and poor life there and even the ugly swear words her masters flung at her.¹⁷⁶ This hatred of the city is a constant theme in Jia’s four novels and a tragic deadlock for his protagonists, for, as noted above, they hate the city while being helplessly attracted to it.¹⁷⁷

The critic Zhong Benkang wants us to pay attention to the “philosopher” Cow’s observations and reflections, which he thinks express most thoroughly human existential danger and anxiety.¹⁷⁸ The Cow seems to be the source of wisdom. Humans are ignorant. Right after they are born they need to learn until they learn well and when they learn well they die. So they repeat endlessly and forever remain in ignorance. Therefore, humans can neither really know themselves nor the world. Nor

¹⁷⁶ Jia on several occasions recalled that during the few years he was laboring in the fields in his own village, the elders cursed him with very ugly swear words.

¹⁷⁷ In his interview with Han Luhua, Jia Pingwa says: “It seems writers of peasant descents are all like this. Visibly or invisibly, they all have a hatred, a kind of latent revulsion against the city, although they are all aware the city represents civilization.” “Replies to Questions on Novel Writing,” Sitting Buddha, 214.

can they know that they are situated in an existential crisis. So Cow reflects: Humans are so degenerate that they have nothing but a clever head. It is exactly this head that makes people become more and more degenerate. This is an existential tragedy, another tragic deadlock in modernistic thinking.

The cow is significant in further senses. Cow is Niu, Niu Yueqing’s family name. Niu Yueqing thinks Zhuang is like a child and often takes care of him like her child. Cow also metaphorizes Mr. Niu, Niu Yueqing’s grandfather who was a hermit. The significance of her being from the Zhongnan Mountains twenty miles south of Xi’an is built into the idiom “Zhongnan Shortcut” 终点 捷 径 (zhongnan jiejing). In the earlier years of the Tang, the imperial house of Tang received whole-hearted help from some hermits. Tang Gaozu and Taizong issued many decrees to search for and recommend able hermits to become their officials and ministers because they wanted the military who helped them to establish the dynasty to have less influence in the court and encouraged the reclusive life to curb corruption. This produced the ironic phenomenon that those hermits or aspirants who were in other provinces rushed to settle down in Zhongnan Mountains in the hope that they would be easily located and recommended to the imperial court. Thus Sima Chengzhen commented that Zhongnan is “a shortcut to officialdom.”

Jia Pingwa connects Cow, Mr. Niu (his prototype is

from Lantian which is part of Zhongnan Mountains), Zhuang Zhidie, and possibly Jia himself (he is from Danfeng country, an extension of the Zhongnan Mountains) as hermits who have been recommended and called to "minister" the city. There is irony, self-mockery, and disillusionment, as well as ambivalence in these images.

There is also a modern connection of the cow to those who serve the people but ask for little in return. Ever since Chairman Mao immortalized the most celebrated middle couplet of Lu Xun's poem titled "Self-Mockery": "Eyes askance, I cast a cold glance at the thousand pointing fingers. / Head bowed, I gladly agree, an ox for the children to be" 横眉冷对千夫指，俯首甘为孺子牛, Cow always stands for hard working people and especially for the peasants, as expressed in the slogan: "whole heartedly be the old yellow ox for the revolution" 甘当革命的黄牛 (gandan geming de laohuang niu). 180

Cow and Jia/Zhuang are imperceptibly woven together by many intra-textual and inter-textual strands. It is after Zhuang comments that Cow is a philosopher that she starts her many philosophical musing sessions. Zhuang and Tang go to Liu Sao's home to see her when she is sick with liver cancer, and they also witness her death.

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when they pay her a second visit. The Cow, after ploughing the fields, drawing carts, producing milk for human beings all her life, besides giving her meat and skin to her masters, produces a biological gold—bezoar resulting from her hepatitis. Critic He Xilai thinks this detail symbolizes Jia Pingwa’s sentiment, reflection, and epiphany after his hospitalization for hepatitis. In “afterwords” to the novel, Jia Pingwa writes: “These few years, disasters befell me one after another. First I was infected with hepatitis that could not be cured and had to be hospitalized, much like being imprisoned for over a year. The numerous needle injections are like thousands of arrows piercing my body. The various big and small packages of herbs added together are enough to feed a cow” (520, emphasis added). He Xilai thinks that it is not unreasonable to say that the philosopher Cow was raised on her author’s disease, disasters, and herbs. Cow’s tragedy is Jia/Zhuang’s own tragedy, and her tragic vision is his.

(2) Pairing

Another technique related to but different from the multi-perspective technique or method of splitting oneself discussed above is “pairing” which Jia Pingwa must have learned from such classic masters as Cao Xueqin and others. Angelina C. Yee in her essay “Counterpoise in Honglou meng” notes that “many of the characters in Honglou meng [The Dream of Red Chamber] are conceived in pairs, ____________

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181 He Xilai, 59.
whether as opposites, doubles, or mutual complements”: “the Buddhist monk and the Taoist priest, the Divine Luminescent Stone-in-Waiting and the Crimson Pearl Flower, Zhen Shi-yin and Jia Yu-cun, Zhen Bao-yu and Jia Bao-yu, Dai-yu and Bao-chai, and so on.” The function of this technique is as Yee puts it, “By a series of comparisons and contrasts, characters become more sharply delineated; many minor characters are tributaries that flow into the mainstream, and doubling becomes a means of depicting the commonality of their fate” (649). In White Nights, we have such pairs as Ye Lang and Kuan Ge, Yan Ming and Zou Yun. In Old Gao Village, we simultaneously see the opposites of Xi Xia and Su Hong, Su Hong and Ju Wa, Cai Laohei and Wang Wenlong, and Cai and Gao Zilu.

To begin our examples, Yan Ming is particularly virtuous so far as her good care of Zhu Yihe is concerned. In a changing society that becomes more and more materialistic, utilitarian, and selfish where fewer and fewer young people even bother to take care of their own parents, she is exceptional as far as the traditional virtues of filial piety and loyalty are concerned. Her virtue is brought into sharp relief by her contrast with Zou Yun who works at a bar in the Pingze Castle Hotel. Despite Yan Ming’s success as a star model, she never boasts of her success and popularity to Ye Lang. It happens that Zou Yun invites Ye Lang and Kuan Ge to a dinner at the hotel to thank them for obtaining a business license for her. There, Ye Lang for the first

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time sees what a glamorous model Yan Ming is. After a breath-taking performance, gold miner Ning Hongxiang presents her with a flower basket worth two thousand dollars. Discovering Ye Lang and Kuan Ge in the audience, she goes to talk to them, followed by Ning who is now warmly received by Zou Yun. While Yan Ming treats Ning coolly, Zou takes every opportunity to be near him. A few days later, Ye Lang finds Ning and Zou in the same hotel room.

Both girls have the experience of being stalked by some men on separate occasions. However, while Zou uses it to boast of her attractiveness to Yu Bai and Ding Lin, Yan Ming does not let anybody know about it until Ye Lang’s housemates ask her if she has a friend waiting outside the compound. A man followed her across the city from outside the West Gate (Ye Lang is living outside the East Gate) and at one point even told her that he was in love with her.

Although Ye Lang may have reason to doubt Yan Ming’s chastity after their first sexual intercourse, what is important is her present self. Yan’s whole-hearted devotion to him, to her work as a model, and to her care of Zhu Yihe, and her appropriate and proper conduct and attitude to all around her demonstrate that she is beyond reproach. But Ye Lang is stubborn, and Yan Ming has to divorce him, and disappear with her baby to Beijing or Shanghai, hoping that she will work and save money and have surgery done to her baby as she had done to herself earlier. She is made a tragic figure exactly because she does not deserve to suffer. What is critiqued is Ye Lang’s and ordinary people’s esthetic standards. What is affirmed is a
transcendence of vulgar esthetic norms and attainment of a more reliable and more rational truth.

Zou Yun, in contrast, ruins both her intellectual boyfriend’s career and her own life by her moral abandonment and her boundless material desires. As already compared above, Yan Ming’s love for the country lad Ye Lang who never had an opportunity to go to university is a whole-hearted, selfless devotion. Zou Yun, in contrast, though she herself has not been educated at university, forever complains against and disparages her intellectual boyfriend. Her snobbery, shallowness, and insensitivity are in striking contrast with Yu Bai, Yan Ming, and Ding Lin. For example, Yu Bai lets the old country woman Ku live in her house. This would be unthinkable for Zou Yun. She even shows her disgust of the old woman at Yu Bai’s house. In the habit of judging people by their appearance, she comments on Ye Lang’s dress: “Just by one look, you can tell that he is one of those who labor hard but earn little money” (47). After Ye Lang finally obtains a business license for her through his connection with Li Gui, the director of a bank credit office, Zou Yun’s first words are: “I say anybody is better than Qingpu” (165). Ye Lang’s answer that he is a piece of old rag that is only good to stuff a hole in a wall can wake other people to Zou Yun’s inappropriate remark, but not her. She immediately makes a further request to Ye Lang that he apply for a loan through his connection to Li Gui.

Zou herself has American dollars, which she asks Ye Lang to exchange for RMB for her. She buys fashionable clothes ordered from Shanghai or Guangdong,
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shows off to Yu Bai and Ding Lin, and advises them: “If you dress well, he makes love to you a few more times every day. Isn’t it much better than saving the money and let him see you without excitement and passion, and before long husband and wife are no longer like husband and wife?” (50-51) This is an unmarried woman’s speech to an unmarried young woman and a married young female journalist.

She praises Yu Bai, as cousin to Qingpu, for being so capable while he is good for nothing: “If it were another man, let alone eight or ten business licenses, even if it were a nuclear bomb, he would have nabbed it and carried it home, round and smooth!” This prompts Yu Bai to reply: “If the nuclear bomb was made from cotton or linen, you would probably be wearing it.”

Zou treats Ye Lang and Kuan Ge to a banquet in the Pingze Castle Hotel to thank the two for the business license. To lash out at Chinese culinary beliefs, to make fun of the corrupt leaders, and to ridicule Zou Yun, Jia cleverly manipulates what is served. The general manager of the hotel particularly gives Zou Yun a donkey’s penis (like male tiger’s or male dog’s penises, believed to be a tonic as well as an aphrodisiac) and when it is served cut naturally in the shape of coins and thus acquiring its name “coin meat” (qianqian rou), Zou Yun pops one piece into her mouth and, chewing it noisily, asks: “Is it really as effective as it is claimed to be?” Her remark makes both Kuan Ge and Ye Lang very embarrassed. (165)
Importuned by her, her archeologist boyfriend Wu Qingpu quits his job to help her to run a restaurant, but a few days before it opens, she goes to the mining area with Ning Hongxiang. With a colonialist mentality, she shows off as if she were a superior race in front of the mountain people. Yet after she witnesses Ning finishing off a man accidentally hit by her by running over him again and again, she becomes mentally ill, secludes herself in a lonely building daily hassled by Ning’s wife, and has no face to go back to Xijing.

One can imagine Jia Pingwa has a store of qualities, attributes, deeds, words, nouns and adjectives, and he takes an inventory, he saves the good ones for Yan Ming and the bad ones for Zou Yun, so that the polarization in characterization brings out maximum contrast in effect.

While many critics follow Fei Bingxun’s opinion that Ye Lang is a wandering knight, I think he is more of the “wandering” part while Kuan Ge is more of the “knight” part. Together they form a good pair of wandering knights. Kuan Ge’s tragedy is that of a Don Quixote and a Job. In him Jia invests the ideal of Confucianism as well as Mohism. Anachronistic, upright, altruistic to an extreme degree, a living Lei Feng, or a “frozen Lei Feng” in Fei Bingxun’s term, he draws our tears through our laughter. By comparing Ye Lang and Kuan Ge, I hope the

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significance of the knighthood ideal and their respective personalities can be brought into relief.

Kuan Ge’s diary is exactly that of Lei Feng. He notes which soldier’s families need natural gas and coal so that he can help to buy it in his spare time; in which lane a girl riding a bike stops to fix her wheels and is robbed of her purse; which lane has a child missing while a tenant disappears at about the same time. For example, there is a drug addict. Kuan Ge buys medicine, helps him to visit doctors, arranges for him to go to the countryside to have a withdrawal period hoping that he will get rid of the addiction, and goes to see him regularly when he is confined in a drug addict institution, even though the man’s parents refuse to see him. Kuan Sao says: “So I quarreled with him, but he told me he was saving people. I asked him if he was Chairman Mao. He answered he is a policeman. En huh, so you know that you are only a policeman?” (35) To serve the cyclists, he uses his own money to buy an air pump and puts it on a street corner only to be stolen the next day. He then borrows money from Ye Lang to buy another one and chains it to a post.

According to his wife, however, he never buys a single vegetable or a single grain of food for his own family. “He belongs to the Communist Party and they entrust him to me to provide food and lodging. We don’t see each other at both ends of the day.” (34) A true living Lei Feng, an ideal wandering knight as he is, to live with him would probably be impossible for anybody. Kuan Sao says that her husband
“has been growing up in the sound of my curses” and that she will eventually die “at his hands” due to his eternal silence and obstinacy. (35)

Kuan Ge’s case raises the question of the difference between the Mohists, alleged forerunners of the wandering knights, and Confucians. Martin W. Huang in his *Literati and Self-Re/Presentation*, cites Madame Shui, mother of Wen Suchen, protagonist of *Humble Words of an Old Rustic*, warning her son to distinguish between the deeds of the knights-errant and the teachings of the Sage. When Suchen’s brother, Guxin, defends him by citing Confucius’s saying “failure to uphold justice is a sign of lack of courage,” Madame Shui cautions her sons “by pointing out the importance of discrimination between different cases (e.g., between helping one’s own family and one’s neighbors) and proclaims that indiscriminate response to all calls for help is Mohist rather than Confucian” (120). Huang cites James Liu’s relevant discussion: “Thus, by Confucian standards, the knights-errant often went beyond the call of duty. This, to the Confucian way of thinking, was not only unnecessary but also undesirable, for if one died for a stranger, what would one do for one’s parents?” (193)

It is not difficult to understand why the “May Fourth” radical generation and its successors, the Communists, did not like Confucianism. Like any revolutionary organization, they needed total selfless devotion and the spirit of self-sacrifice to

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make their revolutionary causes succeed. Like Christian priests forever preaching for
total devotion to God and to redeem each person’s sin (an eternal task, because
whoever exists is sinful), before Mao’s death in 1976, Maoists forever advocated Lei
Feng’s altruism and called on all people to “struggle against self and criticize
revisionists” 斗私 批 修 (dou si pi xiu). This was an impossible task because one has
to have a self first in order to struggle against self. The constant self-examination and
self-criticism, especially of the Cultural Revolution period made all people feel guilty
because no matter how they tried, they found there was still a distance between
themselves and what they thought of as a true and ideal communist. They had
difficulty telling themselves that they were boundlessly loyal to Chairman Mao
because they knew they still had a self in their thinking.

Kuan Ge is the product of the early Communist times qualified by the revived
traditional Confucian ideal and superstition (he wants to build a temple for Lei Feng).
In the Reform period, the time when idealism, sublimity, and faith are lost and when
nobody believes in Lei Feng’s spirit, Kuan Ge’s practice and pursuit is as
anachronistic as Don Quixote’s.

For example, Kuan Ge borrows money from Ye Lang to give to a young
woman released from a detention camp for having cheated in her marriage (i.e.,
marrying a man for his money and then running away as early as possible) and
criticizes Ye Lang for being so cynical as to regard every person as a con artist or
thinking that every con artist is incorrigible. On hearing that a policeman Huang
received sexual favors from the cheater’s girlfriend and then released him. Kuan Ge reports Huang to the Branch Bureau, which promises to discipline Huang but covers it up instead. Kuan Ge then reports it directly to the General Bureau. As a result, the Branch Bureau praises Kuan Ge in public, but hates him in its heart. Therefore, when the bike of the daughter-in-law of the Chief of Police is stolen, the branch assigns the job of catching the thief to Kuan Ge. It also refuses to assign him an apartment that should be his. Kuan Sao complains to Ye Lang:

“But your Brother Kuan thought he was correct, he was the truth, and the truth should prevail upon evil…. In the 1950s, he would shout ‘Defend our motherland.’ In the 1970s, he would say socialism is good. Now, he’s stopped saying that ‘There are still two-thirds of people in the world to be liberated’, but he keeps finding that this isn’t right and that’s wrong!” (99-100)

As a few critics have already noticed, Jia Pingwa invests deep sympathy in both Ye Lang and Kuan Ge. While the two appear often opposite to each other, they

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are in fact Jia Pingwa's dual aspirations. As Zhou Min in *The Abandoned Capital*, Cheng Yi in *The Earthen Gate*, and Cai Laohei in *Old Gao Village*, Ye Lang, with his boldness to think and to act even through illegal means, is much more effective and direct than the effete intellectuals who only know how to go through legal and proper means. Through characters like Zhuang Zhidie, Meng Yunfang, the Old Madman, and Zhong Weixian in *The Abandoned Capital*, Kuan Ge in this novel, Old Ran and Fan Jingquan in *The Earthen Gate*, and Gao Zilu in *Old Gao Village*, mostly intellectuals, Jia Pingwa often exposes the intellectuals' ineffectuality and helplessness. Like Unamuno who claims Don Quixote to be the Spanish national spirit and who calls Don Quixote "Our Lord" particularly because Don Quixote dares to make himself ridiculous and dares to laugh at his own soul, Jia Pingwa in quite a few places pokes fun at people very much like himself.

