The Representation of History in Contemporary Chinese Fiction:
Han Shaogong, Mo Yan, Su Tong

by

Vivian P. Y. Lee

B.A. University of Hong Kong, 1988
M.A. University of Hong Kong, 1991

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

in
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
(Department of Asian Studies)

We accept this thesis as conforming
To the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
January 2001

© Vivian P. Y. Lee, 2001
In presenting this thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for an advanced degree at the University of British Columbia, I agree that the Library shall make it freely available for reference and study. I further agree that permission for extensive copying of this thesis for scholarly purposes may be granted by the head of my department or by his or her representatives. It is understood that copying or publication of this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Department of Asian Studies

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

Date JAN 22, 2001
Abstract

The main focus of this study is the changing patterns of historical representation in modern and contemporary Chinese fiction. Beginning with a critical evaluation of Western critical theories such as Hayden White's concept of metahistory and Paul Ricoeur's philosophical reflections on narrative and metaphor, it probes the "interweaving reference" of history and fiction in contemporary Chinese fiction.

Selected works of three major mainland writers - Han Shaogong, Mo Yan and Su Tong - are treated primarily as cultural metaphors that reflect on and re-imagine Chinese history in ways that deviate from the utopian vision perpetuated by Mao Zedong's version of modernity. In literature, this utopianism is exemplified in the so-called "revolutionary historical novel" that thrived under the patronage of the Communist Party after 1949.

My reading of the three authors shows how this utopian (revolutionary) rhetoric has given way to an essentially pessimistic view of history that subverts and overturns the oppressive "optimism" sanctioned by the Party State. This "critical pessimism" is characterized by a parade of the darkest and most abhorrent images of cultural degeneration. From evolution to devolution, this deviant aesthetics represents a major change in cultural imagination in China, and it also expresses a collective anxiety toward the future.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ii  
Acknowledgments iv  
Note on Translations v  
Introduction 1  
Chapter 1 Contemporary Poetics: the Return to/of History 25  
Chapter 2 Changing Metaphors: Fictional Histories in Twentieth-century China 57  
Chapter 3 History as Allegory: Han Shaogong 103  
Chapter 4 Heroes, Bastards and Fictional Homeland: Mo Yan 195  
Chapter 5 Su Tong's Topos of Desire 264  
Conclusion 350  
Bibliography 364
Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Professor Michael Duke, my research supervisor, for his unfailing support, guidance and self-example, which has set me on the right path during the course of my study at UBC; to Professor Andrew Busza for rekindling my self-confidence, and for his always being a source of inspiration; and to Professor Jerry Schmidt, for guiding me through the vast terrain of classical Chinese literature. Special thanks are due to Professors John Cooper, George McWhirter and Glen Peterson for their critical insights and comments. I would also like to thank the Faculty of Graduate Studies for their generous fellowships.

I owe a debt of gratitude to Miss Mina Wong, Graduate Secretary of the Asian Studies Department, for her always willing to go the extra mile for graduate students; to Miss Ellen Wong, whose help in preparing this manuscript has been indispensable; and to my family, for without their generosity and love I would be nothing.
A Note on the English Translations

The following English translations are used for some of the primary sources (in brackets):

"Homecoming?" and Other Stories, by Martha Cheung. (Han Shaogong: "Ba Ba Ba,"
"Nü Nü Nü," "Langaizi" and "Quiqualai").

Raise the Red Lantern: Three Novellas, by Michael Duke. (Su Tong: "Yijiusansinin de
taowang," "Qiqie chengqun" and "Yingsu zhijia")

Red Sorghum Family, by Howard Goldblatt. (Mo Yan: Honggauliangjiazu)

Rice, by Howard Goldblatt. (Su Tong: Mi)

The Republic of Wine, by Howard Goldblatt. (Mo Yan: Jiuguo)

Page references to Chinese and English texts are given at the end of each
quotation respectively. Unless otherwise noted, all other translations from the Chinese
originals are mine.
Introduction

In the Western tradition since Aristotle, history and fiction have long been regarded, until quite recently, as distinct from each other in terms of means and ends. While history describes "the things that have happened," says Aristotle, poetry or literature in general describes "a kind of thing that might happen." Poetry, therefore, deals with "universals" and history with "singulars" (Aristotle 9:1469-364). Poetry, being the art of imitation, can justify the impossible "by reference to the requirements of poetry... or to opinion," for "a convincing impossibility [in poetry] is preferable to an unconvincing possibility" (24: 1486). Mimesis, or the poetic representation of reality, attributes to mimetic art a rhetorical function the purpose of which is the discovery of universal truths or meanings by means of a verisimilitude of convincing impossibilities.

