

HISTORY, IDENTITY, AND THE MARGINALIZED:
AN ANALYSIS OF SELECTED WORKS BY HAN SHAOGONG AND SU TONG

by

NOELLE ELIZABETH HINRICHS

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Department of Asian Studies

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

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Abstract

Since Deng Xiaoping's liberalization of art and literature in 1977, literature in the People's Republic of China has shown rapid development. While there are indisputably many sides to the "new" fiction of the Post-Mao era (1977 to present), the substance of the change can be summarized by saying that such works reflect an overall "return of the individual" to modern Chinese fiction, in terms of characterization, authorial style, and personal vision. This thesis examines the return of the individual from the specific angle of marginalized character and motif, since they are frequently used by contemporary writers to express an individual and often subversive perspective in fiction.

The contemporary writers Han Shaogong and Su Tong both make use of marginalized character types and marginalized motifs in some of their key works. In the four texts presented here, "Ba, ba, ba" and "Three Women" by Han Shaogong, and "1934 Escapes" and *Rice* by Su Tong, marginalized character and motif are used to explore and articulate authorial vision of history and identity in China. Each author defines their marginalized characters differently, yet there are basic similarities. Central characters in the four works are characterized by their social marginalization; all refer to aspects of human nature in general, and to the "Chinese nature" or cultural character in particular. Similarly, marginalized motif in each work underscores an alternative viewpoint. Regional discourse, myth, superstition, fallible narrators, and images of ostracism and alienation posit a challenge to the dominant ideologies and literary conventions of the last forty years of mainland Chinese literature.

This analysis of the techniques of characterization, narration and imagery, illustrates how marginalized character and motif are defined in each work and how they are used to underscore theme and meaning. Despite the continued obsession with China, both authors manage to convey their emphasis on history and identity with a covert cultural exploration. Ultimately, their work is ordered around aspects of human response and the human condition. They are not seeking to provide answers to the question of whither China, but rather to explore the individual's place in history in human terms.

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1. The Return of the Individual in Modern Chinese Fiction:

History, Identity and the Marginalized

The decade of the 1980's has been a fruitful one for writers in mainland China and for their counterparts, the literary critics of both China and the West. Since Deng Xiaoping's [邓小平] liberalization of art and literature in 1977¹, a "new" tide of literature has emanated from the People's Republic of China (PRC); one that is exciting both because it follows on the heels of forty odd years of a stasis of socialist realist fiction, the only permissible school of fiction in the Maoist era (1942-1976), and because it posits a challenge to the more conservative and Party-approved brand of fiction which hitherto dominated and still competes for position on the literary front. In addition, the sudden and rapid development of mainland Chinese literature since 1977 has allowed for a flourishing of not one, but many kinds of literary schools. This period of relative freedom in literature has served to greatly encourage the development of a literary product that is considerably more varied, and decidedly more mature on artistic and philosophical grounds. Moreover, the fact that the impetus for this rapid stylistic development stems as much from global influence as it does from domestic forces and models of earlier works of Chinese literature is of considerable significance, and bears directly on the context of this study.² Thus, while there are indisputably many sides to this "new" fiction, the substance of the change can perhaps best be summarized by saying that such works reflect an overall "return of the individual" to modern Chinese fiction, in terms of characterization, authorial style, and personal vision. Furthermore, it is precisely

¹ See Michael S. Duke, *Blooming and Contending: Chinese Literature in the Post-Mao Era* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

² The reference to earlier models here refers primarily to literature of the May Fourth era (1919-1937), yet still earlier models of vernacular and classical fiction appear to be influences, and some fiction even plays with the jargon and characterizations of the Maoist era in order to parody that time period and the remnants of it that are still in existence today.

this return which provides the larger context for the study undertaken here: a detailed examination of the selected works of two mainland authors, Han Shaogong [韓少功] and Su Tong [蘇童], whose literary innovation and philosophical concerns bring a fresh and provocative perspective to their fiction.

This having been said, it remains to qualify the phrase, the "return of the individual" with a context. The most notable thematic feature of PRC literature written in the 1980's appears to be its emphasis on the individual, a feature which was basically non-existent in the literature produced in the nation during the Maoist era. An individualistic approach to literature was characteristic of May Fourth writings however, and it is in this sense that we can speak of a "return" of the individual to modern Chinese fiction. From this perspective, the intervening years of socialist realist writing can be seen as an interruption of the development of the individual in modern Chinese fiction, in favor of a literature that served the needs of the revolution by emphasizing the collective over the individual. In keeping with the Maoist line to serve the workers, peasants and soldiers, all literature produced during this period focussed on class distinctions; to the extent that differences in thought, feeling and action were attributed to a difference in class and not to the dynamics of the human personality. In the present day PRC, elements of Maoist era fiction are still strongly present, and in fact vie for prominence in the Chinese literary field.³ It is out of this relatively pluralistic state that I come to term the kind of Post-Mao period (1977-present) fiction that stresses the individual the "new" fiction of this period, in order to distinguish it from the other kind of conservative, Party-approved fiction (a triad defined by the critic Li Tuo [李陀] as consisting of literature of the wounds, reform

³ Li Tuo points this out in the article edited by Yu Xiaoxing. See Li Tuo (as edited by Yu Xiaoxing), "Haiwai Zhongguo zuojia taolunhui jiyao" [Brief Record of Overseas Chinese Writers' Seminar], *Jintian* [Today], No. 2, 1990: 94.

literature, and reportage),⁴ which is more readily characterized by its tendency towards the exposure of social and political ills, reformism and overall didacticism.⁵

In providing a context for the return of the individual in modern Chinese fiction, I am also seeking to define the context of the more specific objective of the study to be undertaken here. In considering the scope of the phrase the "return of the individual," it seems obvious that it is a broad characterization that could be defined and exemplified in many ways. I have therefore chosen to look at it from a very specific angle, one that focusses on a particular type of individualization in narrative; that embodied in the form of the marginalized character or motif. While considerable time will be spent on defining what is meant by "marginalized" in the pages which follow, it suffices to introduce it here in the form of its dictionary meaning, describing those who "occupy the borderland of a relatively stable territorial or cultural area."⁶ At face value then, the term "marginalized" fixes itself securely in the domain of that which "borders" the perceived norm or power base; be that in terms of people/ character, localities/ setting, and or language/ discourse. Beyond this, I use the term conceptually to express the ways in which it encompasses aspects of literature other than or related to those listed above, such as the presence of imagistic motifs encoded in the text or an approach to the writing of narrative, if and when they are employed to evoke a sense of the marginalized. In this sense, the term "marginalized" is closely linked to the concept of the individual in life and in fiction in that it represents certain qualities of being or of characterization, and or a certain consciousness or approach that are *not* those of the majority / power base. In fine, my use of the term "marginalized" is intended to direct the focus towards the individuality and alternativeness of the subject.

⁴ Li Tuo, "Haiwai Zhongguo zuojia taolunhui jiyao": 94.

⁵ For a more detailed discussion of the characteristics of this vein of Post-Mao era fiction from 1977 to 1984, see Duke, *Blooming and Contending*: 59-97.

⁶ *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (Ontario: Thomas-Allen and Sons, Ltd., 1984): 727.

As has been alluded to above, much of what is to be discussed about the presence of marginalized character and motif in selected works of fiction written in the Post-Mao period has to do with its relation to theme and meaning. In fact, the attempt to forge the link between marginalization and theme stems from the observation that the presence of a marginalized character is very frequently found in recent works of fiction that focus on the twin themes of history and identity. Furthermore, the marginalized characters are not just coincidentally present in these works, but rather, are linked directly to plot and action, either because the story itself revolves around them, or because they somehow influence the behaviours and consciousness of other characters to adopt a certain, though sometimes changing, perspective. In terms of what the reader perceives, the use of marginalized character and motif are integral to the overall impression given, and it is in this way that it can be said that these images of marginalization are employed to articulate the history and identity themes.

For many, the attempt to analyze the themes of history and identity from the point of view of the marginalized may seem to be putting the cart before the horse, insofar as the phenomenon of Chinese literary works focussing on the themes of history and identity is generally recognized by most scholars of modern Chinese literature, with a clear link back to literary works of the May Fourth era (1919-1937). Nevertheless, to approach the topic from this angle alone would set the parameters for an exceedingly large study, of proportions too great to be undertaken here. Further to this, my interest in the specific study of marginalized character and motif is spurred by the observation that relatively little has been written about this phenomenon as it is present in contemporary Chinese

fiction.⁷ For these reasons, and because I believe there to be a definite link between the use of marginalized character and motif and the articulation of the history and identity themes, I have determined to begin from this premise. The objective is thus to discover the form and substance of this link in addition to its significance as an indicator of developments in contemporary Chinese fiction, of Chinese as well as global shifts in consciousness, and of individual authorial vision.

Finally, before discussing the writers and works that will be presented here, it remains to make one further point about the themes of history and identity which bears heavily on the relevance of discussing together two authors whose works span a six year period, and whom I determine to belong to different literary schools within the Chinese literary scene. To this end, a brief return to the circumstances highlighting the burgeoning of the new fiction of the 1980's may best serve as an explanation. While it is precisely the comparison between the heavily dogmatic and formulaic literature of the Maoist era and the provocative, varied approach of literature in the Post-Mao era that makes recent developments in fiction so refreshing, there is a line of continuity between the two which, paradoxically, provides a point of departure for a discussion of certain aspects of the new Post-Mao era of fiction. This continuity, put quite simply, is the repeated emphasis on China and its culture, and the propensity of writers to view the

⁷ One article that does focus on this subject is: David Der-wei Wang, "Jiren xing: Dangdai dalu xiaoshuo de zhongsheng (guai) xiang" [The Currency of Abnormality: The Appearance of (Strange) Creatures in Contemporary Mainland Novels], in *Zhongsheng Xuanhua: San ling yu ba ling niandai de Zhongguo xiaoshuo* [Heteroglossia: Chinese Novels of the 1930's and the 1980's] (Taiwan: Yuanliu, n.d.): 209-11.

individual in relation to, or in terms of, the larger social and cultural whole.⁸ In many ways, and much more overtly, this same preoccupation is evident in May Fourth era fiction. The observation that this trend is present in Maoist era fiction is therefore not intended to eclipse the more direct links of the Post-Mao era fiction to its May Fourth predecessor, but rather to highlight the fact that there is a sense of continuity throughout the fiction of the modern era which takes the form of a concern with the condition and direction of China and Chinese society. The latter perception is of course shadowed by the familiar words of C. T. Hsia, which succinctly expressed the defining characteristic of May Fourth literature: "its obsessive concern with China as a nation afflicted with a spiritual disease and therefore unable to strengthen itself or change its set ways of inhumanity."⁹ Arguably, writers during the succeeding Maoist era had little choice but to focus on China and its rebuilding, and on subjects that would illustrate the direction the nation and its people were to take, yet the point here is that these restrictions and experiences are also central to the recent history of the Chinese writers and are therefore significant determinants of the type of fiction that has been written over the last ten years. Moreover, such a perspective allows one to view recent trends in mainland fiction not in isolation, but as a part of an ongoing developmentary process; in effect, as part of the evolution of modern Chinese fiction. Additionally, this perspective most certainly provides added insight into the preoccupation with the question of "whither China,"

⁸ This observation is not meant to imply that the individual, in the sense of a character type, was characteristic of Maoist era fiction. Quite to the contrary, the individual disappeared during the Maoist era as characters were dehumanized and typified in accordance with the guidelines laid down by Mao Zedong [毛澤東] in his *Talks at the Yenan Forum on Art and Literature*. Subsequent developments in Maoist literature produced works that featured model characters, either heroes or villains, and plots that always focussed on the work itself and not on the individuals behind it. The point to be made here is that where characters were identified and described, their social background was of central importance, not unlike the practice in classical fiction of identifying a character through reference to his family and geographic origins. Thus, traditional conventions in fiction no doubt had some impact on the development of the particularly Chinese version of socialist realism in the Maoist era.

It should also be noted here that many of the experimental works being published today are proof that there is now a movement to break from this perspective, and this includes writers like Su Tong, Yu Hua, etcetera.

⁹ C. T. Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, 2nd. ed. (London: Yale University Press, 1971): 533-4.

which has so effectively manifested itself in an abundance of Post-Mao fiction dealing specifically with the twin themes of history and identity.

From the Nativist to the Experimental: From Han Shaogong to Su Tong

In selecting the authors Han Shaogong and Su Tong for analysis, my purpose has been to focus on two contemporary mainland authors who make use of a marginalized character type, and what I have chosen to call marginalized motifs, in some of their key works to express a very specific emphasis on the closely related themes of history and identity. Thematically, there is thus a strong basis for comparison between the works selected for discussion, even to the extent that they express similar underlying or secondary themes. In addition, the thematic similarity is an interesting one, as it exists in spite of the fact that the individual styles of each author are quite distinct in terms of their treatment of the subject matter and markedly, in terms of the tone of their conclusions. Further to this, the two writers are interesting to compare because of their relative positions in the body of fiction emanating from the mainland in recent years. The specific works selected for discussion are two works of novella length by Han Shaogong: "Ba, ba, ba" (1985), and "Nü, Nü, Nü" (Three Women, 1986)¹⁰, and two works by Su Tong, of novella and novel length respectively: "Yi jiu san si nian de taowang" (1934 Escapes, 1990), and *Mi* (Rice, 1991).¹¹ The discussion which follows and an analysis of the works themselves will hopefully illustrate why and how these writers have attained their place in the corpus of contemporary Chinese fiction.

¹⁰ Han Shaogong, "Ba, ba, ba," *Kong Cheng* [The Empty City] (Taiwan: Linbai, 1988): 131-181.
Han Shaogong, "Nü, Nü, Nü" [Three Women], *Kong Cheng*: 182-246.

¹¹ Su Tong, "Yi jiu san si nian de taowang" [1934 Escapes], *Qi qie chengqun* [Wives and Concubines] (Taipei: Yuanliu, 1990): 15-78.
Su Tong, *Mi* [Rice] (Taipei: Yuanliu, 1991).

As one might expect, the factors surrounding the sudden burgeoning of Chinese fiction in the 1980's are numerous and interrelated, and stem from political, economic, socio-cultural and foreign influences. One of the chief characteristics of the literature produced in this decade has been the quickly changing, and evolving, face of modern Chinese fiction. As critics now look back from the viewpoint of the nineties and attempt to summarize this decade, many focus on the year 1985 as a pivotal one for mainland Chinese literature, as it saw the rise to prominence of one particular school of fiction, the *xungen pai* [尋根派] (the Nativist or "searching for the roots school"). In examining the phenomenon of nativist fiction in a few key articles, the Chinese literary critic Li Tuo has pointed out both its impact on subsequent fiction and its brevity as a trend to illustrate his theory that it is but a stage, albeit a highly significant one, in the ongoing literary development of Chinese fiction.¹² To elaborate on his theory, one with which I am in general agreement, Li Tuo feels that the various trends of Chinese literature from 1977 to the present - that is, the literature of the wounds, literature of reform, reportage, obscure or misty poetry, nativist fiction and experimental fiction - are not merely chronological developments of the same line of fiction, but are rather two competing and opposing lines divided between the former and latter three stages.¹³ The Nativist School is thus a stage that has both overlapped with and contributed to the development of other stages, most significantly, the school Li Tuo refers to as the *shiyan pai* [實驗派] (literally, the "experimental" school).

Following Li Tuo's line of thinking, there is thus a sense of the evolutionary about the range of fiction from the Nativist to the Experimental Schools, both chronologically and substantively. With respect to the former, it is noteworthy that the popularity of writing nativist fiction was short-lived, with many writers moving on to explore other

¹² See Li Tuo, "1985," *Jintian*, No. 2, 1990: 59-73; and Li Tuo, "Haiwai Zhongguo zuojia taolunhui jiyao:" 94-103.

¹³ Li Tuo, "Haiwai Zhongguo zuojia taolunhui jiyao:" 94.

angles and approaches from which to express themselves in the years after 1987. From the substantive point of view, nativist writing signalled an obvious break with Maoist discourse, often referred to as "Maospeak," that held sway throughout the Maoist era, and continues to hold sway in works of reportage and socialist realist fiction. This observation, which has been made by many writers and scholars of Chinese fiction, is the basis of Li Tuo's developmental linking of the obscure poetry movement to the nativist movement, as in his words, ". . . when looked at from the surface, the connection between their outer forms is not great . . . but their inner connection is identical; in terms of language they both use the 'language of the margin' to challenge the 'language of the center.'"¹⁴ In this light, nativist fiction reflects a thematic concentration on tradition and on explorations of Chinese culture and society, as well as a symbolic and imagistic focus on the marginal perspective, which cannot but be considered a deliberate move on the part of Chinese writers.

The writer Han Shaogong is a central figure in the nativist fiction that emerged in the pivotal year of 1985 in that the works selected here, "Ba, ba, ba" and "Three Women," are often cited as examples of the nature of fiction written in this period. Although Han Shaogong is not considered the first to write nativist fiction in the contemporary period, with precursors like Wang Zengqi [汪曾祺], Zheng Wanlong [鄭萬隆], Zhong Ah Cheng [鍾阿城], and the Tibetan Zhaxidawa [扎西達娃] among others,¹⁵ his early essay on the subject has largely come to define the essence of nativist writing. Thus, in an article published in January 1985, Han Shaogong remarked on the phenomenon as follows: "young writers are beginning to cast their vision out; to re-examine the national soil

¹⁴ Li Tuo, "Hawai Zhongguo zuojia taolunhui jiyao:" 96.

¹⁵ In addition, the influence of Shen Congwen's [沈從文] pastoral legacy on Han Shaogong's nativist fiction is worthy of note. Jeffrey C. Kinkley has explored the stylistic and thematic links between Shen Congwen, Han Shaogong and three other contemporary Chinese writers in "Shen Congwen's Legacy in Chinese Literature of the 1980's," in *From May Fourth to June Fourth*, eds. Ellen Widmer and David Der-wei Wang (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993): 71-106.

beneath their feet, and to look back at the past of our people, [thereby] attaining a new literary awakening."¹⁶ And, more categorically, he defines the goal of nativist writers to be the unearthing of the "mysteries that determine the development of the race and the existence of humankind,"¹⁷ and conceives of it as "a kind of re-recognition of the race, a kind of revival of the historical factors latent in the aesthetic consciousness, and a kind of objectified expression of the pursuit and grasping of the boundless and eternal feelings of the human world."¹⁸ To this end, Han's view of "searching for the roots" arises from his sense of the link between the city and the countryside, where the latter is considered a living museum of the history of the race. His conception of the roots of the nation is therefore expressed in his literature through the exploration of all the unorthodox practices of the country: the vulgarities and jokes, the popular legends and unofficial histories, the folk songs and stories of gods and spirits, and the local customs of the people.¹⁹

In an article published one year later in 1986, the scholar Chen Sihe 陳思和 reviewed the movement in an attempt to summarize the ideology behind *xungen* consciousness, and determined it to consist of three main reflections on literature and society. His analysis, which is also a definition of the nature of the nativist movement, is that, "in the area of literary aesthetics, [nativist consciousness] reflects a re-recognition and expounding of the cultural material of the race (including classical works of literature, ancient religion and philosophy, and historical documents); it employs the sensibilities of modern people to gain an appreciation of the ancient culture and customs that have been handed down, as in the observation of the primeval forces of nature and in experiences of folk customs and traditions of the people; and it unearths and critiques the

¹⁶ Han Shaogong, "Wenxue de 'gen'" [The 'Roots' of Literature], in *Miandui kongkuo er shenmi de shijie* [Confronting the Vast and Mysterious World] (Zhejiang: Zhejiang Art and Literature, n.d.): 4.

¹⁷ Han Shaogong, "Wenxue de 'gen':" 7.

¹⁸ Han Shaogong, "Wenxue de 'gen':" 5.

¹⁹ Han Shaogong, "Wenxue de 'gen':" 7.

elements of the old culture that are still in existence in contemporary social life."²⁰ Certainly, each of these elements are present in the nativist works of the period, although Chen Sihe perceptively makes the additional observation that what constitutes nativist consciousness and searching for the "roots" is ultimately a matter of the individual interpretation of the writer. This is why critical opinion of the nativist movement is so varied, with the movement itself cloaked in a mist of uncertainty: Is it merely a renewal of May Fourth iconoclasm? Or a nostalgia for the social and literary traditions of the past? Both? Or neither? Yet the paradox inherent in these questions is perhaps the key, for it illustrates the significance of a detailed examination of the works themselves, to determine the extent to which the writer's personal style and treatment of the subject matter express a predilection for one or the other, or embodies the tension between them.

In setting forth a definition, or better perhaps, an explanation of the nativist movement, it is necessary to continually focus on the aspect of cultural exploration. In the context of nativist writing, cultural exploration has tended to be restricted to an exploration of the cultural practices of a specific "marginalized" or border group, such as the people of China's northeastern provinces, the minorities of Xinjiang 新疆 and Tibet, or the mountain people of Hunan 湖南 province if we consider the particular work of Han Shaogong. Yet cultural exploration is also undertaken in the experimental fiction of mainland China, albeit in a slightly different way, and it is this link, along with the challenge of language referred to above, which illustrates the sense in which the nativist and experimental schools can be said both to overlap and at the same time, indicate an ongoing process of development. This observation, however, makes a definition of the Experimental School difficult, as the movement is in itself rather amorphous. Perhaps it is then best to begin with the school's other title, *xianfeng wenxue* 先鋒文學 or "avant-

²⁰ Chen Sihe, "Dangdai wenxuezhong de wenhua xungen yishi" [Nativist Consciousness in Contemporary Literature], in *Wenxue pinglun* [Literary Review], No. 6, 1986: 27.

garde" literature, since this is a term which generally embodies the dynamics and nature of the movement.

As Li Tuo observed, the term "avant-garde" as it is applied to modern Chinese literature is at best a confusing one, because it evokes comparisons and definitions from the body of earlier Western literature of the same name, despite the fact that the forces behind the respective movements are quite separate.²¹ Yet the term "avant-garde" does focus in on the characteristics of this later stage of Chinese fiction: particularly, that element of positing a challenge to the existing socio-political conventions of language and subject matter in literature.²² Li Tuo's definition of the leap from nativist to avant-garde fiction is thus based on certain breakthroughs made by authors (Ma Yuan [馬原] and Can Xue [殘雪]) in 1987 and 1988, and entails a new perspective on the act of writing literature that is twofold; firstly, to conceive of the creation of fiction as a process of encoding a system of language, and secondly, to use narration to effect a break between real life and fiction in any given work.²³ At this point, it should be noted that breakthroughs such as these developed in conjunction with the trend of the new fiction in general, and that elements of experimentation in language and subject matter are present in nativist works as well. In point of fact, the foregoing discussion is intended to highlight the significant markers of the various stages of recent mainland fiction, with the understanding that there is no clear cut line between nativist and avant-garde works. Consequently, what is most significant in defining the so-called avant garde movement for the purposes of this study is to recognize the shift in focus to a much greater

²¹ Li Tuo, "Haiwai Zhongguo zuojia taolunhui jiyao:" 97.

²² My definition of the western "avant-garde" comes from M.H. Abrams, who defines it as follows: "a small, self-conscious group of artists and authors who undertake . . . to 'make it new.' By violating accepted conventions and decorums, they undertake to create ever-new artistic forms and styles and to introduce hitherto neglected, and sometimes forbidden, subject matters. Frequently avant-garde artists represent themselves as 'alienated' from the established order. . . ." M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 5th ed. (Toronto: Holt Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1988): 109.

²³ Li Tuo, "Haiwai Zhongguo zuojia taolunhui jiyao:" 98

experimentation with narrative style, symbolic imagery and subject matter than was present in the works of the nativist period. For this reason, I prefer to use the term "experimental literature" to describe the most recent stage of fiction in China as it more accurately describes the level and scope of such works, rather than merely the essence of the innovative spirit behind them, which is no less a characteristic of the vitality of nativist works.

There is a great complementarity between nativist and experimental fiction, which it seems best to express in terms of a quality of literary spirit. Both schools of fiction are extremely dynamic, and the dynamism that they reflect has a shared origin and focus in the act of breaking with established norms in literature, and inventing, re-inventing and experimenting with literary technique. Su Tong, who is widely considered to be an experimental writer, along with writers like Yu Hua [余华], Ge Fei [格非], and Liu Suola [劉索拉] among others, has recorded his own perspectives on the essence of avant-garde fiction in his preface to the collection *Wives and Concubines*, from which the story "1934 Escapes" is drawn. His view of the concept of the avant-garde is that the use of the term is relative to its context; he states that "in all categories of culture there has always existed a kind of culture that is relatively radical and that carries with it a character of revolt and rebellion; they [these cultural elements] may gain the upper hand, or they may disappear in an instant, but within them there is definitely a kind of active consciousness. Avant-garde writers possess a spirit of adventure and risk; on the literary stage they batter at the decrepit walls, destroying or creating, [thereby] pushing forward the development of literature."²⁴ In this sense, Su Tong considers avant-gardism to be a cultural force that has always existed, and one that is now merely finding its expression in the literature of the present time. Additionally, his words adumbrate traits that readers and critics of experimental fiction might put forward as the underlying impetus of this movement - the

²⁴ Su Tong, "Da-wen (Daixu)" [A Preface], *Qi qie chengqun*: 10.

challenge to express oneself through a self-created imagery and discourse, to continually stretch the philosophical and artistic boundaries of literature, and to explore the world without the fetters of conventional approaches. His words bring us back to the central force behind both the nativist and experimental schools, the way in which they both illustrate a desire to challenge the existing norms of language and subject matter in order to develop new literary techniques and a new focus.

To return specifically to the writers Han Shaogong and Su Tong, a feature of each of their works is their ability to engage in a kind of covert cultural exploration on one level, while keeping their works anchored in the universality of human response and human nature. Their styles can rightfully be termed avant-garde for their innovative handling of narrative form and imagery, their creation of an individual discourse, and their skillful employment of modernist and post-modernist techniques. With respect to Han Shaogong, his style in the nativist works selected here is primarily characterized by innovation in discourse, ironic narration and the use of elements of magic realism to create an indistinct world that hovers between the real and the unreal. In "Ba, ba, ba," he creates a regionalized discourse through his reliance on the mountain dialects and customs of Hunan Province, and makes use of the unofficial histories, myths and superstitions of the mountain villagers to explore and parody not only the puzzle of their individual existence, but that of the whole of the Chinese people. In doing so, a tension is created between tradition and modernity, as well as between what is good and bad about the wealth of tradition that forms the backbone of Chinese culture.

In "Three Women," Han relies on innovative narration and an imaginative blending of imagery and symbolism to develop the themes of history, identity and the meaning of existence as the main male protagonist journeys back to his ancestral village in the Chinese countryside. The story, which is organized around the central figure of his deaf

aunt, involves this protagonist as an alternately reticent and involved first person narrator who views and speculates upon the present and past of individual characters, of the Chinese people as a whole, and of the whole of humanity. Additionally, the personal discourse that is created expresses a concept of identity that is established through linguistic links, as well as through a highly symbolic relationship with nature and with the history of the narrator's ancestral homeland, all of which are interwoven with elements of magic realism and stream-of-consciousness narration. Interestingly, the discourse of "Three Women," as the title itself indicates, concentrates not only on man speaking of and for himself, but also on man viewing and speaking for woman. Both works have cultural exploration at their core, with the former a more direct investigation into the cultural attitudes and traditions of China, while the latter considers these aspects within the larger context of the puzzle of human existence in general.