Kuan Ge's tragi-comedy is just such as example. In order to catch the bike thief who he guesses might strike in the same place again, he hides in the bike shed for three days and nights, bitten by both mosquitoes and flies, suffering both hunger and heat. He falls into an uncovered water sewer and has to be bandaged up. Ye Lang asks him: "It's enough to be in plain clothes. Do you have to make up like this?" (109)

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Ye Lang ends Kuan Ge’s ordeal by stealing someone else’s phoenix brand woman’s bike and lying to Kuan Ge that he caught the thief selling it at the ghost market by the East Gate.

A wandering knight hurrying to the side of maidens in distress, Kuan Ge goes to Ning’s hometown to persuade Zou Yun to return to Qingpu, only to be shunned by her. On the way back to the city, he stops a local skinhead from bullying two women passengers and is hit in the head with a brick. The bus driver refuses to stop, fearing that the skinhead might make trouble for the bus later. Wounded and bleeding, Kuan Ge has to wait till all the passengers get off at their destinations before tending his wounds in a hospital. When Ye Lang points out the callousness of the masses, Kuan Ge insists on seeing the positive side: “You should see how all the passengers were relieved and glad that righteousness prevailed over evil when I subdued the skinhead” (322-23).

Forgetting that a bus driver can refuse to stop for him, he writes a note certifying the story of a woman with a baby in her arms who says she was going home with her baby but was robbed; Kuan Ge asks the railway and bus services to provide assistance to her. She turns out to be a nanny who kidnapped her charge in Beijing. “Kuan Ge has committed a serious error and, especially taking into account his early mistakes, he is no longer fit to be a policeman.” (352) The past mistakes, of course, include his exposure of the Branch Bureau, which cannot be said openly. Not fit to be a policeman, and even less fit to be a salesman, he loses his job, wife, home, and is, in
other words, no longer fit to be in the city where he has worked for the past thirty years.

Critics studying Kuan Ge’s tragedy will probably take his certifying the woman kidnapper to be his “tragic flaw.” But the concept of “tragic flaw” often turns out to be at best the salt we add to our hero’s injury. Just as Job’s counselors do Job a double injustice by repeating that God is just and punishes the evil ones and Job himself must have committed some serious offences against God, we know that Kuan Ge’s mistake only serves as an excuse for getting rid of him because of his troublesome righteousness. The punishment Kuan Ge receives for his so-called “tragic flaw” never gives us relief or a sense of reconciliation, but indignation at the wrong done to him by his corrupt leaders.

I believe there is a pattern in many works of literature, and especially in the melodrama of Chinese vernacular fiction, to use the concept of karma to give an ending of “poetic justice.” Richard B. Sewall cites Anthony and Miriam Hanson to conclude that *The Book of Job* is a “dangerous” book. The “neat and tidy finish” of *The Book of Job*, as Eileen Chang deplores in *Beijing Opera*, does not provide people with a questioning mind with a sense that God is good; that justice has been rendered; and that the universe is secure. Punishment not meeting or often exceeding the crime or sin or error is what I might term “malentendu.” The police arrest and maltreat Ye

187 "We have the feeling of reaching darkness rather than light. A mystery has been probed, little help given, and the unconvincing conclusions only deepen the mystery...[pp.16-17]" Richard B. Sewall, *The Vision of Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959) 154.
Lang because they believe that anyone engaged in a fight must be a rascal. Even Kuan Ge who had been drinking the spilt liquor from the top of the table with Ye Lang in a pub earlier blamed Ye Lang for being ambushed by the gang on his going to the pub in the first place. This Chinese idea of “borrowing a head” to warn the public 借头示众 has the effect of executing the wrong person just to make an example. Cheng Yi in the next novel does the same to Meizi, and the government does the same to him in the end, too.

Arthur Miller wrote in “Tragedy and the Common Man” a few months after his “Death of a Salesman” in defense of the play as a modern tragedy: “Now, if it is true that tragedy is the consequence of a man’s total compulsion to evaluate himself justly, his destruction in the attempt posits a wrong or an evil in his environment. And this is precisely the morality of tragedy and its lesson.”

Kuan Ge indeed makes a mistake in not discriminating between the real needy and the fake criminal and in certifying a person’s story without finding out her real background, but dismissing him from the post at which he worked for thirty years just for that mistake is excessive. The later arrest of Ye Lang for sending a master thief to steal Gong’s appropriated public funds and bribes is another example of the evil environment crushing a man who is exposing corruption. The motive for the arrest is that other powerful figures are afraid that Ye Lang might do the same to them.

Some people might point out that Kuan Ge should be careful whom he helps. If we are so particular about whom we help, we will probably end up in the preposterous extreme of what was going on during the Cultural Revolution. It is reported that the emergency room refused to tend to the critically wounded before they checked out the patients’ class background. Kuan Ge is sensitive in the sense of Mencius’s teaching. Mencius says: “All men must have a mind which cannot bear to see the suffering of others.” If we bear in mind the fact that Yan Ming disappears to another city with her newborn baby in her arms not long before the female kidnapper incident, Kuan Ge’s helping the wrong woman is pardonable.

Having too many concerns about other people, Kuan Ge suffers from psoriasis, a skin disease that is often caused by a nervous disorder. Although I find no medical proof for the theory, Jia Pingwa means it that way. Kuan Ge’s dry scaly skin falls like snowflakes and itches and stinks like Job’s leprosy. Like Job, Kuan Ge is shunned and mocked by all. And like Job’s skin condition, his skin disease is looked upon as if it were the result of moral failings.

Jia Pingwa packs Kuan Ge with sympathetic images, letting them transform from one type to another effortlessly. Kuan Ge’s psoriasis creeps up his neck to his head and forms a hard crust all over his body, turning him into a beetle. This is unmistakably the image of Gregory in Kafka’s “Metamorphosis.” On the bank of the

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189 Gu Lu 顾鹿, Zhushi jiaozheng 注释校正 (Proofread and Annotated), Hua Ying Sishu 华英四书 (The Four Books in Chinese and English), (Shanghai, 1900) Mencius, 77.
moat, he hears kids saying to themselves “beetles, beetles” and, thinking that he is a beetle, he leaps into a horse-riding posture, thrusting out the walking stick he bought for the neighboring Lady Ma (horse), very much like Don Quixote charging forward with his lance, and feels himself a real Don Quixote. (376) But unlike Don Quixote, he decides to walk along the Yellow River to Zhumadian (Horse Resting Inn) in Henan Province to treat his psoriasis as well as to raise funds to build a Lei Feng temple. 190 He tells his friends who come to see him off that it is inadequate to learn from Lei Feng only once a year. Like Confucius, and Guan Yu, Lei Feng should have a temple, too. (377)

Building a temple for Lei Feng! Kuan Sao says everything Kuan Ge says is either straight from books or from the leaders’ mouths. He is like Don Quixote who goes crazy after having read too many romances about knighthood. Kuan Ge is anachronistic because the ordinary people have almost forgotten all about Lei Feng’s spirit on the one hand and on the other hand the Communist ideologues will be displeased with him for spreading superstitious beliefs which would be a blasphemy against the hero Lei Feng. However, his anachronism is also a double irony that undercuts the Communist ideology, which is exactly using the image of Lei Feng to promote their obscurantist policy and government.

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190 Ye Lang is described as having a long horse face and an unruly horse. Horse is a key animal image in this novel as Cow is in the first, dogs in the third, and pigs in the last novel of this study.
Nan Dingshan is afraid that Kuan Ge might die long before he reaches Zhumadian, but Kuan Ge tells him: “Buddy, you must remember that not every river is able to reach the sea. Nor will all promises be able to be realized. As a choice for everybody, seriously do one’s work, actively conduct oneself, and leave behind a pure and righteous passion-nature in the world.”

We can easily see another contrast between Kuan Ge and Ye Lang, the “knight” part and the “wandering” part respectively of the “wandering knights.” While Ye Lang busily seeks to know himself, Kuan Ge is busily doing his work. Unamuno says: “Seek thyself” begins with ‘Know thyself.’” To which Unamuno quotes Carlyle’s answer: “The latest Gospel in this world is, Know thy work and do it.”

This passion-nature (literally qi of justice of pure justice) Kuan Ge talks about comes from Mencius’s answer to Gongsun Chou’s question wherein Mencius surpasses Gao Zi. Mencius says:

I understand words. I am skillful in nourishing my vast, flowing passion-nature.... This is the passion-nature: —It is exceedingly great,

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191 Carlyle goes on: “‘Know thyself’: long enough has that poor ‘self’ of thine tormented thee; thou wilt never get to ‘know’ it, I believe! Think it not thy business, this knowing thyself; thou art an unknowable individual; know what thou canst work at; and work at it, like a Hercules. That will be thy better plan.” Unamuno, 231.
and exceedingly strong. Being nourished by rectitude, and sustaining
no injury, it fills up all between heaven and earth. This is the passion-
nature: — It is the mate and assistant of righteousness and reason.
Without it, man is in a state of starvation. It is produced by
accumulation of righteous deeds; it is not to be obtained by incidental
acts of righteousness.\textsuperscript{192}

Kuan Ge’s “vast, flowing passion-nature” is produced by accumulation of righteous
deeds and not by incidental acts of righteousness. He has done righteous deeds all his
life and hopes to raise funds by his death on his journey to Henan Province.

On the other hand, the contrast between Kuan Ge and Ye Lang is only
superficial. Jia Pingwa intentionally converges the two characters in the images of
horse and the spirit of Don Quixote. While Kuan Ge anachronistically upholds an
ideal which obviously will not be realized (his words about not every river being able
to reach the sea shows that he knows it); Ye Lang plays a role of the Seabird trying to
fill the sea with tree branches and earth she takes in her beak, the sea from which she
was born and which provides her with food and drink, which is even more absurd. As
Sewall remarks, the tragic heroes are usually stubborn. The tragic spirit of Ye Lang
and Kuan Ge is exactly that they know the impossibility of their task, but persist
anyway.

\textsuperscript{192} Gu Lu, 55-56.
In *Old Gao Village*, we have such contrasting pairs as Zilu and Shunshan, Zilu and Cai Laohei, Juwa and Su Hong, Su Hong and Wang Wenlong. Zilu is a university professor marrying a city beauty Xi Xia. He must be the most advanced intellectual the village ever produced, but compared with Shunshan, the village Party Branch Secretary, he is a simpleton. For example, after his cousin Chentang leads a vegetable peddler home with his heavy load and insists on paying a price of two cents per jin lower than promised, which makes the seller sigh resignedly that he just has to take it as if his vegetables were fed to the pigs, inadvertently suggesting that all Zilu’s clan and relatives and friends are pigs, Zilu, instead of satisfying the seller, thinks it is proper to help his cousin and when Chentang slaps the seller across the face, Zilu holds the seller. If not for Shunshan who arrives to appease the seller, Zilu’s commemoration of his father’s death would turn into a scandal by the end of which people would remember nothing except that the whole Gao clan were cursed as pigs and they had a fight with a vegetable seller. Shunshan, the star of wisdom, often helps both the warring factions between Cai Laohei and Su Hong, but also the township government out of difficulty while Zilu can only wring his hands and take insults from all sides.

Zilu, despite his academic achievement in the city and high social status, is forever inferior to and, like the Mohist passage about Confucious’s embarrassment in Chen and Cai, seems embarrassed in front of, Cai. Cai dares to sleep with Zilu’s ex-wife and challenge his new urban wife as well. In the end he seems to have won both
women’s admiration by his highwayman’s manner and deeds while even Xi Xia’s respect for Zilu seems to have been lowered and she will not even laugh at his jokes any more.

Though divorced, Juwa charms both Cai Laohei, the peasant entrepreneur, who has drive and charisma, and Wang Wenlong, the urbane, polite, civil, well-educated and wealthy industrialist and modern upstart. Su Hong, never married, yet interests nobody except those effete gigolos like Lumao who are only after her money. Juwa is virtuous, proper, respected and well-liked by everybody while Su Hong is despised and insulted by all, not only because of her past as a secret prostitute in the city but also by her vain and haughty manners. She also forms a contrast to Wang Wenlong who is from the city, wealthy and powerful, but seems to be morally proper, chivalrous, and generous, although both are managers of the mill.

2. Image, Metaphor, Symbol, Myth

At the outset I want to provide my understanding of the definition and properties of these terms: image, metaphor, symbol, and myth. According to René Wellek and Austin Warren, the four terms semantically overlap and point to the same area of interest. The image may exist as “description” or as metaphor and symbol.

In writers as different as Shakespeare, Emily Brontë, and Poe, we can see that the setting (a system of ‘properties’) is often a metaphor or symbol.... Like ‘image,’ ‘symbol’ continues to appear in widely
different contexts and very different purposes.... The shared current in all these current uses is probably that of something standing for, representing, something else. But the Greek verb [symbol], which means to throw together, to compare, suggests that the idea of analogy between sign and signified was originally present. It still survives in some of the modern uses of the term.... In literary theory, it seems desirable that the word should be used in this sense: as an object which refers to another object but which demands attention also in its own right, as a presentation.\(^{193}\)

Primarily in the sense of the recurrence and persistence of the “symbol,” it differs from “image” and “metaphor.” “An “image” may be invoked once as a metaphor, but if it persistently recurs, both as presentation and representation, it becomes a symbol, may even become part of a symbolic (or mythic) system” (189). “Myth” appears in Aristotle’s *Poetics* as the word for plot, narrative structure, “fable.” “Its antonym and counterpoint is logos. The ‘myth’ is narrative, story, as against dialectical discourse, exposition; it is also the irrational or intuitive as against the systematically philosophical: it is the tragedy of Aeschylus against the dialectic of Socrates” (190). Myth in modern times is often used as a program, like the “General

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Strike” of all the world’s workers that Georges Sorel speaks of, the “total redemption of humanity” that Marx speaks of, but in my thesis, myth is simply a mini-narrative scientifically or historically untrue, like the myth about the four rare flowers and Zhuang Zhidie’s father-in-law’s divination by his hermetic magic of the location where the enemy underground channel would come out.

Not wishing to treat the whole series of the four terms externally and superficially by viewing them as decorations, rhetorical ornaments, and detachable parts of the works in which they appear as older literary study often does, Wellek and Warren see the meaning and function of literature as centrally present in metaphor and myth. “There are such activities as metaphoric and mythic thinking, a thinking by means of metaphors, a thinking in poetic narrative or vision” (193). They call for a nice equilibrium to avoid the rhetorical concern on the one hand and on the other both psychological biography and “message hunting.” My attention is particularly on Jia’s metaphorical and mythic thinking, but before starting that I would like to invoke the authority of Wellek and Warren on the usage of puns: “The nineteenth century regarded the pun as a play on ‘words’, the lowest form of wit’; the eighteenth century had, with Addison, already classified it as one of the species of ‘false wit’. But Baroque and modern poets use it seriously as a doubling of ideas, a ‘homophone’ or ‘homonym’, a purposed ‘ambiguity’” (194). As my study will show, Jia puns

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extensively on names, with a purposed ambiguity. It is well noted and commented that his own name Jia Pingwa 贾 平凹 is a pun on 贾 平娃 (Jia Pingwa).\textsuperscript{195}

I will start with three little myths Jia himself created for his thematic and structuring purposes and move on to metaphors or symbols. But since Jia’s usage of any of the four terms, image, symbol, metaphor, and myth, is similar to what Wellek and Warren describe—“the Expansive image” which they think by definition, “is one in which each term opens a wide vista to the imagination and each term strongly modifies the other: the ‘interaction’ and ‘interpenetration’ which, according to modern poetic theory, are central forms of poetic action occur most richly in the Expansive metaphor” (203)—it is difficult to discuss only one term exclusive of others.