In Europe since the First World War, the breakdown of faith in religious belief and human civilization has provoked radical changes in the perception of reality in the arts and humanities, and hence in the nature of human knowledge. As pointed out by Erich Kahler (1973), reality in Western narrative undergoes a "progressive internalization" so that it is no longer conceived as an objective given, but rather a subjective construction by the human consciousness. This schism between external and internal reality also means that mimetic representation gravitates toward the problematic human psyche as the basis of reality. The fragmentation of the social order, nonetheless,
is still “mirrored” by the fragmentation of fictional narratives, whose internal dynamics usually exacerbate the sense of formlessness rather than “form,” disorder rather than order, in the conventional sense of these terms. The turning inward to the erratic currents of emotional life places increasing emphasis on the self as the basis of human perception and knowledge. Subjectivity, then, replaces “objectivity” as the foundation of “reality” in fictional representation.

This skeptical, indeed subversive, stance has been continued and transformed in recent years in postmodernism, characterized by a Derridean deconstructionism that throws into doubt all established epistemological paradigms by a critique of repressive ideologies and the hegemony of power (political/sexual/racial) perpetuated by a Eurocentric worldview. Setting its political and cultural agenda aside, postmodernism injects into contemporary culture a new stream of subversion that, significantly enough, contributes to a radical rethinking of existing categories of values by transgressing social, political, sexual and cultural boundaries. The idea of “text” and the textual construction of reality directly contribute to the “textualization” of human experience. “There is nothing outside the text”: Derrida’s provocative assertion comes to serve as the “dictum” of postmodernist critical thought.

Against this background, the conventional boundary between history and fiction is bound to be redrawn. The question of how, and to what extent and purpose, this is or
can be done immediately comes to mind. Both historians and literary critics, in their respective fields, are divided in their approaches to this “boundary” issue. The most influential work on the part of historians comes from Hayden White, whose *Metahistory: the Historical Imagination of Nineteenth-century Europe* has provoked many debates across the humanities. In some cases, it has become an authority in itself whenever questions concerning “historical reality” and “historical truths” are raised. By adapting Frye’s new-critical approach to literature in *The Anatomy of Criticism*, White sets out to delineate the tropes that define historical consciousness using the works of major historians and philosophers of history of his chosen period. White’s analysis of the various historical and philosophical writings, texts in themselves, concludes that the historical imagination is governed by the tropes of literature, so that historical truths (the meaning of past events) are in effect products of the literary imagination. As some critics have argued, White’s theory of tropes, insightful as it is, is limited to one kind of “metahistory” (literary imagination), but since there are different kinds of metahistories, the theory of tropes alone cannot adequately determine the truth claims of history.¹

The on-going debate over the “facticity” and “fictivity” of historiography also underscores certain new directions in literary discourse that seek to reformulate the relationship between history and fiction, leading to such dramatic revisions from a total

¹ The reactions to White’s thesis by historians are discussed in Chapter 1. For a critical survey on the postmodern “linguistic turn” in historiography, see Perez Zagorin (1999).
separation to near-complete identity. The prerequisites of objectivity and truth that used
to apply to both kinds of narratives, moreover, have given way to the problematization, if
not renunciation, of these values. Obviously my description above is limited to the two
extremes that mark the extent of change in recent years, but an overview of the
polarization of opinions and attitudes is useful to the setting up of a conceptual
framework within which the dynamics between history and fiction are reconsidered.