The two works of Su Tong's that will be presented here for analysis were written only a year apart, yet there is more of a difference in their respective styles than there is between the above two works written by Han Shaogong. The first, the novella "1934 Escapes," adopts a storyteller mode, wherein the implied author, who is also the narrator, recalls his family history through an open discourse in which he frequently communicates to the reader and interrupts the story to express and emphasize the high level of subjectivity that has gone into its creation. In effect, Su Tong is here experimenting with inner-textual dialogue, insofar as characters in a fictional present are interacting with and influencing the actions of characters in the narrator's own story, set in the ostensibly historical, but ultimately fictional past. Su Tong's innovations in style in this work are thus centred around his use of language, both in the form of the discourse outlined above and in terms of his approach to imagery, wherein language serves to anthropomorphize the natural world. There is also a strong textual reliance on shocking imagery and some previously rather taboo subject matters, such as sex and sexual perversions, which serves

to jolt the reader into a new perspective on Chinese culture and humanity. The main motif of the story is one of escape, and it is embodied and underscored in the text by provocative and paradoxical combinations of dream sequences and magical connections between separate worlds: city and village, past and present, life and death. Time is infinite and open in "1934 Escapes," and Su Tong's treatment of history and identity within this framework allows for much critical and or suggestive commentary to be encoded in the ambiguity of imagery and symbolism.

In the second of his works to be discussed, the novel *Rice*, Su Tong adopts a realistic style of narration with an omniscient third person narrator, which distinctly changes the tone of this text from that of "1934 Escapes." In *Rice*, the main male protagonist lives a life governed by feelings of hatred and alienation and seeks to establish his identity by embarking on a lifelong path of despotism and cruelty. All characters in the story are similarly motivated however, and Su Tong expresses the weight of the characters' emotions and motivations in a correspondingly heavy style. The strength of this work therefore lies jointly in Su Tong's depiction of character and in his use of imagery and motif. There is an intensely psychological treatment of the characters and of the subject matter, which focusses on the elements of human greed, hatred and cruelty that are one aspect of the human will to survive. Furthermore, the motifs of alienation, fragmentation, and the journey are themselves highly expressive of the main themes of this story and their employment in the novel is one of the main indicators of Su Tong's skill. Finally, Su Tong also makes use of flashbacks and delusions to create an almost otherworldly sense of reality in the novel as he depicts the web of social and psychological relations between characters and seeks to express the darkness and circularity of their lives. In this work, however, as with the others, there is still a central focus on the relation between history and identity, insofar as the novel focusses on one man's struggle to define himself in the specific setting of China in the 1930's, where hunger dominates daily life and is

depicted as a defining characteristic of China's past. Moreover, there is again the presence of marginalization in narrative tone and character in *Rice*, which leads us finally to a more complete discussion of the definition and significance of the phenomenon of marginalized character and motif in the realm of contemporary Chinese fiction.

Marginalization as a Narrative Focal Point

In present day literary criticism, use of the term "marginalized" to describe a type of character and motif invites confusion since the term has gained political currency in western philosophical debates on the nature of literary theory. Distinct conceptions of the margin/ marginal/ marginalized are key to deconstruction, feminist studies, and critical perspectives on knowledge which examine the strategies of exclusion and power, and the relation of self to other.²⁵ Most topical perhaps, is the way in which the margin is considered anew in the theory of deconstruction put forth by Jacques Derrida. Derrida conceives of the margin as fundamental to his strategy of *différance* (a term that encompasses both "difference" and "deferral") which "challenges the possibility of an identity, sameness, or inside that could be conceived of independently of the altering power of its difference, its other, or its margin" ²⁶ The very idea of the margin existing as a place or state in binary or hierarchical opposition to a center is brought into question.

²⁵ Key persons in these areas of theoretical debate are Jacques Derrida (Deconstruction), Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous among others (French Feminist Criticism), Michel Foucault (examining the pervasiveness of power-knowledge strategies in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* [1969] and *The History of Sexuality* [1978]) and Edward Said, who "traces the process by which knowledge and learning can essentialize an exotic geographical margin as object, an other that becomes the medium of a collateral self." See Winfried Siemerling, "Margin," *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms*, ed. Irena R. Makaryk (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993): 587.

²⁶ Siemerling: 585-6.

In feminist studies, marginality rather generally refers to the position of women in male-dominated discourses such as literature, philosophy and history. Similarly, Edward Said considers relations between what might be called center and margin in his work on Orientalism and the Orientalist discourse, where he outlines the process by which a dominating framework (as self) can contain and represent a geographical or cultural area as its other.²⁷ As these examples of usage illustrate, the concept of margin/ marginalized in western literary theory currently addresses the issue of power-knowledge relations.

In this thesis, the focus is on examples of individuality in modern Chinese literature. While cognizant of the theoretical underpinnings of the margin in western literature, my usage of the term is as a descriptive tool. It is intended to reflect and describe a kind of characterization and approach to narration that is quite specific and definable, and useful for this analysis of modern Chinese fiction. Therefore, the description of marginalized that I apply to this discussion is derived from two concepts that are frequently evident in works of mainland fiction. The first, *jixing ren* [畸形人], is a Chinese term which refers to physically deformed or abnormal people. The second, *bianyuan ren* [边缘人], is the Chinese translation of a western term which refers to people of marginal or border areas.

The former category, *jixing ren*, encompasses characters who border the social circle; they are social outcasts because of an obvious physical, mental or social abnormality, be that in the form of a disability such as lameness, blindness, deafness or disease, a mental condition of insanity or retardation, or in social behaviours and attitudes which reveal alienation, cruelty, and perversion. The latter category, *bianyuan ren*, refers to a larger and in some sense less specific group, in that it concentrates upon people of marginal or border areas and reflects a distinction that is set up along the lines of setting (locality), cultural custom and social and political status within the national arena. "Marginal

²⁷ See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

people," are thus people of China's villages or minority areas, whose lifestyle sets them apart from the dominant framework of Han culture because of differences of language, customs, residence, beliefs, economics and or lack of a modern (westernized) education. Yet the term also refers to people who are technically within a dominant framework, but marginalized from its power, as in the case of women and children, and even political outcasts. Therefore, while the two categories are separated by specific contexts, there is a concrete relation between them in that they both describe people, conceived of as individuals or as members of a group, who are, for whatever reason, marginalized by a power base.

The additional sense in which I have chosen to apply the term marginalized is in the description of the characteristics of certain literary devices or references contained within the text that exist outside of the category of character outlined above. In referring to them as motifs of marginalization, my intention is to indicate the linguistic and imagistic references in the text which set a tone for the narrative as a whole. Given the scope of four separate works, a wealth of examples can and will be highlighted in the textual analysis which follows, but a general indication of what is meant by this terminology can be exemplified here. A discourse that is regional, that is, one that uses local dialect or the perspective of local beliefs to tell a story, is focussing on those aspects of the group which serve to define it as marginalized. Insofar as this is not the standard approach or handling of narrative discourse in the PRC, examples of regionality reflect a marginalized tone. Writers who use a non-dominant cultural or linguistic framework to shape their story are providing a perspective that is alternative to the established literary norms. Marginalized motif, then, is here meant to describe the way in which the story is told if it is narrated from the perspective of one who conceives of his or herself as alienated from the conventional attitudes and perspectives of his or her society. Its use is not restricted to a linguistic approach alone however, and the other sense in which it is applied is in the

description of frequent references to marginality which are primarily indicators of theme, and which are expressed in the form of a repetition of imagery. An example here would be imagery that evokes a sense of social isolation and alienation, and to a more horrific extent, imagery that focusses on disfigurement to express the self-lessness and fragmentation of the ideal human whole.

Finally, it is necessary to address two important points about the use of the term marginalized in the context of literature in the PRC. In comparison to the situation in many western countries, literature in the PRC is tightly controlled by politics, so that it is possible to speak of a power relationship between the dominant political framework and the artistic community it seeks to contain. Thus, the nature of the situation in PRC literary circles provides a context that justifies a consideration of the margin from a mainstream perspective. By using the term as a descriptive tool, my intention is to highlight the character type and/or narrative voice that is portrayed to indicate the direction and imaginative nature of the author's literary vision. Secondly, the liminal role of the margin brings us more centrally to the usefulness of the term marginalized as a descriptive tool. The fact that writers have consciously focussed on the margin, which is both outside and yet integral to that which is inside, is a fundamental part of their experimentation. The term margin not only encompasses the direction of their literary perspective, but also highlights the cultural exploration that is at the core of their work. The focus on the margin in the four texts presented here does not determine a mutual exclusivity of center and periphery, but rather emphasizes the relations between them. The texts describe the root or origin of the culturally and politically authoritative group as closely relating to or stemming from the margin or borderland that is portrayed.

At this juncture, one may well want to consider the relevance as well as the significance of focussing on examples of marginalization in character and motif. In a

survey of several of China's foremost young writers of the 1980's, this kind of focus on the marginalized is evident in many of their works, particularly those that touch upon or deal directly with the themes of history and identity.²⁸ On many levels, the link to the marginalized is obvious, as when you consider works of nativist fiction where the focus is clearly on the regional. On other levels, the link may appear more tenuous, but upon closer examination it seems clear that there is an intended reference in works that focus on a marginalized character to aspects of human nature in general, and to the "Chinese nature" or cultural character in particular. This much it seems can be presumed from the observation of the prominence of this character type in recent works of fiction, since it is one way of exploring issues of philosophical concern, such as the meaning of life and the behavioural dynamics of human interaction, by human example, quite in addition to the exploration of the characteristics and motivation of a race.

In considering the relation of the marginalized character and motif to the twin themes of history and identity, there is an obvious correlation to earlier works of Chinese fiction in the modern era. The theoretical currency of the term "marginalized" aside, the image of such an outcast figure has its modern origins in the work of Lu Xun [鲁迅]. The image of Ah Q [阿Q] lingers on, and remains a significant influence in contemporary works that deal with the history and identity of the Chinese people. Similarly, Lu Xun's madman in "Diary of a Madman" has left its mark on the contemporary literary scene, and this is perhaps why so many young authors seek to articulate a vision through the words of a madman, or the image of a cripple, or by describing actions of violence or cruelty. Yet these observations are not intended to categorize contemporary works as

²⁸ For example, Mo Yan's [莫言] "Bai gou qiujianjia" [White Dog and the Swings], "Huanle" [Happiness], "Ku he" [Dry River], "Jinfa ying'er" [The Yellow-Haired Baby]; Su Tong's "Yi jiu san si nian de taowang" [1934 Escapes], "Guai ke" [The Strange Guest], "Waixiang ren" [The Outsiders: Father and Son]; Han Shaogong's "Ba, ba, ba," "Nü, Nü, Nü" [Three Women], "Lan gaizi" [The Blue Bottlecap], "Gui qu lai" [Homecoming?]; Zhaxidawa's "Ji zai pisheng kou shang de hun" [Souls Tied like Knots on a Leather Cord]; Shi Tiesheng's [史鐵生] "Hei hei" [Blacky]; Wang Anyi's [王安憶] "Ah Qiao zhuanlüe" [A Biography of Ah Qiao], etcetera.

imitators of their May Fourth precursors, or to suggest that the cultural exploration being engaged in today is no more than a reversion to that of the past, but rather to reflect on the sense of continuity between them. While it is on the one hand difficult to discuss the concept of marginalized characters without referring to obvious parallels in the works of Lu Xun, it is hopefully made clear on the other that the writers of the contemporary period are certainly developing their own approaches and devices to articulate their themes. In fact, in selecting to examine the link between marginalized character and theme the intention is to illustrate how the works in question reflect or question something profound about the history and identity of the Chinese people, precisely because it has substance to the authors themselves, and not just because it is an oft-repeated and widely accepted critique of Chinese society embodied in the form of Ah Q.

In the four works presented here for study, marginalization, in fact a form of alienation, is considered the narrative focal point. Thematically, imagistically and linguistically it can be linked directly to the plot of each text. An in-depth examination of the texts under consideration is of course necessary to truly exemplify the ways in which these links are established, yet there are certain basic links to theme that can be discussed even before undertaking an analysis of *how* the authors define the marginality of specific characters in each text. To begin with, the role of the marginalized character in all four works is to underscore the main themes of history and identity as well as to convey many of the secondary themes to the reader. It is, for example, descriptive of the rural-urban split, and of the tension between tradition and modernity in a changing China. Furthermore, the focus on marginalized character allows the works to be anchored in a more universal perspective, since this character type facilitates the expression of many aspects of the human condition, such as feelings of ostracism, ridicule, absurdity, cruelty, ignorance, hatred and empathy. In addition, it is employed to symbolize the circularity of history and to question the significance of life, if not concretely, then at least in terms of

an abstract impression which is indicative of authorial vision. Finally, in combination with all of the themes listed above, marginalized character and motif serve to symbolize the will to survive, and reflect the inner struggle of man to define self through the exploration of individual as well as national identity.

Before beginning our analysis of the works selected here, one further point about marginalization as a narrative focal point deserves mention. There is an aesthetic component to the use of marginalized character and motif in recent mainland literature. The point was earlier made that the Chinese are currently re-discovering their language, in the form of discourse that reacts against Maospeak and westernized language forms. They are choosing to focus on regional areas and are using oral and dialectical, and even classical forms of speech to tell the story. Overall, there is a desire to eschew the political jargon of the Maoist era by dispensing with it altogether or by using it to parody contemporary situations and personalities. On a most basic level, this kind of experimentation with regional language forms reflects a calculated move away from the dominant cultural framework, that is tantamount to expressing authorial inclination for a questioning, subverting perspective. Moreover, it is most significant that Chinese writers and readers are currently gravitating towards an approach which involves the exploration of the foundations of Chinese tradition, knowledge and culture, at a time when they are finally able to express themselves individually. Certainly, the alternate perspective inherent in adopting a marginalized point of view fits the Chinese need for expression at this time. The need to challenge the established political and cultural framework (in the form of its dominant ideologies, linguistic and literary conventions), to develop a modern Chinese literary tradition, and to react against years of one way and one voice, are no doubt part of the appeal of marginalized tone and character in literature.

2. Han Shaogong: Centering the Marginalized

In the many critical articles that have been written about Han Shaogong's nativist works of 1985 and 1986, two main points readily surface and become central to the ensuing discussions. The first point is that this group of works, "Homecoming?," "The Blue Bottle Cap," "Ba, ba, ba" (1985), and "Three Women" (1986), mark a significant stylistic departure for Han Shaogong from his earlier realist style to one that experiments with many western modernist approaches, such as surrealism, magic realism, and existentialism, and also has a decidedly domestic focus on innovations in language and subject matter. The second point revolves around Han Shaogong's choice of "strange" characters to carry the main action of the plot, and the psychological treatment that he engages in as a method of elucidating a character's nature, motivation and life circumstance to the reader.¹ Further to this, a personal yet widely accepted critical observation is founded on the relation between this departure in style and characterization to a thematic emphasis on the exploration of cultural, historical and personal identity. In fact, Han Shaogong himself alludes to this connection between character and theme when he reflects on the process of his literary creation in "Ba, ba, ba" and "Three Women" as follows:

The protagonists of these two works are extremely familiar to me, as I was once their neighbour or relative. When I sat before the blank page silently recalling their appearance, I thought of using a style that was true to life to meticulously depict them, and so I wanted to describe them in the customary realist style. But while writing, I could not restrain myself from giving Bing Zai [丙崽] an extremely large navel, and placing a great wall behind Yao Gu's [妖姑]

¹ An example of the *guaiwu* [怪物] or "strange characters" from the short stories and novellas listed above are as follows: Huang Zhixian [黄治先] in "Homecoming?" [Gui qu lai]; Chen Mengtao [陈梦桃] in "The Blue Bottlecap" [Lan gaizi]; Young Bing (Bing Zai) in "Ba, ba, ba" [Pa Pa Pa]; Aunt Yao (Yao Gu) in "Three Women" [Nü, Nü, Nü]. The degree and nature of the strangeness of these characters is variously defined, and ranges from mental conditions of insanity and retardation to physical conditions of abnormal development, deafness and impairing illness.

back, and even went so far as to write in things like an earthquake that speaks of "resonance and response" between Heaven and Man. In this way, I seemingly touched on some other kind of literary style.

I strove to write of the typicality of these characters, and simultaneously infuse my writing with rational considerations - either in the form of thoughts concerning the social history of mankind as in "Ba, ba, ba," or in the form of thoughts on the condition of individual existence, as in "Three Women."

... While writing, I discovered that my weak and indistinct thoughts were frequently swamped by a certain kind of atmosphere, lost in a certain image, or betrayed by the sudden onset of some kind of emotion.²

This quotation, although lengthy, is an important indication of Han Shaogong's approach to literary creation in these works and his conscious use of characterization to evidence and exemplify the main themes of his stories. In essence, the process which he outlines above reflects an intellectual and emotional approach to the design of the plot, at least insofar as he admits to the expansion of character as a symbol in itself, and as a vehicle, concrete or abstract, for the conveyance of certain philosophical themes. Given this, an appropriate characterization of Han Shaogong's approach to character and discourse in both "Ba, ba, ba," and "Three Women" seems to be his emphasis on centering the marginalized. The phrase refers us to two important features of Han Shaogong's style in these novellas: his preference for a specific character type that is socially outcast or marginalized, and his predilection for a regional focus in terms of setting and discourse. Yet, as with all well written works, there is a successful interlocking of plot elements in both texts, and the discussion would not be complete without an attempt to reflect on this synthesis. Thus, the specific features of characterization, narration (with attention to the nature of the discourse created), and imagery will be presented in the context of an ongoing discussion of their relation to theme. In an effort to illustrate the connection between marginalization and theme in

² Han Shaogong, "Hao zuopin zhuyi" [A Doctrine for Good Writing], *Hong gaoliang: Ba shi niandai Zhongguo dalu xiaoshuo xuan* [Red Sorghum: An Anthology of Fiction from Mainland China in the 1980's] (Taipei: Hongfan, 1987): 139.

each of the two works, I will deal with them systematically in the following discussion, dealing first with the earlier work "Ba, ba, ba," and secondly with the more recent novella, "Three Women."

"Ba, ba, ba": Exploring the History and Identity of a Race

The story "Ba, ba, ba" ³ is a unique work which explores a series of events in the life of the residents of a remote mountain village in China's Hunan province. Recounted by an omniscient and critically distanced third person narrator, the plot is alternately focussed on a broad and narrow view of this village community. On the one hand, the village as a whole is taken as a character in itself and becomes the vehicle for an impersonal view of a kind of rural consciousness, while on the other, the plot is an examination of the thoughts and behaviour of an individualized cast of characters. The movement between this shifting perspective is skillfully accomplished through an abstract and inventive blending of myth, local superstition and the lore of local history with the concrete events of the plot. In this respect, Han Shaogong's style in this novella transcends the boundaries of realism, as he presents the fantastic details of local belief and superstition as a realistic framework for the actions and motivations of individual characters. Moreover, it is the shift from the individual to the collective in terms of characterization and narratorial voice which allows the work to be read allegorically, and gives rise to the expression of its main themes: the circularity of history in the context of

³ Quotations from this work will be drawn from an authorized English translation by Martha Cheung. Han Shaogong, *Homecoming? and Other Stories*, trs. Martha Cheung (Hong Kong: Renditions, 1992). Page numbers given in text.

In some cases I have supplied my own translations of words where I feel the above does not sufficiently convey the sense of the original. For example, I have chosen to refer to the work by its *pinyin* romanization "Ba, ba, ba" rather than use the Wade Giles romanization "Pa Pa Pa," simply because the *pinyin* system better captures the phonetic sense of the original. Also, I refer to the village as "Chicken's Head" rather than "Cock's Head" because the former is the literal translation of the Chinese *ji tou* 雞頭, and because it reflects the folksy and absurd tone of the narrative.

Chinese culture, the ignorance of those who blindly adhere to tradition and superstition, and the insolubility of the link between individual identity and the social history of mankind.

To begin with characterization, there are four characters who are given individual description in the novella: the main protagonist Bing Zai, his mother, the village tailor Zhong Man [仲滿] and his son, Shi Ren [石仁]. Each of these characters is individualized for the role they play in bringing forth the afore-mentioned themes, as well as for the color their strange and comic actions add to the story. In addition, the interactions of the latter two, the tailor and his son, serve to introduce a secondary theme that dovetails neatly into the first: the tension between tradition and modernity in China. The main purpose of the characterization of the tailor and his son, who represent tradition and modernity respectively, is to symbolically highlight the conflict between these two approaches to life in the context of a village that has remained isolated from the rest of the world. To this end, while Han Shaogong has taken measures to give the village a name and the specificities of regional custom and dialect, he is equally careful to set the story in an open time frame with a generic locale. The village in this narrative could be any village in China existing at almost any time in Chinese history, as seen from the point of view of character motivation, cultural beliefs and life philosophy.⁴ It is for this reason that I consider the village to be a character in itself, since the narrator presents the cultural attitudes towards tradition and ritual as if culled from the collective mind of the villagers. Through the expression of these attitudes the village is defined as a mysterious place, where the people are highly superstitious, dependent on the land for survival and incapable of separating the natural and human worlds in their daily life. The village

⁴ One concrete example of this typification is found during the poisoning of the old and sick. The narrator describes an elderly woman, grandma of the Yutang [玉堂] family, as "basking in the sun like a door god. She was so old you could hardly tell if she was a man or a woman . . . She could not hear what was said to her, and would only glance indifferently at whoever went up to address her. Perhaps in a lot of places one would come across old folks like her - a living symbol of this type of village." (86-7)

mentality, not unlike that of the individual characters mentioned above, is confrontational, cruel, ignorant and laughable. Yet the continued existence of the villagers, even in the face of self-wrought disaster, is of great symbolical significance in that it reinforces the central theme of cyclicalality - the idea that their history will be repeated again and again.

The plot of the novella revolves around one particular character, the village idiot Bing Zai, who is mute except for his ability to roughly stutter two sentences: "Ba ba ba" and "F- Mama."⁵ Ironically, his ability to speak only these two sentences brings abuse and derision upon his head when times are good, but is precisely what elevates him to the status of an immortal capable of pronouncements on the future when the village, Chicken Head, falls upon hard times and into a darkly comical battle with the neighbouring village of Chicken Tail. By the story's end, both villages face disaster; the old and sick engage in a mass suicide through poisoning and the healthy young men and women burn their huts down and move on in time honored tradition. Only Bing Zai, who is considered the weakest and most dispensable member of his village, remains alive despite his serious poisoning, thus becoming the hopeless symbol of a history doomed to repeat itself.

The character of Bing Zai is the technical and symbolic focal point of the story, insofar as he is the catalyst for the action of the plot as well as the imagistic reference point from which theme and meaning are drawn. Yet he is also the epitome of the marginalized character, being physically and mentally inferior to the other residents of Chicken Head Village, and socially ostracized by almost all of them. His introduction to the reader comes in terms no less certain to identify him as an outcast, as follows:

⁵ The phrase "Ba ba ba" [爸爸] is the Chinese equivalent to saying "Da da da" (i.e. Daddy) in English.

When he was born, he showed no sign of life for two whole days, his eyes remained closed, and he refused to feed, scaring his folks out of their wits. It was not until the third day that he started to cry. . . . Very soon he picked up two expressions, one was "Da da da," the other was "F- Mama." Time passed; he was three, then five, then seven or eight years old; but still these were the only words he could say. Besides, his eyes were dull, his movements slow; and his head was big, fleshy, and lopsided, like a green gourd turned upside down. (35)⁶

From this description, it is evident that a tone of black humour is used to describe Bing Zai. As he grows older, he comes to be known as the "little old man" for his aging face and childlike mind and body, and there is no attempt to portray him in an appealing or sympathetic light. He is described in repulsive and comic terms, with a head that rolls like a "pepper grinder,"⁷ a loose-limbed and staggering walk, and crossed eyes that confuse and discoordinate his performance of the simplest everyday activities. In short, he is an absurd figure, bordering on the grotesque, that quite haplessly plays a role in the equally absurd sequence of events in the plot. In this sense, Bing Zai is actually a caricature employed as the primary agent of farcical action in "Ba, ba, ba." Yet Han Shaogong's comic victim is not alone in his foolishness and ignorance. The villagers' range of behaviour towards Bing Zai, from bullying to foolish worship to hatred, reflects the dark side of human nature as well as the ludicrous extremes of their superstition. However, it is notable that Bing Zai's marginalized status is what enables the villagers to make him the object of their ridicule and abuse.

The lack of sympathy extended to Bing Zai by the locals is not incongruous to the narrative, and a detached and critical view of Bing Zai is intentionally extended to the reader through the darkly comic tone which describes his marginalization. In choosing to render Bing Zai in an innocently offensive and comic manner, Han Shaogong

⁶ Cheung has translated the first of the two phrases as "Papa." I have changed it here, and in subsequent quotations, to "Da da da" (a translation of "Ba ba ba") in order to better convey the incoherency of Bing Zai's speech.

⁷ The full description is as follows: "His neck was weak, and his head had to roll like a pepper grinder, tracing a big arc before steadying into the turn." (36)

purposefully defamiliarizes the character to the reader, so that the aspects of marginality which define Bing Zai serve to describe him both as a character and as a symbol. Thus, the focus of the narrative is not concentrated so much on what Bing Zai suffers through in human terms, but on what his marginalization signifies in symbolic terms. In this respect, Bing Zai's marginalized status introduces aspects of the human condition, such as ostracism, ridicule, absurdity, cruelty and ignorance, which ground the narrative in the universality of human response and human nature. Yet the depiction of the marginalized Bing Zai also expresses a critique of the Chinese national character through the self-symbolism of the protagonist, since the latter both embodies and exposes the culture and traditions of a people that choose to conduct themselves in this manner.⁸

The complexity of Bing Zai as a symbol works as a counterbalance to his simplicity as a caricature. The self symbolism of this character is one of the ways in which a kind of synthesis is achieved between the implied author's broad and narrow views of the people in Chicken Head Village. Again, this can be exemplified by a further expression of Bing Zai's outcast status in the village, since physical and mental deficiencies are not the only criteria by which he is defined as marginalized in the narrative. Of equal importance is the fact that his social links to the village are tenuous. His mother, while a midwife and community busybody, is after all an outsider who "married in," and there is no more concrete a link established through the father, whose identity is unknown. Moreover, the ambiguity of the identity of Bing Zai's father is one of the subtle yet powerful links to the

⁸ This is indicated by Han Shaogong in an interview recorded in 1988. Considering the question of theme in "Ba, ba, ba" he comments: "It is difficult to clearly state the themes of "Ba, ba, ba." Generally speaking, it is a critique of the national character that coincides with one part of my own opinions. Yet it is not completely in keeping with this view, nor can I thoroughly express it. If everyone feels that I have described something deep and profound occurring on our soil, then I feel that this is sufficient."