(1) The Rare Flower Myth

The Abandoned Capital is a constellation of big tragedies breeding and controlling small tragedies, and with Jia’s clever manipulation of allusions, symbols, and multi-perspective techniques in structuring and characterization, and his interest in as well as critique of antiquity and the Chinese sense of history, especially its

\textsuperscript{195} Sun Jianxi reads 贾 娃 as “plain boy,” or “ordinary boy,” speculating that Pingwa’s father either meant that or hoped that his son would just enjoy “peace.” Sun thinks Pingwa chooses 平 instead of 凸 (tu, “projecting, prominent”), because he dares not to be “prominent” either among ordinary people or among men of letters. He would rather follow Daoist teaching to be as empty as a valley 虚怀若谷 (xu huai ruo gu). When Pingwa changed his the characters from 平娃 into 平凹, he meant that his life is up and down and eventful. Sun also suggests the self-contradiction embedded in the name just like the famous writer Mao Dun’s name implies. Stowe follows this lead and reads Daoist meaning in it. Stowe even mentions the Nobel Prize winner William Faulkner who changed his name from Falkner as one of the three similarities between Pingwa and Faulkner. See Stowe, 8-9.
cyclical vision, the tragic vision leaves a rippling and mirroring ambiance long after
the novel is put down. It starts with the first myth: “In 1980, in the City of Xijing, an
odd event happened. Two inseparable friends, out of ennui, went one day to pay
homage to the tomb of Yang Yuhuan, favorite concubine of Emperor Xuanzong of
Tang.”  

They bring home some soil from the turf of the tomb and out of it a plant
grows by itself. True to a prediction given by the Grand Master of Wisdom of the
Temple of Immanence, the plant blooms in a shape somewhat like a rose and
somewhat like a peony and with four flowers, delicate and subtle, with different
colors; one being red, the other yellow, the third white, and the last one violet. Also
true to his prediction, it is killed by its grower as he wakes up at midnight one day
after being drunk, thinks that the flower needs to be watered, goes to the kitchen, and
picks up a pot of hot water from the stove. Seized with remorse, the man smashes the
pot; falling ill, he stays in bed for a month.

This little modern myth, following the pattern of classic and vernacular
Chinese fiction, encapsulates the plot and sets the tragic tone of the novel.  

196 Jia Pingwa, Fei Du (The Abandoned Capital) (Beijing chubanshe, 1993) 1. All the translations
are mine since there is no English translation available; where necessary I consulted Geneviève Imbot-
Bichet’s French translation La Capitale déchue (Stock, 1997).

197 Readers familiar with the classic Chinese novels will easily recall that The Water Margin starts
where Marshal Hong stubbornly insists on opening a stone tablet that covers a well in a temple and
releases one hundred and eight evil spirits who a century later wreak havoc in the Song Empire; that
Wu Jingzi opens The Scholars with a lyrical story about artist Wang Mian setting a perfect example of
how a true scholar should conduct himself for the generation a century later; and that Cao Xueqin, with
an “article of faith,” answers the unanswerable harrowing question why the love between Jia Baoyu
and Lin Daiyu ends in tragedy by supplying the mythical story of the Divine Luminescent Stone-in-
Different from classic and vernacular fictions, this myth happens to the same characters that will play major roles in the novel. The grower is Zhuang Zhidie and his inseparable friend is Meng Yunfang. The flowers, as many critics agree, are Zhuang’s wife Niu Yueqing, his maid Liu Yue, his mistresses Tang Wan'er and Ah Can. Liu Yue’s words to Zhuang near the end make clear this connection: “It is you that created me and Tang Wan'er into new persons and helped us gain courage and confidence for a new life. But it is also you that destroyed us and, in the course of destruction, you also destroyed yourself, your image and reputation, and Niu Yueqing and this family” (406).

What is also ingeniously woven into the myth is the supernatural connection of the rare flowers to the tragedy of Yang Yuhuan and Tang Xuanzong. As described in the Tang poet Bai Juyi’s poem “The Song of Everlasting Sorrow,”198 Emperor Xuanzong “doted on beauty” and through “the domains of his sway” after many years he found “in the family of Yang a maiden just then reaching fullness,” whom heaven had given a ravishing form and “[w]hen she glanced behind with a single smile, a hundred seductions were quickened.”199 In front of her, “[all] the powdered and

Waiting (Baoyu) watering the beautiful Crimson Pearl Flower (Daiyu) every day with sweet dew and conferring on her the gift of life in their pre-existence.


199 “The Song of Lasting Regret,” 478-85. In Bai Juyi’s poem, it is “Monarch of Han” to avoid political trouble. This also brings the question what time exactly is the story in The Abandoned Capital. Although the first sentence states clearly it is 1980, the actual situation can only be that of the 1990s.
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painted ones in the Six Palaces now seemed without beauty of face” and “[f]rom this
time onward the sovereign king no longer held early court.” Then An Lushan 安禄山
and Shi Siming 史思明 rebelled in the northeast and “out of Yü-yang, horse-
borne war-drums came, shaking the earth.” The emperor had to flee to Sichuan and
just as they reached Mawei Slope, thirty miles west of the capital Chang’an, “the Six
Armies would go no further—there was no other recourse, /But the fluently curved
moth-eyebrows must die before the horses.”

The sovereign king covered his face—he could not save
her;

When he looked back, it was with tears of blood that
mingled in their flow.

Like Jia’s predecessors such as Wu Jingzi, author of The Scholars, and Cao Xueqin, author of The
Dream of the Red Chamber, who all put their story in the dynasty before their own, I think, Jia does the
same to avoid trouble with the Jiang Zemin era. At least the 1980s was Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang’s
decade, and Jiang Zemin would not be as sensitive about that time as about 1990s. We can see the
evidence in Jia’s novel. Probably partly because Cao Xueqin had to revise his work ten times and partly
because, as Eileen Chang conjectures, he had to make the age of his hero and heroines younger each
time he was revising his manuscript in order to make it plausible for his main young characters to live
together in the Grand View Garden, he ended up leaving the age of his main characters very confused,
“a muddle,” as one of the few points on which redologists reach a consensus. See Eileen Chang
Honglou mengyan. Like Cao, Jia shows his inconsistency about the age of his characters. For example,
Tang Wan’er was born between 9:00 pm and 11:00 pm on the third day of the third month in 1957; she
would be 23 years old according to Chinese count in 1980. Liu Yue was born between 5:00 am and
7:00 am on the eighteenth day of the twelfth month in 1963; she would be 18 in 1980. (p. 232) Their
ages sound right to their role in the novel. But Zhuang Zhidie was born in 1951; he would be just 30.
But Niu Yueqing says clearly that “he is about forty, but his temper is still that of a child” (p. 205).
However, if we really take the year to be 1990, then it would be unimaginable for Liu Yue, who would
be then 28. The only plausible explanation is that Jia Pingwa wrote about 1990s but professed it is
about 1980. The tension between his concerns regarding political pressure and his will to tell the truth
results in this inconsistency.
After the rebellion was finally put down and when Xuanzong came back from Sichuan passing again the death place of his beloved, “amidst that muddy earth, below Ma-wei Slope, Her jade countenance was not to be seen—just a place of empty death.” It is this muddy earth that Zhuang and Meng Yunfang, twelve hundred years later, scoop up and carry home with them and put into their antique black pottery pot. Tragedy transmigrates. Loving her beauty, the emperor bestowed all favors on her and her family, thereby bringing new life to her and her family, yet bowing to political pressure, he could not save her life.

Bai Juyi immortalizes the tragedy of Yang Yuhuan and Emperor Xuanzong. Although he takes a sarcastic stance, as conditioned by his tradition, he betrays his sympathy for Lady Yang and Xuanzong and contrives a tragic relief by resorting to Daoist magic to let the couple meet again briefly on “a transcendent mountain in the sea.”

Jia Pingwa lets Bai Juyi’s name resurface seamlessly in the middle of the novel when Mao Zedong’s large calligraphy of Bai’s poem appears in Gong Xiaoyi’s hands. Gong exchanges it for drugs when an addiction fit becomes uncontrollable after number two of the “four young scoundrels” withholds his supply of the drug following Zhao Jingwu’s manipulations and Zhuang Zhidie’s endorsement. This piece of information not only reiterates Lady Yang’s tragedy and Zhuang’s treachery, but also serves as a sarcastic comment on the contemporary situation and on Mao when his work turns into a commodity used in exchange for drugs.
I will for the moment discuss the tragedies of four women as symbolized by the four flowers. Niu, Liu, Tang, and Can, whom I identify as rural women, and along with their urban counterparts Jing Xueyin, Meng Yunfang’s wife Xia Jie, and Wang Ximian’s wife, they are what the seven rainbows crisscrossing the sky stand for.

The first flower is Niu Yueqing, Zhuang Zhidie’s virtuous wife, who sacrifices all her life for him. Despite or because of her sacrifices, she cannot save their marriage. Her tragedy is caused both by her husband and her own shortcomings. In order to help him in his early career, she has three abortions, and later when she wants children, she is unable to have them. She is kind and generous to underdogs. Taking care of her husband like a mother, she can also be too trifling as when she worries her husband merely to figure out a way to return a cheap fifty-cent back scratcher. Zhuang complains to Zhao Jingwu: “People worship me as soon as I step out across my threshold, but at home I have to endure a life like this. She is unbearable and terribly tiring, the kind of person who sticks a piece of cake into your mouth although you are already full” (40-41). She is too familiar with his shortcomings to idolize him.

There seems to be a built-in mechanism, a kind of tragic deadlock in her character that prevents her from being happy. Incapable of stimulating her husband’s sexual desire, she relies on watching pornographic videos, gossiping about other people’s romances, and asking her husband to fabricate pornographic stories. Once she arouses him by telling him how Wang Ximian’s wife, before marriage, insisted on
finishing sex with a man on a shop floor even after their fellow workers burst in upon them. Then she blames him for being aroused. When he suggests they change positions or make some noise, she accuses him of wanting her to emulate prostitutes, which makes him pull away grumbling: “It’s like raping a corpse.” As Zhong Benkang notes, her tragedy lies in her spiritual impotence and decrepitude, and she represses her husband as well as herself. What she lacks is the “flame” that Zhuang Zhidie admires in Tang.200

As one critic points out, whatever Niu does to help others is what Zhuang Zhidie would like to do himself. However, as soon as she focuses her attention on him, she seems to do everything unwittingly against his grain. For example, she spends tons of money “borrowing the belly” of her cousin to conceive a boy child. At gatherings, Niu Yueqing is embarrassingly obtuse at games, especially in front of the quick-witted Tang, Liu, Xia Jie, and Wang’s wife. However, her dealings with Tang Wan’er after she discovers her and Zhuang Zhidie’s affair smacks of a dominatrix like Wang Xifeng of The Dream of the Red Chamber. Niu invites Tang over and cooks the dove that carried love messages between Zhuang and Tang. Here is an often-quoted scene:

She wrung off a pair of wings and put them into Wan’er’s dish: “Wan’er will have the wings. One who eats wings will fly

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and perch on the highest branch!” Tearing off the legs and putting them into Zhuang’s dish, she told him: “The legs are for you. Look how white and plump these thighs are! Aiya, look at me. How could I have forgotten to take off the ring from its foot?” She then gave the dove’s back to Liu Yue and put its head into her own dish: “There is no meat in the head, but I hear that doves’ eyes can prevent myopia. My eyes have been myopic for a long time. Let me taste these pupils.” She clawed them out with her fingernails and popped them into her mouth. Munching nosily, she remarked: “Ah, delicious!” (448)

The dove’s eyes might very well be those of Wan’er. The hatred of Wan’er who dares to cheat on her drives her into this crude gesture.

Understanding neither her husband nor changes of time, she always believes that once married, a couple should stick together whether there is love left or not. She cannot bear mention of the word “paramour.” Her reaction to Tang and Zhuang’s affair seems hysterical: her lips tremble, her face turns blue, sky and earth seem to have changed place, and she cries in agony: “Good Heavens! I’m totally in the dark when things have already come to this stage!” Then she realizes that the love between her and her husband was already extinct a long time ago. It would probably be better if she continued to be “myopic.” The knowledge that Ah Can and Liu Yue, whom she takes as her allies, are also carrying on affairs with Zhuang would probably kill her.
The second flower is Tang Wan’er. Her tragic end is the most gruesome of all. Just the woman Zhuang needs to cure his impotence, she is not only a ravishing beauty, but is also full of vitality and power of understanding, and knows how to make herself up to excite men. Her first impression induces Zhuang secretly to exclaim: “She is the essence of a human being!”(26) She tells him that if a man is impotent, it’s the woman’s fault and she will forever renew herself to stimulate Zhuang because a creative writer needs the new to replace the old. She says she likes to dress up because by dressing up she shows respect both to herself and to people she sees.

Tang’s understanding is deep but not deep enough. She thinks she does Zhuang a great service by aborting their child on her own responsibility, but it turns out, as in the case of Ah Can, Zhuang would probably appreciate her more if she bears and raises the child on her own without bothering him at all. Her tragedy is partly social and partly existential. The philistine morality and social conditions would not tolerate her marriage with Zhuang. Her eagerness to change her status may launch her into the orbit of boundless desire, which cannot be stopped once started. Her love of Zhuang, though stimulating to both him and her, is still somewhat misplaced. It is Zhou Min rather than Zhuang Zhidie that really deserves her devotion.

Ah Can is the third flower. She is a female knight-errant secretly cherished by both Zhuang Zhidie, the protagonist, and Jia, the author. She comes out of the blue and after finishing her errand disappears into nowhere. She is like a fox spirit in Pu
Songling's *Liaozi Zhiyi* (Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio), who comes at night to accompany a poor scholar in a lonely deserted temple and leaves before dawn so that the poor scholar enjoys the pleasure without incurring moral blame. The first time she sees Zhuang she dedicates her body to him: “I can’t believe that you like me. I think even if I do it with you, it will be beautiful. I want to be beautiful once.” Like Remedios the Beauty in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez, she emits a strange strong fragrance and she disappears without inconveniencing anyone.²⁰¹ A true male fantasy figure!

Two of Ah Can’s memorable acts are somewhat heroic. First, after Director Wang raped her sister, Ah Lan, she enters Wang’s home and tells his wife: “My name is Ah Can. I love Wang and Wang loves me. We’ve been going on for three years. Would you please help us be together?” She sits right down on the bed and pours a cup of tea and leaves with the words, “Only Ah Can deserves to live in this house.” Then, when Wang tries to make love to her, she bites his tongue off. Second, after she has a “splendid time” with Zhuang for the last time and conceives his child, she takes a hairpin from her hair, cuts her face, holds a bottle of ink onto the wounds, says farewell to him, and disappears to raise his child, asking him to forget her and not seek her anymore.

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²⁰¹ Ah Can used to work as a rusticated youth from Anhui on a military farm in Xinjiang where in the 1980s a “Fragrant Imperial Concubine” tomb was excavated.
If we judge Jia/Zhuang’s male fantasy, this is a typical specimen: have sex and children without incurring any inconvenience to himself. It also reminds one of Colonel Aureliano Buendía’s in *One Hundred Year of Solitude* having seventeen sons by seventeen young virgins sent by their mothers to his army camp to “improve the breed.” Critics reading the names of the two sisters Ah Can 阿灿 and Ah Lan 阿兰 as “splendid” 灿烂 (canlan) (兰 being a homophone of 烂) and stressing the knight-errant valor of the women is sound and reasonable. But if I see the tragic or sad aspect of Ah Can’s action and character and read Can 灿 as 慘 (can, “tragic, miserable, pitiable”), it seems also a legitimate reading because the pun carries a deliberate ambiguity replete with multiple meanings.202

Ah Can’s tragedy and Zhuang Zhidie’s anguish are caused, Zhang Zhizhong thinks, by the old literati’s male fantasy clashing with modern times, especially by the conflict of their polygamous wishes and their lack of courage and strength to realize this dream.203 Only one critic says Ah Can is selfish to leave her own husband and child at home and go in hiding to raise her and Zhuang’s child alone. Male fantasy or

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202 Incidentally, one of Colonel Aureliano Buendía’s seventeen illegitimate sons is named Triste Aureliano (as the Latin American masterpiece goes, all the illegitimate sons adopt the given names of their mother as their given name and the given name of their father as their last name) and “triste” in Spanish means “tragic, miserable, pitiable.” I have not been able to find out the Chinese translation of that minor character’s name, but I think that the similarity of the women characters’ names and their similar fates in both novels, even if coincidental, still deserves comparison.

not, women should first have a life of their own rather than living for vanity’s sake. Ah Can is at least partly responsible for her own tragedy.