Before turning to my overall approach, I would like to draw upon certain aspects
within the Chinese literary tradition relevant to my present concern. In the Chinese
literary tradition, history and fiction are not diametrically opposed modes. Together with
imaginative prose and philosophical discourse, historical texts are studied both as
accounts of past events and models of the art of writing. In the Chinese tradition,
_hxiaoshuo_ (fiction) originated from historical anecdotes and gradually developed into a
literary genre most notably in the Tang-Song period (seventh to thirteenth century);
before which fictional narratives were treated largely as pseudo-historical accounts,
unofficial histories, or biographies of famous political and social figures. From then on
fiction as a “supplement to history” no longer served as a primary objective, but writers
of historical fiction still espoused the ethical view of history in the Confucian tradition.

---

2 Among these texts are the _Zuo zhuan_ (《左傳》) (Commentaries of Zuo), an expanded version of the _Spring
and Autumn_ believed to be written by Zuo Qiuming, an immediate follower of Confucius. As an important
historical classic, it is also admired for its “animated prose...use of the narrative and dialogue, moral
comments and poetic quotation [that] exemplifies a mastery of the Chinese language rarely found in ancient
In works such as *Sanguo yanyi* (The Romance of the Three Kingdoms) and *Shuihu zhuan* (Water Margin) the dual impulse “to record historical reality and to realize the collective moral vision of good and evil” gives rise to the unique form of the classical historical novel (Zhu 109-114). This concurs with the Confucian notion of *wen* (writing, literary cultivation), the primary task of which is to convey the truth, or the True Way. Hence literature is considered to be primarily an embodiment of the True Way and a means of moral teaching, although artistry is also an important aspect of accomplishment in *wen* (Liu “Introduction”).

In China, the historical vicissitudes of the twentieth century have been reflected in the development of a modern Chinese literature whose first ambition was to replace the classical tradition with a new mode of representation inspired by the realist novel of the West. As Lin Yusheng (1979) has convincingly argued, this wholesale condemnation of tradition is uniquely Chinese and extremely traditional in its holistic and “organismic” outlook necessitated by its ultimate concern for the spiritual/moral well being of the Chinese race as a whole. In fact, the very choice of the Western “model” reflects uniquely Chinese social values and cultural preferences. Literature was still largely
conceived as a means for social transformation, an ideal not very far from the Confucian conception of *wen*. The sense of historical urgency (i.e. that China has to catch up with the evolution of nations or face extinction), intensified by national and international crises on the eve of the Second World War, is a defining characteristic of Chinese literary modernity, whereas the modern intellectual sees him/herself as “the bearer of light” and the agent of History (as a linear process of overcoming).

The growing influence of Marxism among Chinese intellectuals in the late 1920s and 1930s marked a turning point in the development of modern Chinese literature. While the rebellious spirit of the May Fourth Movement created the cultural climate for literary experimentation and relatively open-minded debates, leftist literature sponsored by the Communist Party successfully established its predominance in intellectual circles on the eve of the Anti-Japanese campaign. If Social Darwinism was the “model” of historical explanation borrowed from the West at the turn of the twentieth century, Marxist dialectics superceded it with the advent of party politics and international war. In literature, this ideological battle is reflected in the transition from critical social realism to socialist realism and finally to the so-called “revolutionary historical novel” after 1949, in which the linear progression of history characteristic of the evolutionary model is replaced by a utopian, and no less linear, process of a heroic and victorious proletarian revolution.
There is much truth in the saying that modern Chinese literature cannot be separated from politics, but much would be missed if the self-professed “historical mission” of its creators is left out of the picture. As Leo Ou-fan Lee has pointed out, Chinese modernity posits a new mode of historical consciousness that casts the creative self at the forefront of History (“Modernity” 158-177). To a certain extent, this Promethean predisposition explains why many writers were later attracted to the utopian rhetoric of revolution. Without losing sight of the discontinuities in aesthetics and politics, there exist certain temperamental continuities between the early generation of May Fourth writers and their successors in later decades.5

Beginning as a sub-genre of historical writing, fictional narratives in China gradually gained their independent status as a literary genre, but their ultimate social and moral function remained more or less unchanged up to the May Fourth period. After 1949 fiction writing was largely restricted to perpetuating a utopian historical vision, while moral and social values were subsumed under and determined by class values. The beginning of the post-Mao era, then, signals another turning point in the historical mission of modern Chinese fiction, for it is a time when Chinese writers take stock of the lessons of the past to open new paths toward the future.