Han Shaogong (as interviewed by Shi Shuqing), "Niao de chuan ren: yu Hunan zuojia Han Shaogong duitan" [Heirs of the Phoenix: A Conversation with Hunan Writer Han Shaogong], *Bafang Wenyi*, 1988, No. 9: 153.

three primary themes outlined above. Consider the implied author's anecdotal depiction of Bing Zai's social connections as follows:

Young Bing had a lot of "dadas", but he had never seen his real father. The story had it that his father, tired of his ugly-looking wife and fed up with the monstrosity she had given birth to, had long left the village to become an opium trader and had never been back. Some said he had been killed by bandits, others would have it that he was running a bean curd shop in Yuezhou [岳州], yet others would tell you that he led a wild life, had squandered all his money on women, and had been seen begging on the streets of Chenzhou [郴州]. Anyway no one could say for sure whether he actually existed; it had become a mystery of little importance. (36) [1]⁹

In the foregoing passage, Bing Zai's identity is paradoxically linked to the men in the village, and to no-one in particular. While his lack of a real father is one aspect of his social marginality in the context of the village as a community related by kinship, there are linguistic and situational factors which symbolically connect him to all of the village men. Linguistically, there is the fact that the village custom is to call those men whom you would normally refer to as your "uncle" as "father," and vice versa.¹⁰ Additionally, Bing Zai's inability to say anything other than "Ba ba ba" when happy and "F- Mama" when angry means that he commonly refers to everyone, particularly men, as his "Ba ba," or father. There is therefore a definite symbolic link between the marginalizing factor of Bing Zai's mental condition and the marginality of his "fatherless" social status in the village. Through the restriction of Bing Zai's vocabulary to these two sentences alone, Han Shaogong opens the narrative to a highly symbolic reading. While Bing Zai's idiotic mouthing of "Ba ba ba" is one of the reasons he is the object of constant mockery, the irony is that all who seek to ridicule him for his speech become his symbolic relations. Thus, Bing Zai's propensity to call everyone in the village his "father" is an indication of

⁹ Superscript numbers in square brackets refer to the Appendix.

¹⁰ Although this will be discussed in more detail in the following pages, there is an explanation of this practice in the narrative itself. It is the custom in some remote villages of Hunan to refer to your uncle as your "father," and vice versa, with numerous reversals in the usage of other kinship terms.

the symbolic bond that exists between them. In this sense, Bing Zai's main character traits: ignorance, idiocy and a strong will, are equally those of the villagers, which is a symbolic indication of the individual's link to the social whole.

As the foregoing indicates, the theme of identity in "Ba, ba, ba" is manifested in the specific issue of Bing Zai's parentage, but it is also extended to the Chinese race as a whole through a kind of allegory of ideas that revolves around the self-symbolism of certain characters. In other words, Bing Zai's identity and life circumstance is a vehicle for the exploration of the cultural identity of a race. This relation between the individual and the social whole can be exemplified through a brief return to the question of Bing Zai's natural origins. Once the ambiguity of the identity and whereabouts of Bing Zai's father is established, there is only the odd, ostensibly casual speculation on who his father might be. Significantly, however, these references occur only in the context of the implied author's exposition of the origin of the village or in the depiction of a village ritual. For instance, the lengthy description of village lifestyle in the second chapter (of eight) mentions an individual named De Long [德龍] as the singer of the local folksongs which describe the villagers' arrival to the area. Yet after presenting the lyrics of one of the songs, the narrator provides this anecdote:

It was said that an official historian had once visited Qianjiaping [千家坪] and pronounced that there was no truth to the peasant's songs. The official said that Xingtian's [颛帝] head was chopped off by Huangdi [黃帝] when the two were fighting for the throne. The four big families of the region-the Peng [彭], Li [李], Ma [麻], and Mo [莫] clans-had come from the area of Yunmengze [雲夢澤] and not from "the shores of the East Sea." It was when war broke out between the early kings, Huangdi and Yandi [炎帝], that the refugees fled southwest along the five rivers into the land of the barbarians. The strange thing is, there is not the slightest reference to the terrors of war in the ancient songs.

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

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

He was probably Young Bing's father. (46-7)

Two main observations can be drawn from this anecdote, and both are directly linked to theme and meaning. The first is that the character of De Long, however briefly he is mentioned in the overall story, is of considerable allegorical significance because he represents the traditional culture and mythology of the people of West Hunan. As a singer of folksongs, his social role is to transmit and reaffirm local culture and legend to the villagers. Because of this, his role in the story is a very symbolic one, and the speculation that he is probably the natural father of the village idiot is a concrete connection between the traditional culture and legend that De Long represents, and the idiocy and ignorancy of related popular beliefs, epitomized by the character of Bing Zai.¹¹

In relation to this, the second observation drawn from the anecdote cited above is founded in the conflicting views of the official historian and the villagers on the truth of the locals' arrival to the area. Despite the historian's "official" record of the history of these people, the narrator tells us that they prefer to believe in their own legends, which is one more indication of the strength of their cultural beliefs and their reliance on tradition. This is further exemplified by the fact that there are definite parallels between the events described in the folk songs and the events of the plot of "Ba, ba, ba" itself. Just as the ancient songs speak only of the glories of the people and not of the terrors of war, so do the village people move away from their village without comprehension of the role they themselves played in the disaster. Here, the implied author's ironic reflection on the

¹¹ The connection between De Long and Bing Zai is indicated once again when Bing Zai's mother is called forth to participate in a ritual, and the village leaders refer to her as "De Long's wife." (69)

omission of the details of war's strife and bloodshed reinforces the idea that the songs embody a kind of life force for the people, and that this speaks both of the idiocy of much of their behaviour as well as of the strength of their collective will. In this way, the critique of the Chinese national character, which is one of the main themes of this story, is expressed allegorically through the ignorance of the villagers' blind adherence to tradition and superstition.

The two sentences that Bing Zai utters have a strong connection to the themes of history and identity in the story "Ba, ba, ba." As the foregoing indicates, the phrase "Ba, ba, ba" refers to the symbolic connection between Bing Zai and the villagers, while characterization and imagery expand this connection to incorporate the relation between the individual and the race, and the self to the social whole. Yet Bing Zai's other phrase "F- Mama," is no less significant. It is here, once again, where Han Shaogong makes use of symbolism to most effectively present his themes to the reader. On one level, these two sentences are nonsense, hence the absurdity of the villagers who consider them to be divination symbols for *yin* [陰] and *yang* [陽], yet on another symbolic level they signify the basics of human existence in their combined reference to sexual relations between men and women. Therefore, the vulgar words uttered by Bing Zai in his idiocy are also profound, and they are the vehicle for a conceptual return to the origins of human life. This interpretation of Bing Zai's speech is also reinforced by the final description of Bing Zai as having an uncharacteristically large navel. As Han Shaogong himself indicated in the quotation at the beginning of this chapter, the navel is a symbolic feature: with it, Bing Zai's connection to all of mankind is symbolized. In the context of the whole novella, the character of Bing Zai is thus representative of the continuance of human life, and this symbolism extends both backwards into the past, into an individual identity that is inextricably bound up with the ancient songs and myths, and into the future in the sense

that he has curiously survived despite war, hunger, poisoning and being a victim of his marginalized status.

The culmination of all of the symbolic references in the text comes on the final page, and I have chosen to cite it in an effort to tie together the various threads of theme and meaning that have been discussed. The passage reads:

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

"Da da."

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

"Da da da da da!"

A woman came and said to another woman, "Is this big enough for the swill?" And she walked up to Young Bing and took away that half jug of swirling light. (90) [2]

In this passage, the fluid connection between the main themes of this novella revolves around the reader's final impression of the marginalized Bing Zai. To achieve this effect, Han Shaogong uses magic realist techniques to present incongruencies in Bing Zai's situation which run counter to a logical reasoning of the plot. In addition, Han relies heavily on the web of interrelated symbols established in the story to convey a particular perspective on the issues of history, identity, and culture as they are summarized in this passage. Consider, for example, the fact that Bing Zai miraculously survives and appears

to flourish amidst the village ruins. As the village idiot, his continued existence at the story's end signifies that the idiocy and ignorance of traditional Chinese culture and superstition will persist. However, by virtue of the same symbolism, Bing Zai also represents the strength and resilience of the national character, and it is this paradox that Han Shaogong presents us with in his exploration of the traditions and attitudes of the Chinese race. Furthermore, the song that Bing Zai hears in the distance is the one that recalls the origin of the people, and its direct association with his soft mumbling of "Ba ba," is a concrete connection between the identity of the individual and the history of the race. Yet the final image is a dark and hopeless one. The children's admiration of Bing Zai's large navel and their joyful shouting of "Ba ba ba ba ba" would seem to be a positive portent of the future, yet the image is undercut by the two women who come to take away the "half jug of swirling light." Ultimately, Bing Zai is left in darkness, and the message that is conveyed is of a people who are doomed to repetition and cyclicity. The parallels between myth and practice are too obvious: their origin myth is a cycle that they repeat but do not advance from.

Bing Zai's marginalized status makes him a most effective symbol. He is a catalyst for the expression of the negative qualities of human nature because his physical and mental deficiencies undermine the norms of human social interaction. The character of Bing Zai is therefore a physical image that directs the reader from external observations of culture and custom to inner explorations of human nature and existence. In this sense, his marginalization is a medium through which the writer delves into people's inner selves to reveal certain characteristics of human behaviour. Thus, Han Shaogong uses Bing Zai's behavior and spoken vulgarities as a fertile ground for profundity and for the symbolic expression of the connection between the individual, the race, and the social history of mankind.

Narration, Discourse and Imagery: A Marginalized Focus

In telling the story of the half mute Bing Zai and the people of Chicken Head Village, the implied author of "Ba, ba, ba" adopts a critical stance which involves both his steady distance from the subject matter and a pervasive ironic tone. Thus, while the foregoing discussion of character highlighted Han Shaogong's use of symbolism, particularly character self-symbolism, it did not fully express the satiric narrative voice behind character depiction. Narratorial distance from the subject and satiric characterization are two parts of a whole: both are brought about by an alternately intrusive and unintrusive narrator that is employed to express the third person omniscient point of view.¹² The intrusive narrator in "Ba, ba, ba" describes character motivation and action primarily through "telling" and employs a sarcastic tone of voice to remain at a critical arm's length from the events of the story. The unintrusive narrator, on the other hand, is frequently used to describe the details of local custom, mythology and setting, yet it is also duplicitly employed in character depiction. One example of the duplicitous narrator is found at the beginning of Chapter Five. The narrator "tells" the reader of the villagers' decision to sacrifice Bing Zai to the God of Grain by saying that, "to take the life of this useless blockhead was in fact to do him a good turn. He would be spared the pain of having his ears boxed, and he would no longer be a torment to his mother." (62) In this case, although the narrator adopts an ostensibly unintrusive voice to express the village viewpoint, there is an underlying sarcasm in his objectively recording the equating of violent death with having one's ears boxed, and listing the former as the better. The reader is in this instance well aware that the views expressed are likely not those of the

¹² Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*: 145-6.

As Abrams uses the word "narrator" to define the unintrusive and intrusive modes, I have chosen to do so in this paragraph. As my preference is for "implied author," I will use that term throughout the rest of the discussion.

narrator, and a subjective and critical view of village character and action is thus conveyed.

Other than "telling" about character and character motivation in the novel, the implied author relies on "showing" as a method of character depiction. However, while this method establishes psychological insights into individual and social character, it is also employed as a vehicle for indirect satire. To this end, two characters, the tailor Zhong Man and his son, Shi Ren (also called Ren Bao [仁寶]), are recalled as illustrations of the psychological distancing and satirical undercutting of character in the narrative. As was mentioned earlier, these two characters represent tradition and modernity (or, in Han's own words "conservatism" and "reformism")¹³ in an allegorical reading of the story. The former, the tailor Zhong Man, is a strong proponent of tradition, filiality and established custom; he is suspicious of new-fangled things like leather shoes and motor cars. He also has an intense fear and dislike of women that is born out of the many superstitions he holds as irrefutable truths. Ren Bao, on the other hand, is Zhong Man's opposite. Much to his father's consternation, he is the one who wears leather shoes that click-clack along the village paths, who aspires for the modernity of the town, and who advocates the use of vernacular over classical Chinese. However, even though these characters represent two conflicting approaches to life, neither perspective is given support by the implied author whose critical stance is maintained throughout the narrative as a result of the psychological distance imposed between the implied author and the subject.

¹³ Han Shaogong (as interviewed by Shi Shuqing), "Niao de chuan ren," *Bafang Wenyi*, 1988, No. 9: 153.

To illustrate this, the first example focusses on Tailor Zhong Man. When he goes into the forest and reflects on the custom of marking trees for coffins, his thoughts run thus:

In fact, he hated these damn trees for their evil intent. A gentleman does things the proper way: there's a proper way to sit, a proper way to stand, even a proper way to die; he mustn't lose his dignity when he dies. When you die, you die, why all these preparations? He'd come with a knife. He'd pick a tree, lop off the branches, sharpen the stump into a piercing stake, and end his life by throwing himself onto the stake. It'd be a glorious death. He'd met people who had died like that. One of them was Cripple Long [龍拐子] over at Mazidong [馬子洞] After his death, it was found that he had raked the soil in front of his stake into a criss-cross of loose earth with his fingers. You could tell it had been a painful death, a glorious death. The event had made it into clan records. (62)

In this passage, a psychological insight into individual character is provided by the unintrusive narrator, who "shows" us the motivation of the tailor. Furthermore, this insight gives the reader a perspective on the tailor that counterbalances the previously established image of him as a traditionalist and as one whose word "carries weight"¹⁴ in the village. The passage shows him to be quite obviously eschewing village tradition in favor of a violent (but in his own mind "glorious") death through which he would gain local and historical notoriety. The tailor's desire for a martyr's death is thus an expression of a shallow nature that revolves around image, insofar as he so obviously has no cause to die for and is contemplating the act out of his own need for recognition. This insight into the tailor's true motivation undermines the perception of him as a honorable and selfless man. Quite simply, Zhong Man's views are subverted because the implied author and the reader are in agreement that the kind of death he aspires to is not necessarily glorious. Moreover, the satire presented here is not restricted to the character of the tailor. In mocking Zhong Man's twisted attempt at propriety through violent death, the writer extends his critique to the Chinese race and seeks to ridicule their privileging of historical and heroic image, as well as their blind faith in traditional rites and propriety.

¹⁴ The text describes Zhong Man as "someone whose word 'carried weight' in the village" (shi ge you 'hua fen' de ren" 是個有話份的人). (38)

One other example rounds out the discussion of indirect satire in "Ba, ba, ba." Narrative "showing" of the tailor's son Ren Bao also sets up a psychological insight into the character and undermines it through satire. Throughout the narrative, Ren Bao is characterized as the modern and educated son of the village, yet that which the implied author both "tells" and "shows" about him reveal him to fall somewhat short of these ideals. His advocacy of modernity is no less a mask for the attainment of a certain image than is his father's adherence to the rites of propriety. At the time of the village council's discussion of the sacrifice to the God of Grain, Ren Bao happens by and the narrator delves into his mind as follows:

Today, a council was held in the temple to discuss the details of an offering to the [God of Grain] - a custom [Ren Bao] frowned upon. He had seen the folks of Qianjiaping perform the spring ritual; now that was a real offering. But look at this god-forsaken place. Here the fields were ploughed only once a year, the land wasn't properly tilled, and the irrigation was poor. How the hell could you grow anything? . . . Nevertheless, he went to the temple to have a look and saw his father kneeling just like the others before the altar. He sneered. How ridiculous! Why didn't they touch their caps in salute? He'd seen people saluting in Qianjiaping. (53-4) ¹⁵

The first few lines of this passage reveal Ren Bao's obvious disgust at his father and the others praying to the God of Grain, which is an offense to his modern sensibilities. Yet the next few lines reveal that Ren Bao's disgust stems not from their superstitious practice of prayer and sacrifice to the God of Grain, but rather from his Ah Q-like perception of the inferiority of the village image compared to that of Qianjiaping. In this case, the expression of Ren Bao's thoughts indirectly undermine his character. The reader and the implied author share the understanding that superstition and ritual are here presented as backwards aspects of culture, yet Ren Bao, the reformist, misses the point: it

¹⁵ I have substituted "God of Grain" for Cheung's translation "rice god," and used the Chinese name "Ren Bao" rather than Cheung's too broadly translated title of "Idiot Ren."

is the fact that the villagers do not engage in the rite the *proper* way (that is, with enough pomp and ceremony) that engenders his dismay. The irony of the incident implies the superficial nature of "modernity" or "reformism," and Ren Bao is made to look ridiculous for his posturing and for his naive ignorance as to the true source of the backwardness of the village. In presenting this insight into Ren Bao, the implied author imposes a psychological distance between himself and the character, just as was done with the character of Zhong Man. Furthermore, this distance is extended to the reader because the satiric tone serves to undermine any integrity the reader might attribute to these characters on the basis of psychological insights. The reader and the implied author are thereby estranged from character and action and stand above them as more knowing observers.

In "Ba, ba, ba," Han Shaogong's aim in undermining character through satire is to reinforce his critique of the national character as well as to bring to light the negative features of certain aspects of Chinese culture. In order to draw these themes out in allegorical fashion, the maintenance of a critical distance between the reader and the characters depicted is essential. The same critical distance is employed in other areas of narration, however, such as in the implied author's description of superstition and ritual in the novella. As the Chinese critic Hu Zongjian 胡宗健 points out, one of the factors in the establishment of distance in Han Shaogong's works is his deliberate deconstructing of the plot, which puts the stylistic emphasis on narration.¹⁶ In his view, the primary indications of narrative distance are found in Han's particular brand of character depiction which relies heavily on symbolism and abstraction. As the foregoing discussion illustrates, I have made the same observation with respect to my analysis of "Ba, ba, ba," yet I would expand this observation of narrative distance to include Han Shaogong's

¹⁶ See Hu Zongjian, "Han Shaogong jin zuo san si" [Random Thoughts on Han Shaogong's Recent Works], *Wenxue pinglun*, 1987, No. 2: 56-63.

handling of motifs such as myth and cultural anecdote, and the description of superstition and ritual noted above.

In a novella length work like "Ba, ba, ba," it is notable that anecdotal descriptions of village beliefs, superstitions, history and ritual make up a full quarter of the narrative. Given their relation to theme and meaning in the story, it is understandable that they be presented as a framework for the plot, yet their employment in the novella is not strictly to provide background information on the villagers. Additionally, they serve to interrupt the main action of the plot: creating, through a shifting narratorial perspective, a further distance between the reader and the subject. With this shifting between plot action and segments of custom, belief, superstition, etcetera, the reader's view is constantly pulled away from a direct and consistent focus on the plot towards a more abstract view of the cultural framework of characters and events. A good illustration of this can be found in the second chapter where the implied author focusses entirely on the fairytale setting and cultural history of the village, with the exception of the brief mention and loose definition of the character De Long. While no other chapter in the narrative is devoted so exclusively to the expression of culture and custom, cultural anecdotes are heavily interspersed throughout the text and continue to have the effect of breaking the logic of the plot and the unity of action up until the last page. Stylistically, this is an important feature as the insertion of these segments of myth and superstition builds on the novella's main themes throughout the narrative. Moreover, these segments are key to the philosophical impact of the story since the thematic effectiveness of the novella rests on the writer's ability to reinforce the sense of an insoluble bond between the individual and the social history of mankind.

The recording of village myth and custom as a central part of the narrative affects the overall tone of the story by opening it up to a critical perspective achieved through

narratorial distance and impersonality. One factor in this distance is the abstraction of the village into a fairytale place through the use of descriptions of superstition and myth which blur the line between the real and the unreal. To refer back to Han Shaogong's own description of his technique in "Ba, ba, ba" (see pages 24-5 above) he incorporates elements of the fantastic into a realistic foundation of life-like descriptions of character and setting, as is done in magic realist narratives. The following definition of magic realism puts this aspect of Han Shaogong's style in "Ba, ba, ba" into perspective: "the author of a magico realist narrative . . . implicitly presents the irrational world view as different from his own by situating the story in present-day reality, using learned expressions and vocabulary, and showing he is familiar with logical reasoning and empirical knowledge. The term 'magic' refers to the fact that the perspective presented by the text in an explicit manner is not accepted according to the implicit world view of the educated implied author."¹⁷ While it would be erroneous to say that "Ba, ba, ba" is a magic realist work, elements of magic realist technique are present in the implied author's recounting of village beliefs and superstitions as a rational world view. The following short passage describing the neighboring village of Chicken Tail is one illustration of this:

The villagers had always regarded the tree and the well as fertility symbols and worshipped them regularly by burning joss sticks and incense, in the hope that more boys would be born in the village. One year, several girls were born in succession and one woman produced a mole, and the atmosphere in the village grew tense as people tried to find out why. After some time, it was said that things had gone wrong because a lad from Chicken Head Village, on passing through, had climbed the camphor tree to gather some bird's eggs, and had broken a branch. (63)

It is through other stylistic devices, such as the satire of character and an overall structural irony in the course of events, that the implied author informs us of the gaps

¹⁷ Amaryll B. Chandy, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved Versus Unresolved Antinomy* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1985): 21-22.

between his (rational) world view and that of the villagers. Also, verbal clues are present in the form of the implied author's frequent use of "it was said," "it so happened," and in his accounting of the ambiguity and indistinctness of village belief and linguistic concepts. Certainly, this latter factor is one of the reasons that the work cannot be defined as a magic realist narrative, but the ambiguity, the conjecturing, and the specious recollection of "history," are an indication of the influence of magic realist techniques on Han Shaogong's narrative style. In blending fantastical elements of myth and superstition with the realism of concrete plot action, he uses the former to advantage and achieves the overall abstraction of character and setting.

One other important aspect of Han Shaogong's narrative style in "Ba, ba, ba" and a further example of his "centering the marginalized" is found in his creation of a regional discourse which centers on his use of dialect.¹⁸ The specifics of this discourse are closely linked to the presence of the segments of local belief, custom, myth and superstition in the story insofar as they both contribute to the overall marginalized tone of the narrative. In other words, they both enhance the reader's perception of the village as isolated, thus serving to accentuate the gap between the periphery (the village) and the center (urban areas). Han Shaogong's specific focus on the dialect of the Xiangxi 湘西 area (West Hunan), which is in large part composed of archaisms and linguistic concepts born out of local beliefs, definitely locates the story at the margin; it thereby posits an indirect challenge to the perspective of the Han center. The four observations that follow illustrate the effectiveness of Han's use of a regional discourse in "Ba, ba, ba."

Firstly, as was alluded to above, the creation of a regional discourse to tell the story of Bing Zai and the residents of Chicken Head Village adds an air of authenticity to the

¹⁸ Han Shaogong's use of regional dialect links him to important precursors like Shen Congwen and Wang Zengqi among others. See page 9 of this text above for additional comments and references.

narrative. Quite simply, it emphasizes the rural setting and reinforces the reader's conception of the cultural idiosyncrasies and backwardness of the villagers. This is exemplified through the implied author's explanations of the local custom of kinship address, where the convention is to call one's father "uncle," one's uncle "father," one's elder sister "elder brother," etcetera (43), as well as through the conventions of the villager's everyday speech.¹⁹ Secondly, the specific use of dialectical terms in the text is in keeping with the narrative's overall shift in perspective from the center to the margin. In this respect, standard Mandarin, complete with political terms and words of foreign origin, is not only incomprehensible to the villagers, but useless to them in their day to day life.²⁰

A third result of Han's reliance on a regional discourse is that it opens the narrative up to even more abstraction, by introducing dialectical terms and linguistic concepts in the context of their ambiguity and obscurity. An examination of the actual words used in the Chinese original illustrate this point, as the words *hanhun* [含混] and *mohu* [模糊], which mean "ambiguous" and "vague" respectively, are scattered throughout the work. The implied author frequently draws upon these words to describe an obscure regional phrase, as when Bing Zai's mother says, "*Shi yi xia*" [視一下] (I'll go and have a watch). (149) As the implied author elaborates, this phrase was "loaded with ambiguity. It could mean 'I'll try and find out,' or 'I'll intercede for you,' or 'I can see to it for you,' or even 'I'll go and take a look.'" (56-7) Numerous examples of this are found in the narrative, and the implied author's apparent inability to provide a specific definition contributes to the overall sense of cultural mystery and ambiguity. It is also of note that the implied author

¹⁹ This is only discernible in the Chinese original. See Han Shaogong, "Ba, ba, ba," in *Kong Cheng*: 135.

²⁰ The tension between the traditional and modern forms of speech is exemplified in the humorous exchange between Ren Bao and the villagers over the proper title for their letter of complaint. They argue at length over whether to call it a "supplication" or a "report," with the final result being "report-supplication." See pages 74-5 of the Cheung translation.

introduces the archaisms of the local dialect by focussing on the ambiguity of the origins of these people. The villagers themselves are not sure where they come from (*shuo bu tai qingchu* 說不太清楚), yet their linguistic conventions put the emphasis on the "unity of a large family," which has a direct bearing on theme.

Finally, the Xiangxi area dialect that Han Shaogong uses to create his regional discourse is a direct link to the nation's past. The dialect is full of archaisms such as the use of the word *qu* [渠] for the present day pronoun *ta* [他], the pronoun *wu* [吾] for *wo* [我], and the reference to nearby towns and cities by their ancient names, such as calling the present day Yueyang [岳陽] by its historical name Yuezhou. In referring to a dialect that has preserved ancient terms through everyday usage, Han Shaogong also emphasizes the presence of the past in the village by illustrating the links of ancient culture to present day life. The historical connection that is established through the regional discourse facilitates the expression of the novella's main themes. In short, language, in the form of dialect, is yet another symbolic referent to the resilience of Chinese culture, and points to the fact that the people of this area are characterized by isolation and a lack of change.

In concluding the discussion of "Ba, ba, ba" it remains only to touch briefly on imagery and its relation to theme and meaning in the narrative. The sense of history and ambiguity surrounding the various components of regional discourse in "Ba, ba, ba" is underscored by imagery which is used to blur the line between the real and the unreal. This is one of the aspects of Han Shaogong's work that most clearly exemplifies his use of magic realist techniques, in that he uses natural imagery to evoke a sense of village isolation, timelessness and cyclicity. Images of fog, mist, ghosts, stories of people disappearing and the like are all employed to enhance the fairytale setting of the village and to encourage the reader to suspend his disbelief about the events of the story. Moreover, the description of the natural world parallels the human world in such a way as

to accentuate the continuity of both natural and human life. The theme of cyclicalality is therefore affirmed not only in the continued existence of Bing Zai, but in the lengthy descriptions of the timelessness and permanence of mountains, trees, and flowing water. There is a thematic relevance in the writer's juxtaposition of the human to the natural world, and in the villagers' conceptual crossing of boundaries from one world to the next in their superstitions and beliefs. One passage effectively links the two worlds, and ties imagery into theme at the end of the story when the men and women move off in the manner of their mythical forebearers:

Men and women all sang in earnest, or more appropriately still, they shouted in earnest. Their voices were inharmonious, dry, raw, harsh, and without tremolos. . . . This type of singing reminded you of mountains with sinister cliffs, tall bamboo forests, and needlessly thick, heavy thresholds. Only a land like this could exude such sounds. (89)²¹ [3]

Imagistically as well as thematically, the foregoing passage links the people to their land. A sense of continuity is established between the specific events of the plot which have sent this resilient people on their journey, and the origins of their dark and primitive culture, which stems in large part from their dependence on a daunting and perilous land for survival. Furthermore, this link between environment and culture points to the question of the roots of the Chinese race, which is central to the exploration of culture and humanity that is undertaken in this novella.