The fourth flower is Liu Yue. She tells Zhuang that he destroys her, Niu, Tang, and himself although she appears to be a natural survivor in the world of *The Abandoned Capital*. She is from Mizhi County in northern Shaanxi. Wang Ximian’s wife recites a rhyme as soon as she sees her: “stone slabs from Qingjian, coal from Wayaobao, women from Mizhi, and men from Suide.” The legend goes that Diao Chan, the beauty that the former Chief Minister Wang Yun uses to break up the bond between Dong Zhuo and Lü Bu in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, was born in Mizhi and Lü Bu was born in Suide. The protagonist Ye Lang in *White Nights* is from Suide.

To illustrate how beautiful she is, Jia lets Xia Jie, Meng Yunfang’s wife, take Liu Yue’s hands immediately after she sees her and exclaim: “This is a real princess! Not at all a maid” (92). Xia Jie whispers into Zhuang’s ear and makes him blush to the ears: “This is a nanny, not a concubine for you” (93). She later chats with Zhuang Zhidie: “As soon as I arrived in the city, I had a feeling that I will succeed here.” (Emphasis added.)

Clever and confident, Liu Yue can grasp every opportunity. The first time Zhuang sees her, she is reading a book by Zhuang beside a sleeping baby. She comes in as soon as she hears that Zhuang is there. When Zhuang asks her to recommend a

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204 “清涧的石板瓦窑堡的碳，米脂的姑娘绥德的汉。”
maid (homemaker) for him, she answers without the slightest unease: “It must be nobody but me.” When Zhuang applauds her for being frank, she turns to mock Zhao Jingwu: “See? You didn’t need to wink at me. After I confirmed he is Professor Zhuang, I’ve a feeling that I will be his maid” (50, emphasis added). On the day when Zhuang entertains guests, Liu Yue comes, leaving her young charge unattended. Her former mistress has to quit work for half a month until she finds a replacement. It is confirmed that she feeds her young charge sleeping pills.\(^{205}\)

Liu Yue often spouts shocking truths despite her young age. For example, as she tells Niu Yueqing, she reads Zhuang’s sexual repression in his novels, because he always writes of women as Bodhisattvas. When Niu tells her another time that to be Zhuang’s wife one has to be his mother as well, Liu adds that one has to be one’s husband’s prostitute as well as his daughter.

Liu Yue is a natural climber. Jealous and seeing the whole process of Zhuang and Tang’s love making, she becomes so intoxicated as readily to consent to Zhuang’s desire. Zhuang promises her to Zhao Jingwu and the two must have already had affairs, but Zhuang later marries her off to the mayor’s son instead to solicit the mayor’s help with his legal troubles. She is disappointed, but she concedes because it is, for her, always an upward movement. After she marries the mayor’s son, she starts

\(^{205}\) This is confirmed on two separate occasions. First, Niu Yueqing tells Zhuang that a woman shop assistant asks her if she is Zhuang’s wife and tells her that Liu Yue has fed her child with sleeping pills. Second, when Zhao Jingwu informs Liu Yue that his neighbor says that she fed her child with sleeping pills, Liu Yue does not deny it but only says: “Her child is a reborn ghost who had cried to death.”
to work in Ruan Zhifei’s dance hall and develops a friendship with a foreign young man from the Foreign Languages University. Here we catch a hint that for her next step she might go abroad.

Once she rises in status, she can be mean to others like her, a recurrent minor tragic theme, a concrete manifestation of the cyclical view, in all four of Jia’s novels. There is a small incident showing Jia’s susceptibility to his younger contemporaries’ influence and also revealing Liu Yue’s character. The day after Liu Yue marries into the mayor’s family, by instinct and habit she helps the maid, Xiaoju (Chrysanthemum) pick chives in the kitchen, but immediately stops and goes to the sink to wash her hands, telling Xiaoju to put shrimp into the *jiaozi* (Chinese dumpling) stuffing. When the maid gives a grunt and answers that the mayor’s family does not put shrimp into the *jiaozi*, Liu Yue tells her: “I want shrimp in it!” Leaving the tap running loudly, she goes to her room and shouts to the maid to turn off the tap. Readers familiar with Su Tong’s *Qiqie chengqun* 妻妾 成群 (A Profusion of Wives and Concubines) can recall how the third wife Songlian (Lotus) similarly maltreats her maid Xiaoju.²⁰⁶

This leads to a subtle clue in the rare flower myth. A man looks at the gardener’s clippers in his hands and involuntarily says “Ear.” The Grand Master of Wisdom then predicts that the plant will bear four flowers and they will be killed by the grower. There is no connection either in origin or formation between the character

“ear” 耳 er and the word “clippers” or “scissors” 剪刀 jiandao except in Su Tong’s novella where Lotus purposely cuts the second wife Cloud’s ear off when the latter asks her to give her a haircut.²⁰⁷ Jia is mocking Zhuang Zhidie’s polygamous ideal even in this almost imperceptible detail.

The four women discussed are not mere victims; their sufferings are caused by Zhuang’s love or lack thereof and by their own various faults. But as evidence of Jia’s artistic maturity, their characterization not merely transcends the type of Bodhisattva but attains to such a sophisticated level that despite their faults, they seem lovely and worthy of deep sympathy.

I take issue with Wang Yiyan’s reading of these women as typical *femmes fatales*. Wang wants to argue both ways. For example, she on the one hand insists without textual proof that all the women are depicted as *femmes fatales* following the Neo-Confucian traditional view of women and on the other hand concedes: “Although such plotting does not mean the author necessarily shares the values of the Neo-Confucianism of the Ming-Qing period, it shows the importance of women’s traditional roles as signifiers of cultural traditions” (158). Another example concerns these women’s education and intelligence. Wang on the one hand does not believe in these women’s intelligence and she seems to equate education with intelligence when

²⁰⁷ Wang Yiyan’s reading of 耳 “rotated 90 degrees” becoming 四 (si, “four”), homophone of 死 (si, “death”) implying the death of the four flowers is obviously stretched, because no matter how we rotate 耳, it won’t turn into a 四. See her dissertation, 174.
she writes: “Although the moral judgement demonstrates a depreciation of the narrative framework and its cultural implications, indeed Zhuang’s desire for empathy from these women is pure fantasy, since the women do not seem to have enough education to achieve a genuine understanding of Zhuang’s inner struggle at all” (159-60). On the other hand, she concludes: “The male narrator’s prejudice is obvious in his depiction of women as less intelligent, less cultured and less talented in many ways” (160). This echoes the confusion of some Mainland Chinese critics who blame Jia for letting Zhuang only appreciate women of country origin and with not much education on the one hand and depicting those women as being cleverer than their education seems to warrant. Wang compares Liu Yue to Pan Jinlian in Jin Ping Mei because both women are described as without pubic hair and therefore belong to “the stars of white tigress” (baihuxing, 白虎星) that will bring disaster to men. It is true that Zhuang arranges for Tang Wan’er to tell Zhao Jingwu after Zhuang betrothes Liu Yue to the mayor’s son that she heard Niu Yueqing say that Liu Yue has no pubic hair. However, on reflection anyone will at once see that this is merely Zhuang’s low dirty trick, and nobody, character or reader, should believe such nonsense.

Jia has clearly arranged these women to be subtly connected. Niu Yueqing is a special case. She is a second-generation urbanite, but her surname Niu (Cow) puts her in the rural category. Niu Yueqing and Liu Yue both share the character yue (moon) in their names. Tang’s surname suggests the Tang dynasty and Liu Yue is a replica of
a Tang maid as I mention above, both from the countryside. Ah Can by her experience on a military farm in Xinjiang puts herself into the rural category.

While both Niu and Liu are “moons” and Zhuang is one of the “four suns,” Ah Can and Ah Lan 灿 烂 means “magnificent” and “brilliant.” Critics wonder why Zhuang Zhidie only likes women with rural backgrounds who lack higher education. Some think he wants relaxation and many believe he is still a rustic. Zhong Benkang analyzes the reason and concludes that Tang, Liu, and Can, uncontaminated or tamed by “the abandoned capital civilization” bring their wild nature with them. It is under the impact of their whole-hearted zest that Zhuang’s potency, repressed for years, erupts like a volcano and he miraculously becomes a manly man. That is where the tragedy lies: Zhuang harms those rural women with a wild nature whom he loves the most. These women instead of being “femmes fatales” are actually victims. I turn now to the second myth: the four suns appearing on the noontime sky.

(2) The Myth of Four Suns

After the first “odd incident” of the rare flower which the narrative claims is only known by a few, the second “odder incident” of “four suns” suddenly appearing in the sky at noontime is “on the seventh day of the sixth month according to the old calendar experienced by everyone in the City of Xijing” (2). It is so bright, as bright as a welding torch, that it feels like complete darkness. As a consequence, people in the streets, on bikes, in buses, taxis, and cars which fit their status and wealth, even including dignitaries from Beijing accompanied by police motorcades, all come to a
halt, with horns blowing just as in a cinema when the projector suddenly goes wrong with no image appearing but with the sound track still going. When the four suns at last disappear, there appears on the platform where the traffic police usually direct traffic a madman who is looking coldly at the crowds around him. This reinforces the ethos or angst suggested by the first myth.

For a long time the image of the red sun was a prerogative to Mao Zedong. Now in place of that "Red Sun" are "four suns." Critics all agree that the four suns symbolize the "four big celebrities." While they might be right, and in the following I will analyze these celebrities as the "four suns" (the significance of symbolism is that it is ambiguous and open to many interpretations), I think the four suns image replacing one sun might be also understood as symbolizing a multi-value system that is replacing the centralized system which had been practiced under Mao and failed. The centralized system means that the Chinese Communist Party and Chairman Mao were always at the center. Politics and power were at the center. In the Reform Era, multi-value systems were revived. Not only power, but also money, sex, and fame rule the country and as values they are, for better or mostly for worse, interchangeable.

As history unfolded, after the CCP took over the country, tighter and tighter ideological control was introduced. Fame was considered a "feudal" or "bourgeois" value. Money was discussed only as a reminder of "bourgeois rights" (zichan jiejifaquan 资产阶级法权) by Zhang Chunqiao first in the early 1960s and then reiterated in the early 1970s, and was on the point of being done away with. Sex was a
taboo in any literature and, except for the elite who were beyond the rules, society was more puritanical than any period before. Clothes and dress styles were uniform and colorless (characterized by the term “blue ants”). People caught in adultery were severely punished. Even those in power had to be careful lest their opponents use sexual dalliance as a weapon against them. Love and family relations would be considered what Vivian Lee describes as “impurities.”

This puritanical priggery went to such an extreme that there are no family relationships in the “Eight Model Operas” sponsored by Jiang Qing. Niu Yueqing’s hysterical reaction to the mere mention of the word qingren (情人 paramour) is understandable in the context. People were taught to address their spouse as airen (爱人 lover) but never qingren. In a stoic and near puritanical society, the word qing (情 feeling, sentiment) is suspect, because it might suggest tender-heartedness or compassion for the enemy classes while distracting from the ardor due to the “revolutionary cause.”

When the centralized rigid and stoic system was quickly being replaced by the multi-value system with the new “open door policy” allowing both foreign and past indigenous influences to quicken the modernization process, then power, money, sex, fame, culture, and history become values that are openly exchangeable.

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Xijing is a historical and cultural city. Residents here should be people of
culture but they have no culture or no use for culture except to make a living selling it
to tourists, because they have no skills or opportunities or hearts to engage in other
professions as in the coastal areas where business is booming and people work hard
but thrive. A lad peddling counterfeit glasses tries to pass them off to people by telling
a story that he stole them from a shop with a price tag of eight hundred yuan, but he is
willing to part with them for only a couple of hundred. On seeing Zhuang’s name card,
he immediately salutes him as Professor Zhuang and tells him that he has been to his
lectures. Zhuang remarks: “Xijing should not be belittled. If a meteor fell and crushed
ten people, seven of them would be lovers of literature” (35).

Successful literati, “the cream of the crop,” like the rest of the “four big
celebrities” degenerate and lose all moral conscience even faster. They cause
suffering and tragedy for others as well as themselves. They also induce people like
Zhuang Zhidie to emulate them and to degenerate like them.

Gong Jingyuan, the first of the four, as his name suggests, is a pig with his
incorrigible addiction and lust (龚靖元 punning on 拱 洪元 gong jingyuan, “pushes
away all the money with his snout”). 209 Like the statesman and calligrapher Yu
Youren from Shaanxi who wrote all the big signboards for the shops and hotels of

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209 We only see him once in his baggy shorts and slippers with a big fan in his hand on the street of the
Temple for the City God 城隍庙 when he runs into Niu Yueqing, taps his Pigsey’s belly, and chottles:
“Sisy, why are you still so young? You should grow older quicker, otherwise, you will kill me with
envy for my brother Zhuang.” Niu Yueqing goes up and gives his belly a few more taps and jokes that
only a man with a big belly has machismo.
Xi'an in the Republican era, Gong writes all the signboards of Xijing. It is said that when hotels or restaurants interview chefs, the first question they ask is: "Has Gong Jingyuan ever eaten your food?" Gong boasts that if beautiful women did not hold his paper or grind his ink, he would have no passion for writing characters or painting pictures.

Addicted to gambling, each time he is detained by the police he pays a hefty fine or bribes them with his calligraphy and is released. Meeting his Waterloo while gambling in a hotel where the Minister of Public Security from Beijing is staying, his drug addict son Gong Xiaoyi sells all his precious artifacts to redeem him. Finding that all his savings of good paintings and calligraphy have been swindled, he kicks his son out, pastes a hundred thousand dollars on to the wall, shreds them into pieces with a rake,\textsuperscript{210} and curses that it is money that has ruined him and his son; then he bangs his hands, bites his fingers, and takes his life by swallowing three gold rings. Traditionally, Chinese believe swallowing gold can kill you. Literally it is gold that kills him. His suicide proves that he is incapable of being enlightened or delivered.

Wang Ximian's name (汪希眠 punning on 汪希眠 meaning "hope to fall asleep in vain" or "insomnia") reminds us of the "delirium of prosperity" in Macondo in \textit{One Hundred Years of Solitude} in the few years where there is no night and people

\textsuperscript{210} Pigsy in \textit{Journey to the West} carries a rake as his weapon. It is not a mere coincidence that in \textit{One Hundred Years of Solitude}, Aureliano Segundo pastes his walls with money after he enjoys the "delirium of prosperity" raffling off cattle with his mistress.
all suffer from the insomnia of modern life. It provides the literary meaning of the
name of the next novel *White Nights*. He makes counterfeits of such famous paintings
as those by Shi Lu, which even deceive Shi Lu’s relatives. It is said that money falls
on him like snowflakes. Once he had an outing to Zhongnan Mountains and carried
two minibuses full of his mistresses. When one of them dropped a gold ring, his gift
to her, worth a hundred thousand *yuan* into a lake and all his retinue busied
themselves trying to find it, Wang stopped them and threw a pile of money at her to
buy another as if the gold ring was a piece of dirt. According to his wife, he seldom
comes home but when he does, he lies to his wife that he has hepatitis and needs
protected sex. In the end, Wang becomes a fugitive hotly pursued by the police.

Ruan Zhifei (阮知非 punning on 原知非 meaning “he knows right from the
beginning that all is illusion, or everything is unreal” -- 阮 in ancient pronunciation or
southern dialect has the same pronunciation as 元 yuan), originally a helper in a
drama troupe, took charge when the troupe was contracted out, turned it into a
dancing and singing group, and opened four singing and dancing halls with rich
people pouring in to watch his fashion shows. He is said to change women as he does
shirts. He saves a pair of shoes from only the memorable ones and keeps a full
wardrobe of them as souvenirs.