5 According to Lin Yusheng, this included the young Mao Zetong himself. (5, n. 1)
After an initial outburst of grievance and yearning for justice in the so-called scar literature (shanghen wenxue) that emerged shortly after the death of Mao Zedong and the fall of the Gang of Four in the late 1970s, Chinese writers entered a new experimental stage in literary representation. The relatively relaxed political atmosphere enabled writers to renew their contact with world literature and explore the previously “prohibited zones” of human experience. Meanwhile, calls for “cultural pluralism” and “cultural self-reflection” in the intellectual arena coincided with the emergence of new fictional genres, beginning with search-for-roots fiction and other modernist – or even postmodernist – experimentation that exhibits an increasing aesthetic self-consciousness.

What this brief overview attempts to show is the dynamics between history and fiction in the development of modern Chinese fiction. The main focus of this study is what Paul Ricoeur calls the “interweaving reference” of history and fiction (Time and Narrative 3: 181-192). My primary concern is the way in which history is “figured” in the fictional works of three mainland Chinese writers – Han Shaogong, Su Tong, and Mo Yan. As I have mentioned, the representation of reality in fiction and historiography has led to much discussion and debate among historians and literary critics both East and West. In recent years, “historiographic metafiction” as a literary genre has become a popular subject in postmodern and postcolonial writing. This kind of fictional representation of the past is characterized by a self-reflexive foregrounding/fictionalizing of the endless exchange between the phenomenal world and the human efforts to
construct narratives that seek to understand and explain it. It is, in short, a poetic gesture toward the myriad forms in which history may present itself to the human imagination. History as represented in the literary text thus undergoes an aesthetic-hermeneutic transformation through which new forms of understanding and examining the nature of the past are born.

In the Chinese context, and specifically that of modern Chinese history, the "demystification" of the official version of history is a form of political dissent and aesthetic autonomy often involves social protest, directly or indirectly. For this reason any theoretical explication of fictional histories must take into account the actual socio-political realities of the past decades and their psychological repercussions, i.e. the "felt history" (Forster 281) that has made the confrontation with (and narrative understanding of) the past possible in the first place. To a significant extent, this represents a uniquely Chinese way of "writing back" to the center of an autocratic political system whose power, unlike most former colonial governments, is still formidable. Apart from aesthetic and philosophical inquiries into the nature of historical knowledge, fictional histories thus conceived remained "politicized" in the sense that they no longer serve a single course, be it political, national or ideological, as their predecessors did in the past. Ironically, the tragic results of China's "modernization" in the past fifty years, leading to a widespread disillusion with the existing authority, contribute to a radical rethinking of the past by a new generation of writers from the mid-1980s onwards. They are more
sober, more skeptical, and much more pessimistic than their May Fourth predecessors. While China’s open door policy in recent decades has brought sudden wealth and prosperity to a few privileged social groups, this historical pessimism in the cultural and intellectual spheres aptly reflects the inadequacies of a massive, though erratic, social and economic reform program driven exclusively by utilitarian motives.

Several factors have influenced my choice of authors and texts for this project. First, Su Tong, Mo Yan and Han Shaogong are among the most prominent writers manifestly associated with a regionalism that is inseparable from the kind of historical imagination projected through their works. Second, their fictional narratives of the past demonstrate a consistent effort not only to create meaning out of a chaotic field of past events (political movements, natural disasters, personal conflicts), but also to inquire into the nature (generation or degeneration) of the Chinese cultural psyche from its “roots” to its present manifestations. Third, the regional outlook of these writers, i.e. the specific locale created in their works, is a deviant move in the quest for national identity that has been a moral and ideological imperative ever since the May Fourth era. That is to say, the desire for political, cultural and spiritual unity or uniformity, no less than the historical processes that nurture and frustrate it, is transformed in the literary text into a quest for narrative coherence, hence narrative understanding, within a specific social and cultural milieu. On many occasions, such an undertaking may have a “decentering” effect on official (Maoist-Communist) versions of “what really happened” in the past.
Introduction

My discussion explores different forms of the historical imagination by examining the nature of the transformation in the works of these writers.