The focus of this analysis of "Ba, ba, ba," and of the novella "Three Women" which follows, is the relation between marginalized character and motif and the expression of the twin themes of history and identity. As we have seen in "Ba, ba, ba," Bing Zai, the epitome of the marginalized character, is symbolic of both the identity and history of the Chinese race. His personal identity is symbolically linked to everyone in the village, and

²¹ I have revised this translation from the original.

to the mythology and superstition which forms the foundation of local culture. Beyond this, he also embodies the negative aspects of the culture, and paradoxically, the positive aspect of cultural resilience. This is also his connection to history: his survival indicates that the villagers' repetition of the events of the past will continue into the future. Underscoring these themes is a marginalized motif, embodied in Han Shaogong's creation of a regional discourse that is composed of elements of local language, custom, superstition and mythology. Together, marginalized character and motif provide the writer with an ex-centric perspective from which to engage in his exploration of Chinese culture. Throughout the work, the writer never strays from his impersonal and critical view of the subject, and the result is a provocative and philosophical critique of the Chinese character.

"Three Women": The Connection Between Marginalized Character and Perspective

In comparison with "Ba, ba, ba," the novella "Three Women" reflects a more subtle return to many of the same themes, such as the link between the individual and the social history of mankind, the exploration of aspects of the human condition, and the tension between tradition and modernity. The latter theme, however, is less explicit in "Three Women" and is primarily expressed through the extremes of rural and urban lifestyle and setting. In addition, where "Ba, ba, ba" touched upon human origin in its symbolic return to mother and father, the novella "Three Women" takes the concept one step further through its direct exploration of the puzzle of human existence. This is the main theme of the novella, and an interesting twist in perspective is added as the participant narrator, a male, puzzles over the question through his observation of three women. His interaction with them stimulates introspection and self doubt, and is the catalyst for his consideration of personal identity and family history. Unlike "Ba, ba, ba," the novella "Three Women" is not a critique of the Chinese character. It addresses aspects of the Chinese past, but it remains anchored in the broader context of human nature and human response. Thus, while it explores Chinese beliefs, attitudes and circumstance, the question of what it means to be Chinese is second to the question of what it means to be human.

For the reader of "Three Women" there is a text within a text. An alternately involved and reticent first person narrator, Mao Ta [毛它], reflects on the character and circumstance of his deaf Aunt Yao (Yao Gu), who is by local custom also addressed by male title, as Yao Bo [姚伯] or "Uncle Yao."²² His recollection of her in her later years,

²² This is explained in the text, and is similar to the practice that was outlined in "Ba, ba, ba." I will refer to her as Yao Gu rather than Yao Bo in this discussion because that is how she is most frequently referred to in the Chinese original.

Han Shaogong, "Three Women," in *Homecoming?*, trs. Martha Cheung: 92.

from seniority to disability to death, makes her the main character of his narrative. Yet his consideration of her character and behaviour involves flashbacks of their life together which draws him into the narrative as well. In effect, he begins to review his own life through the window of his relation to his aunt. The result of this is that his own character is exemplified to the reader, and he becomes the main protagonist in a broader text that only the reader perceives.

The story itself revolves around the narrator's concern, frustration and guilt over the care of his aunt. At first, he is concerned for her because of her deafness; later, after she suffers a stroke, his concern turns to frustration over her tyrannical behaviour. Finally, being unable and unwilling to care for her further and receiving no help from her goddaughter Lao Hei [老黑], he arranges to have her sent to the countryside to stay with her sworn sister Zhen Gu [珍姑], also referred to as Zhen Xu [珍嫗],²³ (Aunt Zhen). Eventually, the narrator himself journeys to the village to attend to Yao Gu's funeral, where he is confronted with his feelings of guilt and confusion in what is to him the unfamiliar world of the Chinese countryside. These events form the framework of the story, but it is the narrator's reaction to them that set the plot in motion. Although there is overall a steady progression in the narrative from Yao Gu's deafness to paralysis to death, specific events are not relayed in strict chronological fashion. The narrator jumps back and forth between past and present, and fills the gaps in his knowledge of certain events by speciously reconstructing incidents out of his own imagination. In this sense, the emphasis of the work is primarily on narrative style. Furthermore, narration in "Three Women" appears to encompass three interior perspectives: the narrator's perspective of the marginalized character Yao Gu, male perspective of female, and an urban perspective of the countryside.

²³ The suffix "xu" to the names of women is a custom particular to the narrator's home village. It is also explained in the text on page 128 of the Cheung translation.

In determining specific instances of interior narratorial perspective, my intention is to highlight the fact that all three in some way reflect the significance of marginalized character and tone to theme and meaning in the narrative. The first instance is straightforward: the plot is set in motion by the narrator's articulation of his reaction to the marginalized status of his aunt, Yao Gu. Her physical presence in his life has a great impact on his own exploration of identity and his quest for the meaning of existence. In the second instance, his recollections of Yao Gu and his efforts to care for her involve him directly with three women: the aunt herself, Lao Hei, and Zhen Gu. In observing and interacting with these three women to varying degrees, the narrator not only explores their different life experience and attitudes, but also what he feels to be their aura of mystery - that is, they, as women, represent a form of existence with which he is unfamiliar. Through philosophical speculation on the women's motivations, struggles, weaknesses, and strengths, the narrator seeks to elucidate their conception of life as one of the pieces in the puzzle of human existence. Finally, the aunt's return to the family's ancestral village causes the narrator to embark on a very significant journey "home" on the occasion of her funeral. His view of the countryside, and particularly of the village, provide him with an historical context for his exploration of personal identity. Nevertheless, the return to the countryside is characterized by narratorial reticence, and the reader does not lose sight of the fact that what is presented is an urban perspective of a rural area. Given the prominence of these three interior perspectives to theme and meaning in the novella, the discussion which follows will focus on marginalized character (Yao Gu), an examination of narratorial technique as it is embodied in a perspective of the marginal (male viewing female, urban viewing rural), and Han Shaogong's thematic use of imagery.

As the foregoing indicates, Han Shaogong has again focussed plot action around a marginalized character: the deaf Yao Gu. In the narrative, she is defined as being physically, culturally and, during a certain period of Chinese history, politically cum socially marginalized. With respect to the first, her deafness is a disability which marginalizes her from the story's outset, as is indicated by the narrator's opening line: "Because of her, we had to shout and scream nearly all our life." (91) Further to this, the stroke she suffers confines her to bed and results in the progressive debilitation of her remaining mental and physical capacities. To Mao Ta, Yao Gu's physical disabilities - first deafness then paralysis - are an integral part of her identity. Her physical marginalization is thus one of her defining characteristics, even to him. Mao Ta's further consideration of her cultural and political marginalization come later, and incidentally, as he obtains information from a village woman about the locals' negative views of Yao Gu's childlessness and widowhood, and as he remembers incidents from his own past, when Yao Gu was ostracized by Mao Ta's father out of the latter's fear of political persecution. All of these details contribute to the impression of Yao Gu's marginalization, in terms of the lifetime view that Mao Ta attempts to construct from his own observations, memories and imagination, and in terms of the reader's perception of Yao Gu as a character who does not fit within the norms of society.

At this juncture, it is of interest to introduce the comments of Han Shaogong on the character of Yao Gu. In an interview published in a Hong Kong journal in 1988, Han Shaogong is questioned on his emotional motivation in depicting the character of Yao Gu as a strange and inconsistent character, when his earlier works focussed on straightforward, model images of women. In response, Han reveals that the prototype for Yao Gu was his own aunt, whose entire nature changed after she had a stroke. Furthermore, his decision to employ a character like Yao Gu in "Three Women" stems

from her effectiveness as a vehicle for his main themes. He reflects on her character depiction as follows, saying:

Yao Gu's sex is not important. I was chiefly interested in expressing the structure of consciousness that is deep within each person and reflecting on the condition of individual existence. Under the oppression of feudal culture, people had to firmly repress themselves, and the length of this repression led to a kind of physiological and psychological illness. Upon its collapse the other side of human nature burst forth causing people to be utterly disgusted and bereft of any pleasant memories. This is a great tragedy."²⁴

With these comments, Han Shaogong provides the reader with insights into the symbolic significance of Yao Gu's strange character depiction and unsettling pattern of behaviour in "Three Women." Moreover, the connection between her depiction as a marginalized character and the conveyance of the above message is made clear. The following discussion will attempt to illustrate this point and elucidate the ways in which Yao Gu's state of being is not only the focus for exploration of the Chinese past, but also for a consideration of the meaning of existence within the broader context of humanity. I will begin by analyzing the ways in which Yao Gu's physical marginalization causes Mao Ta to investigate the puzzle of human existence, as well as the links between personal identity and family history.

It is obvious from Mao Ta's own comments that the view he has of Yao Gu's character and motivation has a great deal to do with her physical disabilities. To him, she is an enigma and a substantial part of her mystery is encoded in her retreat behind deafness - it alternately fascinates and confuses him, and stimulates him to continually puzzle over her experience of existence. This is made particularly evident in the opening pages of the novella, when Mao Ta imagines chopping sounds from the kitchen to be Yao Gu inadvertently slicing off her arms and legs while cutting up the vegetables. When he

²⁴ Han Shaogong (as interviewed by Shi Shuqing), "Niao de chuan ren," *Bafang Wenyi*, 1988, No. 9: 155.

runs into the kitchen to check on her, the startled Yao Gu proffers an unsolicited explanation as to her activities, which leaves Mao Ta musing, as follows:

I hadn't asked her any questions, certainly I hadn't mentioned anything about hot water. But perhaps to her, much of my silence - a large part of my existence - was not real. She thought that I'd said this or that and built up an illusion of me. I somehow got the same illusion too. But did she ever have the illusion that I had also engaged in such casual, mindless slaughter? (94)

The narrator's initial speculation on the possibility of the aunt's self-mutilation suggests his paranoid state of consciousness about her deafness, and the passage quoted above confirms his preoccupation with her disability. In this case, it is her verbal reaction to his silence (she is obviously not sure if he has spoken or not) that prompts the narrator to contemplate her experience of reality. His thoughts are then directed inwards to consider his own experience of existence, which indicates the direct relationship between his perception of her deafness, his reaction to it, and his introspection.

Mao Ta's explorations of personal identity and family history are also ordered around his perspective of the marginalized Yao Gu. To begin with, the narrator views himself and his whole family in the light of Yao Gu's deafness, as when he considers his habitual shouting:

It'd been two years already, two long, endless years, the world ought to have quieted down, and I shouldn't have had to scream and shout anymore. But I was beginning to suspect that my hearing was deteriorating and that the membranes in my ears, grown hard like a layer of rock, were filtering out all the sounds so that they only reached me in a timid whisper. Was that how Aunt Yao went deaf? The story had it that her father, too, was hard of hearing. Moreover, of her five granduncles, two were also deaf . . . In fact, the whole clan had to scream and shout, shout and scream.

Did they shout because they couldn't hear? Or had they shouted themselves deaf? (92) [4]

The significance of this passage is found in the use of a physical characteristic, deafness, to link Yao Gu and Mao Ta together and identify them in the context of the family history. Furthermore, the passage suggests that the family deafness is more than physical. On a certain level, the deafness seems to signify a more abstract reference to the origin of their family troubles: are they victims of their circumstance, or did their attitudes and behaviours bring such circumstances upon them? One other example, occurring later in the story, underscores this impression, and infers its reference to a broader sphere. Shortly after his arrival to the ancestral village, Mao Ta listens to a shop owner tell how his uncle was shot in a peasant uprising. Again, Mao Ta relates the incident to the family deafness:

I knew for a fact that the dandy who excelled in horse-riding and gun play was shot to death. . . . My grandfather was so terrified when the shot was fired that he lost his hearing. The deafness was handed down to Aunt Yao. Of course, the history of deafness in our family could perhaps be traced to an even earlier generation, to the generation before that, and the generation before that . . . What had happened in those days? (134) [5]

This quotation exemplifies a level of symbolism in the narrative that is manifested in the narrator's repeated emphasis on the family's deafness and in his perspective of Yao Gu. Throughout the work, there is a symbolic connection made between silence and historical instances of cultural and political oppression. Yet even though the marginalized Yao Gu is herself an illustration of someone on the receiving end of oppression, the narrator does not intend to absolve himself or his family of personal or social responsibility for the situation. Nor is Yao Gu completely the victim, as her sudden change of temperament after the stroke seems to accord with the tumultuous tone of the family past. In this sense, the narrator's return to his family past is problematic, in that he recognizes the role his family, and perhaps he himself, have played in the troubled course of history. There is also an implied extension of the personal circumstances of his

family to the Chinese race as a whole in his tracing back the deafness to previous generations. The passage conveys a sense that the events of Chinese history and certain aspects of culture are responsible for deafening not only Yao Gu, but the entire family, and perhaps the Chinese people as a whole. In view of Han Shaogong's own comments, mentioned at the beginning of this section, the "events" are perhaps a referent to China's feudal past and deafness a symbol of Chinese capitulation to this circumstance. However, regardless of the author's intended reference, the fact that the narrator's exploration of personal identity in this passage is expanded to incorporate the history of the race implicitly reinforces one of the main themes of the novella: the inseparability of the individual from the social history of mankind.

Throughout the first part of the novella, the narrator's recollections of Yao Gu shape his perspective on identity and existence. While this is due in large part to her role in sustaining the family after the father's disappearance (a probable suicide by drowning), it is also a result of the narrator's inability to relate to her life experience or to understand her personal motivation, despite a lifetime of interaction between them. Primarily, this is because she is deaf, yet she is also a woman, and Mao Ta frequently views her only in light of the latter distinction. The relevance of her gender to his exploration of her identity can be illustrated through a brief examination of some examples from the text. The first example occurs when Mao Ta goes through Yao Gu's clothes to find money for her medicine: "They all smelt of mildew and exuded the stale musty odour peculiar to old women. I seemed to have searched through her entire mysterious existence before I found a gold ear-ring that was worth a bit of money." (103) In another example he engages in a detached but sexual description of Yao Gu when he finds her unconscious in the shower:

The hair, wet, matted and soapy, was plastered over one side of the head, exposing the white scalp at the roots, and gave you the feeling that the mystery of women lay entirely in their long hair, for their scalp looked quite ordinary, even coarse and ugly, certainly not so very different from that of some bald fellow. . . . Falling away below the ribs were deep creases made by the rope belt used to hold up her trousers, and then the jagged twin mountain peaks that were the pelvis, the whole enclosing a space big enough to accommodate a great world. (115)

Interestingly, he considers his look at Yao Gu's body to be the first time he had ever seen "the real her."²⁵ The thought prompts him to think of the one time in his life when he saw a photograph of her as a young woman, and again he speaks of mystery: "Faded and yellow with age, the photo showed a few enchanting women wearing lipstick and cheongsams. It was hard to tell which one was her, hard to know what sort of a mysterious world was linked to the lipstick and cheongsam." (116)

In these three examples, Yao Gu is consistently described in terms of her mystery, which seems rooted in several expressions of her womanhood: her clothes, her naked body, lipstick and a cheongsam. The fact that these are the focal points of the narrator's description of her as mysterious illustrates the concrete link between her female identity and the male narrator's inability to understand her world. It is not until he sees her naked body - her womanhood - that he considers himself to at last have a window onto her identity. Furthermore, there *does* appear to be a connection between the narrator's focus

²⁵ The description of the human body naked and exposed to observation is a recurring motif in Han Shaogong's fiction of this period. In "Homecoming?" [Gui qu lai], the main male protagonist "I" reflects on his own nakedness as follows: "I looked at this blue body of mine and was suddenly overcome with a peculiar feeling: the body seemed a stranger, seemed alien. . . . There was only my naked self, the reality of my own self." Han Shaogong, "Homecoming?," trs. Martha Cheung: 13.

In both "Homecoming?" and "Three Women" the image of the naked body is closely linked to the conception of personal identity. Han Shaogong's appeal for this motif perhaps stems from its profundity; it is a ready symbol of man stripped of his cultural veneer, and thus open to seeing his true self, his animal self.

on her gender and his exploration of identity and existence.²⁶ On a symbolic level, Yao Gu's womanhood refers the narrator back to human creation. In his detached observation of her body, the narrator describes her physical features abstractly and in terms of their function in the process of creation, as when he reflects on her nipples "drooping forlorn in despair" out of a "yearning to give suck." (115) Most importantly, his view of her pelvis, "the whole enclosing a space big enough to accommodate a great world," is indicative of a perspective of woman as a signifier of existence. Thus, the gender of the marginalized Yao Gu is also a stimulus in the narrator's quest for the meaning of existence. She is inextricably linked to the puzzle of existence because, as a woman, she gives birth to life.

The effect of Yao Gu's physical presence on Mao Ta is exemplified by another aspect of her character, which happens also to be a stylistic feature of the characterization of the main female characters in "Three Women:" Han Shaogong's contrasting of opposites in character depiction. For the moment, we will consider only the primary example of Yao Gu to illustrate the ways in which her physical disabilities not only describe her as marginalized, but serve to bring about the extreme transformation of her character. Prior to her stroke, the narrator's anecdotes describe her as stubborn, thrifty but generous, considerate and self-sacrificing. In addition, the consequences of her deafness manifest themselves in her frequent silence, her preference for isolation from the world outside, and her martyr-like position at work and at home. However, the Yao Gu that emerges after the stroke is transformed and becomes the antithesis of everything she was before. She becomes greedy, demanding, uncooperative, and sullen. Whereas in former times she would contentedly do household chores and conform to the wishes of others, she is

²⁶ The italicized emphasis on "does" here refers back to Han Shaogong's comments on the irrelevance of Yao Gu's sex to the message he is trying to portray in "Three Women." Theme and meaning in the story overall indicates that the focus on the form of *individual* existence is primary, yet evidence from the text seems to support the interpretation that I have presented here; that the image of "woman" is employed to symbolically underscore the identity and existence themes. Thus, my point is not to contradict what Han Shaogong says about the role of Yao Gu, but rather to note that her gender is a focus because it has close symbolic links to the question of existence.

afterwards determined to disrupt the household by refusing to use a bedpan, complaining about the food, and demanding that Mao Ta and his wife cater to her every whim. Furthermore, her characteristic reticence is contradicted with her incessant tapping and thumping on the bedside table. To Mao Ta, no less than the reader, her sudden change in personality and behaviour is unexpected and shocking. Yet her transformation is of great structural and thematic significance to the narrative.

To begin with, the inexplicable change in Yao Gu's temperament results in the depersonalization of her character for the reader. The reader is initially distanced from Yao Gu because they are given no window on to her thoughts and motivations, yet her sudden transformation compounds this effect by robbing her character of its consistency. Already different because of her deafness, Yao Gu is now made even more unfamiliar to the reader - becoming a "strange" character along the lines of Bing Zai in "Ba, ba, ba." Structurally, Yao Gu's transformation forestalls any development of her character and estranges the reader from identification with her character by imposing a critical distance between them. In addition, her transformation is the pivotal point in the plot because it causes the narrator to observe her from a new perspective. Like the reader, the narrator is unfamiliar with the transformed Yao Gu, and his estrangement from her compels him to embark on a broader consideration of their past interaction and of the significance of her life. In this way, the extremes of behaviour which render her character strange also facilitate its abstraction, with the result that Yao Gu becomes less a character than a symbolic functionary in the plot.

The abstraction of Yao Gu's character as a result of her transformation is one of the significant links of her character to theme and meaning in the novella. As the narrative progresses, Mao Ta sees her less as an individual than as an example of the state of being. As a result, his interest in her existence is increasingly ordered around his observations of

her physical form and the treatment she receives at the hands of others, particularly when she is returned to the village for care. With considerable sarcasm, he records the details of her inhuman treatment there: the cage bed, the mud surroundings, her shaved head, and the bamboo rod which was effectively employed to keep her in line. Yet his focus is ultimately on the process of her physical deterioration. Thus, he imaginatively reconstructs the process of her final decline in the countryside, and tells of her gradual devolution to an ape, a fish, and finally, a creature.²⁷

With this description, Yao Gu is no longer identified as an individual but rather as a symbol. Through her devolution, she becomes a symbol of life at its most basic level, and a curious paradox is thereby expressed. On one level her reduced state of being indicates the inconsequentiality of her life, while on another level she is still a being capable of emotion and profundity, as is indicated by her last mumblings about a bowl of yam. In addition, Yao Gu's devolution makes her a symbol of the human condition, which ties directly into Mao Ta's exploration of the relation between the individual and the social whole as one piece of the puzzle of existence. Finally, from this it can be seen that the abstraction of Yao Gu's character is the vehicle through which Mao Ta expresses important aspects of his own world view to the reader.²⁸ It is not just that she, as a close relative, engenders his attention, but that her deafness and progressive debilitation - and devolution - cause him to consider her, and life in general, from a new perspective.

The foregoing discussion illustrates the ways in which Yao Gu functions as the catalyst for the narrator's introspection and philosophizing. Moreover, her marginalization is one of the significant causes of his attention to her character, for the

²⁷ In the Chinese original, the progression is from *hou* [猴] to *yu* [魚] to *huowu* [活物].

²⁸ It is noteworthy that Mao Ta's view of Yao Gu's devolution thereafter influences his perceptions of the human condition. At the end of the novella his last impression of Lao Hei is that "she, too, looked like a fish!" (159)

reasons outlined above, and because it is the vehicle through which he observes his own and others' reactions to her as part of an ongoing investigation into human nature and motivation. Her condition brings out his feelings of guilt and hypocrisy, especially as he compares and contrast his own behaviour and response to that of the other main characters of the narrative: the two women Lao Hei and Zhen Gu. These two women, together with Yao Gu, function as a category of woman that is deliberately contrasted to male perception and experience. The relevance of this contrast is that it reinforces the marginalized tone of the narrative in its male perspective on the characters and motivations of the three women. Having discussed the character of Yao Gu in detail, the following will address the character depiction of Lao Hei and Zhen Gu, to illustrate in what ways Mao Ta's perspective on them is relevant to theme and meaning in the novella.

An interesting aspect of the depiction of the three female characters is that they all appear to embody a kind of double nature, which is a further example of what I earlier referred to as Han Shaogong's attention to a contrasting of opposites in character depiction. A character profile of the women reveals an extreme from the modern, educated and urban Lao Hei, to the traditional, superstitious, and rural woman Zhen Gu. Between them, bridging the gap, is the marginalized, servile and enigmatic Yao Gu, who notably comes full circle from rural to urban and back to rural in her lifetime. In addition, the narrator's view of all three women seems to focus in large part on their contrary characteristics, or on a kind of character transformation. The primary example of the latter is of course Yao Gu, whose pre- and post- stroke temperament indicate an extreme in character transformation. However, Lao Hei is also described by the narrator in terms of a contrast of opposites: she is intelligent, hard yet compassionate, lacks social responsibility yet maintains a social honesty, and despises yet depends on male attention. Her character is thus defined by its contrariness, even to the point where the narrator recalls her earlier revolutionary zeal (that is, she embarked on her own "long march" in

her youth) and contrasts it with the now cynical older woman who claims to have "seen through everything long ago." (117) Moreover, the narrator judges her character quite harshly. Although he notes her strength of character with grudging admiration, he finds her morally reproachable and is completely indignant when she suggests that they engage in a mercy killing of Yao Gu. Nevertheless, Lao Hei's role as Mao Ta's antithesis does serve to balance and add to his perspective on life.

The character of Zhen Gu, on the other hand, is handled somewhat differently. In the eyes of the narrator, she undergoes a kind of psychological transformation. Having never met her before his journey to the village, Mao Ta is predisposed to be grateful to her for accepting the burden of caring for Yao Gu. When he meets her, his initial impression is of a kind country woman whose largeness "enveloped you at once and touched you to the quick, so that you wanted to snuggle up to her large plump bosom." (148) Yet, despite this motherly impression, Mao Ta shortly thereafter presents a rather different picture of Zhen Gu; as the unconscionably cruel murderer of Yao Gu. Whether or not there is any truth to this is never made known, but the reader is left with a strong impression of the darker, more primitive side of human nature that is represented by Zhen Gu, who stands as a symbol of rural China.

In considering the narrator's view of Lao Hei and Zhen Gu, it is noteworthy that he considers them both to be capable of unconscionable acts in their treatment of Yao Gu. This point is emphatically made in the narrative, particularly after Lao Hei suggests her plan to set up a phony suicide for Yao Gu, yet the narrator later admits that he comes to a similar conclusion himself. With full comprehension of his hypocrisy, the narrator reflects, "As a matter of fact, Lao Hei had said something similar a month and three days ago. One month and three days. Was that the difference between me and Lao Hei? Was that what my aspirations amounted to? If it was, wasn't the world a little too fragile?"

(121) Insofar as it reveals the narrator's fallibility, this quotation serves to illustrate the importance of the interaction between Mao Ta and the women throughout the novella. In addition, it highlights the functional role of his perspective of their characters and attitudes. Lao Hei and Zhen Gu, as two examples of very different women, express different conceptions of life through their words and behaviour. Given that "Three Women" is a story that focusses on Mao Ta's exploration of the meaning of existence and aspects of the human condition, the reactions of these two women serve to round out his impressions of life. In effect, they both contribute to and counterbalance his perspective on existence.

Moreover, Lao Hei and Zhen Gu add another dimension to Mao Ta's investigation into identity and existence, precisely because they are women. Not only do they articulate views on life which are very different from Mao Ta's, they also live an existence, as women, which he perceives to be far removed from his own life experience. As a result, he conceives of their identities as being cloaked in mystery. In this respect, his observation and consideration of them from the point of view of a male perspective on the female complicates his exploration into existence even further. Although his observation of Yao Gu, Lao Hei and Zhen Gu is one way of exploring the issue, his efforts are problematized by his inability to relate to their form of existence. Thus, the perspective of male viewing female in "Three Women" directly reinforces the theme of the mystery of human existence. Moreover, marginalized tone is reinforced insofar as the male narrator considers women to be the main object of his investigation into the meaning of existence, with the result that narrative focus is on the margin, here represented by the women, Yao Gu, Lao Hei and Zhen Gu.

The second interior perspective of "Three Women" is the urban narrator's perspective of the Chinese countryside. Mao Ta's journey back to the ancestral village for Yao Gu's

funeral is the culmination of his explorations, and for the reader it is the event which ties together the themes of history, identity and existence. Entrance into this rural world provides Mao Ta with a physical and historical context for his thoughts on family and personal identity. Notably, it is once again Yao Gu who has brought about the change in perspective since her physical disability is the reason for his decision to send her back to her home village for care. His imaginative re-construction of what happens to her once she returns there (her inhuman treatment and devolution) is but one example of the ways in which he continues his investigation into the meaning of existence through his focus on her life and death. Furthermore, Yao Gu is the link between Mao Ta and the previous generation, and in this instance she is also the physical connection between the urban Mao Ta and his rural ancestry. In the process of experiencing the environment that shaped Yao Gu and his own father, Mao Ta is himself drawn into family history. In this way, his story of her becomes the vehicle through which he explores his own identity. His journey to the village opens the window to an experience of the past, in that the village and its people represent cultural attitudes and beliefs that are not a part of his urban experience. In addition, the journey "home" contrasts the urban and rural worlds, which adds yet another dimension to Mao Ta's exploration of history and identity.