His wife also has numerous lovers. As it happens one day when he shows off
his apartment, newly decorated with imported materials, to Zhuang Zhidie, he opens
the master bedroom and there his wife is sleeping together with a man in broad daylight. Without the slightest embarrassment, he tells his friend that the woman is his wife and the man must be himself. He never acted in any opera but he still wants the academic title of artist. Letting Zhuang write him a thesis based on his father’s old manuscript about how to play a role with fiendish facial features, he tells Zhuang that he himself is a living ghost making trouble in the human world. If he succeeds, it is good; if he fails, so be it. Compared with Zhong Weixian, Ruan can be said to “see through the world” in another sense of the phrase—he does not believe anything is sacred or worth his devotion. He is cynical in the sense of the Chinese expression “playing with the world” (玩世不恭). In the end he is mugged, robbed of his money, and blinded, and ends up with a pair of transplanted dog’s eyes.

Zhuang’s inseparable friend Meng Yunfang, regarded by one critic as a pander to Zhuang, seems happy-go-lucky, studies mysticisms, and appears detached, but inwardly is never above the secular world. As his wife Xia Jie says, he is never able to live without an idol to worship. He follows all kinds of fashions, worships Buddhism, Daoism, and mystics, until in the end he worships and follows his own eight-year old son who is studying some kind of qigong with his master roaming about in Xinjiang.

He is forever burdened with desires. Meeting his second wife by exchanging tea with “tea friends,” divorcing her after she loses all her pubic hair when drinking chicken blood was in vogue; when he married Xia Jie, his third wife, he had to agree
to never bring his son home, and she often fights with him when he does so in her absence. Mencius’s (Master Meng, Meng Zi) mother is praised for moving her house three times just to avoid an undesirable environment. Meng Yunfang married three times and remained unsatisfied. One moonlit night, Xia Jie comes home and sees Meng and a young nun, Huiming, chatting across the wall again. Mosquitoes are biting his bare legs, and he lifts one foot and uses his toes to scratch the other leg nonstop. Suddenly a branch on which he stands snaps and Meng slips down, his chin catching a tile, which falls into pieces on the ground. Xia Jie calls out: “Hey, Meng Yunfang, be careful. I only saw one act of *The Story of the Western Chamber*!”

Through Meng’s life, Jia implies that man cannot deliver himself no matter what he tries: religion, qigong, Buddhism, mysticism, or philosophy. Meng Yunfang introduces Huiming to the mayor’s secretary Huang Defu and she no longer sees him afterwards. After following all the fashions, qigong, and Master Shao Yong’s *Magic Numbers*, he becomes blind in one eye, but comments good-humoredly that with one eye he knows all (一目了然). He requests Zhuang Zhidie to come to see him often, if both his eyes are blind after he decodes the heavenly secrets (“heavenly secrets should never be betrayed” 天机不可泄 *tianji buke xie*), he jokes about his one eye

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becoming blind as a consequence of releasing half of the heavenly secrets decoding *Master Shao Yong’s Magic Numbers*), for Xia Jie is rude to him already, which makes Zhuang want to cry.

As discussed above, the rest of the “four big celebrities” the “four suns” above the ancient capital and Meng, his inseparable friend, serve as bad influences and hasten Zhuang’s degeneration and in the course of his degeneration he destroys those women he loves. They are also what Zhuang might be or might have been, thus his alter-egos in the multi-perspective scheme.

Now I will discuss the literary bureaucrat Jing Xueyin, Zhuang’s former girlfriend, a modern aristocrat, vain, haughty, and selfish, for whom Jia reserves the deepest contempt and venom. As Jia likes glymphancy, we can see a hidden sun in her surname 景 which when broken up becomes a sun 日 (ri) over a capital 京 (jing). Because her father is a veteran Red Army man turned into a big official whose underlings are now officials in various departments (even the Deputy Governor in charge of culture and propaganda and the director of the Cultural Bureau were her father’s former underlings), she is as powerful as a sun over the “abandoned capital.” Her given name Xueyin 雪荫 reminds us of another aristocrat, Xue Baochai, in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. In “The Mistaken Marriage,” the first song of *Dream of Golden Days* in chapter five of the classic novel, there are these lines:

> And while my vacant eyes behold
Crystalline snows of beauty pure and cold,

From my mind can not be banished

That fairy wood forlorn that from the world has vanished.\(^{212}\)

[终身误] 空对着，山中高士晶莹雪；终不忘，世外

仙妹寂寞林。\(^{213}\)

“Crystalline snows of beauty pure and cold” 晶莹雪 that refers to Xue Baochai also contains Jing Xueyin’s name. The 莹 ying in 晶莹雪 jing ying xue and the 雲 yin in Jing Xueyin 景雪ıc are often the same sound in southern dialects. Jing Xueyin’s surname 景 has one sun and the homophone of her surname 晶 contains three suns. There in her name alone we have four suns. Jia Pingwa shares the opinion of many redologists who read criticism and disparagement in Cao Xueqin’s attitude towards and description of Xue Baochai and will not let this name go even in Old Gao Village, written six years later. Jia lets his protagonist Gao Zilu in that novel regret his romantic involvement with Xueying 雪莹 and he recalls that after he tasted the flavor of the urban woman and was infatuated, his friends all told him that he mistook a


\(^{213}\) Cao Xueqin, *Honglou Meng*, vol 1 (Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1982) 84.
“sparrow” for a “magpie.” This reminds us of Jia’s friends’ “instructions” to him after he divorced Han Junfang.214

Jing Xueyin’s lawsuit is senseless, an indication that friendship, love, respect, honor, and ideals are all forgotten. Although she and Zhuang did not have physical contact, she does harbor an abnormal attitude towards him. This can be borne out by Wang Ximian’s wife’s words to Zhuang. She tells him that years ago she herself was his secret admirer and when she did not know that Jing and Zhuang were in love and asked her friend to convey her love to Zhuang through Jing Xueyin, Jing sneered coldly at the messenger, a telling indication that Jing is spiritually and psychologically abnormal. A normal woman would feel glad that her choice is confirmed by another girl’s admiration for the same man. She would feel elated if she has a confident claim to that man’s affection. If they were merely friends, she should understand what true friendship means and should also be glad for Zhuang. The last thing she should do is sneer. She is typically what the cliché describes as “a dog in the manger.” What she demonstrates is not only selfish, snobbish, and unreasonable haughtiness, but also sheer spite.

214 Sun Jianxi records that He Danmeng and Liu Xiaoping, Jia’s close friends went to Dali County on December 9, 1992 to see Jia and came back the next day leaving Jia with “Six Instructions,” as Sun puts in humouredly. They mainly advised him not to reveal his relation with Ms. Xia at the time, have some self-restraint, and wait for a couple of years to remarry Han Junfang. They told him that a man cannot have too many good women’s love, that there are women much better than Ms. Xia and there are cases in which love and marriage are not unified, etc. Guicai Jia Pingwa 鬼才賀平凹 (Ghost Genius Jia Pingwa) (Taiyuan: Beiyue wényi chubanshe, 1994) 741-43.
She is not as innocent as she wants to appear as demonstrated by her reaction to the letter that Meng Yunfang writes in Zhuang's name. She reads the letter and arranges for Zhou to work in the *Xijing Magazine* Editorial Office with the words: "Zhuang would not get down from his high horse to see me in person but only sends me a note" (17). Zhou Min is quick to fabricate a reply: "Professor Zhuang is busy writing a long novel and he said he will see you in person in the near future." She then answers that she is too old and ugly for Zhuang to look at. If she had or has no attachment to Zhuang at all, taking him to court without bothering to learn the truth, then her words here are nothing but coquetry. Even if she does not know the truth the first time she takes him to court, she should at least know from his letter of explanation that he really had nothing to do with Zhou's story, and let the matter rest at that. The last thing she should do is to take the letter of good and sincere intentions (Zhou hates Zhuang so much and Meng and Niu both think that Zhuang is stupid to write it at all at this stage) to the higher court as evidence.

Does Jing really care so much about her name? She is probably sexually involved with Wu Kun (literally, "martial female"), another treacherous literatus, and is notorious in the Cultural Bureau, as the widespread jubilation at her loss demonstrates. To win in the higher court, her sister-in-law sleeps with a judge, which fact indicates that the court case is not intended to protect either reputation or chastity. One can conclude that she uses the opportunity to attack a celebrity friend to make herself famous or more worthy. That is why Zhuang in the end fantasizes
revenge in the style of Gong Xiaoyi taking his hallucinated revenge on his former girlfriend Xiaoli; on the female drug dealer who would not finish her sex with her boyfriend, the number two young scoundrel, in front of him and who, when she at last finishes, slowly pulls up her pants as if he were not a person; and on all the men and women of Xijing. In his fantasy Zhuang marries Jing and, on the wedding night, covers her private parts with a broken tile as though they were a pile of excrement, and then publishes a notice in the newspaper that he divorces her.

It is Jing Xueyin who gives Zhou Min a job and it is also she who takes it away. Zhou is employed with the help of Zhuang’s name and he is also defeated because of his name. Zhuang refuses to help Zhou further, telling him that he has lost more than Zhou. It is true that a celebrity may lose more in a scandal, but what Zhou loses is his livelihood. In other words, an underdog’s fate is the sport of the powerful. As is evidenced in all the four novels in this study, Jia is clearly critical of intellectuals who suffer anguish of any kind and transfer their sufferings onto others lesser than them. Now I will deal with the third myth I choose to discuss.

(3) The Myth of Mr. Niu’s Divination

This third myth is based on an anecdote about general Yang Hucheng’s hermit advisor Niu Zhaolian who was from Lantian county southeast of Xi’an.\(^{215}\) Jia lets Niu

\(^{215}\) In his Old Xi’an, Jia writes that in Lantian every woman and child knows the stories about Niu Zhaolian. See Old Xi’an, 25-28.
Yueqing’s grandfather live on the River Wei north of Xijing. When the Henan warlord Liu Zhenhua besieged Xijing for eighty days and caused a hundred thousand civilians and soldiers led by Yang Hucheng to die within the city, but could not enter, Liu adopted a Japanese advisor’s plan to dig an underground channel from the east outside the city wall. All the soldiers and civilians were anxious to predict where the channel would come out within the city and vats filled with water were half buried in the ground to detect any movement. At Yang’s request, Niu walked about the city, sat on a stone on Jiaochang Men (the former imperial guards training ground), smoked his water pipe twelve times, and then told Yang to dig a lake right there. The result was that Liu’s underground tunnel was filled with water, hundreds of soldiers drowned and the siege was lifted. Niu was awarded a mansion and thus his son gained the right to live in the city, though he himself insisted living in his thatched hut on the River Wei.

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216 It is legended that Jiang Wang (Jiang Ziya) who helped King Wen of Zhou to establish his dynasty had been a hermit fishing with a straight needle (uncrooked) on his rod on the bank of the River Wei. When King Wen sent his advisors for him, Jiang answered the advisor’s question about how he could expect to fish with a straight needle unbaited: “Those willing will be hooked.” King Wen then had to go in person to request Jiang’s help in his cause.

217 According to Old Xi’an, in 1926, the city was under siege for eight months instead of merely eighty days. Liu Zhenhua was Shaanxi governor who invited Lu Xun to lecture in the Northwest University in 1924. According to Chen Yuanfang, Liu passed his intention that he would like Lu Xun to give a speech to his soldiers, thinking that Lu Xun could not avoid singing a few praises of Liu, but Lu Xun insisted that if he was to give a speech it would be also on the history of fiction. Liu was angry. Xi‘an Daily released some details of the incident and was fined and stopped for a few days. See Chen Yuanfang, “Xiang Lu Xun xuexi—zai Shanxisheng jinian Lu Xun dansheng yibai zhounian dahui zhongde fanghui” (Learn from Lu Xun—A Speech At Lu Xun’s Centennial), Xi’an Diqu Jinian Lu Xun Dansheng Yibai Zhounian Wenji (Learn from Lu Xun—A Speech At Lu Xun’s Centennial in Xi’an) (Shanxi Renming Chubanshe, 1984) 33-51.
This myth is interesting in several aspects. First, it is about a city besieged for months when hundreds of thousands of soldiers and civilians died but it was successful in refusing entry to the Henan and Gansu (neighboring provinces to the east and west of Shaanxi) Warlords. Second, a hermit with his magic that won the war and saved thousands of lives earned the right for his children to live in the city. Third, with the influence of Qian Zhongshu’s novel *Fortress Besieged* very much in the air, the metaphor of marriage as a besieged fortress where the people inside fight to get out and the people outside fight to get in is pertinent to one of the themes of Jia’s novel. Fourth, the paradox of characters like Zhuang, Meng, Zhou, and Tang whose first ambition is to live and work in the city, but in the end leave or attempt to flee it is particularly interesting and significant of Jia’s tragic vision.

Xi’an is a big city, but Jia lets its Bell Tower in its center symbolize it. Both in the 1926 siege and in the famous “Xi’an Incident”—“armed pleading” on December 12, 1936, staged by Generals Yang Hucheng and Zhang Xueliang, Yang had coffins made for himself and all his family members. At the mobilization meeting in 1926 attended by thousands of civilians and soldiers Yang told them in tears that if the city succumbed to the enemy troops he would take his own life under the Bell Tower. After the Xi’an Incident, Zhang Xueliang was immediately put under house arrest when he accompanied Chiang Kai-shek to Nanjing. Yang Hucheng was forced to take a tour to Europe. In 1949, Chiang’s special agents assassinated (stabbed with daggers) Yang, his wife, and two sons in a temple in Guizhou Province.
When Zhuang Zhidie entered the city and saw the splendid Bell Tower, he vowed to make a name there.\textsuperscript{218} When Zhou Min comes and looks at the Big Clock on the gothic post office building across the street from the Bell Tower, he swears that if he cannot succeed in living and working in the city he will hang himself on a point of the clock and die in the beautiful music. Tang Wan'er says that she will jump from the big clock and die a splendid death. That these characters have such a strong emotional reaction, almost a spiritual epiphany, can only be understood when we consider the huge gap that existed between the rural people and urbanites at the time. While I do not believe that if there were no such social gap there would be no tragedy, I do believe it is a contributing factor to these people's tragedies. Now I will discuss Jia's use of metaphors.

(4) Dog as Metaphor

In \textit{The Abandoned Capital} Jia uses Cow as a character who is a metaphor, a spokesperson as well as a split part of the author Jia Pingwa and protagonist Zhuang Zhidie. In \textit{White Nights}, the horse is a metaphor of Ye Lang. In \textit{The Earthen Gate}, dogs are metaphors of Cheng Yi and his fellow villagers. Besides this animal image as metaphor, the village itself is a metaphor of China while Cheng Yi is the CCP Party Central.

\textsuperscript{218} Jia writes about his awe at the magnificence of the Bell Tower when he first saw it at the age of thirteen, and after he became a resident of Xi'an his most frequented place is still the Bell Tower. \textit{Old Xi'an}, 87.
Jia Pingwa closely connects the fate of dogs to that of the villagers in quite a few ingenious ways. First of all, dogs are massacred on the city square which was formerly Renhou Village’s land. Second, they are massacred because they are homeless, which fact saliently warns the villagers what their own fate will be like after their village is completely wiped out. Third, dogs, like the villagers, belong to the element of earth, as after the German wolf’s dramatic struggle and tug of war with the police, he is hanged, but the policeman with a savage face still sharply warns against letting him down because “dogs belong to earth and as soon as they touch the earth, they will revive” (10). Now not only the villagers are rural people who have the closest affinity with the earth, but also Renhou Village is situated in the Earthen Gate District. Fourth, Jia allows so many dogs, among which are Swiss, German, Japanese, American, Afghan, be hanged; except the white native dog Ah Bing who makes everybody present ill at ease with his beauty. “Native dog” in Chinese is tu gou 土狗, which connects him directly and tightly to the villagers of Earthen Gate, which in Chinese is tu men 土门.

In the incident of saving the native dog Ah Bing, the word native/tu not only connects him to the fate of the Renhou villagers, but to the fate of all peasants as well. As a writer born and growing up in the countryside and living and working in the city—the special term now is “writers of peasant descent and urban residence” (chengji nongyi zuojia 城籍农裔作家)—Jia Pingwa, like Mo Yan and many others, seems forever to have a penchant for the peasants. Jia expresses much resentment on
behalf of those from the countryside who come to work and live in the city. In The Earthen Gate, Meimei says: “In any case, we all share the destiny of dogs and have an inextricable relation with dogs. Perhaps our pre-existence was as dogs” (27).