Finally, since the main concern here is the figuration of history in fictional narratives, admittedly there are always more materials to be left out than dealt with in a single study. By limiting my discussion to three authors (each representing a specific locale or domain of cultural experience), I attempt to delineate the patterns in which fiction creates its own "metaphorical truth" (Ricoeur) by consciously problematizing the real and the "unreal," i.e. the historical and the poetic realms of human experience.

According to Hayden White, historians approach their fields of data to confront (and contain) the strange and the exotic, and produce narratives about past events in order to familiarize the unfamiliar. The literary text reverses the historian’s course: in order to "read" the past, the past (real or imaginary) is first defamiliarized, so that the strange, the exotic and the grotesque become part of the norm. My reading of the three authors examines the validity of fictional histories as an integral part of the human understanding of the past, as well as the questions whether, and in what ways, fiction serves as a bridge between past, present and future in human consciousness; and if so, how it operates in the literary text to invoke a creative (defamiliarizing) use of memory and historical knowledge. Knowing that literature is distinguished by its generality and specificity, I hope the limits imposed on my subject (a kind of subjectivity) will also accommodate a
Chapter 1 “Contemporary Poetics: the Return to/of History” is a critical review of modern Western critical thought on the nature of and relationship between historiography and fiction. Narrative as a mode of explanation (hence a form of knowledge) is common to all cultures, and its complex relation to human historical experience and imagination will be a point of departure here, for fiction as a synthetic (and syncretic) form provides an imaginative access to the past as a subjective, idiosyncratic and yet aesthetically unifying experience. Specifically, I have chosen as the basis of my discussion Hayden White’s writings on the subject of metahistory and Ricoeur’s theoretical studies on metaphor and narrative. As I have argued already, White’s theory of tropes, insightful as it is, runs the risk of a radical relativism that somehow conflates history with fiction. This theoretical impasse can be resolved, I believe, by re-reading White’s *Metahistory* through Ricoeur’s *Rule of Metaphor*, in which he argues for the case of “metaphorical reference” (“seeing...as...”) in articulating “metaphorical truth” that is beyond the reach of ordinary, literal language. In *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur develops his argument by asserting the “interweaving reference” of history and fiction, so that fiction, being “quasi-historical,” is able to “free, retrospectively, certain possibilities that were not actualized in the historical past.” This kind of “quasi-past” therefore “includes both the potentialities of the ‘real’ past and the ‘unreal’ possibilities of pure fiction” (*Time and
Narrative 3:191-192). By resituating the real in the realm of the “unreal” (symbols and metaphors) fiction does not offer historical explanations as such, but new ways of “seeing ... as...” that creates its own “metaphorical truth.”

Chapter 2 “Changing Metaphors” examines the relationship between fictional representation and the changing conception of history in the development of modern Chinese literature since the May Fourth Movement (1919) to the present. My main concerns here are: the adoption of a linear, evolutionary view of history and its effects on intellectual and literary discourse during the May Fourth period; the Marxist historical vision in the realist novel of the late 1920s and 30’s; the utopian rhetoric in the “revolutionary historical novel” after 1949; and finally the changing metaphors in the post-Mao era (and beyond). This chapter is not intended to be a detailed study in literary history, but an illustration of how fictional representation participates in the ideological discourse of modernity since the May Fourth, and how writers and intellectuals nowadays strive to demystify the utopian myth of Maoism and thereby critically reassess their cultural heritage.