Technically, the shift in perspective between the urban and rural worlds involves a kind of narratorial double view. The reader is familiar with the narrative voice of Mao Ta, which up until this point has been expressed entirely in the first person. However, the passage which describes his journey to the village is told in the voice of a reticent third person narrator. The reticence is short-lived and lasts only a few pages, but it is significant for the break it signals between the first and second halves of the narrative, and for the impression it leaves on the reader. With respect to the former, it is of note that the passage is introduced gradually, through Mao Ta's reflections on the cultural and linguistic links between Zhen Gu and Yao Gu, and himself:

I had no idea when she [Aunt Zhen] and Aunt Yao became sworn sisters, or why, or whether the story of their relationship was dull or gripping. Just as I'd no idea why my folks told me that our ancestor was a spider, why there was the word "xu" [] in the names of most women in my home village Some scholars said that the practice of communal times had left its mark in the language and that this was one of the surviving linguistic traces of such a practice. I was taken aback when I learnt about it, but of course it had nothing much to do with me. It was only because of Aunt Yao that I learnt there was an Aunt Zhen living in a dark timber house (128)

The passage reveals Mao Ta's sense of alienation from what he recognizes to be connections to the family past, in the form of the linguistic link "xu" and the dark and secret edifice of Aunt Zhen's house. Following this, the narrative voice changes, and Mao Ta's actual journey into the countryside is told distantly. While it is ostensibly still Mao Ta who is narrating the events to the reader, the "I" is dropped, and the observations made are voiced without the use of a pronoun; *ke kan* [可 看] and *ke wen* [可 聞] are used instead of *wo kan* [我 看] and *wo wen* [我 聞]; they would be translated as "one saw" or "you heard" in English. Notably, this change of voice is employed precisely at that point in the narrative where anecdotes about local landmarks and customs are presented to the reader. As a result of the impersonality of voice, the reader is deliberately pulled back from the immediate story and made to observe the passage into the countryside along with the narrator. In this way, the sense of the narrator's distance and alienation from the land is conveyed to the reader, who becomes aware that the entrance into this rural world presents the narrator with an entirely new perspective and experience. There is thus a clear connection between the shift in narratorial voice and the shift in setting, which emphasizes the fact that the story encompasses two very different sides of China: the urban and the rural.

Finally, Mao Ta's transition into the rural world directs us to an important aspect of Han Shaogong's style in "Three Women:" his use of imagery as an extended expression

of his major themes. To an even greater extent than in "Ba, ba, ba," Han Shaogong employs magic realist techniques in "Three Women" to blur the line between the real and the unreal, and to establish a magical connection between the narrator and his ancestral homeland and between the physical conditions and behaviour of members of the family. Moreover, imagistic contrasts and paradoxes are used to emphasize marginalized tone in the narrative, insofar as they denote the significance of Yao Gu's character and condition to the narrator's final conclusions on the meaning of life. In the following discussion, I will attempt to illustrate the wealth of imagery in the story by selecting prominent examples and elucidating their significance to the themes of history, identity and existence.

As we have seen, Mao Ta's entrance into the rural world signals a change in his perspective. Prior to his arrival, his thoughts on the identity and life experience of Yao Gu, and on his own links to the family, had been based on philosophical speculation. However, once he is present in his ancestral village, he is confronted with landmarks, like the little great wall and his ancestral home, and aspects of culture, like language and social conventions, which are at once alien and familiar to him.²⁹ His first reaction to hearing the villagers' speech is one example, as he notes: "The way they talked bore such a close resemblance to my father's speech that I was stunned." (133) In addition, his sense of connection to the place is compounded by his discovery of the little path running alongside the former site of the family's ancestral home:

I could indeed see that smooth footpath - cool, light, delicate. The side near the ditch was covered with a film of moss. It looked strangely familiar. This footpath, I thought, had drawn boatloads of grain from the river and provided sustenance to my family, and to me, who was still living and breathing. Ah! So

²⁹ This paradox of the alien and the familiar once again recalls Han's focus in "Homecoming?" [Gui qu lai]. The protagonist "I" arrives in a rural village and expresses feelings and impressions that are akin to those expressed by Mao Ta in his similar situation in "Three Women." In "Homecoming?" the protagonist muses, "all this looked so familiar and yet so strange. . . . Damn! Had I been here before?" Han Shaogong, "Homecoming?," trs. Martha Cheung: 2.

that was it. Father had always refused to let me visit my ancestral home because he was afraid I would see this footpath. He must have known that the moment I set eyes on it, it would rouse me to rebellious disobedience. (134)

In both of these instances, the narrator is startled by his connection to a place that he presumed to be unfamiliar. In the latter example, the footpath unexpectedly evokes a sense of his belonging to the place insofar as it symbolizes the family's livelihood. In this way, his increasing awareness of the physical links between himself and the family past present him with a framework for his investigation into personal identity. Moreover, the narrator's visual acquaintance with local landmarks such as this forms the foundation for his personal re-creation of history, one which attempts to put into perspective his role and that of his family in the puzzle of human existence.

The narrator's link to the family past is also established through "magically" handed down behaviour and actions. One such example, mentioned earlier, is the narrator's frequent consideration of the family deafness. Although the physical cause of the deafness is unknown, the narrator considers it to be the result of horrible events in the family past. While this is an irrational view to the reader, it is nevertheless presented in the text as a rational explanation, and is therefore one example of Han Shaogong's use of magic realist techniques. The reader is here not encouraged to question the narrator's reasoning, but merely to accept his explanation for its symbolic meaning; that it expresses the narrator's views on the probable link between the negative aspects of society, culture, and politics and the weaknesses and troubles in his family. Still another example is found in Han Shaogong's use of the recurring image of rats. Early in the story, the narrator recalls his father's practice of jabbing at rat holes in times of trouble, in this instance during a period of political upheaval in China. For reasons the narrator does not understand his father continues to poke into rat holes long after the family has trapped and killed the rats and "restored peace in [the] house." (109) However, later, when the

narrator is at wits end over the incessant demands of Yao Gu, he himself inexplicably begins to poke into rat holes in his own home. Only when the narrator arrives in the village does he see the "magical" connection: as a child, his father had found money in a rat hole in the wall, which enabled him to go off to the city to school despite the fact that the family had fallen on hard times. With this piece of information, the reader is able to appreciate the magical connection between the behaviour of father and son when solace is sought in times of trouble.

The image of rats occurs again at the climax of the narrative, during the narrator's mysterious and almost dreamlike experience of an earthquake. In this passage, Mao Ta's perceptions of an earthquake are confusingly blended with his memories of Yao Gu's funeral, and the rats serve as the image that symbolically links the two events together. As Mao Ta runs along the streets alerting people to the earthquake, a tide of rats, panicked by the tremor, move over his feet and run before him, sweeping everything out of their way in their path to the river. Unsure whether or not he is dreaming, Mao Ta can think of the earthquake only in terms of Yao Gu: "Was this earthquake caused by Aunt Yao's thumping fist?" (151) And, as the rat-tide moves on into the water, the thousands of bodies seem to form a small island, which the narrator relates once again to Yao Gu: "No, it wasn't a rat-island. It wasn't. I saw clearly, it was the rush basket filled with charcoal slags that was standing in a corner by the door of my house. It was Aunt Yao's basket." (155) Here, the image of the rats links the narrator's physical experience of the earthquake together with his emotional response to Yao Gu's life and death.

Yet the rats are themselves symbols of humanity in this passage. In his description of their teeming mass, endlessly pushing forward, Mao Ta evokes their parallels to the history of human existence, and particularly to the Chinese experience, by going so far as to note that the sound of their splashes was "like the cheers that broke out in a certain

square." (155) While not overtly stated, the message evoked through the use of this imagery is direct enough in its allegorical impact. The earthquake that follows Yao Gu's death is reminiscent of the 1976 Tangshan [唐山] earthquake which was widely held to be the prophetic sign from Heaven that Mao Zedong's "rule" had come to an end.³⁰ In addition, the image of panicked rats confusedly running forward is most certainly symbolic of the Chinese people, blindly following Mao to an uncertain future. At the very least, the symbolism of this passage reflects one significant aspect of Han Shaogong's authorial vision: his cataclysmic view of the events of the Chinese political past.

The entire scene is the culmination of the narrator's exploration into history, identity and existence, and the three themes are effectively linked in the final passage of the penultimate chapter. In this passage, the narrator attains a kind of enlightenment on the meaning of life and death. His thoughts, which are expressed through stream-of-consciousness narration, range from the mythical legends of human creation to the immortality of the landscape, and finally to the trials and glory of the human race. In the end, the earthquake occurs and the little great wall falls to ruin, as if signalling a symbolic end to Yao Gu and the troubled ages that she represents: pre-Revolutionary "feudalism" and the Maoist era.³¹

With this return to Yao Gu, it remains to touch briefly on one other aspect of Han Shaogong's use of imagery to underscore the novella's themes. Key images in the

³⁰ This observation is based on the traditional Chinese belief in the "Mandate of Heaven," which held that periods of devastating natural disasters signified the withdrawal of the divine mandate to rule. Given that Mao Zedong died only a month and a half after this major earthquake, it is popular belief that the two events are connected: that the Tangshan earthquake heralded Mao's death.

³¹ It seems clear that Yao Gu is representative of both of these eras. She is born, raised, and married in a rural community during the pre-Revolutionary years (considered the "feudal" age by the Chinese Communist Party), yet she makes the transition to the revolutionary period and becomes a committed worker, studying the example of the model Communist Party Secretary Jiao Yulu 焦裕禄 (see pages 104, 111 in the Cheung translation), in the new society under Mao.

narrative, such as silence, whispers, roars and tapping are contrasted for thematic effect, and all seem to revolve around the condition of Yao Gu's deafness. To begin with, the narrator questions the relation between the family deafness and their habitual shouting, with the result that deafness is symbolically linked to history and the family scars through the motif of sound. Whispering also has a connection to the political upheaval of the recent past, since the narrator associates this image with troubled times during the Cultural Revolution and the subsequent ostracism of the marginalized Yao Gu. Yet quite in contrast to these images of silence, the transformed Yao Gu begins to tap incessantly on a tabletop as a means of getting the family's attention and voicing her demands. Moreover, through the use of magic realist techniques, Yao Gu's tapping is oddly and inexplicably heard by Lao Hei, thousands of miles away. Finally, as we have seen, the tapping is also associated with the earthquake and the narrator's very real impression that the two are somehow closely connected. However, all of these contrasts have a direct bearing on theme.

The silence that is characteristic of Yao Gu throughout most of her life is symbolic of her status as a marginalized and oppressed member of Chinese society. In this sense, the direct focus on her deafness in the narrative is expressive of authorial view on the cultural and political oppression of the Chinese past. If we recall Han Shaogong's own comments on the character of Yao Gu (see page 53 above), we return to his explanation of the meaning behind her silence and subsequent transformation. Yao Gu's deafness is the physical manifestation of her repression, a kind of symbol of Chinese acquiescence to the political and societal status quo, just as her final tapping and bodily debilitation are expressions of the resulting "physiological and psychological illness" of the Chinese people. Yet despite her transformation into a demanding and noisy invalid, Yao Gu's life ends darkly. Her incessant tapping may well be an example of the other side of human nature bursting forth (see page 53 above), but it brings her no release from oppression,

and therein lies a message central to theme in "Three Women." The description of the last months of Yao Gu's life in the countryside leaves a powerful impression of cruelty and continued repression. Mao Ta, no less than the reader who accompanies him on his narrative journey, is left to consider the fact that neither of the eras, pre-Revolutionary or Maoist, that circumscribe Yao Gu's life are bright ones.³² In this sense, the events of Chinese history described by Yao Gu's existence in "Three Women" are truly bereft of any pleasant memories.

Mao Ta's conclusions on existence are put forth on the last page of the novella, when he recalls that Yao Gu had left the world muttering about a bowl of yams. Valuing the simplicity of her last words, he considers them to be the profound answer to the meaning of life, "When you've eaten you do the dishes. That's all. *Xu*." (161) As the final touch in a narrative riddled with philosophical speculation and introspection, this concluding maxim leaves a twofold impression on the reader. Within the confines of his own story, Mao Ta considers himself to have pondered over and resolved the question of the meaning of life. However, from the point of view of the reader, who sees Mao Ta as the main protagonist of a broader text, the conclusions he accepts are problematic. The reason for this is that the overall structure of the narrative, and its interior elements of characterization and imagery, together present the reader with another, in some ways contradictory, impression. The noise and tremor that are associated with Yao Gu's demise seem to contradict the narrator's simple conclusion on the inconsequentiality of life. Furthermore, the presence of the other two female characters, Lao Hei and Zhen Gu, not only complicate the narrator's exploration into existence by presenting him with a

³² This impression is compounded by a consideration of the ambiguity of Han Shaogong's use of the term "feudal culture" in the quotation on page 53 of this text. Given that the term "feudal" is frequently used as a safe term to criticize negative aspects of society and politics in the present, Han's reference to the "oppression of feudal culture" is double edged. It can quite readily be taken to refer to the oppressive social, political and cultural practices of the decades immediately preceding the Communist takeover in 1949, as well as to the negative aspects of politics and society in the Maoist era, from 1949 to 1976, some of which are possibly still existent in present day China.

condition of existence that he cannot really comprehend, but they also act as foils to his perspective on life. Finally, there is the fallibility of the narrator himself. Throughout the narrative, Mao Ta's awareness of his guilt, hypocrisy and uncertainty is expressed directly to the reader through the vehicle of his introspection. The depth of his own soul-searching and the range of his philosophical speculation on the meaning of individual life suggest that his simple conclusion on the matter is but an extension of his inability to truly make sense out of the puzzle of human existence.

Inspired by Yao Gu's life experience, Mao Ta's maxim is nevertheless his best solution to the philosophical dilemma over the indeterminable mysteries of existence. Not knowing what he is waiting for, what awaits the people of a city "struggling to emerge from a chrysalis of scaffolding and safety net,"(160) he sees a need, not unlike Voltaire's famous *Candide*, to dispense with his rather fruitless philosophizing and concentrate on life in the present. Whether out of a sense of hope, acquiescence or indecision, Mao Ta finally passes over the web of questions about history, identity and existence and fastens onto a solution that is simple and personal: merely to do his part and leave the greater scheme of things to take care of itself.

3. The Experimental Writer Su Tong: History, Identity and Culture

In the latter half of this discussion of marginalized character and motif and their relation to the themes of history and identity, we turn to an analysis of two recent works by the experimental writer Su Tong. Already an accomplished author at age thirty, Su Tong represents a score of new mainland writers who have moved beyond the specific regional focus that is characteristic of nativist fiction to explore a wider variety of subject matters in innovative and often shocking ways. He is thus not alone in engaging in increased experimentation with literary techniques, but his fresh approach to narration and plot structure conveys a most individual perspective on the issues of history, identity and culture. In addition, he is a prolific writer who displays great stylistic diversity in his works, which range from short stories to novellas, and recently, to full length novels.

The uniqueness of Su Tong's style hinges not only on his experimentation with the literary devices mentioned above, but also on his particular brand of imagery, which is successfully employed for its dramatic effect. In the two works presented here, "1934 Escapes" and *Rice*, imagery is always closely related to theme: recurring motifs and images occupy so central a position in the story that they become features of character thought and behaviour. In this sense, Su Tong's use of imagery not only conveys a mood, but often a symbolic message which underscores theme. In the discussion which follows, I will attempt to illustrate how these aspects of Su Tong's style in "1934 Escapes" and *Rice* contribute to the marginalized tone of the narratives, and how this impression relates to authorial vision on the issues of history, identity and culture.

In the prefaces to his two early collections, *Wives and Concubines* (1990) and *A Sad Dance* (1991),¹ Su Tong outlines the important features of his literary orientation. In the former, he describes his personal approach to writing fiction as follows:

My own particular failing is that I am always buried in the minor details of the life of the past but lack any plans for the future. The realm of art is a kind of light; it may be bright or it may be dark; it may exist or it may not. The world that I hope to attain has several elements; I hope for naturalness, simplicity, peacefulness and breadth; I also hope for abundance, complication, and multiple changes. All these elements have one aspect in common; they must be purely artistic.²

In his second collection, *A Sad Dance*, his form of literary creation is again indicated in the preface, wherein he outlines his criteria for good writing:

A good writer approaches the process of literary creation with an intensely self-directed consciousness; he hopes to leave his particular brand on every part of the work and use his own groping method and style to form every detail and every sentence of dialogue. He can then rely on his own aesthetic approach to construct the work . . . All of this requires the courage and intelligence of a loner.³

With these two quotations, we can see that Su Tong's literary orientation is rooted in his preference for an aesthetic approach to the writing of fiction, and most definitely, in his belief that the expression of individual consciousness plays a central role in the writing of "good" fiction. Certainly, Su Tong's own works display these qualities. In both "1934 Escapes" and *Rice*, the individual consciousness of the author is expressed through the overall tone of the narratives - dark and brooding - and in the form of narratorial voice. The latter, whether in first or third person, utilizes a range of narratorial point-of-view to ensure that the shadow of the writer is always present behind the detailed descriptions of character behaviour and motivation. Yet each work also exhibits distinct

¹ Su Tong, *Qi qie cheng qun* [Wives and Concubines], Taipei: Yuanliu, 1990; *Shangxin de wudao* [A Sad Dance], Taipei: Yuanliu, 1991.

² Su Tong (as translated by Michael S. Duke), "Daixu" [Introduction], *Qi qie cheng qun*: 10, as translated in Michael S. Duke, "Walking Toward the World: A Turning Point in Contemporary Chinese Fiction," in *World Literature Today*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1991: 391.

³ Su Tong, "Zixu" [Preface], *Shangxin de wudao*: 10.

features of the kind of literary style that Su Tong outlines in the preceding quotations. In "1934 Escapes" the key features are a naturalness of language, multiple changes in plot structure, and a complicated look at the subjectivity of identity. In the novel *Rice*, Su Tong concentrates upon psychological characterization and an abundance of symbolic imagery to develop a narrative that focusses on one man's struggle to define himself. Beyond this, the best indication of what he is trying to achieve through his fiction is found in an analysis of the works themselves, which direct our attention to the breadth of his perspective on the issues of history, identity and culture.

Thematic similarity is the basis for the comparative analysis of "1934 Escapes" and *Rice* presented here. While many of Su Tong's works, such as "Opium Poppy Family," "Flying Over My Old Maple Village Home," and "A Profusion of Wives and Concubines,"⁴ reflect a similar preoccupation with the themes of history and culture, the two works that I have selected to discuss share the most direct focus on the link between history-culture and the identity of the individual. In addition, despite their marked difference in narrative style and overall approach to the subject matter, the two works are also similar in their focus on marginalized character and motif. This is the common thread, perhaps one intended to foreground certain aspects of Chinese culture, that runs throughout both works. It is this thread of marginalization - a form of alienation - that I will highlight in the following discussion, for its relevance to theme and meaning and authorial vision.

⁴ The Chinese titles of these stories are as follows: "Opium Poppy Family" [Yingsu zhi jia], "Flying Over My Old Maple Village Home" [Fei yue wo de Fengyangshu guxiang] and "A Profusion of Wives and Concubines" [Qi qie cheng qun].

"1934 Escapes:" Determining the Self Through History

The context for the first of the two works, "1934 Escapes," is the recent social, and to some extent political, history of the Chinese people. In this novella, the theme of history is intentionally articulated through the highly subjective view of the participant narrator. The story, which centers on the relationship between family history and personal identity, is driven forward by the conflict that rages within the narrator's own consciousness about his paradoxical sense of affiliation with and alienation from his family past. Given the central role of the narrator, who by his own admission actively "creates"⁵ the family history, the sense of conflict that is reflected in his verbal quest for identity is further echoed in the type of imagery used and in the form of narrative structure. Through the conflict presented in this story, the narrative addresses the issues of identity, history and culture by focussing on the narrator's consideration of how he is linked to the larger cultural body in which he lives, and how he embodies the tensions between the present and the past, and urban and rural, in the context of a changing China.

The latter point indicates the direction of marginalized focus in the narrative, since it takes shape in narratorial perspective on character. Primarily, the narrator characterizes his grandmother, Jiang Shi [蔣氏], as marginalized, yet he also extends this view down to his father and finally himself, since his look into the family past seems to confirm the continued existence of certain marginalizing traits, such as muteness and a sense of alienation, into the present. Yet the story also addresses marginalization in the form of the central motif of escape. I consider this motif to contribute to the marginalized tone of the narrative because the "escapes" in the story are for the most part indicative of the act of breaking away from the group, or of remaining alienated and marginalized. Some

⁵ Throughout the story, the narrator openly discusses how he "composes" (*puxie* [譜寫]), "imagines" (*xiangxiang* [想像]) and "creates" (*chuangzao* [創造]) the family history.

characters, like the narrator's grandfather Chen Baonian [陳寶年] (the husband of Jiang Shi), become completely assimilated into the destination of their escape (that is, the city), while others like the narrator's uncle Gou Zai [狗崽], the narrator's father, and even the narrator himself are characterized by feelings of alienation as a result of their escapes. In effect, they are marginalized from a part of their identity that they wish to regain but cannot. Notably, the story is centred around the narrator's exploration of the ways in which he is set apart from - yet still held captive by - his family origins as a result of the escapes of 1934.

In order to set the stage for this story of escapes, it is best to begin with a synopsis of the structure of the work. The story begins with the reflections of the main protagonist, who is also the narrator, on his identity, which rests heavily on his relation to his father and the eight family ancestors whose pictures hang on the wall of their house. Upon establishing his obsession with his own identity, he then proceeds to extend his consideration of the matter to an exploration of the lives of those family members whose historical presence he feels so strongly. His method of "inquiry" (*tanjiu* [探究]), is to write a family history about his ancestors from Maple Village, which focusses on the events of one disastrous year, the title year of 1934.

The second story of the narrative is thus the family history of 1934, the unfolding of which is directed by the narrator and contained within the framework of his own story. In the family history, the narrator proceeds to introduce and describe five of the ancestors whose lives in that year have a direct bearing on his own sense of self as he writes from the standpoint of the present: his grandmother Jiang Shi, grandfather Chen Baonian, their son Gou Zai, the wealthy distant cousin Chen Wenzhi [陳文治] and the little woman Huanzi [環子], who is not a member of the Chen family by blood or marriage but whose presence in the family history bears directly on the protagonist's identity. In chronicling

the history, which is a blending of fact, fantasy and imagination, the narrator repeatedly interrupts the plot line with commentary on the unfolding events, on the nature of the people he describes and, significantly, on how their lives affect his own outlook and sense of self. The following look at the ways in which the narrator focusses on the motif of escape will illustrate how the thematic and structural links are made between the two stories and how this contributes to the overall sense of meaning.

It is made clear at the outset of the narrative that the narrator is seeking to escape from his father, and by extension of this idea, from his family past. A vivid description informs us of the intensity of and the reason for the "escape":

Turning my head to look again at my shadow on the ground, I saw myself in the deep night of the city painting the image of a fleeing figure. A kind of innate fear and confusion caused me to cover my head and scurry away. I'm like my father. As I ran desperately through the dimness of the night-darkened city, my father's shadow came behind in roaring pursuit I understand: at that time, my desperate flight was a kind of escape.(15) ⁶ [6]

As the above quotation illustrates, the narrator begins his account out of a sense of fear and confusion that he is like his father, afraid of and unable to escape the presence of the past, in this case a kind of personal history, long enough to determine his own identity. Interestingly, however, the fear which drives him to escape is born of a kind of fascination that compels him to return to his past, so that in effect the protagonist is escaping *to* that which he wishes to escape *from*. To elude pursuit, he jumps into and in fact creates a history that he has never seen. In the plot movements which follow the narrator begins to build his identity upon this history, thereby linking his own escapes to the cultural and historical framework which identifies his ancestors. In this way, his escapes, flight to the city at age nineteen and the act of writing the family history, can be considered a kind of quest for identity.

⁶ Su Tong, "Yi jiu san si nian de taowang" [1934 Escapes], *Qi qie cheng qun*.

All subsequent quotations from the story come from this edition. Except where specified, all translations are my own.

In the focus on the year 1934, we are presented with the main indication of the significance of history to the narrator's quest. Initially, he is introduced to the year as one of disaster by his father, but without explanation, as follows:

Over and over again he said, "1934. Do you know?" Afterwards he told me again in a louder voice, "1934 was a year of disaster. 1934. Do you know? 1934 was a year of disaster." (18)

The ambiguity of his father's words allow the narrator to use his imagination in composing the family history, as he seeks to elucidate the ways in which 1934 was a year of disaster for his ancestors. Historically, the decade of the 1930's was one of calamity for China; a time beset with political turmoil,⁷ flood, famine and disease of epidemic proportions.⁸ In the narrator's family history, however, it is a year of disaster for many additional reasons and, significantly, the motif of escape runs through them all.

A brief summary of these events suffices to illustrate this point. His grandfather, Chen Baonian, escapes to the city leaving his wife Jiang Shi behind, pregnant and without anyone to help her support her six children; her eldest son, Gou Zai, soon follows suit to join his father, despite the fact that life under his father's tyranny is in actual fact no better for him; the women of Maple Village are left behind when one hundred and thirty-nine of their men leave to find work in the city;⁹ five of Jiang Shi's children are lost

⁷ From the mid twenties through to the late thirties, China was characterised by political turmoil in the form of resistance to the Japanese incursion, ongoing fragmentation from warlordism, and rapidly swinging power struggles between the Nationalist and Communist-led armies. In Su Tong's narrative, 1934 seems to be a year representative of social and political unrest in recent Chinese history. As a matter of intrinsic interest, it was also the year of the Communist Long March. See Craig Dietrich, *People's China: A Brief History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986): 22-26.

⁸ For facts on the living conditions of the Chinese peasantry during the early decades of the twentieth century see R.H. Tawney, "Poverty, War and Famine," in *The Chinese Revolution: 1900-1950*, ed. Ranbir Vohra (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974): 102-7; and Lucien Bianco, *Origins of the Chinese Revolution: 1915-1949*, trans. Muriel Bell (London: Oxford University Press, 1971): 82-107.