Like Renhou’s neighboring villagers who meet their tragic end in various manners after their villages are “developed,” the homeless dogs go to their death with various postures. Some dogs walk to their deaths with composure like heroes, either out of ignorance or out of a stoic stance. Some are frightened out of their wits and defecate onto the ground, dirtying their legs and spattering their killers and spectators. Some put up a fierce resistance like the German wolf. The German wolf does not bark except instinctively holding firm on the ground. Fatty the Policeman has a tug of war with it as the dog is dragged forward a while and Fatty is dragged backward a while. When another policeman joins Fatty, there are four deep ditches ploughed by the dog on the grass. After they pull the rope tight which lifts the dog in the air for some time with the dog’s tongue sticking out, everybody thinks the dog must be dead. But as soon as they put it on the ground, it runs about twenty meters, falls, gets up, and runs

In the “Postscript” to The Earthen Gate, Jia Pingwa writes: “I like the Earthen Gate District. The first reason is that I was born in the countryside and came here at nineteen years of age. The people of the countryside have to till the land, do not eat good food, do not have experience of the outside world, and their features are coarse. After more than twenty years in the city, I am still often scoffed at by some city dwellers. They do not admit me as a city resident just as they think Mao Zedong was a peasant, as if cities belong only to them and their ancestors. However, if you trace their history, it is often as recent as at the time of their father or at earliest their grandfather that they came to settle in the cities from the countryside. The second reason is that I do not debate about the name when they do not admit me. But after all it has been more than twenty years since I stopped tilling the land of the countryside. It must be courageous and poetic to have an area in this big modern city to be named the Earthen Gate. I am a writer and play the game of words and naturally developed a fondness for it” (334-35).
again. Resisting or not, they all end up being hanged except Ah Bing who only prolongs his life a while before he is hanged again.

Ah Bing becomes homeless after the murder of his rich artist master, along with his wife, son, and daughter by two drug addicts. Witnessing the whole process of the murders and his experience on death row while witnessing again dozens of his fellow dogs being hanged in front of him have such a traumatic effect on him that he cannot hide his exposed penis. Fan Jingquan, a researcher in the institute of agricultural science, like Old Ran, Meimei’s boyfriend, says that he read somewhere about ninety-nine percent of those who came out of Nazi concentration camps are incurably impotent and that although Ah Bing is not a person, the terror and impact he received are similar. (243)

Like the struggling dogs, the villagers fight the developers to protect their home. Their former neighboring villagers’ tragic experience foretells their destiny. At the time of demolition two years earlier, the villagers of Dongwang were promised that they would get the exact amount of living space as they used to have, but after the realty agent sold the land to another, the new agent built the land into small villas and had no buildings left for the villagers. The old agent went to the south, and suing him took years. Cheng Yi asks his villagers if they know of the American Continent and tells them that, after the white people went to the American Continent, they drove the Indians to the forests. He also cites the examples of migrant workers coming from the countryside to Xijing who can only move bricks at the construction site, dig ditches
when paving the streets, wash dishes in restaurants, and carry furniture for stores and will never enter the urban political, economic, and cultural center.220

To the villagers, the city is dirty, swarming with secret prostitutes, thieves, and drug dealers, and noisy with football rioters and police sirens. They are afraid to live in the apartment buildings like "caged birds" which cut them off from the qi [vital essence, energy, or force] of the earth. Grandpa Yunlin treats the village exactly like a person and even prescribes medicinal herbs to bury in the southeast corner of the village. Meimei discovers that: "Numerous men and women of the city of Xijing are short-tempered and easily pick a quarrel and start a fight on the street. They all must have liver diseases." (211) Hepatitis patients should all go to Renhou Village because it first has the "legendary Grandpa Yunlin!" and second the village houses touch the earth. "Only the earth can receive and contain patients and only the qi of the earth can wipe out viruses! You city people who have left the earth and qi of the earth will have nothing but damaged or dead livers!" (211)

The tragic irony is that the more efforts the villagers under the leadership of Cheng Yi make to resist development and preserve their village, the faster they head

220 During my interview with Jia Pingwa in 1998 I asked him whether the villagers of Renhou in The Earthen Gate might not mind if their village developed or whether they hold on only hoping to make a better bargain. He drew my attention to the long-term consequences for the villagers: "Like these villagers in the suburbs who have a lot of money and live in much more spacious buildings than many urban residents do and who live quite comfortably on rent income, these people have a grim future ahead. Because they have sold out their land, they have no land to till. They can live comfortably for a while, but what will happen to their children and grandchildren? They cannot compete with urban young people because their children lack both education and professional skills. Besides, their spiritual and sentimental sufferings are deep."
towards destruction. They build a village cemetery and archway for economic, cultural, and spiritual reasons, but the projects cost the villagers their public funds. Cheng Yi ironically cut off his hand years ago in a resolve not to steal anymore, but to save the village he breaks his promise and decides to steal a terra cotta warrior's head which costs his own human head. His “knight-errantry” and execution only hastens the demolition of the village.

The metaphor of dogs is extended beyond the villagers and rural people until it includes all mankind by Jia Pingwa's ingenious allusion to the words of Daoist Master Lao Zi. Lao Zi says “Heaven and Earth are not humane; / They regard the ten thousand things as straw dogs. / The Sage is not humane; / He regards the common people as straw dogs.” 而天不仁，以万物为狗；圣人不仁，以百姓为狗. While Daoists stress the neutrality of Natural law and the sage's rule, through the tragic fate of dogs Jia Pingwa certainly laments and expresses his regret if not outright hatred for the lack of benevolence and shabby treatment of common people.

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221 Critic Zhong Bekang in his “At the Turn of the Century: Anguished Struggle of Metamorphosis—Metaphoric Consciousness of The Earthen Gate,” Fiction Review (June 1997) notes that this story is based on a real case.

(5) Setting as Metaphor

In an earlier quote I cite Wellek and Warren who find that in "writers as different as Shakespeare, Emily Brontë, and Poe, we can see that the setting (a system of 'properties') is often a metaphor or symbol." I mentioned in discussing background and tragic heroes that Renhou Village is a symbol of China. Old Gao Village is another symbol of China as well as the global village. *The Abandoned Capital* and *White Nights* both use the city as their setting. As setting the tragic action takes place there. It may contribute to the cause of action as well as a metaphor.

The City of Xijing is just such a metaphor. Critic Wang Furen relates that the city is surrounded by numerous imperial tombs and the tombs of their ministers, and inside the center of the city is the Stele Forest, which holds and exhibits the tombstones and tablets from the imperial tombs and their accompanying tombs. He even discovers that his teachers and schoolmates of his graduate years in Northwest University die earlier than those in his undergraduate years in Beijing. The city is like a necropolis. Jia Pingwa lets the crows hover over the Bell Tower, the crying of the old madman, and Zhou Min's *xun* music generalize the atmosphere of the whole city. Towards the end of *The Abandoned Capital*, Zhuang Zhidie sees the effigy of a panda used as a symbol for the city and comments: "It befits this city to have this..."
animal as its symbol.” The panda is a silly animal inept at adaptation and reproduction and it will soon become extinct. It is in fact not the symbol of the City of Xijing but a well-known symbol of China. This city as metaphor echoes Macondo, the fictional city in the Latin American masterpiece, which is wiped off the face of the earth in the end due to its own problems.

Shortly after The Abandoned Capital was published, Jia Pingwa said in answer to the questions raised by his editor Tian Zhenying:

“I appreciate the two characters ‘abandoned’ and ‘capital.’ In this character ‘abandoned,’ there are so many vicissitudes! As a capital, it is now abandoned. It embodies the feeling of the people in this city, which I cannot convey but know by heart. Xi’an can be said to be a typical abandoned capital. China is an abandoned capital on a global scale. The globe can be said to be an abandoned capital on the scale of the universe. The people here naturally carry their past glory and the burden of this past glory. They have the pitiableness of lostness, helplessness, and unresigned, but defeated feeling. The abandoned capital can suffocate but it can also compel to blaze out a bloody trail.”

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When and because we suffer, we attempt to achieve tragic relief. Our attempts are usually in the form of actions, religious, philosophical, or aesthetic. Our actions are often combined with religious faith and philosophical ideas, which might be either the cause or the consequence of our actions. Our cry, lament, description, interpretation, or theorizing of it is in the way of relief and consolation. Tragic heroes and victims have their respective ways of delivery and consolation. Artists and readers express and receive and are inspired through various manners of consolation, relief, and thereby delivery. Philosophers (e.g., Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, to name just a few) have their different ways to console us, which often turn out only to be capable of consoling some people who are convinced by them.

Hegel's interpretation of tragic action to me is exactly such an attempt to rationalize the tragic suffering to appease us sufferers. According to him, tragic action is one in which "valid but partial claims come into inevitable conflict; in the tragic resolution, they are reconciled, even at the cost of the destruction of the characters who stand for them." Though it involves the downfall and destruction of individuals, tragedy provides, "over and above mere fear and tragic sympathy...the feeling of reconciliation...in virtue of its vision of eternal justice, a justice which exercises a

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225 Williams, 34.
paramount force of absolute constringency on account of the relative claim of all merely contracted aims and passions" (33-34).

Marx, according to Williams sees the conflict of ethical forces and “their resolution by a higher force” in social and historical terms and sees social development as necessarily contradictory in character, so that what is affirmed in the tragic issue is “the general movement of history, in a series of decisive transformations of society” rather than “eternal justice” in Hegel’s sense. (35) Marxists would interpret the tragedy of Renhou villagers and Cheng Yi as victims of collateral damage that need to be sacrificed for the march of world history. To build we need to destroy.

For more than half a century, Chinese people were inculcated with the idea that “the proletariat cannot liberate itself until it liberates all humankind” and with that slogan the CCP subjected most of its members and the Chinese people to “iron discipline” for its noble-sounding utopian aims. Justifying the means by the ends, millions of people’s happiness and even lives were sacrificed. In the 1980s and 1990s China, people no longer believe in those noble-sounding words and no longer cherish high ideals. They realize it is not right to sacrifice a whole generation or some generations of people’s lives in the name of interests for the later generations, which they find is an excuse for those in power to hoodwink them into doing whatever the leaders want them to do for a minority of the privileged.

Therefore, Meimei, the first-person narrator of The Earthen Gate, overhears someone among the villagers say: “We admit we are frogs in a well but we like our well.
Chapter 6 Tragic Relief

The sky is huge but when the bird perches, it only perches on one small branch. How much of a big city can we live in? A person lives a lifetime while a blade of grass lives for only one season. Why should we deserve to be unhappy?" (55) Ye Lang in the previous novel asks the same question. People no longer want to be mere objects of sacrifice for the so-called necessary social development or transformation.

Fan Jingquan, one of Jia Pingwa's spokespersons, highlights his thesis, which may serve as one way of transcendence over tragedy:

“What can I say? I’m opposed to his methods, but it will be unimaginable without Cheng Yi in the village. The reason I’m fascinated with the village is I feel God is good at arranging Grandpa Yunlin to be a Jesus and Cheng Yi to be a Devil. Life can neither do without Jesus, nor without the Devil. The human soul is a real hell and, like the primeval forest, the area illuminated by civilization is very tiny. However, civilization stubbornly adheres to its own opinions, takes the part for the whole, treats the tiny part for the complete and most rational soul, fabricates a pile of deceiving and self-deceiving sublime, exquisite, and kind-hearted stuff, poses some false questions, forcefully constructs some moralized, hierarchical, rationalized stuff while completely ignoring their opposites, and thus completely refuses to face squarely its inner world. This is why we feel disgusted with the city while dissatisfied with country life, why the achieved civilization becomes hardened and ossified, why
we become less and less comfortable and more and more atrophied. For the society to go forward and for civilization to be amplified, it needs many animating factors. Truth, goodness, and beauty can only become amplified in the ghastly, spasmodic, violent, and coarse...  

This somewhat Nietzschean aesthetic and somewhat Hegelian interpretation that historical development necessitates Renhou Village's extinction given by Fan Jinquan can only satisfy Fan and believers like him, but they are attempts at relief.

As in all four novels studied in this thesis, Jia Pingwa lets the undercurrents of the major Chinese philosophies clash and commingle in this work. Often these “ideas-in-action,” to use Richard Sewall’s expression, structure the tragic conflicts that bring forth the tragic action. Zhuang Zhidie, a modern representative of a typical instance discussed by Li Wai-yee in her book *Enchantment and Disenchantment,* is constantly torn between Confucian attachment and Daoist detachment, engagement and withdrawal, between “roaming within the world and wandering beyond,” and in the end the tragic dilemma takes its toll in the form of a stroke that turns the “butterfly” into a chrysalis. Apart from his inner conflict created by the two philosophical currents in his mental make-up, there is also the conflict between both his philosophical leanings and that of his alter ego, Zhou Min’s wandering knight’s temperament and practice. Secretly, Zhuang

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226 Fan’s original words end here. *Tu Men,* (203-204).

Zhiedie, like his author Jia Pingwa, has been fascinated by knight-errantry, which is
certainly a much quicker and more direct solution to many problems.

This conflict or coexistence is carried over to *White Nights* in the image of Ye
Lang and Zhu Yihe, whose child like existence is a clear embodiment of the Daoist ideal
state or the ideal of the “heart of a new-born child.” Zhu Yihe is like a Confucian scholar-
onficial who suffers defeat in a power struggle and retreats into a Daoist indifferent
attitude by suffering a stroke and turning into a silkworm.\(^{228}\) His name 祈一鶴 (pray to
be a crane) suggests this Daoist leaning.

Jia in his “On Death” says that it is human nature to treat life and death very
seriously and the expression of this nature is what we call feeling, but it is a Creator’s
plot. Those who see through this plot are philosophers, masters, and true men and they
are therefore very calm and composed before death. At the other extreme are the muddle-
headed who have no idea of fear of death. Between these two extremes are us ordinary
people who are troubled forever with the questions where they come from and where they
will go after this life. Daoists describe death as “flying on the back of a crane to become a
fairy”; Buddhists tell us that the soul will neither be born nor die, neither come nor go;
while materialists say man comes from dust and returns to dust.\(^{229}\)

\(^{228}\) Ye Lang dreams while dozing: “He enters Zhu Yihe’s room and discovers lying in bed not Zhu Yihe but
a white fat silkworm that is pulling a white thread and making a nearly complete giant cocoon” (269).

\(^{229}\) *Sitting Buddha*, 84.
Zhu Yihe not only becomes a crane in the Daoist sense, but also becomes a baby in Mencius’s sense. After Yan Ming and Ah Chan shave his moustache and wipe off his perennial saliva, Zhu Yihe turns into a newborn baby:

Beloved Zhu is as soft and white as cotton. The wrinkles in both his hands and feet disappeared. All his fingers are plump even with a dimple at each joint. He sleeps there, curled up, even sucking a finger in his mouth. Ah Chan comments: “Look, when people live to this age, they are exactly like children.” Yan Ming adds: “Probably the happiest time for anybody is babyhood, worry free and care free” (333)

He achieves literally what Mencius calls “a child’s heart.” Yet, like Zhuang’s fascination with death, ghosts, xun music that suggests to him the midnight howling of wild ghosts from the ancient graves, and funeral music, his stroke, a form of living death, is more like a tragic resignation than an achieved ideal state. Likewise, Zhu Yihe’s stroke, the continuation of Zhuang’s, is also a tragic resignation that befalls him by chance rather

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230 Gu Lu, The Four Books in Chinese and English (Shanghai, 1900), Mencius, 198.
than by choice. This kind of resolution is like Schopenhauer's giving up the will to life and Nietzsche's invocation of the ancient Greek saying that the best is never to be born and next to the best is to die as soon as possible. It is certainly not exactly a Confucian ideal.

Mencius said: "The great man is he who does not lose his child's-heart" (198). Gu Lu thinks the sentiment is like Jesus Christ's words: "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (198). While Christ speaks of the child's-heart as a thing to be regained, Mencius speaks of it as a thing not to be lost. With Christ, to become as children is to display certain characteristics of children. With Mencius, "the child's-heart" is the ideal moral condition of humanity.

Zhu Xi said: "The mind of the great man comprehends all changes of phenomena, and the mind of the child is nothing but a pure simplicity, free from all hypocrisy. Yet the great man is the great man, just as he is not led astray by external things, but keeps his original simplicity and freedom from hypocrisy. Carrying this out, he becomes omniscient and omnipotent, great to the extremest degree" (198). Agreeing with Gu Lu that Mencius himself might not expand his thought as Zhu Xi does, I think Zhu Xi's interpretation and Jia Pingwa's literal expression of it here in the novel are Confucian by ordinary understanding.