In Chapter 3 “History as Allegory: Han Shaogong” I offer my reading of Han Shaogong’s fictional works as collective allegories of Chinese culture and history. The first part of this chapter considers Han’s ground-breaking stories – “Guiqulai” <歸去來> (“Homecoming?”) “Ba, Ba, Ba” <爸爸爸 > (Father, Father, Father) and “Nü Nü Nü”
(Three Women) – since they embody the kind of collective allegory that characterizes his style. History in the first two novellas is an obscure presence in the life and experiences of the main characters who remain half-conscious or unconscious of the social and political forces behind the deadly and grotesque occurrences around them. The third novella deals with a more concrete reality but is cast in the same mythical mode, in which traditional virtues and political vice combined distort and finally destroy a person’s sense of self. Han’s fictional narratives, in effect, conjure up an oblique, mythical and nonetheless starkly threatening reality that looks backward to a forgotten, timeless antiquity and forward to the present. The historical nightmare articulated in these three texts undergoes a series of nuances in Han’s other stories, which finally lead to his recent full-length experimental work, *Maqiao Cidian* (A Dictionary of the Maqiao Dialect).

Han’s other short stories, though less explicitly historical in design, exhibit a similar allegorical impulse with certain nuances in their encounter with time past. In stories such as “Lan Gaizi” (The Blue Bottle Cap), “Beimenkou yuyan” (A Prophecy of the North Gate), “Bixue” (Bleeding Nose), “Shanshang de shengyin” (Sounds from the Hilltop) and “Zuotian Zaihui” (Yesterday Farewell) the past is revisited as a kind of traumatic encounter that raises questions about memory, history and human perception of reality. Mainly set in the Cultural Revolution years, these stories probe the psychological
repercussions of this historical nightmare by mapping personal tragedies onto the broader socio-political realities of the recent past, which are very often rendered as a grotesque presence that resembles what Alejo Carpentier calls the “marvelous real” (Carpentier 75-88). Han’s penchant for symbolic intensity and dialectical thinking in the treatment of themes and characters in these stories sometimes renders his ultimate statement on his subjects unclear or ambivalent. This also reveals the inner tension Han experiences as a writer. That is to say, the attempt to relearn the truth of the past always brings about disturbing knowledge of the present, resulting in a more gloomy and despairing vision of the future.

Han’s incessant search for his cultural roots takes a new departure in *Maqiao Cidian*, his first and most recent novel and a new experiment in creating collective allegories out of the “native soil” of Chinese culture in the form of a cultural lexicology, i.e. a fictional history of words. As a modern work of fiction cast in a controversial, pseudo-traditional mode, it is a hybrid form that combines the anecdotal, episodic and prose narrative within the framework of an anthropological glossary. As in his short stories, Han’s fictional anthropology consists of characters that are mainly cultural metaphors, a result of the writer’s persistent effort to dig deep into the Chinese cultural psyche for clues to its decline. By subsuming each fictive historical anecdote under a cultural lexicon, Han’s concern with language, especially the etymological roots of words, as a source of historical and cultural knowledge is overtly thematized. The
peculiar form in which these stories are told facilitates the incorporation of a wide spectrum of apparently disconnected episodes within a “master narrative” that is essentially metafictional. In this connection, Han’s exploration into the linguistic roots of the Chinese cultural and historical past in *Maqiao Cidian* also reveals the writer’s skepticism toward his own work and his role as a creative writer: “All languages are ... but signs describing some kind of reality ... so its function should not be overstated” (430-431). Han’s rationalistic approach to Chinese history and culture, it seems, has led him into an ideational *cul de sac*.