⁹ Considering that the women do not want the men to leave, I interpret the mass exodus as a form of escape for the men. Later, the narrator himself says, "Nineteen thirty-four was a year of escape for the bamboo workers of Maple Village." (37)

to the cholera epidemic - an escape from the miseries of life;¹⁰ and Huanzi, brought to the village to have Chen Baonian's baby, finds herself the victim of Jiang Shi's abortion medicine, and retaliates by escaping back to the city with Jiang Shi's baby, who is the narrator's own father. Finally, the central character of Jiang Shi also escapes from poverty and starvation by becoming a concubine of the wealthy but lecherous Chen Wenzhi. The narrator articulates his last glimpse of Jiang Shi through Chen Wenzhi's eyes:

[He] saw that woman standing on top of the slope like the numerous branches and leaves shaken loose from a stalk of bamboo. Chen Wenzhi had a premonition that at the end of the year 1934 this stalk of bamboo would escape and be planted right in the palm of his hand. (76)

The narrator's choice of the word "escape" (*taowang* [逃亡]) is deliberate, as it is the actual description of the characters' actions in almost every one of the instances mentioned above. In this sense its repetition becomes the echo of his own inner desire for escape, given the fact that he is the one writing the family history. Thus, Su Tong's use of the motif provides the narrative with an overall unity, linking together two stories that are constantly interrupted by the non-linear progression of their plots. In addition, it serves to reinforce the concept of the exploration of cultural and personal identity which drives the narrative forward as a whole.

Having discussed the relevance of the escape motif to the identity theme, it is necessary to illustrate its relation to marginalized tone in the narrative. All of the escapes embody a kind of blurring of the boundaries between separate worlds, so that they transcend the line between such separate realms as dreams and reality, fiction and fact, rural and urban, past and present, and life and death, but do not eliminate the distance between them. While this aspect of the motif is primarily a stylistic feature of the novella

¹⁰ Jiang Shi alludes to death as a form of escape when she admits to aborting Huanzi's child: "I bore six children, all of whom grew up and died . . . dying in the mother's belly is better than being born." (74)

that is expressed through Su Tong's particular brand of imagery, it also establishes a structural and marginalizing relation between certain categories. Thus, the motif of escape does describe the marginalization of the poor to the wealthy, of women to men, and of rural to urban. Narratorial perspective on the character of Jiang Shi best exemplifies the link between escape and marginalization and introduces the secondary theme of the narrative: the conflict between urban and rural.

The narrator's descriptions of the life of his grandmother Jiang Shi indicate that to him at least, she is marginalized on three counts: she is poor, female, and rural. As a villager and long term field worker, her life is obviously characterized by hardship and economic uncertainty, yet her husband's escape to the city compounds her problems by leaving her in almost total destitution. This is why she is driven to watch the local men leave the village for the city and to crazily and pathetically ask: "Where is Chen Baonian's money?" (36) Furthermore, it is the harsh reality of her situation at the close of the family history, when she is penniless, childless and broken in spirit, which causes her to make her escape to Chen Wenzhi. Although an escape and a last chance for survival, this action serves to underscore her marginality, not only as a victim of poverty, but also as a female victim of male power.

The narrator focusses on Jiang Shi's treatment at the hands of the Chen family men as one way of exploring the personal as well as cultural traits that shape the course of the family history. Thus, he describes Chen Baonian's cruel and abusive treatment of Jiang Shi on their wedding night, and reflects on Chen Wenzhi's relentless observations of her as a sexual object from the roof of his black brick building. However, the emphasis on the marginality of women to men in "1934 Escapes" is not restricted to the individual circumstance of Jiang Shi, and the narrator gives several descriptions of other women in the family history who are marginalized by men. Consider for example, the anecdote

about the beautiful Fengzi [鳳子] (Phoenix) who is sold to Chen Wenzhi by her brother Chen Baonian for a few acres of land. The narrator reflects on this tragedy, as follows: "I imagine Maple Village morality was eroded and corrupted, rose and fell, generation after generation, in just this manner." (30)¹¹ Shortly afterwards, the narrator again links the sexual desires of the Chen men to their own early demise, and to the ruination of two hundred years of beautiful Chen women, saying: "those women who entered the Chen family compound . . . were like beautiful wild horseflies sadly and indifferently stinging the bodies of the Chen men. After they had sucked the morbid, mildewed blood and semen of the Chen men, they lost their original beauty; after that, they were pushed into the firewood house in the back courtyard to chop firewood or cook the meals . . ."(32)¹² In presenting descriptions such as these to the reader, the narrator not only expresses a view of personal shortcomings in the character of his male ancestors, but of cultural practices towards women that perpetuate their victimization and oppression.

Finally, the narrator conceives of the character of Jiang Shi as a kind of Earth Mother that symbolizes the rural world. While this image provides her character with a certain symbolic strength, it also reinforces her marginalized status, and that of all the women in the village, as the rural victims of the massive migration - the escape - of the village men to the city. Two examples illustrate the ways in which Jiang Shi's marginalized status, as both a woman and a villager, is linked to the theme of urban-rural conflict, and to history. The first occurs when the narrator "observes" the effects of this desertion on the women, and comments on the situation as follows:

Decades later, faintly hearing the sound of the rebellious Chen footsteps passing through the family history, I was at a loss and dispirited. You women of my old home, why weren't you able to keep your men at home to live and die with you? Women should not have been left behind like my grandmother Jiang Shi to sink

¹¹ From an unpublished translation by Michael S. Duke of Su Tong, "Nineteen Thirty-Four Escapes," *Wives and Concubines*: 16.

¹² Translation by Michael S. Duke: 18.

or swim in a bitter sea; Maple Village should not have become a village of women. (37)

In this quotation we have an example of the social conflict that began in China during a period of mass migration to the cities: broken homes, poverty for the rural - and largely female - population and, from the point of view of the narrator, the discontinuity of culture for a generation of youth who have rural roots but an urban consciousness. In this passage, the narrator's link to the women of his old home is a strong one, revealing his sympathy and connection to them for the bitterness and hardship that he perceives their lives to have held. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that his view of the urban-rural split is articulated through the image of the women's marginalization. As if to reinforce this impression, the narrator inserts the vignette of a Maple Village woman following her departing husband along the road in an attempt to stop him from leaving, only to have their struggle end brutally when he cuts her down with his bamboo knife. In this scene, man and woman symbolize urban and rural, and point to human cruelty and victimization as well as the beginning of a widespread social phenomenon and a changing cultural order.

In the second example, the relations between Jiang Shi and Huanzi are the focal point of the urban-rural theme. Throughout the text repeated descriptions of Huanzi and Jiang Shi characterize them as urban and rural respectively, and the conflict between them is articulated as one based on this difference as much as on their mutual jealousies. As Jiang Shi pursues Huanzi, who has fled with her only remaining child, the tension and separation between the urban and rural worlds is brought to the fore. In a very moving scene, the trail of Huanzi's footsteps leads Jiang Shi to the banks of the Yangtze River, yet despite her desire to regain her son, she cannot or will not cross over. It is just as she says to the other villagers when they query her upon her return home:

"Did you catch up to your child?" Leaning against the wall, Jiang Shi unexpectedly smiled at them, "No, they crossed the river." "They crossed the river and you didn't chase after them?" "They went into the city, I can't follow them there." (76) [7]

The riverbank is the border of Jiang Shi's world and thus, it is culture and not distance which in this case perpetuates the rift between urban and rural.¹³

In the foregoing examples, the urban-rural theme addresses the link between the individual and his culture through the narrator's exposition of the character and hardships of his grandmother Jiang Shi. In terms of relating marginalized tone in the narrative to the promotion of these themes (the conflict between urban and rural, and the trio of history, culture and identity), it is significant that the narrator "creates" the history of Jiang Shi, and openly admits this to the reader. His active description of Jiang Shi and the Maple Village women as marginalized is an indication of his own perceptions on both the course of Chinese history and the effects of recent social and cultural change. With respect to the former, the narrator's awareness of the women's marginalization is intended to illustrate certain negative features of culture to the reader, while the latter can be considered the cause of the narrator's own feeling of rootlessness in the context of a changing China. Given that the rural world, symbolized by Jiang Shi, is portrayed as ex-centric and relatively powerless in the face of urbanization, the reader is forced to examine the effects of the sharp dichotomy between China's urban and rural populations on a generation of individuals, like the narrator, who have rural roots but an urban consciousness. In considering the development of the identity theme in "1934 Escapes," it is to this paradox we now turn as we briefly examine the narrator's relations to the characters he describes.

¹³ The narrator earlier says: "Thus, the border of the world in my grandmother Jiang Shi's mind was this length of mighty river. She was unable to go beyond it." (75)

In reflecting on the urban-rural split through an exploration of character in his family history, the narrator links "their" story to his own quest for identity. The relationship between Jiang Shi and Huanzi is thus of key importance to the narrator, as it is their brief interaction in the winter of 1934 which is responsible for the removal of his father to the city. Huanzi, whose name itself means "link," is precisely that, the link between the narrator's rural ancestry, the past, and his urban upbringing, the present. As he himself reflects:

They [Jiang Shi and Huanzi] appear in the family history as two of the most remarkable images of motherhood. Perhaps they were two different meteorites that collided in 1934, and the silent blue sparks that flew out from the impact were my father, myself, our sons and grandsons. . . . (77)

In this passage, we are given one of the most direct statements from the narrator on the subject of his own identity. Coming as it does at the close of the family history, there is a sense that the narrator has determined self through his journey into the lives of his ancestors, yet it is contradicted both by the novella's ending and by the discord between the "historical" events the narrator records and the way he feels about them. One of the significant indicators of this conflict is found in the narrator's own sense of marginalization from his family past. Despite the fact that he proudly admits to city friends that he is an "outsider" (*waixiang ren* 外乡人) (77), the course of the narrative rather contrarily reflects his uncertainty and distance from the lives and identities of his rural ancestors. This is yet another example of marginalized tone in the narrative; the narrator's views on identity and history are not only described by his marginalizing viewpoint (that is, an urban view of rural society and a male view of women), but also by his own feeling of alienation from all sides: present, past, urban and rural.

Throughout the novella, the reader is struck by the darkness, perversion and cruelty that characterizes the family history. It is a tale that repeatedly focusses on the misery of its players, leaving no-one unscathed from the hardships inflicted on them in the

disastrous year of 1934. There are no innocents in Su Tong's novella, as each character is both victim and victimizer. In setting out the parameters for this message however, Su Tong incorporates another sense of history into the narrative that extends beyond the confines of the year 1934. Philosophically speaking, "1934 Escapes" presents a certain view on the course of human history through the grounding of character action in human nature. In this sense, the narrative is both about social and cultural order in China and the dynamics of human interaction. Evidence of the latter is illustrated by certain incidents of plot action, as follows: Gou Zai rebels against his mother, yet longs for her afterwards; Jiang Shi and Huanzi share a symbolic bond, yet hate each other; the narrator's father hates his older brother Gou Zai for hitting their mother's belly and causing him to leave the womb too soon, yet still sets out a pile of grass for his soul to come back and rest on; and the narrator himself wishes to escape from his father, only to realize the strong bond he feels to his father when the latter falls ill. These are examples, however individualized, of a kind of "real" history of the human race, which manifests itself in a cast of characters that incorporate the bad, the good, and those in the middle. Moreover, in developing morally ambiguous characters, and characters engaged in contradictory patterns of behaviour, Su Tong has added a level of complexity to the identity theme, which is furthered by the introduction of an unreliable narrator.

Strong connections are made between all of the ancestral characters in the narrator's family history. As he composes the past, the lives of the characters he describes are constantly interwoven. The process begins with the narrator's own father, with whom he feels a kind of confused affinity despite their marked lack of communication, and expands to incorporate those relations, in particular Jiang Shi and Huanzi, who have the most direct connection to his father's identity. Thus, while the narrator initially views his father as some kind of oppressive shadow, he gains a certain sympathy for him as the narrative unfolds, and begins to see him more as fellow victim than victimizer.

Similarly, the narrator is in conflict over the character of his grandmother Jiang Shi, who is the central figure in the family history. In almost every instance she is portrayed as a victim: as the abused and deserted wife of Chen Baonian, as the long-suffering mother of Gou Zai, and as the grieving mother of five children struck down by the cholera epidemic. With the arrival of the pregnant Huanzi to the village, however, Jiang Shi's character loses its status as victim and becomes victimizer. After recording Jiang Shi's admission that she caused Huanzi to miscarry, the narrator is beset with misgivings, and makes the following comments: "Actually, I ought to avoid the description of this scene. It is only uneasily that I smear the image of my grandmother Jiang Shi, but facing the family history of 1934 I have no other choice." (74) Through these words, the narrator reveals that his sense of morality is in direct conflict with his sentimental attachment to the character of his grandmother. In addition, it seems as if he is not really able to solve the dilemma, except to confess it, as he has done, to the reader. Not surprisingly, the narrator's sympathies are also extended to Huanzi and her unborn child, as he laments the loss of another link in his family chain:

If he (or she) had been born into our old home in Maple Village, my clan would have had one more relation, Father and I would have had one more person to long and wait for, and the eternally distinguished Chen Family blood line would have put forth one more tributary. Had such been the case, would my family history have been even richer in detail? (74-5)

Again, the narrator is seeking to derive his own sense of identity from his ancestors, but is troubled by the fact that his family history is colored by events such as these, which at best speak of a kind of immorality and pathetic cruelty. He himself does not know the answers to the questions that he poses about the behaviour of his ancestors. Thus, the ambiguity with which the narrator regards his ancestors reflects his own uncertainty as to how their lives define his own. In constructing a family history, he is in actuality seeking

to define himself, as if by an examination of family character and circumstance he can come closer to reaching some kind of understanding of who he is as an individual, and of how he fits into Chinese as well as family history. The paradoxes of narration and character as outlined above are a key aspect of the narrator's quest for identity, and it remains only to discuss the third aspect, his use of imagery, to round out the whole.

Silence and Shadow, Cries and Reflections: The Imagery of Identity

The symbols, motifs and images used in "1934 Escapes" are numerous and varied, but a close reading of the story reveals two sets of images which consistently reinforce theme and meaning in the narrative. The images, outlined in the section title above, are those of silence and shadow, cries and reflections, and they are set in oppositional pairs to highlight the fact that they act in conflict with each other throughout the novella. It is precisely the fact of their conflict, however, which links them so closely to the identity theme because they embody the narrator's often contradictory feelings about his cultural and personal past. Additionally, imagery adds an element of fantasy, presented through narratorial imagination, which adds both color and depth to the story. With respect to theme, the imagery used also serves to heighten reader perception of the events of the narrative, thereby deepening the sense of meaning for the whole. The discussion which follows will attempt to illustrate in what sense these images operate as a paradox and how they relate back to aspects of marginalization and the culture, history and identity themes.

The first image the reader is met with in the novella is the image of silence. In the opening lines, the narrator makes the following cryptic statements:

My father was probably a mute fetus. His profound reticence has caused our family to be shrouded in a barrier of murky fog for a full half century. In this half

century I was born, grew up, flourished and became senile. The essence of my father's Maple Village bloodline has extended itself to me. I was probably a mute fetus. I too am profoundly reticent. (15) [8]

As has been pointed out in the first part of our discussion, the narrator relates his own identity closely to that of his father, despite the fact that he is unhappy with this parallel; it is in fact what we understand him to be escaping from as the story begins. In composing the family history and weaving in his own recollections about the lack of communication that exists between himself and his father, the narrator pursues this motif of silence in an attempt to explain its origins. Thus, we have repeated descriptions of the grandmother Jiang Shi's silence: when she is married and endures Chen Baonian's cruel fingernails tearing into her flesh and his abusive hands on her face and body at night, when she gives birth to her children, and when in the act of intercourse with her husband, she is considered "as silent as a withered old tree"(62) by the secretly watching Gou Zai. It is Jiang Shi's characteristic silence, however, which makes it all the more effective when she does speak, as sound then works in opposition to silence to underscore meaning. Consider for example, the impact of her repeatedly crying out Chen Baonian's name after seeing the departing bamboo worker murder his wife on the road, the desolate sound of her singing mourning songs to her own strange rhythm, and her crying out to Chen Wenzhi in the end - a final cry dredged from the depths of a spirit in defeat. Both the silence and the cries stem from the personal disasters of 1934, and are thus directly related to the narrator's exploration of identity.

The muteness of the father is also counterbalanced in the narrative by his cries as an infant. While it is implied in the narrative that his silence is the result of being beaten by Gou Zai while still a fetus in his mother's belly, it is nevertheless the father's urgent cries as an infant which repeatedly jar his mother back to "life," that is, when she is in a trance or on the brink of losing consciousness. The relevance of this to the plot is obvious; if it were not for the father's sharp cries when he is feverish, he would not have woken Jiang

Shi from her own feverish dream so that they were both able to go outside and drink in the life-restoring dew. Similarly, his loud cries rouse Jiang Shi from her slow descent into the "Pool of Corpses" (the place where the bodies of the cholera victims are disposed of) so that once again, she is able to go on living and provide for herself and her infant son. The father's actions are thus a key factor in the continuance of the Chen family bloodline, and the whole existence of the narrator depends upon the instances in which the father countered his characteristic silence with life-restoring cries.

The other significant contrast between silence and sound is expressed in the relationship between the narrator and his father. The silence that the narrator constantly refers to with respect to the connection that he has with his father stands in marked contrast to the communication he seeks to establish with his father through the narrative itself. This is reflected in one key scene in the story, where the narrator expresses his feelings for his father, who is sick in the hospital, by drawing upon the image of silence in a poem that he recites. In describing a father and a son who "walk shoulder to shoulder," and who "need not say even one word" (45), the narrator's conception of his connection to his father comes to light. Interestingly, however, the image of silence in the poem is contrasted to the narrator's own very verbal act of communicating these sentiments to his father. Furthermore, his father's reaction to the poem breaks their symbolic silence, as follows: "On this day, speaking to me loudly, my father escaped from his state of muteness. I stared at him as if staring at an infant; in this way, I prayed for Father to be brought back to life." (46) From these two quotations, we see that the images of silence and sound embody the relationship that the narrator has with his father. Given that the link between father and son is one which the narrator is struggling to determine through the family history he writes, these images, in all of their manifestations, are central to the narrator's search for identity.

Taken together, the motifs of sound and silence that are illustrated above underscore the marginalized tone of the narrative. They are descriptive of Jiang Shi's oppressed and marginalized state, of the narrator's father's state of dislocation from his family origins and of his eventual escape through death, and of the narrator's alienation from his father and all the ancestors that came before him. In addition, the image of muteness suggests that the events of the national and family past have silenced the people, or at least hints at a relationship between cruel and tyrannical behaviour and the psychological disabling of an individual. The second set of contrasting images, shadow and reflection, compound this impression, and again serve to conceptually link together the views on culture and society that are being expressed.

In writing the family history, the narrator draws repeatedly upon the images of darkness and gloom to express the rot, pestilence, desolation and misery that characterize the lives of the ancestors he portrays. The image of the shadow thus occurs frequently in the story and symbolizes the darkness of the family history, the oppression of culture and society,¹⁴ and the fear which pursues the narrator throughout his journey into the past.

As with the image of silence, the image of shadow is also used by the narrator as a symbol of his quest for identity. Thus, the narrator is obsessed with his shadow at the story's opening, telling us how he stands in the city at night "studying his shadow" in the glow of a streetlight, and how he was "at that time being pursued by his shadow." (15) If we refer back to the narrator's initial recognition of his desire for escape, it is also a shadow, his father's, that follows behind him in roaring pursuit." (15) In this context, the

¹⁴ One very good example of this is found in the description of the shadow of Chen Wenzhi's brick building cast over the back of the toiling Jiang Shi. As the shadow of Chen Wenzhi stands atop the roof gazing down on Jiang Shi working in the fields we are presented with an image that is symbolic of the social oppression of the wealthy over the poor, and of man over woman.(19)

image of the shadow is symbolic of the narrator's crisis of identity as he recognizes it to be something that is infinitely personal, yet dark and indistinct.

The contrasting image to the shadow is that of reflection; the glow and brilliance of flashes of light. In a text dotted with images of darkness and shadow, it might be expected that images of light would express feelings of openness or release in the narrative. In "1934 Escapes" however, it is only seldom that the images of light support or reinforce a positive concept. In fact, the imagery of light is most frequently used to describe the reflections in the eyes of the characters, where it is typically blinding, piercing, evil or frightening. Consider the following examples from the text: "... when he was beating Gou Zai, a tyrannical flame, characteristic of all the men in our clan, shone from Chen Baonian's eyes"(61); and, "Jiang Shi's eyes were half flowing with tears and half burning with the flames of an abundant hatred." (74)

In both of the examples cited above, the imagery of light describes a kind of violence, thereby expressing the dark side of the characters under discussion. Viewed in terms of opposition, the image of light, or reflection, is only visually in contrast with the image of shadow, while conceptually it complements the imagery of darkness and gloom that characterizes the narrative. Considering the narrator's exploration of his family past as a kind of quest for identity, we can see how the darkness and violence that these images convey is linked to his perception of the cultural and social environment which surrounds him. The imagery thus succeeds on two levels: by heightening the emotional intensity of the narrative itself, and by articulating the consciousness of the narrator, whose world view is reflected in the type of imagery used.

As a heading for this section, the word "reflections" has been chosen because it can be interpreted literally, as above in the discussion of imagery, and figuratively, indicating

that this story is about the reflections of the narrator on his personal and cultural identity. In concluding the discussion of imagery, it remains to touch once more on the image of the shadow, as it brings the identity theme around full circle in the closing lines:

I want to use the death of my grandfather Chen Baonian to offer up a big basket of flowers to my family history. Then right away I will pick up this basket of flowers and go out, walk across the late night streets, walk past your windows. If you open your windows you will see my shadow cast upon the city; drifting.

Who can say what shadow that is? (78) [9]

In these lines, the narrator poses a question to the reader that reflects his own rather ambiguous stance on the identity issue. Yet rather than interpret this final query as a kind of denial of identity, I would suggest that the progression of the narrative has in fact led the narrator to draw some conclusions about his relationship to the past. As we have seen, the protagonist begins his investigation of the family history in an effort to free himself from it; as if by recording the events of the past he can detach himself somehow from the sorrow and evil that lie buried there. Ultimately, however, the process of creating the history seduces him even as he seeks to exorcise it from his consciousness. The final lines quoted above illustrate the result of this process: the narrator has not resolved the conflict of identity that is within him, except to recognize and admit that he is as firmly anchored to the past as ever. The reader is left with a final sense that the protagonist feels himself to be made up of all the identities that came before him in his family history. In the end, he values the bloodline connection even as it troubles him and presents him with problems.

In "1934 Escapes" Su Tong has directly addressed the issue of the subjectivity of identity within the framework of history. Yet Su Tong's approach to history is not simple and straightforward in this work. Quite to the contrary, it is problematized by the narrator's own admissions of fallibility and uncertainty about the people and events he

recalls in his story of the year nineteen thirty-four. To a great extent, this uncertainty pertains directly to his own ambiguity about his personal identity, yet it also suggests a broader perspective on Chinese history. In considering both the fact that history is foregrounded in "1934 Escapes" and the fact that Su Tong adopts a metafictional approach to the writing of the historical record, it seems clear that he means to provide an alternative perspective on history. With this in mind, I will briefly consider the vision of history that is suggested by the blending of fact and fantasy in the narrator's look at his family past.

To begin with, the narrator's focus on the darkness, hardship and misery of his ancestors in the year 1934 indicates that he is seeking to make a point about certain aspects of history that are not a part of modern day China's historical record of this period. The narrator's imaginative re-construction of history, which highlights the negative features of Chinese society and culture, indicates that for him at least, there is a need to speak of the misery, perversion and sickness precisely because it is not a part of the standard historical record of the Chinese Communist Party. Narratorial exposition of the cruelties and disasters of 1934 suggest that China was not then the picture of the strong and progressive nation that is suggested by present day history books. This impression is underscored by the narrator's frequent admissions that he cannot know whether what he tells you is accurate or not. Why, if he is uncertain about events that took place long before he existed, does he bother to create and re-create them and bring them to the attention of the reader? Quite simply because he believes them to have substance, insofar as he can only imagine dark and morbid events such as these to have shaped the confused and fearful lives of himself and his father. In effect, the narrator of "1934 Escapes" is working backwards from the present; he considers the feelings of alienation and dislocation which define the lives of himself and his father in the present to have originated in the circumstances of history.

Finally, it should be noted that the narrative itself can be considered a most vocal challenge to a long-standing silence, a muteness, about Chinese history. The narrator of "1934 Escapes" is exploring, creating and re-creating the events of the past by instilling them with meaning - a meaning that he hopes will provide both a context for his own existence as well as another perspective on the Chinese national past. However, not only are the escapes of 1934 futile and hopeless for the majority of characters, they also indicate the narrator's marginalization and alienation from his self-directed context. The narrator's poem is sufficient illustration: "My old Maple village home/ Has been silent for many years/ And we/ Who have escaped here/ Are like wandering blackfish/ For whom/ The road back is eternally lost."¹⁵

¹⁵ Translation, Michael S. Duke: 2.

Rice: History, Hunger, and Alienation

Discussion of the novella "1934 Escapes" provides us with a useful point of departure for the consideration of Su Tong's first novel, *Rice*.¹⁶ In this work, Su Tong's preoccupation with the themes of history, identity and culture is continued, although the structure of the narrative reflects a marked difference in writing style. *Rice* is written in a realist style, but with a twist; strong emphasis on the characters' dreams and fantasies add a psychological depth to characterization that complements the dark and heavy tone of the narrative. Using this approach, Su Tong achieves a psychological realism, and heightens the effect with a unique brand of harsh and haunting imagery that underscores theme through the introduction of a series of related motifs. In *Rice*, both characterization and imagery incorporate marginalized character and motif. The discussion which follows will attempt to elucidate the ways in which these aspects of marginalized tone express a perspective on the link between history, identity and culture, as we focus on the significant features of narrative structure, narration and imagery.

In considering aspects of narrative structure, it is useful to return once again to the comparison with "1934 Escapes," for one of the notable structural features of *Rice* is that it likewise employs an historical framework as the setting of the story. However, one notable difference in the use of history as a framework in each work is its relative prominence vis-à-vis other elements of the narrative, such as characterization and plot action. In "1934 Escapes" for example, history is foregrounded by an overtly controlling first person narrator who actively adopts an historical framework to tell the story of his ancestors. In the novel *Rice*, on the other hand, there is no such overt consideration of history. Rather, history is relegated to the background of the narrative, where it is de-

¹⁶ Su Tong, *Mi [Rice]* (Taipei: Yuanliu, 1991). All quotations come from this edition.

centred by the individual actions and life choices of the main protagonist. The latter observation has a very central link to theme and meaning in *Rice*, since the depiction of the life and character of the novel's main protagonist, Wu Long [五龍], is the primary vehicle for the expression of authorial vision on history and culture in China. Moreover, history in *Rice* is presented both in the form of the specific setting of China in the 1930's, as well as in the sense of depicting hunger as a defining characteristic of China's past. Finally, there is also a shift in focus: Su Tong departs from the rural setting common to "1934 Escapes" and the majority of his works to anchor the historical events of the novel *Rice* in an urban setting, which provides the reader with a different perspective on the urban-rural dichotomy.