Another instance of spiritual anguish and attempts at relief is located in Yu Bai who suffers from pride, self-respect, hesitation, and oscillation. Fearing that her age cannot compete with Yan Ming for Ye Lang, she decides to forget Ye Lang completely.
But the more she tries not to think of him, the more she misses him. She drops her shoes to the ground to divine if she has a hope of marrying him. When they land sole up she finds that they are “against” and she tries again. She also tries to have her dog bring things to her to test her luck to no avail. She goes to a fortune-teller and gives him the character 也 ye. The fortune-teller, playing on characters with 也 plus another element, tells her outright: “In him there is no person; in the pond there is no water; in the land there is no earth; if you want to gallop, there is no horse for you.” On hearing that there is no “horse,” her heart shudders. Anyone who has experienced spiritual anguish will recognize this typical circular thinking process in her situation and state of mind.

She goes to Liu Yishan and, before she even speaks, he writes a character in her palm 夜 ye and tells her it is better not to do things her way. She reads the Diamond Sutra and is surprised to find that the Buddha does not in fact walk in the air, step on to the lotus flower, or disappear by levitation, but eats and walks barefoot and washes his feet like all men. She concludes that to aspire to Buddhahood is to live an ordinary life and do ordinary things and be an ordinary person. That leads her back to the thought of marriage as an ordinary person lives her life and she looks in the mirror and sighs with self-pity that she is old. (246-247)

The route of this circular thinking is that one’s annoyance from which one cannot deliver oneself leads one to an aspiration for enlightenment in Buddhahood or Daoist
retreat, but the very effort to attain this enlightenment reminds one of the annoyance that compels one to seek it in the first place, and furthermore the enlightenment itself tells one to go back to live an ordinary person’s life which returns one to exactly the place one set off from at the beginning. As Wai-ye Li concludes in her book, it is a leitmotif in many of the classical Chinese works that the heroes suffer from this clear-confused, awake-drunk, disenchanted-enchanted, withdrawal-engaged oscillation. Although Yu Bai is serious when she leans towards Buddhism, she is not enlightened in the end. Nor can she achieve complete relief.

Two other attempts at relief can be located in Ye Lang and Yan Ming concerning Ye Lang’s crushing ants. Finding the fate of human beings helplessly absurd, as if at the hands of a higher power like that of a God, Ye Lang finds relief by crushing the life out of a lower form.

Like many Shaanxi people who compare people to worms and call people “walking worms,” Jia uses the image of worms on many occasions. He named his collection of diaries and prose written on his trip south Walking Worms which implies that people are walking worms who should always be on the move rather than stay in the same place. In an essay entitled “On Death” collected in Sitting Buddha, he starts his second paragraph thus: “People are afraid of worms, because it is said that people evolved from worms.”

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231 Sitting Buddha, 82.
Jia describes his experience of stepping onto a worm in his "Afterwords" to *Old Gao Village*:

“At dusk on a cloudy day in the beginning of this year, I was to go for an errand. Just as I was about to step down, I suddenly spotted a worm wriggling under my foot, but it was too late for me to avoid crushing it. I stood there, sad for a long while, regretting my accidental damage, and thinking that it is so like mankind. It was probably just living happily or sorrowfully and all of sudden was crushed to death. All the other worms must be panicking and wondering what calamity is this?”

It is no accident that Hemingway describes a similar incident in *A Farewell to Arms* as related by Charles I. Glicksberg:

“Frederick Henry, as he sits in the hospital waiting for news of his Catherine who had just given birth to a dead child, reflects defiantly: One died without knowing what it was all about. He recalls how once in a camp he put a log on top of the fire and watched how the ants scurried frantically and ran toward the center where the fire burned and then fled back toward the end and finally fell off into the flames. For Hemingway, the fiery immolation of the ants presents a frightening symbol of the end

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232 *Old Gao Village*, 412.

of the world. The modern hero beholds a vision, instinct with irony, of a life that is without meaning and beyond redemption.”

Ye Lang’s crushing the life out of a lower form and showing the irrationality of God to humans has a Chinese characteristic attached to it. That is, he is like Ah Q who, when he is bullied by Mustache Wang, goes on to bully Little D and the little Nun to find relief. Yan Ming’s common sense persuasion, like many great religions and philosophies in the world, is actually a practical Chinese way of assuaging our resentment against the lack of equality in society:

“People should not compare themselves with other people. Do you think those seniors are happy? If you ask them, they all have resentments buried deep in their hearts. What kind of officials are they? If they keep comparing themselves with those leaders on the provincial level and the central level, they won’t be able to live any longer. The Mulian drama you play also has the differences between the king and the small ghosts in the netherworld. Wu Shun and Xiao Li must have a deep envy for you if they compare themselves with you.” (239-40)


235 Shaanxi local dialect has a popular saying: 人比人，活 不 得; 马比 鬣子 骑 不 得 (ren bi ren, bi bu de; ma bi luozi qi bu de. “You can’t go on living if you keep comparing yourself with those more fortunate; likewise, if you take a horse for a mule, you will not be able to ride one.”) The implied horse again reminds us of Ye Lang.
People invent ghost dramas on the one hand to reflect on the human world, and on
the other hand to console their own suffering and achieve their tragic relief. For example,
the Deputy King of the netherworld played by Nan Dingshan sings:

Don’t tell me officials are different.
Seventy-two of them are of the same pack.
Being officials thousands of miles from home just for money.
Who cares if the whole earth is drenched in blood?

休说官吏有区别，
七十二者皆一脉，
千里为官只为财，
哪管杀人遍地血。 (309-10)

The ancient Chinese dramatists deserve commendation because they could lash
out at contemporary injustices without being censured. One can easily imagine them
defending themselves: “Of course the netherworld has no justice to speak of.” The
following passage from the Mulian drama Ye Lang’s troupe compose and perform
reflects the universality of corruption and Chinese humor towards it:

Now my dream at last comes true. A lame official like me, sits in
the center, in place of the King of Hell. In the old days as a mere officer, I
could only pick the meat on the bones. Now a big official, I rake in big
money. Just now I judged a case that involved two greedy ghosts. From
each I fined three and a half strings of cash, which I will use to treat my wife to a new dress.

今日里遂心愿，我跛爷坐中间，代理阎王掌大权，
过去当官啃骨头，如今高官找大钱，适才我问
一案，二鬼把财贪，两人各罚三吊五，拿与太太缝衣衫...

(128)
This kind of reasoning can hardly succeed in making people willing to accept corruption and lack of equality. However, it is an attempt that seems to work for centuries.

Again in The Earthen Gate, after the village is demolished with Cheng Yi’s grandfather howling among the debris like a lone wolf, “Bury me alive!” Meimei experiences a trance in which she feels her soul go out of her body. She flies to the top of the city buildings and sees various activities people are engaged in and then the whole history of how on a boundless wilderness on which grass and forests thrived, flowers were beautiful and fragrant, rocks stood in various poses, water flowed flashing and rippling, and how one day came a few capable men and women who started to build the first house and started the first smoke, and then farms, streets, schools, stores, banks, post offices, markets, trade centers, administration buildings, skyscrapers, cars, pollution—environmental pollution and spiritual pollution—fret, restlessness, and infectious diseases, and people begin to reminisce about Mother Nature, and start to go the countryside and mountains, come back with grasses and flowers to plant on the sides of the streets and on
the balconies, and spend much money to buy birds and animals to preserve them in the parks. (327-28)

It seems as if history has to run its cycle no matter how cruel and how absurd it is. The western philosophies as represented by Hegel and Marx interpret the march of history along a teleological order and fix their eyes on the “development” or “progress” aspect while the Chinese three teachings believe in the cyclical movement, which ends always at the beginning. Some people find solace and transcendence while some are forever indignant.

Meimei in the end asks Grandpa Yunlin where she should go and he tells her in the enigmatic language of a Buddhist ṣāṭṭha: “Go where you come from!” (331) She then hallucinates, or rather, her soul soars out of her body again: “Thus I see my mother, with

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236 The mainstreams of the three teachings all hold the view of that the history is devolutionary plus cyclical. Some legalists, for example, Xun Zi (ca. 298-ca.238 B.C.), believe history is static while others, especially Han Fei Zi (d. 233 B.C.), though advocating changes in politics to fit the change in society, still hold that the conditions of the past were better than those of today and do not believe in historical progress. Neo-Daoist Guo Xiang (d. A.D. 312) believes the principle of change operates equally in the world of man, but he refrains from expressing any opinion whether this change is for the better or not. The Han dynasty expositors of the Ch’un Ch’iu, or Spring and Autumn Annals like Dong Zhongshu (179?-104? B.C.) and, later, Ho Xiu (A.D. 129-82) believe that history is developing through “Three Ages of Disorder, Approaching Peace, and Universal Peace.” This theory seems to be the first in Chinese thought which explicitly recognizes the possibility of positive human progress according to a fixed pattern of historical evolution, though it never became influential until the nineteenth-century revival of New Text school of Confucianism headed by Kang Youwei (1858-1927). Kang refurbished the old theory of Three Ages and “brought it up to date and gave it a world-wide context by ascribing the Age of Disorder to the time of Confucius, the Age of Approaching Peace to his own (K’ang Yu-wei’s) day, and the Age of Universal Peace to a period yet to come.... In his Ta-t’ung Shu, or Book of the Great Unity, K’ang describes the coming millennium with apocalyptic fervor as one in which there will be no political or racial divisions, no social classes, and no exploitation of man by man” (Derk Bodde, “Harmony and Conflict in Chinese Philosophy,” Studies in Chinese Thought, ed. Arthur F. Wright, 34). However, as Derk Bodde points out, Kang and his associates Tan Sitong (1865-98) and Liao Ping (1852-1932) were acquainted to varying degrees with Western literature, and their insistence on progressive evolution very probably reflects Western influence. (34-36)
her full bosoms and fat buttocks.\textsuperscript{237} I start to enter a tunnel, dark, soft, moist, slippery, warm, and cozy. I see my mother’s womb and murmur to myself: this is my home!” (331-32)

As early as at the time when Meimei points out to Cheng Yi that he is going to turn the village into a landlord plantation, he says that the “landlord” should be “landlady” 地母. He unwittingly reveals Jia’s understanding of chapter six of \textit{Dao De Jing}:

\begin{quote}
The valley spirit never dies;  
We call it the mysterious female.  
The gates of the mysterious female—  
These we call the roots of Heaven and Earth.  
Subtle yet everlasting! It seems to exist.  
In being used, it is not exhausted.\textsuperscript{238}
\end{quote}

The Chinese name \textit{Tumen} 土门 has its ambiguous meaning: the earthen gate or the gate of earth. In the “Postscript,” after quoting the definitions of \textit{tu} and \textit{men} from the \textit{Modern Chinese Dictionary}, Jia writes: “\textit{Tu} (land, soil) and \textit{di} (earth) are one word: earth correspond to sky or heaven; heaven is Yang and male while earth is Yin and female.

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\textsuperscript{237} Jia Pingwa is using the name of Mo Yan’s novel \textit{Fengru Feitun (Full Bosoms, Fat Butocks)}. According to Vivian Lee, “\textit{Fengru Feitun} was under severe attack by left-wing and conservative critics for its display of ‘eroticism’ and ‘sexism’ when it was first published in 1995. Mo Yan suffered a mental breakdown which put a halt to his creative writing for nearly two years” (250).  

\end{flushright}
Combining ‘earth’ and ‘gate’ enables me to understand why the *Dao De Jing* has the words:

> These two together emerge;
> They have different names yet they’re called the same;
> That which is even more profound than the profound—
> The gateway of all subtleties.” (188)

Therefore the gateway of earth can be understood as the female vagina. The gate to the earth is a “tomb” as well as a “womb.” Thus the ultimate relief is either go to the tomb or go back to the womb where one originally comes from. This echoes in distance the ancient Greek saying that the best is never to be born and the next best is to die as soon as possible. In Jia’s previous two novels, both Zhuang Zhidie and Zhu Yihe achieve a tragic relief by death or semi-death, while in this novel Jia gives the Renhou Villagers the option of going back to their mothers’ wombs.
Conclusion

We hear it said so often that we tend to believe that tragedy is dead in modern times; and that in oriental countries such as China, India, and Japan there is no tragedy. But when we examine it closely, the people who hold such opinions often conflate and confuse the general and specific layers of the meaning of the word so much that they also tend to perpetuate a mistaken notion. Specifically, “tragedy” is an ancient Greek word signifying a particular dramatic form in which one, two, three, and gradually more actors and a chorus play out a story, almost always with an unhappy ending. That form died with the decline of that particular civilization. It is truistic to say that no other countries can produce that particular form. Not even the later or modern Greece itself can.

Even the Elizabethan tragedies, which most critics will not hesitate to group along with the Attic tragedies as “high” tragedies, were often called “modern” tragedies as late as the middle of the twentieth century. Perceptive critics acknowledge the difference between Elizabethan tragedies and Attic tragedies. And we have many critics who firmly believe that there are only four periods of tragedy in such a long history of human civilization: Attic, Elizabethan, the seventeenth-century French neo-classic, and modern (as started and represented by Ibsen). George Steiner, who is thought to argue for the “death of tragedy,” concentrates on Elizabethan, Neoclassic, and later dramatic forms of
tragedy, and admits that different ages and different social environments need to develop different forms of tragedy. He concludes that by strictly following the rules one draws from the past tragedies one is sure to fail to produce great tragedies.

It will render the word “tragedy” nonsensical if we, like pedants, insist that since the word and the form it signifies are Greek, no other countries are able to reproduce them (strictly speaking, there is no such thing as a replica of something, for any reproduced thing is another different thing in itself). It will be like holding words such as “philosophy” or “democracy” whose origin is Greek as proof to insist that no other countries or ages can have philosophy or democracy. While no critics of tragedies are so naïve, many forget to bring this point up to their conscious level when they pass judgment on later works using criteria they abstracted from the Attic models.

The wider, more general sense of the word expresses an experience and a form of response to such an experience. I firmly believe Jaspers’s analysis that we human beings have tragic experience and tragic vision first and then respond to it next. As I quoted earlier, Williams at the outset of his book makes it clear that tragedy is “an immediate experience, a body of literature, a conflict of theory, an academic problem.” Human beings of all races and all civilizations at their inception experienced such tragic conditions or situations of sickness, death, and suffering. At first their response might be just gesture, crying, or acting out their grief; then they lament in words, songs, or express themselves in drawing until they gradually develop myths, rituals, religions, and philosophies. As their language is more and more developed, they express their feelings.
grief, and lamentation in poetry, songs, and drama. One important function and purpose of religion, philosophy, and art is people’s quest for answers to such questions as where people come from and where they are going, why there are suffering, sickness, and death, accident, necessity, evil, and injustice; and philosophy, religion, and art are in a sense their answers to, the result of, these questionings and are therefore a kind of explanation of, relief of, and consolation to, their sufferings. The Greek Attic tragedy happened to be a supreme artistic form arising out of this perennial human need.

Tragic experience is universal. As long as there is life, there will be tragic experience. Since all religions, philosophies, and arts are explanation, justification, sustenance, of life, all take it as their important obligation to respond to and explain tragic experience so that people can go on living with a sense of purpose and meaning. There was tragic experience long before the birth of Greek tragedy and there will be tragic experience long after the death of many particular tragic forms. Critics often say there is no Christian tragedy and that Christian tragedy is a contradictory term, because any hope of salvation will kill tragedy. However, that is as long as one is a one hundred percent believer and one never doubts God’s rationality and justice for any single moment. Theoretically, yes, there are many such martyrs who seemed never to doubt for an instant God’s love and justice. But practically, even Jesus Christ “in the last agony on the cross, suffers the anguish of terror, doubt, and desolation of a human creature in the hour of
ultimate, intolerable trial" and cries out: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46, Mark 15:35)

The same argument was advanced numerous times that India and China and Japan do not have tragedy because the people there believe in Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism. Again that is in theory as long as one believes in these religions one hundred percent without any moment of doubt. But in practice, there is hardly any such a perfect believer. To achieve such enlightenment is always an aim towards which the believer is always approaching but never attains, as Unamuno says of most devoted Catholic believers. It is also like Marxists who profess that once the communist society is realized, everybody will do what he or she loves to do. To each according to his or her needs and from each according to his or her ability, there will be no unhappiness, no inequality, no injustice, and no tragedy of any kind at all. All these are ideals and wishes and dreams, which if we realized them, would eradicate sufferings, injustices, and tragedies of all kinds. By this mere subjunctive mood, we know that they have not been realized and we may very well doubt they ever will. However, the mere existence of these beautiful dreams, wishes, ideals, beliefs, and philosophical systems exactly prove the existence of suffering, injustice, evil, and tragic experience of various kinds.