Chapter 4 is devoted to Mo Yan’s major historical novels in which reality and fantasy are interwoven to tell tales about his native land, Northeast Gaomi Township. Hereditary traits and the degeneration of the Chinese race in time, as is well known, are pivotal in Mo Yan’s endeavor to mediate between past and present, transience and permanence through a narrative return to his ancestral roots. My reading of Mo Yan’s novels is in three parts. Beginning with his family saga, namely *Honggaoliang jiazhu* 《紅高粱家族》(Red Sorghum) and *Shicao Jiazu* 《食草家族》(The Grass Eaters) that embodies his vision of “human devolution,” I proceed to trace the development of this theme in *Jiuguo* 《酒國》(Republic of Wine), a highly provocative novel about Chinese culture in the vein of Lu Xun’s “Kuangren riji” 〈狂人日記〉(Diary of a Madman), and his two-volume novel *Fengru feituan* 《豐乳肥臀》(Full Bosoms, Fat Buttocks).
In *Red Sorghum* and *The Grass Eaters*, the most dramatic episodes of the exceptionally tumultuous periods in modern Chinese history are seized upon and transformed into a unique understanding of the past. *Red Sorghum* presents an interesting case as a self-professed family history and a fantastic tale of heroes and bastards, romance and lust, and most of all the “devolution” of the human species through natural and social disintegration. Nostalgia is conveyed through Mo Yan’s florid, extravagant prose but the ideal past is also skeptically circumscribed by its self-conscious fictionality. The conscious play between myth and historical truth is a rhetorical device and a complex mode of cognition and signification. Like Han Shaogong, Mo Yan favors the first person narrator as the active interpreter of reality. However, in these two novels the I-narrators are always intimately connected (as an “unfilial son”) to the socio-cultural milieu in which the stories take place. As a descendant of a family of heroes, the unfilial son passionately yearns for a spiritual reunion with his ancestors through an imaginative reinvention of the past, supplementing his limited knowledge with a *fictive* omniscience. The juxtaposition of past and present underscores the vision of devolution as a nostalgic yearning for lost innocence. Devolution, thus, is coterminous with a longing for self-redemption and spiritual purification.

In *The Grass Eaters* Mo Yan’s vision of devolution takes a negative turn. Instead of reinventing the heroic past as a cultural ideal that has been eroded in time, the moral failings of the forefathers become a permanent birthmark of posterity. The stunning
discovery of the half-human, half-bestial descent of the family obliterates the redeeming vision of purity and innocence in Red Sorghum after a painful recognition of certain "genetic flaws" in human nature. Be that as it may, the imaginative content of the text can still be grounded in more concrete historical contexts. In a series of mythical and dream-like narratives organized around periodic (cyclical) locust attacks, the history of the grass-eating family alludes to a number of bloody episodes in Chinese history from the Taiping Rebellion in the late Qing to the Cultural Revolution. This allegorical element thus resituates the notion of "devolution" within the moral and socio-cultural realms of human experience. In this light, "devolution" can be seen as a metaphor, or a kind of literary hermeneutics that exploits the tension between nature and culture, primitive and civilized modes of thought, as well as the paradoxical impulse to return to a "purer" state of being as a buffer against the encroachment of modernity.

"Devolution" is taken up and further developed in The Republic of Wine, a collective allegory that consists of probably the most negative and horrifying images of Chinese culture since Lu Xun’s "cannibalism" critique almost a century ago. This is Mo Yan’s as yet most radical historical metafiction both in form and content. Primarily focused on the present, the author makes use of both historical and literary precedents (both real and imagined) to conjure up a surrealistic fin-de-siècle fictional landscape (Wineland) in a multi-layered narrative combining the epistolary narrative, social satire, popular romance, crime thriller, melodrama and fictional autobiography. The portrayal
of grotesque and deformed characters in a world of total moral and spiritual bankruptcy conjures up a bleak and frightening picture of "human devolution" and historical decline, culminating in the final destruction of the hero (and the dramatized author). This novel, seen as an extension of Mo Yan's historical metaphor, also reveals the inner struggles of an artist trying to defend his moral vision in an uphill battle against the corrupting currents of an increasingly utilitarian society – one that has apparently lost its sense of direction in a ruthless race of "modernization."

Mo Yan's most recent long novel, *Full Bosoms, Fat Buttocks*, spans the entire twentieth century. It signals a return to the more humane realm of human experience despite its bold imagery and fantastic content. In this novel Mo Yan seems eager to come to terms with his obsession with purity and hybridity, as seen from his treatment of the bastard hero, his central character and first-person narrator. The bastard, Golden Boy, is a "weak" character who never grows out of his infantile obsession with women's breasts. The true "heroes" in this novel are the female characters, whose "full bosoms and fat buttocks" conjure up an extraordinary image of the Mother figure, culminating in Golden Boy's final vision of a heaven of breasts metamorphosed into "the highest mountain between Heaven and Earth." As a symbol of femininity, it goes beyond the conventional views of chastity and female sexuality and redefines morality in terms of the sanctity of life. The tragic events that shape the course of life of individuals, after all, are subsumed under this transcending vision of breasts. While this grand finale may not be construed as
“optimistic,” it does give a broader view of Mo Yan’s vision of art and reality, and most interestingly art (fiction) as a kind of spiritual redemption against the destructive forces of history.