The latter point leads us to one additional structural feature worthy of mention. The circular progression of plot events in *Rice* suggests a cyclical perspective on Chinese history and the nature of human existence. To exemplify this, it is useful to draw upon an observation made by the Chinese critic, Wu Yiqin [吳義勤] in his article on *Rice*. Wu Yiqin highlights the three main phases of Wu Long's physical and spiritual wandering in the novel as a progression of entering the city, seizing control of the city, and fleeing from the city.¹⁷ In categorizing Wu Long's life in this way, Wu Yiqin not only describes the main course of action in the novel, but also draws attention to the fact that Wu Long's life is carefully depicted as a process of moving from village to city and back to village. In my analysis of *Rice*, I regard this process of movement between village and city to be both an expression of a rural-urban theme (describing the rural-urban shift that is so great a part of recent Chinese history) and of the cyclical process of human existence. The latter is also a theme of the novel insofar as the story describes the life process of an individual who not only seeks to return to his rural origins, but who also manages to

¹⁷ Wu Yiqin, "Zai xiangcun yu dushi de duizhizhong gouzhu shenhua" [Constructing Fable Out of the Opposition of Village and City], *Dangdai zuojia pinglun* [Modern Writers' Review], No. 6, 1991: 57-8.

transmit his behaviour and life attitude to still another generation. The main themes of *Rice* are thus the twin themes of history and identity, alienation, the dislocation brought about by the rural-urban shift, and the tenacity of the human will to survive.

Further to this, the cyclical nature of plot action is perhaps best illustrated by a synopsis of the work. Written as a kind of *bildungsroman*, the novel *Rice* traces the life course of the peasant Wu Long, who flees to the city at age twenty to escape the famine and flooding in his native Maple Village. The bulk of the story is concerned with the process of Wu Long's character development over the twenty year period following his arrival in the city, which is characterized by his increasing despotism and cruelty. In some sense, his life process may more accurately be seen as a journey down the road of evil, insofar as his efforts to carve out an identity for himself involve his ruthless ascension to power as the manager of the local rice shop, and then as the criminal head of the city. His authority in both cases leads to a subsequent reign of terror and violent reprisal. Moreover, food and power are the important directives of the plot, since Wu Long's initial lack of them is the motivating force behind the choices he makes in adult life. After arriving in the city, he directs every action in his life towards the goal of securing food and assuming power over women, business, family and finally the city itself.

Wu Long is afforded his rise to power by the individual choices he makes, the strength of his will, a certain set of fortuitous circumstances, and, of course, by the particular cast of characters with whom he interacts. To a very great extent, they allow him to enter and change the course of their lives. While this analysis will concern itself primarily with the character of Wu Long, I will take this opportunity to introduce the central players in this urban drama: the two daughters of the rice shop, Zhiyun [織雲] and Qiyun [綺雲], their father Boss Feng [馮老板], the local hoodlum Ah Bao [阿保], the

city power-lord Sixth Uncle [六爺], Baoyu [抱玉] (the bastard son of Zhiyun), and the surviving children of Wu Long and Qiyun: their sons Misheng [米生] and Caisheng [柴生]. The lives of all of these characters are defined by feelings of alienation and hatred, and they are without exception either physically or spiritually destroyed by the novel's end. However, the effects of destruction are also wrought upon Wu Long, and his physical decline and waning of power at the novel's end leaves him little choice but to return to his native village, even though he himself sees this last act as the culmination of a lifelong dream to return to the country as a wealthy and powerful man.

The foregoing synopsis provides us with a standpoint from which to view the overall circularity of the events of the plot. Since cyclicity is an integral part of theme and meaning in *Rice*, it will continue to be addressed in the discussion of style which follows. Thus, I will begin by focussing on the process of Wu Long's life through an exposition of the prominent features of narration, which includes Su Tong's particularly psychological method of characterization, and of imagery, which centers on the recurring motifs of rice, the journey and fragmentation.

With respect to the first area of discussion, narration, the novel *Rice* employs a reticent third person narrator who records the cruelties of character behaviour as distant background events of history: the famines and floods of China in the late 1920's and 30's, and the upheaval of the Japanese invasion. Furthermore, the omission of quotation marks to enclose segments of direct speech reinforces the passivity of narrative voice in the novel. This practice has the effect of making direct dialogue seem secondhand, and gives the impression that a kind of "historical record" is being relayed. Yet the psychological treatment of characterization lends a certain immediacy to narrative action. Characters are brought to life through the frequent descriptions of character premonition, dreams and fantasy. In a sense, Su Tong's technique in *Rice* is to present history subtly as the

unquestioned and real framework of the story, but to allow this framework to be stretched and colored by the actions and psychology of individual characters.

The psychological treatment of characters, particularly Wu Long, plays a major role in conveying the main themes of the novel. Unlike the narrator of "1934 Escapes," the omniscient third person narrator of the novel *Rice* rarely comments on character or circumstance.¹⁸ Instead, the narrator seems to hide behind the character of Wu Long, and provides insight into the latter's character through flashbacks and direct exposition of his thoughts, fantasies and dreams. It is through this form of characterization that the identity theme is addressed. Wu Long's past is represented by his native Maple Village and its central significance to his life is expressed through his many dreams and memories of the place. Further to this, it is precisely because of the recurrence of Maple Village memories that the reader recognizes the role it plays in shaping the later course of Wu Long's life.

The first indications of Wu Long's concerns with his own identity are provided in his recollections of the village life from which he has just fled. We thus begin with an example from the beginning of the story, which is a catalytic incident presaging much of the novel's later action. Shortly after arriving in the city by train, the starving Wu Long stumbles onto the city docks after running from the sight of a corpse. On the docks, he meets Ah Bao and his gang (the Dockyard Brotherhood), who promise to give him some meat if he will only acknowledge them all as "Father" (*die* [爹]). Succumbing to hunger, Wu Long finally pays homage, but the word he utters triggers some inner questions about his identity:

¹⁸ At two separate points in the novel the local schoolteacher records the family lineage at the request of Qiyun. These incidents are reminiscent of narratorial style in "1934 Escapes" and are the only perceivable examples of external judgement on character. The relevance of this to theme and meaning will be discussed in the conclusion of this section.

Father. . . . Who is my father? Wu Long was extremely unfamiliar with this title. He was an orphan. In Maple Village he had had countless cousins and distant relatives, but no father or mother; the villagers told him that they had died in the great famine of twenty years ago.(10)

In this passage the reader is directed to two important points: Wu Long's estrangement from any direct personal ties that would provide him with a sense of social identity, and the parallel between the death of his parents by starvation and the life and death situation which faces him in the present. With respect to the former, we are presented with the first concrete link between Wu Long's feelings of alienation and the identity theme. Yet the passage also makes it clear that Wu Long was born into famine and poverty, and that this circumstance has characterized his life up to this point. This fact, perhaps more than any other, is what defines Wu Long's character in the novel, since it is in some sense the very foundation of his identity. Notably, it is also the factor which defines him as marginalized when he first arrives in the city. Moreover, the cyclicity of human existence, and to a certain extent, of Chinese history, is suggested by the second point, in the parallel between the famine that killed Wu Long's parents and the one which now inspires his desperate flight to the city. In this instance, Wu Long is representative of yet another generation faced with hunger, a fact which firmly locates him in the historical framework of the story. Viewed from this perspective, the novel is in one sense an exploration of the role of hunger in the formation of individual character and, by extension of this idea, in the course of Chinese history.

On a personal level, Wu Long's orphaned status is one example of his social alienation, yet his alienation is also described on a broader level: one that considers him in the context of his ambivalent feelings towards the rural world of his origins and the city world that he eagerly adopts. As his frequent dreams of the flood and famine in Maple Village illustrate, Wu Long's identity is inextricably bound up in his associations

with his rural home. Yet despite his almost obsessive identification with the village, he becomes almost irreversibly alienated from it upon his arrival to the city. For this reason, Wu Long's views of the city and the village can be considered the central paradox of his identity. While he is in some sense a bridge between the two, he is ironically marginalized from both. This point can be exemplified by an examination of the conditions surrounding the rural-urban-rural cycle of Wu Long's life.

While a youth in Maple Village, Wu Long's dreams of a move to the city expressed his spiritual alienation from the rural world. Upon his arrival in the city, however, he finds himself alienated and victimized by the metropolis. He is marginalized from city dwellers and city life because of his rural origins, his hunger, and his powerlessness. For instance, the preceding quotation (see page 101 above) illustrates how the orphan Wu Long is forced to accept a "father" (Ah Bao) as a result of his marginalized and inferior status. It is this initial incident of victimization which fills Wu Long with a hatred that becomes one of the strongest motivating forces in his life. From that point on, Wu Long's life in the city becomes a kind of quest for identity that is most clearly manifested in his pursuit of power.

Wu Long's feeling of alienation from the city gives rise to a concomitant shift in his attitude towards it. What he once perceived to be a fantasy destination of factories, shops and women,¹⁹ he now considers to be "a huge smokestack" (7), "an enormous decorated graveyard" (270), and a place where women represent immorality and impurity (40). Yet his view of the city as a place of abundant evils is actually ironic, because he himself is

¹⁹ Wu Long's longing to move to the city was not just a response to the flooding, as is evidenced by his later recollection of the summer months before the disaster: "At that time it was as if he had a premonition of the changes to come in the autumn. Amidst his fatigue and exhaustion he fantasized about going to the city: the many factories and shops, the many women walking down the street." (54)

the epitome of all the evils he describes.²⁰ Thus, while his increasing hatred for the city instills him with a futile longing for his native village, his sentiments are undermined by his obvious addiction to city life and his reluctance to quit that lifestyle. In addition, there is also an ironic link between his pursuit of power and his inability to wholly (that is, spiritually and physically) return to the village. In an effort to overcome his initial alienation from the city, Wu Long adopts city ways to ascend to power, which in actuality only serves to put greater distance between himself and his rural origins. Wu Long's spiritual links to the village are strongest when he is in the city, but the aforementioned factors illustrate how he is in many ways irreversibly alienated from it throughout the course of the novel.

In terms of the identity theme, the above aspect of Wu Long's paradoxical alienation from city and village can be considered further to determine how it is that his life in the city is indicative of his efforts to define himself. To begin with, there are many subtle indications in the story that inform the reader of Wu Long's preoccupation with his identity. In addition to those already mentioned, Zhiyun catches Wu Long absorbed in a rice pile and spies on him, only to discover that he is spelling out the characters of his name in the rice. (121) Further to this, Wu Long frequently admits to the duplicity of his identity as when he tells Zhiyun: "What is false cannot become real. It's just like me: it's my false self that's in this rice shop, my true self is still steeping in the flood waters of Maple Village, I'm not real either." (162) [10] But perhaps the most concrete evidence of the link between Wu Long's life in the city and his quest for identity comes in the form of his efforts to reverse his life circumstance. It is noteworthy for instance, that the orphan Wu Long obtains a family in the city; first, he has a relationship with Zhiyun

²⁰ The incidents describing Wu Long's evil nature are too numerous to be described here. It is sufficient to say that throughout the story he defines himself as a rapist, arsonist and murderer. As Qiyun tells him after learning he blew up Sixth Uncle's house: "I believe you. Because you are the world's most vicious man." (176)

which gives him control of the rice shop, and then, after her departure, he marries Qiyun, with whom he has three children. Following this, Wu Long extends his authority outside of business and family to the city itself and in so doing, initiates a symbolic reversal of roles. As the leader of the Dockyard Brotherhood (the local gang), he is no longer a "son," but rather a "father" in terms of the city power structure. One incident, occurring at the peak of Wu Long's power, illustrates this point, as Wu Long comes upon a sleeping youth on the wharf and offers him two silver dollars if the youth will call him "Father." In this example, Wu Long is repeating what was so long ago done to him by Ah Bao, in a double effort to assert his power and strength of will over another and to reaffirm the difference between the inferior village youth he once was and the superior city man he is today.

Through scheming, violence, and manipulation, Wu Long carves out an identity for himself in the city. Moreover, this identity is shaped by his aspirations to return to Maple Village after having "made good" (*yi jin huan xiang* 依錦還鄉)²¹ in the city, which involves the establishment of a city-dweller identity and the adoption of a city mentality. The fact that Wu Long endures great pain to get a complete set of gold teeth is an extreme example of his attempts to identify himself through the material trappings of the city power structure. The gold teeth are in fact a symbol of Wu Long's aspirations, as the following passage illustrates: "With his hand, he gently stroked the gold teeth in his mouth and said to the dentist: I'm very satisfied. In the past, when I was planting the fields in my old Maple Village home I dreamed of two rows of gold teeth." (182) Only minutes later, Wu Long's comments to the youths who accompany him illustrate a further connection between the gold teeth and Wu Long's pursuit of identity:

²¹ The narrator reveals this to be Wu Long's lifelong dream, as follows: "Wu Long envisaged the thrilling scene of the day he returned to the village in silken robes. Maple Village's three thousand *mu* of land was now already under his name, and the land that the Maple Village peasants were right now ploughing and sowing was *his* land." (271-2) (The italics are mine.)

Do you know why I want to have a mouthful of gold teeth? I've never liked to parade about and show my wealth - do you know why I want to exchange gold coin for gold teeth? . . . Actually, it's quite simple; I used to be poor - no-one thought of me as a person. Now, I'm going to use this mouth of teeth to speak to people, and I want everyone to think that I am somebody to take note of. (182-3) [11]

In this way, Wu Long intends for his gold teeth to become the signature of his identity; representing power and the attainment of his dreams. Moreover, that the identity he assumes belongs to the city is made clear by his refusal to take home his real teeth because they once chattered in the winter cold, even though they carry the "blood and essence" (*jing xue* 精血) of his parents. In contradiction to his earlier protestations that his "true" self remains in Maple Village, Wu Long's response to the dentist indicates his current state of alienation from that place. Abruptly tossing the teeth away he says: "What real teeth? Everything I throw away is false." (183) This line of dialogue picks up on the dichotomy of true and false identity asserted by Wu Long in the narrative. In his perception of the opposition between the urban and rural worlds, Wu Long remains fixed in a no-man's land: he wishes to cast away his village identity for one which symbolizes power and position, yet the novel demonstrates how he remains emotionally dependent on his rural past.

From the foregoing, we can ascertain that Wu Long's pursuit of a city identity stems in large part from his feeling of inferiority about his rural origin, which represents hunger and hardship, and his consequent marginalization from the city power structure. Yet in the end, it is noteworthy that Wu Long's process of citification comes full circle. His departure for the country is the culmination of his dreams, but the fact that he is now a city person himself signifies his final alienation from the village and the "true" identity he seeks to return to. The spiritual connection he feels to his place of origin is therefore

undermined by the reader's perception of his physical and material connection to city life and the city mentality. Perhaps even more significantly, the physical costs of his rise to power, in the form of his bodily disintegration, will likely not even afford him the opportunity to complete the journey. In this sense, Wu Long rather ironically remains marginalized from both the urban and rural worlds, insofar as his life in both places is characterized by a kind of physical or spiritual alienation which he is unable to overcome. Wu Long's last thoughts on the train back to the village seem to emphasize this point, as follows: "In a vast and tranquil mental state Wu Long imagined the circumstances of his birth, but regrettably he could think of nothing. He could only remember that he had been an orphan since infancy. He could only remember himself in the flood waters, fleeing his Maple Village home." (299)

From a structural point of view, the depiction of Wu Long's life process as one which goes from village to city to village is the chief example of the cyclical course of Wu Long's life in the text. However, the theme of cyclicity is also described through Wu Long's behaviour towards others, namely in the repetition of acts of human cruelty, and in the transmission of Wu Long's guiding principle of life: hatred. To this extent, we see that Wu Long's response to his personal life circumstance is rooted both in his individual attitude, which embodies a hatred of people and even life itself, and in the universality of this aspect of human response to the struggle for survival. In the novel, hatred is expressed as the natural by-product, albeit not the only one, of human effort to survive in the face of competition for a limited supply of food. The latter concept is quite clearly exemplified through the actions of Wu Long, who paradoxically believes the world to be a miserable place with "not even one thing to make people happy" (218), and yet devotes his every energy towards the goal of staying alive. Yet hatred is also the by-product of human acts of cruelty, and the narrative's very direct focus on Wu Long's method of

survival is certainly intended to highlight the dark side of this basic aspect of human nature.

What then is the role of hatred in Wu Long's life, and how is it related to the overall theme of alienation and the tenacity of the human will to survive? To illustrate the central significance of hatred to theme and meaning in the narrative, two examples can be drawn from the text. The first returns us to the incident where Wu Long confronts the youth on the docks and asks him to call him "Father." To Wu Long's disgust, the youth complies and the passage which follows highlights hatred as a motivating force:

Holding a club, Wu Long ruthlessly struck him on the head; while striking him he said: I hate you low bastards the most. For a piece of meat, for a couple of coins, you'll call anybody father? . . . Now I see hatred in your eyes. Now you've got it. In the past I was even lower than you; what did I rely on to get where I am today? Hatred is what I relied on. . . . You can really forget your father and mother, but you must not forget hatred. (192) [12]

This passage is of great thematic significance to the narrative. Through it, the link between human cruelty and hatred is made manifest by Wu Long's actions towards the youth. Wu Long's violence is borne out of his own sense of alienation from others and his overwhelming feeling of hatred: hatred for the cruelty done to him by Ah Bao so long ago, hatred for the inferiority and hunger which forced him to submit, and hatred for the weakness of the youth, who is by no great stretch of the imagination another young Wu Long being given a symbolic second chance to recover his dignity. Yet the key point in the passage is that Wu Long is here perpetuating the cruelty that once victimized him. In addition, the chapter ends with the young dock worker wiping the blood away from his face and spitting out two words: "I hate. I hate." (193) These words demonstrate that Wu Long is but one link in a cycle of hatred and cruelty that will continue, insofar as he has successfully taught his lesson of human survival - hatred - to yet another generation. Moreover, we see that hatred is not only a motivating force for Wu Long, but also a kind

of expression of his identity. His disavowal of father and mother indicate that he defines himself through his hatred; in this instance, he perceives hatred to be his parent.

The second example of the transmission of hatred and cruelty to succeeding generations is found in the actions and attitudes exhibited by Wu Long's eldest son: Misheng. In the second half of the novel, Misheng, who is only ten years old, coldly and cruelly suffocates his three year old sister Xiaowan [小婉] as her punishment for having told on her brother for spending the family savings on candy. In this incident, three points of view describe the transmission of Wu Long's perverse form of retaliation to his son. The first comes from the narrator as a kind of external observation: "Misheng's feeling of revenge was extremely violent, in this aspect he was exactly like his father Wu Long." (168) And, just before she is about to be killed, Xiaowan makes a similar observation: "she realized that the expression in Misheng's eyes was very similar to that of their ruthless and tyrannical father." (169) Finally, Wu Long himself sees the connection when he finds the runaway Misheng hiding on the riverside: "carefully studying Misheng's face, Wu Long mumbled: you're truly like me, but how can you have a murderous heart at such a young age?" (171) Nevertheless, in spite of Misheng's similarity to his father, or perhaps because of it, Wu Long brings the boy home and cruelly breaks his leg in punishment. From these comments, and the overall structure of action, the reader understands Misheng to be the product and continuation of an attitude of hatred and cruelty.²² Certainly, the successful transmission of Wu Long's hatred and cruelty to succeeding generations is indicative of the cyclicity of these aspects of human existence. Furthermore, insofar as the narrative very obviously focusses on incidents which describe only the dark side of human nature, there seems little doubt that the story

²² It should be noted here that it is at Qiyun's suggestion that Wu Long breaks their son's leg. Although Wu Long's cruel character is the focus of this analysis, the narrative makes it quite clear, as with Qiyun's implication in the punishment, that society as a whole is cruel. The microcosm of the rice shop household is but the primary example.

sets out to draw a line between certain conditions existent in Chinese society and the perpetuation of acts of cruelty and hatred.

In making the latter statement, my intention is not to overlook the significance of individual will in directing the course of events in the novel. Quite to the contrary, Su Tong's psychological method of characterization not only serves to provide insight into the factors which motivate the protagonist, such as hunger, hatred, and alienation, but also to establish the individuality of his character. In this novel, Su Tong takes pains to reaffirm the significance and strength of individual will, motivation, and choice. For instance, there are many indications that Wu Long is himself aware of the role of his own decisions in the path his life has taken, as when he despondently considers the cause of his physical decline, as follows:

Wu Long soberly sought out his unpardonable mistakes; he had always hated the city and city life, but his flesh had been drawn close to them, become entwined in them: their hundreds and thousands of temptations were difficult to ward off. He really had not been ruined by women - he knew he had been destroyed by a kind of lifestyle and a kind of dream. (222-3)

This passage confirms the reader's perception that the path of Wu Long's life was held largely in his own hands. In effect, his thoughts are tantamount to an admission of self-ruination. However, the novel does present a perspective on the role of circumstance in the shaping of Wu Long's life, through the explicit description of certain key factors, like hunger, as his primary motivation.

Beyond the careful consideration of individual motivation and choice in the final destinies of the characters, the novel also highlights the effect of the Chinese historical circumstance on the development of individual character through a constant emphasis on hunger and cyclicity. While the presence and significance of the theme of cyclicity has hopefully been made clear in the foregoing discussion, it remains to demonstrate the

relationship between hunger, identity and history as it is presented in the novel. The historical framework of famine and upheaval in early twentieth century China is shown to play a role in the life course of the individual Wu Long by causing him to make certain choices and to adopt a certain perspective. Moreover, the story is actually about the ways in which the character responds to the circumstances depicted in the novel, and where this leaves him at the story's end. As a result, there is a close connection between the external (historical) events of the novel, and Wu Long's individual pursuit of identity. Thus, I turn now to a discussion of the most prominent motifs in the story, to illustrate the ways in which the fictitious life of an individual is woven into the ranks of historical circumstance, and what this blending suggests about the authorial vision of history and culture in China.

Identity and History: The Motifs of Rice, the Journey, and Fragmentation

The three motifs of rice, the journey, and fragmentation are closely interrelated in the novel *Rice*. In choosing to discuss them separately, my intention is to highlight the ways in which they each contribute to the main themes of the novel: the twin themes of identity and history. As the analysis will hopefully make clear, all three reflect directly back on the identity theme, and while their reference to history is far less direct, it is nevertheless an important part of the final message conveyed by the writer. We thus begin with the motif of rice, to determine the significance of its prominence in the novel, and the ways in which it shapes Wu Long's identity.

As the title of the novel implies, the motif of rice is of central importance to theme and meaning; in effect, it is the motif which begins, carries and ends the story. For example, it is the smell and sight of the rice-laden handcarts which draws the starving

young Wu Long to the Feng family rice shop, and provides him with the incentive to stay there. Once he is entrenched in the family business, rice forms the very foundation of his urban identity, insofar as it is the rice trade which affords him his wealth and position. Finally, it is again rice which functions so prominently in his dreams to return to the village a wealthy man, to the extent that he will only return there accompanied by a train car full of rice. However, quite in addition to these concrete examples of the role of rice in the progression of Wu Long's life, rice is a most significant image in the novel because it is the symbolic referent to its opposite, hunger. That is to say, it is immediately made clear that Wu Long's obsession with rice throughout the story stems from his earlier experiences with hunger. Thus, the fact that rice becomes central to Wu Long's philosophy of life is indicative of the very great part hunger has played in shaping the course of his life and the form of his identity.

A number of examples can be drawn from the text to illustrate this point. The following passages highlight the connection between hunger and rice (as sustenance and survival) from Wu Long's perspective:

Wu Long felt that chewing and swallowing uncooked rice was actually just the same as eating it cooked, both had the same purpose: to fight off hunger.(14) [13]

Relying on rice was like relying on an enormous cradle; he felt that rice was the only thing in the world to have such a mesmerizing effect, it was even more trustworthy than the flesh of women, and even closer to reality. (92) [14]

[Thinking back to his flight from Maple Village] . . . he stubbornly recalled that road of escape surrounded by flood waters. Everywhere along that road were corpses and murderers, poverty and pillage; cold and starving people were all searching for some distant and immense pile of rice. (238) [15]

These three passages, which appear at the beginning, middle and end of the novel respectively, serve to highlight the frequent connections between the image of rice and the feeling, or memory, of hunger. The fact that Wu Long's preoccupation with rice continues right to the very end of the novel indicates how directly his early experience

with starvation is related to the personal choices he makes in later life. Once his own hunger has been appeased, his efforts to increase his wealth and power are not only motivated by his desire to retaliate against his earlier victimization, but also to ensure that he never again goes hungry. His obsession with rice throughout the novel is thus explained: even though his gradual rise to power in the city ensures that he is no longer a victim of hunger, his fears and memories of starvation keep him emotionally tied to the sight, smell and taste of rice. It is the only truly "clean"²³ substance, and his sexual perversion of stuffing rice into women's vaginas is less an act motivated by lust than a kind of fanatical act of purification. To Wu Long, rice is a thing of worship. As is indicated by the second of the above three passages, rice is Wu Long's cradle; it calms him and gives him peace, and is the only sustenance he needs in life.

In the novel, the motif of rice is linked to the cycle of human existence precisely because it is so essential to life. Thus, it is testimony to Su Tong's skill in imagery that he first makes explicit the connection between rice and survival, and then uses the motif subtly in conjunction with the description of death or acts of human cruelty to further develop his themes. For instance, Wu Long watches Ah Bao's gang raid a ship full of rice and when the captain jumps overboard to his death, Wu Long thinks: "year after year, evil crawls around everywhere like ants . . . For one boatload of rice, he had once again witnessed death." (57) In another example, the rice shop workers come across a dead child in a bag of rice. The description of the body is graphic and shocking, but the real significance of the incident is in its effect on Wu Long, who looks on the corpse almost fondly and reflects: "A child who choked to death on rice, maybe he also came from the flood waters of Maple Village." (132) And finally, there is once again the

²³ The purity of rice is always compared to the impurity of sexual relations. For instance, right after Wu Long stuffs rice into Zhiyun, he explains his action by saying: "This is rice. Rice is cleaner than a man's cock, why don't you want rice?" (124) Again after Zhiyun bears her child Wu Long says: "I'm going to the [rice] storehouse to sleep, it's the only clean place." (141)

example of Misheng's murder of Xiaowan: he smothers her in a huge pile of rice. In each of these incidents, and with respect to Wu Long's rape of the Feng family women in the rice storehouse, the motif of rice figures prominently. As a symbol of sustenance, and therefore of survival, its juxtaposition with incidents of death, cruelty, and lust serves to underscore the miseries of life and man's inhumanity to man. Thus, hunger may be a motivating force for acts of cruelty in the competition to obtain food, but the inclusion of incidents such as these indicate that the writer is also seeking to make the point that cruelty is basic to human nature, irrespective of life circumstance.

Through the symbolism of the motif of rice, Su Tong not only articulates a point of view on basic human nature, but also on the link between environment and motivation. This idea is underscored by the second motif to be discussed, that of the journey. In referring to this motif, my intention is to characterize the physical and spiritual wanderings of the protagonist, which are focussed around his uncertain position between the two equally significant parts of his life, the village and the city. However, as much that is relevant about Wu Long's physical wandering has already been discussed in the previous section, where the course of his life from village to city to village was exemplified, I will here consider the motif of the journey expressly in terms of Wu Long's spiritual wandering, for its relevance to his determination of identity.