Zhuang Zhidie observes Confucian teachings as the norms of man, but he ends up serving the opposite of his aim and he personally lives a suffocated life without love,

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passion, or meaning. He wishes to be a Daoist, but it also proves impossible in modern times. Yu Bai reads the *Diamond Sutra* and wishes to live a Buddhist life, but that very teaching of Buddha that advises people to live a normal and ordinary life tells her to get married—the very troubling problem that urges her to go to the Buddhist scripture to begin with. This circular reasoning does not alleviate a person frustrated in love, let alone wipe out tragedies of all kinds. Meimei hallucinates entering her mother's womb after the village is wiped out, thus completing the Daoist “follow the course of nature” theory, but the tragic experience is there nonetheless.

Ordinarily, the cyclical vision all three teachings cherish is neither happy nor unhappy, neither comic nor tragic, but with Jia Pingwa's particular tragic vision that seems always to focus on the downward part of the cycle, its representation in his novels carries an unmistakable tragic emphasis. For example, Zhuang and Zhou form a cycle of a literary man’s career. When Meng Yunfang tells Zhou Min about the “four big celebrities” and intellectual circles and the “four young scoundrels” of Xijing, very much in the manner Leng Zixing and Jia Yucun chat about the four big clans in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, Zhou thinks to himself that Xijing is not much different from Tongguan where he comes from. There is another big cycle superseding a small circle, as Angelina Yee perceptively notices that Matriarch Jia’s words that when she was a girl she also had a garden like the Grand View Garden, pushing the cycle back to history. Besides,
there is another cycle of Zhen Baoyu and Jia Baoyu. Yu Hua’s ending his story “1986” with a rippling effect of cycle after cycle of a mad teacher chasing after his wife and daughter who refuse to acknowledge him after another mad teacher and another teacher doing the same is another instance of this cyclical “tragic vision.”

Cheng Yi’s grandfather, the old executioner boasts of his skill and scorns the modern day execution by shooting as dull and boring. picks up the foundling Cheng Yi from a she wolf who nursed the boy for at least a night, only to find his grandson executed in exactly the same boring way in the end. Irony combined with cyclical vision makes the experience more tragic. The absurdity of changing a human head for a terra cotta head flings the sarcasm directly onto mankind’s lap. The police, who execute Cheng Yi and hang dogs who are tamed wolves by origin, are proven too be more inhuman than the wolf who nursed the human foundling.

Head Wu of Old Gao Township asks Zilu: “What is wrong with being a peasant or rural person? Weren’t you shaking the world there in the city? We have a saying here that goes like: ‘Nobody can be rich for three generations.’ I think it must be true there, too. The countryside besieges the city and our countryside people lead the city after we enter it. As a result, the old urban people will naturally decline and grow decadent. Then

240 “Grandmother Jia’s childhood spent in a similar garden with her sisters and cousins is a reminder that the present is merely a repetition of the past (Chap. 38); and Bao-yu’s dream of confrontation with another Bao-yu in a gardenful of girls (Chp. 56) as well as Caltrop’s citation of the line, ‘Here abounds precious jades’ 此乡多宝玉 (63.875), highlights the reproducibility and hence universality of his experiences.” Angelina C. Yee, 649-50.
more rural people enter it, so it rotates on and on. His words reveals a hidden theme in the first novel well. Indeed it is the country people who seem to bring life to the city and invigorate it for a while, but at the same time it seems to be all the people from the countryside that are corrupting the abandoned capital world when they get there. They will become urbanized and lose their vitality and become decadent and need new blood from the countryside to jostle them out of it. Head Wu’s words appear to be a compliment but in substance it contains a warning to Zilu that he should not be smug right now because he will be decadent soon.

Williams see a perpetual alienation in perpetual revolution, which is needed to get rid of alienation old and new. He sees the tragic experience but also sees the energy released in crisis, in the revolution to overcome the tragic suffering, which might have originated from the past revolution. He emphasizes the energy side of the cycle and therefore is optimistic. Jia Pingwa sees the new alienation, new suffering, and new crisis produced by the energy released in overcoming the past suffering and crisis and alienation, therefore he is pessimistic. Optimistic or pessimistic, both because of their tragic vision acknowledge there is tragic experience and there always will be.

There are several reasons for Jia to have achieved a tragic vision and brought it into form in the four novels. First, his location in the ancient capital (Xi’an was Changan), an inland cultural and historical city which provides him with so much advantage in terms of ancient history, culture, and tradition by way of folklore, legends, anecdotes.

241 Old Gao Village, 89.
historical sites, traditional views, and even archaic expressions also enable him to become a contemporary writer immersed in tradition. Second, his marginal existence as a country lad struggling to gain and maintain a foothold in a cultural urban area enables him to observe and feel intensely what other complete urbanites or a total rustic cannot. Third, the Reform Era provides him with a golden opportunity not only to observe phenomena that could not exist in normal times and circumstances but also to resonate with, respond to, and express them artistically and freely.

Fourth, Jia has always been a sensitive person from childhood on, thanks to his upbringing in a big conflict-laden family, environment, and time. His maturity in age also serves as a great factor that helps him to resonate and feel as intensely as he does, which in its turn nurtures and develops his tragic vision of life and people. Fifth, Jia has been ever alert and attentive to new trends of thinking and criticism of his works. He often invites intellectuals much younger than himself to introduce him to new theories, philosophies, discoveries, and new academic achievements as a whole. Therefore, he has been responsive and expressive of modernistic concerns such as alienation, identity crisis, modernization, Neo-colonialism, globalization, environmentalism, paradoxes of absurdity in both contemporary life and history, and existentialism. His writings since the early 1990s on have always grappled with such existential and metaphysical problems while persisting in portraying quotidian events so that both ordinary people and scholars are fascinated with his works.
For the reasons given above, Jia is able to record historical, epochal changes in fictional forms with ease, in the style of the Grand Historian Sima Qian. For example, the atmosphere of the tumultuous Reform Era in such a large ancient capital is encapsulated by him with just the *xun* music and the howling, the crying of wares, of the odd madman, the junk collector, that hover and linger over the city and refuse to disappear. Jia’s immersion in traditional culture enables him to employ such insignificant details as historical sites, legends, names, events, cultural objects, historical and literary allusions and symbols the way a Western writer like James Joyce does almost unconsciously in his use of biblical, Greek-Roman mythological, or Homeric references that express so much with so little.

Despite his disclaimers about having a keen interest in technique, he emulates the classical novelist Cao Xueqin and develops the technique of “multi-perspectives” or “splitting oneself” that applies the Chinese painting technique to fictional writing and serves as his self-dissecting spirit very much in the style of Lu Xun and Unamuno. Because of his knowledge of the Chinese philosophies/religions—the three teachings of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism that were intermingled, interacted, confused, and harmonized through historical evolution; because of his fascination with traditional Chinese esthetics; and because of his keen interest in the contemporary Chinese and world ethos, he is able to address various existential and metaphysical concerns of various circles through both traditional and modernistic techniques (magic-realism and stream of consciousness, to name just a couple) in all four novels.
The above is mainly his importance as far as his esthetics are concerned. Now I will summarize briefly his tragic vision as it runs through the four novels discussed and briefly reiterate why I think they are tragic. The first novel describes mainly writers of the cultural circles in the city. The sudden historical change triggers a change in the value systems, which in turn triggers disorientation in people's consciences as well as in consciousness. It provokes people to reflect on the absurdity of history and contemporary reality and makes people lose their moral and ethical base. They degenerate and in the course of their degeneration they destroy the people they love as well as themselves.

The second novel portrays a country lad in the performing art circles, his existential and spiritual tragedy and the tragedies of various people related to him in the city. Reform provides rural young people like Ye Lang an opportunity to work and live in the cities as well as observe and experience social, cultural, and political inequities and tragedies of various causes. Some suffer for material desires like Zou Yun and Ning Hongxiang. Some suffer for spiritual anguish like Yu Bai. Some suffer for their idealistic causes such as Ye Lang and Kuan Ge.

The third novel moves the setting to the border region between the countryside and the city and portrays the evils of modernization and urbanization, the tragedy as well as the hopelessness and the potential dark side of its victims. Their tragic fate is that of mankind as a whole in the ontological and metaphysical sense. The fourth novel lets the tragedy (or farce or drama) play out totally in a village and exposes the hideous behavior,
habits, mentality, culture or lack thereof, and the absurd history as well as the monstrous reality of the villagers who are a metaphor for the entire Chinese people and reveal that the “pure land” ideal is a mere illusion and erases all hope of regeneration for these people as well as the whole of mankind. The fault is not only with urban people. It is moral deformity, cultural heritage, and absurd ideals and thinking that cause their existence to be tragic with no hope of deliverance from their existential misery and anguish. Running through all four novels is a theme of self-ridicule in the sense of protagonists either being highly autobiographical or intellectuals from the countryside in the city like himself or proxy intellectuals (like Meimei in *The Earthen Gate*), which in itself is a most tragic act, according to Unamuno.

There are two major reasons why Jia lets his novels show a tragic vision. First, Reform provided Jia with a suitable environment for a tragic vision. As I argue above, the Reform not only provides a new social environment but also pressures people to interrogate directly Chinese history and reality. As Richard B. Sewall argues convincingly, historically, literary tragedy has always appeared at a mature period of a culture. “Often these critical periods, or ‘moments,’ come after a long period of relative stability, when a dominant myth or religious orthodoxy or philosophic view has provided a coherent and sustaining way of life. Suddenly the original terror looms close and the old formulations cannot dispel it. The conflict between man and his destiny assumes once
more the ultimate magnitude.... The whole society is involved, and the stake is survival. The Chinese situation fits this case very appropriately.

The second major reason has to do with the author Jia’s own age. Jia has been writing on several occasions about the maturing of age that has played a great role in his thinking ever since his essay entitled “On the Age of Forty.” I think it is not by coincidence that Sewall invokes Theodore Spencer’s Death and Elizabethan Tragedy that argues that “a kind of national preoccupation with death during Elizabeth’s last years and following her death” made Shakespeare stop “writing comedies.” “He simply expressed better than anyone else the trend of contemporary thought...He began to contemplate life tragically.”

Sewall repeatedly stresses the biographical and autobiographical factor in the production of literary tragedy: “In the lives of many writers of tragedy there is abundant evidence of deep autobiographical meaning in this recurrent theme, a fact of relevance to the sense of innerness and involvement that tragedy possesses above other forms” (6) He emphasizes that it is especially so in modern tragedy:

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242 Sewall, 7.

243 In my interview Jia spontaneously started to talk about age as a factor influencing his vision of life as tragic. He stresses the point at forty one year’s difference would make a big gap between one’s former self and present self, which point I make in the case of Xi Xia being the immature and untruthful, and romantic Jia while Zilu being the more sophisticated, more mature, more truthful, more realistic, and even more tragic Jia.

244 Sewall, 160, Note 59.
"It is worth noting, now that we have reached in our study the era of modern drama when biographical information accumulates, that such suggestions—they can seldom be more than that—about the ‘involvement’ of the artist in his fictions increase. Berdyaev, for instance, makes them repeatedly about Dostoevski: ‘The destiny of his characters is his own, their doubts and dualities are his, their iniquities are the sins hidden in his own soul.’” (160).

The genesis of Jia’s own vision as well as the production of the four novels are clearly conditioned or even decided by Jia’s esthetic attainment and his historical situation. China has no lack of tragic experience and Jia has a tragic vision and a certain mastery of traditional and modernistic techniques to forge his vision into form. However, the question is how profound his vision is and how accomplished his art is. To date, he cannot compare with either the Western masters such as Dostoevsky, Camus, Faulkner, Márquez, or his Chinese master Lu Xun in profundity of vision. Limited by his religious and philosophical immersion and probing, he lacks the scope and the depth his masters were able to reach. Even among his contemporary writers, he seems to lack the salient features that enable such writers like Mo Yan, Han Shaogong, and Yu Hua to stand out. Jia Pingwa has not reached Mo Yan’s abundance of energy and great momentum. Neither has he reached Han Shaogong’s philosophical and aesthetic depth, nor Yu Hua’s cold, objective, incisive cruelty, and the “indirect and ironic approaches to reality,” and the
“psychological symbolism” Yu Hua inherited from his fellow provincial master Lu Xun who was in turn influenced by such masters as Gogol and Andreyev.\textsuperscript{245}

Jia Pingwa, despite his caution and effort, has been affected by commercialism. His massive production adversely influenced the quality of his art. For example, Zhou Min has been as clever as Jia Yun in \textit{The Dream of the Red Chamber} in the beginning, but to enjoy low comedy, Jia Pingwa lets Zhou Min wait in the washroom in order to pass a letter to the Director of the Municipal People’s Congress and suffer the latter’s insult like a fool. This destroys the integrity of the character. Another example in the first novel is Zhao Jingwu. Zhao is thick with the “four young scoundrels” who have divided Xijing into their separate “territories” and who solve some petty crimes like thefts much more efficiently than the police. Zhao can make them work for him in manipulating Gong Xiaoyi and swindling all the precious art collection from the latter’s hand. It would be unthinkable that Zhuang Zhidie could cheat Zhao repeatedly without being discovered.

In \textit{The Earthen Gate}, the first-person narrator Meimei is a girl of marriable age, but Jia Pingwa lets her collect thirteen dog leashes and tie them around her waist at the dog massacre scene in the front row of the crowds. If this is not enough of a stretch, Jia’s letting Meimei reminisce about Grandpa Yunlin’s grasping the stud pig’s penis dripping with semen to help him enter the sows without the slightest unease is beyond anybody’s belief. In \textit{Old Gao Village}, Jia sometimes writes that Zilu is Chentang’s elder cousin and

sometimes he is the younger one. In the countryside there are strict rules as to who can joke with whom, but Jia lets Chentang’s wife crack dirty jokes with Zilu. Jia forgets that in the beginning he describes Cai Laohei’s father as ninety years old, alive, still practicing medicine, and taking Zilu’s son Stone as his apprentice and, later in the middle of the novel, lets Cai Laohei boast to Xi Xia that his father, after his success in raping a city high school girl, attempted to rape an army general’s daughter and his head was shot and cracked open. Jia’s tendency to be prolific makes him careless and his enjoyment of the grotesque and the absurd dilutes his message.

If readers follow Jia Pingwa closely, they will find that some collections are repetitive and often his later writing repeats incidents and passages of his past writing. For example, he several times uses the ironic situation of someone who fortunetellers predict will be a high official but later can only act as an official in a theater. Although Camus analyzes succinctly the absurdity of actors and the roles they act, Jia repeats this irony without exploring its deeper philosophical implication as the French master did.\(^\text{246}\)

His first novel of the twenty-first century *Huainian lang* (Cherishing the Memory of Wolves) is so repetitive of the past works that it caused a Shaanxi critic Li Jianjun to wonder if the writer has really become senile.\(^\text{247}\)

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247 Li Jianjun 李建军, “Xiaoji xiezuo de dianxing wenben—Zai ping *Huainian lang* jian lun yizhong xiezuo 消极写作的典型文本—再评《怀念狼》兼论一种写作 (A model text of passive writing—A second review of *Cherishing the Memory of Wolves* and some more words on a kind of writing) *Nanfang Wentan* 《南方文坛》(Southern Literary Forum, 2002, 4).
Jia Pingwa records in the past that he benefits from his friends and editors like Fei Bingxun, Hou Qi, and Lei Da because they render sharp criticisms of him when they think he needs it. I hope this time such criticism as Li Jianjun’s will draw enough attention. Lu Xun did not write any novels but he will always be a giant in the history of modern Chinese literature. Great writers become immortal due to the quality of their art but not to their quantity.

Nevertheless, his works are esthetically and historically important both as their germination and as their function and purpose of fictionally recording a historical period. They are important in the history of contemporary Chinese literature because since the demise of May Fourth realism, a period that produced such a giant tragic figure as Lu Xun, nobody in China was able to express such a tragic vision. Neither the political and social conditions allowed it nor were the writers able to attain such a truthful and dark vision as Jia’s. His books are important also because they announce to the world that the time is ripe for tragic vision to express itself and true tragedies to be written. I only hope that my exposition of Jia’s tragic vision will serve to deepen our collective understanding of this important contemporary Chinese writer.
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This bibliography contains three sections: works by Jia Pingwa; books consulted; and journals essays and unpublished dissertations cited.

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