Throughout the novel, Wu Long is haunted by memories of his physical journey to the city by train. Moreover, the memories are a further insight into Wu Long's state of alienation because they describe his uncertainties about his identity, which seems to belong to neither village or city despite his frequent assertions to the contrary. Even though his physical wandering is brought to a halt with his arrival in the city (with the exception of his final departure for the village), his spiritual wandering continues. Wu

Long still feels himself to be on a journey, as his blurring between reality and fantasy indicate in the following passage:

He heard the rumbling of the rails far away, and the train whistle reverberated in the night sky. He saw a coal car pull in from the north; on top of the crow-black pile of coal, a starving and distressed village youth sat huddled up. Once again, he was aware of the earth shaking, the rice shop compound was shaking - it was also a train car, slowly travelling through the open country; he was still on that bumpy, wandering road

I don't know where this train will take me. (103-4)

At this point in the narrative, Wu Long has the first of several delusions that he is still travelling on the train that brought him to the city. Given that feelings such as these are occurring long after Wu Long has established himself in the city, the impression that is given to the reader is that the protagonist feels himself to still be on a journey precisely because he has not yet found that which he is looking for: a sanctuary and place of belonging. Later in the narrative, this impression is confirmed by two other observations on Wu Long's mental journeying. The first comes from the narrator's external point of view: "To Wu Long, his every location was forever a car on that train. It was always bumping, always shaking." (224) The second observation comes from Wu Long directly when narrative voice briefly shifts to first-person, and occurs just after he recalls the starving villagers fleeing down the road from Maple Village in their search for rice:²⁴ "I found a long-lasting and seemingly inexhaustible pile of snow white rice, but I don't know how long this road is; I don't know where this road will take me to rest and be buried." (238) With these two quotations, the relation between the journey motif and Wu Long's pursuit of identity is made manifest. Even though he finds a place for himself in the city and establishes himself there, the continuation of his spiritual wandering indicates that he has still not found his place of rest. Therefore, despite his efforts to secure an

²⁴ See page 111 above.

urban identity and yet remain faithful to his rural origins, he continues to be alienated from both places. Furthermore, the fact that Wu Long has found an inexhaustible supply of rice and yet remains uncertain about his place of belonging indicates just how central the quest for identity is to his life course, and how neither city nor village was able to fulfill his need. It is therefore most significant to the impression of Wu Long's final state of alienation that the novel ends with Wu Long still on the train, on a journey back to his starting point that will likely never be completed.

Given that the journey motif suggests Wu Long's life-long and unsuccessful quest for identity, it is related to the third and final motif, fragmentation, in that the latter refers directly to the physical effects of Wu Long's pursuit of identity in the city. In addition, it should be noted that the recurring image of fragmentation (namely, physical disfigurement) is the manifestation of marginalized motif in *Rice*, and that it can be directly linked to the theme of alienation. There are thus several points brought forth by this motif, beginning with the ways in which it describes the kind of life Wu Long lives in the city.

As we have seen, Wu Long's time in the city is paradoxically marked both by his aspirations to assume an urban identity, and his loathing and disgust with the city's evils. Within a very short time however, Wu Long himself comes to represent these evils in terms of his behaviour and his appearance. With respect to the former, the hatred and cruelty of Wu Long's *modus vivendi* has already been exemplified, but the physical effects of his lifestyle are only brought to the fore by the motif of fragmentation. Throughout the novel, Wu Long's gradual descent into evil is accompanied by an increasing number of physical scars: his missing toe, shot off by bandits hired by Boss Feng; his left eye, poked out by the dying Boss Feng in a last act of cruelty and loathing; his venereal disease, brought on by years of sexual relations with prostitutes; and finally,

his torture at the hands of Baoyu, which costs him the sight of his right eye and two broken legs, and leaves him on the verge of death. Collectively, these scars describe the effects of a lifetime of victimization and victimizing. In other words, they symbolize the acts of human cruelty which, whether he is giver or receiver, characterize the life course of Wu Long.

It remains to ask what connection there is between the identity theme and the recurring motif of fragmentation. This point is perhaps best addressed by Wu Long's own impression of his disfigurement when he looks in a mirror, which is expressed as follows:

The image was seemingly ordinary in appearance, but there were some differences from that of the average person; he was incomplete, he had lost one bright eye and one innocent toe - would he perhaps even lose his entire life through the suffering of this unmentionable disease? (222) [16]

In this passage, we have the first concrete example of Wu Long's physical marginalization and fear of death, expressed through his perception of his bodily disfigurements. Initially marginalized by his inferior rural origins, hunger and powerlessness, the aging Wu Long is now returning to a state of marginalization, this time physical, which he cannot reverse. Moreover, it is of central importance to Wu Long's conception of identity that he remain whole, as is indicated by the expression of his desire to return to Maple Village: "Listen to me, if I'm going to die then I'm going to Maple Village to do it. Do you know why? I'm afraid all of you are going to smash my corpse into ten thousand pieces." (223) Later, his fear of dismemberment is reaffirmed by these thoughts: "Everywhere on my body are scars left by them; in this way, they have slowly cut me up and dismembered me. I've probably already become a piece of stewed meat in a dish." (244-5) Finally, his journey back to the village by train becomes a time of anxious consideration of his final state of being. Now blind, the dying Wu Long lies in the rice-filled train car and asks Caisheng:

But other than these grains of rice, what else is left? . . . You feel my body, tell me what I still have left. My toes are incomplete, my two eyes are both blind, I feel like there is something cutting off every piece of flesh; tell me, what do I still have left? (297) [17]

Wu Long's disfigurement, his maiming, is symbolic of his ultimate alienation from everyone he interacts with. It signifies his victimization and every act of victimization he performed on others. Furthermore, it symbolically undermines his life's work of attaining power and position in an effort to retaliate against the lifetime of wrongs done to him. Intended to secure him an identity, a haven against hunger and marginalization, his life in the city is ultimately what destroys him. By taking away from his wholeness little by little, his physical disfigurement contradicts the idea that he has successfully secured himself an identity after a lifetime of effort. Even Wu Long's gold teeth, considered by him to be the only thing he leaves behind that will not rot, are removed by Caisheng at the novel's end. The loss of his gold teeth is certainly not an indication of his re-establishing a link to his rural identity, but rather a symbolic last step in signifying his bodily and spiritual fragmentation. His final alienation.

The three motifs of rice, the journey and fragmentation, all work to describe aspects of Wu Long's effort to define himself in the novel. Rice is in some sense the initial motivation for his journey to the city, insofar as he leaves the village in search of food, and fragmentation serves to highlight the result of his journey: a life-time of cruelty, hatred and ruination, which disappears into the anonymity of death. However, consideration of the protagonist's life course brings us to the question of history in *Rice*: how is it involved in the story of Wu Long, and how should its role in the story be interpreted?

The connections between the very individual story of Wu Long and the historical framework of China in the 1930's are quite subtle. The conclusions presented here are not intended to be deterministic, but a close analysis of the novel indicates an authorial vision that focusses on certain outstanding concepts: hunger, alienation, human cruelty, and hatred, that are an integral part of the society that is presented through the microcosm of the Feng family rice shop. Along these lines, the Chinese critic Wu Yiqin suggests that the novel describes society's decline by symbolically depicting the decline of the Feng family rice shop.²⁵ While I agree with his analysis that the story describes a process of decline, I feel that the main message of the story does not rest there. As I have endeavored to show through the foregoing analysis, the cyclicity of the events of the plot suggests that the attitudes conveyed by the characters of *Rice* will continue into the future. Moreover, there is certainly a sense that Wu Long is not the only individual to define his life by hunger, hatred and cruelty, as the city-dwellers themselves demonstrate. Wu Long may have played a central part in the evil activities of the city, but cruelty and victimization were existent there before his arrival, and the reader is given no evidence that the cruelty, violence and hatred will come to an end with his final departure and probable death.

In addition, as was mentioned at the beginning of this discussion, history in the novel is presented in the sense of depicting hunger as a defining characteristic of China's past. The prominence of rice in the story, as the motif which links the narrative together and as the source of Wu Long's psychological motivation, is thus expressive of the involvement of one aspect of China's recurring historical circumstance, famine, in the very individual life of the protagonist. Thus, while it can not be said that hunger causes the hatred and cruelty demonstrated by character behaviour in the novel, it can be considered a motivating force in the course of their lives. Certainly, it shapes the course of Wu Long's

²⁵ See Wu Yiqin, "Zai xiangcun yu dushi de duizhizhong gouzhu shenhua:" 58.

life by making personal survival of paramount importance to him. It is perhaps this point which leaves room to suggest that the inhumanity depicted in *Rice* is linked to authorial vision on this defining characteristic of the Chinese past. Perhaps the constant struggle for survival in the face of famine and disaster precludes a conception of life that too readily puts the survival of others before that of one's self.

Finally, in considering the cycle of hatred and cruelty in *Rice*, we are presented with authorial vision on human nature in general, and Chinese society in particular, in the form of the schoolteacher. The teacher, who appears only briefly at Qiyun's request to update the family records, appears to be the shadow of the author, Su Tong. As the only character who seems external to the violence and hatred described in the novel, his decision to add a few extra words about the nature of family life in the Feng household is tantamount to outlining authorial perspective on the horrors of Chinese society. Two brief examples will suffice to illustrate this point: "Just as the primary school teacher finished writing the three characters of Feng Misheng, he entertained another kind of mood to add a very small line of annotation: 'legs deformed, the result of being beaten by his father.' He knew Wu Long would not be able to read these characters, he wasn't afraid of Wu Long." (176) Later, when it is discovered that Misheng begins to chase little girls, the schoolteacher once again steps in to give the reader his view:

Public opinion began to consider Misheng girl crazy, but the East Street primary school teacher didn't agree with this viewpoint; he had once updated the Feng family records, with the result that he had a much deeper understanding of the rice shop family. The primary school teacher considered Misheng to be suffering from a latent mental disorder; in the kind of household atmosphere present in the rice shop, it was inevitable that his psyche would move towards a collapse. (277)

With these quotations, we have an example of what was done overtly in "1934 Escapes" through the articulation of a kind of personalized reflection on history. This

time, however, the writer wishes to create the impression that the speaker (that is, the schoolteacher) is presenting the facts, not imagining them. The schoolteacher's role in this story is as an outsider to the family who wants to record life in the rice shop as it was. The reason for this seems clear. Authorial vision on Chinese history has focussed on the record of its cruelty, evil and decay in order to foreground the weaknesses of Chinese society. The schoolteacher is an obvious reminder that the actions of Wu Long and his family are presented not only as a part of history, but as a part of history that is not usually admitted or recorded. In presenting Wu Long's story within a historical framework the writer wants the reader to know this side of Chinese history and society, just as the schoolteacher wants to give the cruelties of life in the rice shop permanency in the records that future generations will read.

4. Conclusions: Significance of the Marginalized

Marginalized character and motif represent a certain type of individualization in narrative. As a category of characterization and an image governing narrative tone, they respectively reinforce an ex-centric quality of being and an alternate, sometimes subverting, perspective on the norms of society. The reason for their appeal to contemporary mainland Chinese writers is straightforward: marginalization describes difference and distance from the majority or power base in such a way as to foreground the multiplicity of voices that make up our human world. Moreover, it is natural to adopt a marginalized perspective when one seeks a foil to the kind of society that exists. At a time when mainland Chinese society is slowly emerging from thirty odd years of stringent ideological conformity in literature and society, use of marginalized character and motif is one way of creating diversity in literary subject matter, point-of-view, and style.

In the four works that have been discussed here, "Ba, ba, ba" and "Three Women" by Han Shaogong and "1934 Escapes" and *Rice* by Su Tong, marginalization is defined and developed as both tool and metaphor. In Han Shaogong's narratives, the marginalized characters of Bing Zai and Yao Gu are depicted as oppressed and downtrodden members of society, and their role in the story is to facilitate Han's examination into social interaction, individual behaviour and the course of Chinese history. Neither character is given personal expression through voice or thought, yet this limitation makes them well suited to the purposes of the narrative, since it is human reaction to the lives and experiences of these two marginalized characters that is central to theme and meaning. Bing Zai and Yao Gu are tools which direct our attention to the inner workings of the

human being, our motivations, desires, and life attitudes, while also describing aspects of human nature and the human condition, such as fear, hatred, cruelty, absurdity, empathy, alienation and ignorance. Likewise employed are Su Tong's characters: the alienated narrator, father and grandmother in "1934 Escapes," and the despotic Wu Long of *Rice*. They are tools which develop Su Tong's vision of Chinese and world history: a cycle of victimization and cruelty which exploits the dark side of the human personality to ensure survival in a harsh and uncompromising environment. Beyond this, all of these marginalized characters function as a kind of metaphor for the society and culture that surrounds them. Mute, deaf, victimized, and scarred, they are employed as metaphors for the ignorant, dark, perverse and cruel society that has fostered them.

As metaphor, images of marginalization have a significant influence on the mental picture the reader is left with. Thus, if we consider the significance of the marginalized in the four works of fiction discussed above, we see that it not only refers the reader to the universality of certain aspects of human nature and the human condition, but it also evokes a distinct point-of-view, in the form of a marginalized perspective, on theme and meaning in the narrative. The marginalization and alienation of the main characters in these stories animate the writers' vision of history and identity by forcing the reader into recognition that the tale being told is intended to diverge from the standard, Party-supported view on these issues. Insofar as the writers choose to articulate their visions in terms of darkness, ignorance, cruelty and alienation, we understand that the standard view they are reacting to is one which glorifies the Chinese race, history and culture, or at least chooses to overlook the continued existence of negative social traits and inhuman practices. A marginalized viewpoint, whether conveyed through characterization or narrative tone, is therefore indicative of an intended individuality in the expression of authorial vision on theme. Furthermore, Han Shaogong and Su Tong's efforts to return the individual to modern Chinese literature through marginalized character and tone

reflect their desire to present an authorial vision of history and identity in the form of a mental picture - horrible, nasty, pathetic, or ridiculous - that will long remain in our minds.

Within the mainland Chinese context, the focus on the themes of history and identity has a great deal to do with writers' active concern with the ills of Chinese society. However, it is also a by-product of their experimentation with the modernist "search for the individual." Along these lines, Wayne Booth's observations on the "in-dividual" of the western modernist movement seem applicable to the category of "new" writers in Post-Mao China:

For complex reasons, much modern thought about the "individual," the undividable center, has stressed the search inward for the core of the real "me," the authentic self. . . . The search can be pursued back to one's mistreatment in childhood, or further to unfortunate experiences in the womb, or finally to a cursed genealogy. Sooner or later one hopes to locate and remove all alien stuff and discover bedrock - but what one discovers is emptiness, and the makings of an identity crisis.¹

Although Booth is speaking of western literature and Romantic values, there is a distinct ring of familiarity in his words. Han Shaogong explores the identity of the race through the image of a half-mute idiot and an oppressed woman, the latter characterized by a deafness that can be traced back for generations to the horrors of society that lie buried there. Su Tong engages in a dialogue on identity and history through the interplay of inner-texts, yet his story still focusses on a disastrous genealogy and "unfortunate experiences" in the womb. Amidst the plurality of voices ringing out from ancestors and schoolteachers, the search for identity that Su Tong so carefully articulates through the actions of his characters is of individual identities that are inescapably rooted in or subsumed by history.

¹ Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988): 237.

In all four works the question of identity, which stems from or leads to an "identity crisis," is addressed within the framework of history and society. Yet this brings us to a final paradox on the role of marginalized character in the individual search for identity presented here. All of the stories explore individual identity or incorporate aspects of individuality in their subject matter, yet all end up in ironic ("Ba, ba, ba"), resigned ("Three Women"), discordant ("1934 Escapes"), and cautionary (*Rice*) accord with the idea that the individual is inseparable from society. The plurality of voice that enjoys expression through marginalized character and motif is seen to be most basic in the configuration of the individual. Despite the individualizing process of character definition in each narrative, plot action reveals just how firmly ensconced the protagonists are in the trappings of the society that gave birth to them, and which they, in turn, contribute to and perpetuate.

Consider, as a first example, the link between Bing Zai and the villagers in "Ba, ba, ba." Even though Bing Zai is mentally, physically and socially marginalized from village society, he is the ironic focal point of village superstitions and the symbolic representative of local culture and race. In the end, his marginalized status does not grant the impression of individual self, but rather contrarily re-affirms the insoluble bond between the individual and society. Given the allegorical nature of the story, the fact that Bing Zai's individual characteristics are at once symbolic of those of the villagers brings us sharply to Han Shaogong's bleak vision of race and culture in China: the existence of a primitive and foolish society doomed to repetition along inhuman and destructive lines.

In "Three Women," Han Shaogong's approach to identity takes the form of Mao Ta's exploration into the individual existence of Yao Gu. Again, we note that the emphasis on the individual is firmly grounded in the societal context; the narrator's investigation into

the life and death of Yao Gu is oriented towards the reflection of social and cultural attitudes, to determine how the individual fits into the puzzle of human existence. Furthermore, the details of Yao Gu's marginalization are presented for philosophical and social provocation. The marginality which defines Yao Gu enlightens the reader to the injustices and cruelties of society, culture, and politics. In this sense, Mao Ta's exploration into Yao Gu's identity becomes the expression of authorial vision on the oppressive and tyrannical aspects of Chinese culture and the misery of the human condition. Regardless of whether it is Mao Ta's civilized apathy towards the care of Yao Gu or Zhen Gu's more primitive approach, the idea presented in this work is of a society and a culture that fastens onto the dehumanizing and cruel aspects of human nature.

A different perspective on the individual is shown by Su Tong in "1934 Escapes." Society, this time expressed through a definable family history and an oppressive culture, is still the tie that binds. Escaping to the past to define himself, the narrator finds himself ensnared in the net of voices, characters and roles that form the collective family identity. He is inextricably bound up in history and society as a result of his flight, since it ironically faces him with the personal details of societal change - the rural-urban shift - that are responsible for his acute sense of dislocation. The narrator's sense of self remains enmeshed in the society of his ancestors. Even Jiang Shi's escape from marginalization underscores the link between self and society. She escapes to become a member of the same kind of society that marginalizes her. In this sense, Jiang Shi's life embodies the kind of morbid, parasitic society that Su Tong envisions to be the nucleus of the national past.

Finally, there is the novel *Rice*. The protagonist, Wu Long, goes on a lifelong quest to define himself and ends up a fragment of the ideal human whole as a result of his complicity in the evils of society. As an identifiable *self* throughout the narrative, Wu

Long's final state of *selflessness* is the direct result of his individual actions. Yet there is an implicit suggestion that Wu Long's choices in great part reflect his maintenance of the mentality of a "bad" society. Society, as it is depicted in *Rice*, is almost inescapably malevolent. The story of Wu Long's life is thus not only an exploration of the bonds between the individual and society, but a statement on the environmental hardships and cruelties of history that make up the national identity in human terms.

Within the mainland Chinese context, the "identity crisis" is very real.² Chinese writers, literary critics and their Western counterparts frequently refer to Chinese writers' restricted access to the great literary wealth of their national past and the stimulation of international letters.³ The present period of great experimentation in literature is one example of writers' efforts to develop a truly modern literary identity out of the many experiences and influences that have come together for Chinese artists in the 1980's and 90's. The Chinese "identity crisis," not unlike what Lin Yüsheng [林毓生] has termed the "crisis of Chinese consciousness,"⁴ has become fertile ground for literary exploration into broadly universal and narrowly cultural humanist issues. The literary works of Han Shaogong and Su Tong presented here illustrate both the ongoing development of Chinese literature in the present period and the artful consideration of personal vision and experience, translated into works with a universal appeal. In the future, we can only hope that governmental policies towards literature continue to be relaxed, so that writers have

² For further reading on the issue of identity in China see: Perry Link, *Evening Chats in Beijing* (New York: Norton, 1992) for urban/ intellectual interviews; Edward Friedman, Paul Pickowicz, Mark Seldon et al, eds., *Chinese Village, Socialist State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991) for rural/ peasant interviews.

³ Duke, *Blooming and Contending*, 206. See also Chapter Two.

⁴ Lin Yüsheng describes the "crisis of Chinese consciousness" as "that instability and uncertainty in the sphere of culture which makes impossible viable solutions or lasting settlements of new cultural and intellectual problems resulting from sociopolitical and cultural change." Lin Yüsheng, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness: Radical Antitraditionalism in the May Fourth Era* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979): 152.

the opportunity to create unfettered by political restrictions. For writers like Su Tong who shine a little brighter than the rest, the potential exhibited by their stylistic diversity and thought-provoking subject matter promises even greater results in the coming years.

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GLOSSARY

- "Ah Qiao zhuanlüe" 阿蹺傳略
- "Ba, ba, ba" 爸爸爸
- "Bai gou qiuqianjia" 白狗鞦韆架
- "Fei yue wo de Fengyangshu guxiang" 飛越我的楓楊樹故鄉
- "Guai ke" 怪客
- "Gui qu lai" 歸去來
- "Hei hei" 黑黑
- "Huanle" 歡樂
- "Ji zai pisheng kou shang de hun" 繫在皮繩扣上的魂
- "Jinfa ying'er" 金髮嬰兒
- "Ku he" 枯河
- "Lan gaizi" 藍蓋子
- Mi 米
- "Nü, Nü, Nü" 女女女
- "Waixiang ren" 外鄉人
- "Yi jiu san si nian de taowang" 一九三四年的逃亡
- "Yingsu zhi jia" 罌粟之家

Appendix

[3]

男女們都認真地唱，或者說是賣力地喊。聲音不太整齊，很乾、很直、很尖厲，沒有韻音，一直喊得引頸塌腰，氣絕了才留一個向下的小小滑音，落下音來，再接下一句。這種歌能使你聯想到山中險壁，林間大竹，還有毫無必要那樣粗重的門檻。這種水土才會滲出這種聲音。

[2]

丙崽不知從什麼地方冒出來了——他居然沒有死，而且頭上的膿瘡也褪了紅，結了殼。他赤條條地坐在一條牆基上，用樹枝攪着半個瓦壘子裏的水，攪起了一道道旋轉的太陽光流。他聽着遠方的歌，方位不準地拍了一下巴掌，用很輕很輕的聲音，咕囔着他從來不知道是什麼模樣的那個人：

「爸爸。」

他雖然瘦，肚臍眼倒足足有銅錢大，使旁邊幾個小娃崽很驚奇，很崇拜。他們瞥一瞥那個偉大的肚臍，友好地送給他幾塊石頭，學着他的樣，拍拍巴掌，紛紛喊起來：

「爸爸爸爸！」

一位婦女走過來，對另一位婦女說：「這個裝得餓水嘍？」於是，把丙崽面前那半壘子旋轉的光流拿走了。

[1]

丙崽有很多「爸爸」，却沒見過真實的爸爸。據說父親不滿意婆娘的醜陋，不滿意她生下了這個孽障，很早就販鴉片出山，再也沒有回來。有人說他已經被土匪「裁」掉了，有人說他在岳州開了個豆腐坊，有人則說他拈花惹草，把幾個錢都嫖光了，曾看見他在辰州街上討飯。他是否存在，說不清楚，成了個不太重要的謎。

[5]

我知道，那個玩槍玩馬的老手，確實是一槍給崩掉的。跪着陪斬還有好幾位，祖父就是在一聲槍響之下嚇聾了。而這種聾，後來竟傳給了么姑。當然，也許聾史還可以追溯到更早的時候，上一代、上兩代、上三代……那時候發生過什麼事？

[4]

已經有無邊無際的兩年，世界該平靜了，不需要我叫喊了。我懷疑眼下我的聽力是不是也在衰退，任何聲音已經被我岩層般的耳膜濾得弱小了，濾得躲躲閃閃了。么姑莫非也是這樣聾的？據說她爹的耳朵也不管用，而祖爹五個兄弟中，也有兩個聾子……這真是一個叫叫喊喊得極辛苦的家庭。

聽不見，才叫喊？還是因為叫喊，才聽不見呢？

[9]

我想以祖父陳寶年的死亡給我的家族史獻上一只碩大的花籃。我馬上將提起這只花籃走出去，從深夜的街道走過，走過你們的窗戶。你們如果打開窗戶，會看到我的影子投在這座城市裡，飄飄蕩蕩。

誰能說出來那是個什麼影子？

[8]

我的父親也許是個啞巴胎。他的沉默寡言使我家籠罩著一層灰濛濛的霧障，有半個世紀。這半個世紀裡我出世成長蓬勃衰老。父親的楓楊樹人的精血之氣在我身上延續，我也許是個啞巴胎。

[7]

「追到孩子了嗎？」蔣氏倚著牆竟然朝他們微笑起來，「沒有，他們過江了。」「過了江就不追了嗎？」「他們到城裡去了，我追不上了。」

[6]

回頭又研究地上的影子，我看見自己在深夜的城市裡畫下了一個逃亡者的像。一種與生俱來的惶亂使我抱頭逃竄。我像父親。我一路奔跑經過夜色迷離的城市，父親的影子在後面呼嘯著追蹤我，那是一種超於物態的靜力的追蹤。我懂得，我的那次拚命奔跑是一種逃亡。

[14] 倚靠著米就像倚靠著一只巨形搖籃，他覺得唯有米是世界上最具催眠作用的東西，它比女人的肉體更加可靠，更加接近真實。

[13] 五龍覺得嚼咽生米和吃飯喝粥其實是一樣的，它們的目的都是抵抗飢餓。

[12] 五龍操起一根杠棒狠狠地敲他的頭頂，一邊敲一邊大聲說，我最恨你們這些賤種。爲了一塊肉，爲了兩塊錢，就可以隨便叫人爹嗎？……他說，現在我從你的眼睛裏看到了仇恨。這就對了。我從前比你還賤，我靠什麼才有今天？靠的就是仇恨。這是我們做人的最好的資本。你可以真的忘記爹娘，但你不要忘記仇恨。

[11] 你們知道我爲什麼要換上一嘴金牙？我從不喜歡擺闊炫耀，你們說我爲什麼要花這筆錢換上一嘴金牙呢？打傘的人面面相覷，他們總是猜錯五龍的想法，所以不敢輕言。五龍說，其實也很簡單，我以前窮，沒人把我當人看。如今我要用這嘴金牙跟他們說話，我要所有人都把我當個人來看。

[10] 假的成不了真。就像我一樣，我是這米店的假人，我的真人還在楓楊樹的大水裏泡著，我也不是真的。

[17]

可是除了這些米我還剩下什麼？五龍的手緩緩攀過米堆，抓住了柴生的衣角，他說，你摸摸我的身子，告訴我我還剩下什麼。我的腳趾頭是不全的，我的兩隻眼睛都瞎了，我覺得有什麼東西在切割我的每一塊皮肉，告訴我現在還剩下什麼？

[16]

這個形象無疑是古怪而可笑的，四肢頗長而粗壯，腹部肌肉仍然堅挺有力，而生殖器被紅色的膏藥包得嚴嚴實實。這個形象貌似普通但又有別於常人，他是殘缺不全的，他丟失了一隻明亮的眼睛，還有一根無辜的腳趾，也許他還將在暗病的折磨下丟失整個生命？

[15]

固執地回憶那條洪水包圍中的逃亡之路。這條路上到處是死屍和殺人者，到處是貧困和擄掠，饑寒交迫的人們尋找著遙遠的大米堆。