Chapter 4 “Su Tong’s Topos of Desire” begins with Su Tong’s stories of the South. Compared to Mo Yan’s Northeast Gaomi, Su Tong’s fictional homeland is a very different locale. The South, from the very beginning, constitutes an antithesis to the idealized domain of Mo Yan’s red sorghum country. As the primary setting of his fictional narratives of the past, the decadent South defines the overall contour of Su Tong’s fictional topos. His major works, e.g. Mi (Rice), Chengbei didai (The Northern District of the City), Yingshu zhijia (Opium Family) and Nanfang de duoluo (The Decline of the South), can be seen as metonymic signs of the South – a lyrical and haunting presence, an imaginary world in which history is an endless cycle of frustrated psychosexual desire. Nonetheless, the South in these fictional narratives also possesses an evocative sensual appeal, one that Su Tong’s narrators find it hard to resist.

In the Chinese literary tradition, the South is a complex and ambivalent symbol characteristically associated with banishment and exile; it is “alien and hostile to Han Chinese culture,” barbarian and threatening (Schneider 60). In general terms, the aesthetic and political “otherness” of the South has become an important part of Chinese
Introduction

culture as a whole, whereas the north/south bifurcation can be seen as an expression of
the complexity and multiplicity of an apparently static and homogenous ancient
civilization. In Su Tong’s fiction, the South embodies certain alluring characteristics
reminiscent of those in the classical tradition, but it is also radically transformed into an
even more alienating and horrifying image of “home” as a locus of desire, a metaphorical
space where history unfolds in the most bizarre tales of human perversion. From
nostalgia to nightmare, the South is a haunting presence that pervades Su Tong’s fictional
imagination.

A central motif in much of Su Tong’s work is the construction of family history.
Like Mo Yan’s Gaomi, Su Tong invokes the South – its past and present – as the
imaginary homeland for his idiosyncratic “historical” research; unlike Mo Yan, in Su
Tong’s narratives of the South his spiritual home is devoid of heroic grandeur. Instead of
a paradoxical impulse to return (to identify, to embrace, to revere), “escape” is the
predominant movement. Yet, “escape” is also a paradoxical gesture, as the narrative
always gravitates toward home as the ultimate source of meaning. This aspect of Su
Tong’s “home theme” is key to an understanding of the family histories in Qiqie
Chengqun 《妻妾成群》(Raise the Red Lantern: Three Novellas), Rice, The Northern
District of the City and Pusa man 《菩薩蠻》(Bodhisatva Barbarian). In these stories,
“historical” events are structured within a recurrent pattern of escape and return, whereas
characters are always caught within a vicious circle of sadomasochistic cultural/self-destruction.

Another favorite motif of Su Tong is fate, or fatalism as a mythical force of history. Although this suggestion is repeated in most of Su Tong’s historical fiction, fate can also be interpreted as a kind of aesthetic encoding that underscores the subversiveness of the use of fate in the literary text itself. Like the unconventional image of home, fate is a self-conscious fictional device that implies a critique of its own way of “seeing... as...” More important, the creative use of fate in these “southern” narratives as an alternative way of “seeing... as...” is a deviant gesture vis-à-vis the official “scientific” approach to history and the “truth” it represents.

The final part of this chapter looks at Su Tong’s venture into China’s dynastic history in Wu Zetian (Empress Wu) and Wo de diwang shengya (My Life as an Emperor). As Su Tong’s most overtly historical works so far, these two novels take up dynastic decline and kingship as the two main themes of Chinese history. However, they adopt two very different schematic designs: Empress Wu portrays the life of the legendary Empress Wu, an exceptionally talented yet fiercely aggressive woman in eighth-century China who usurped her husband’s throne and became the first “female emperor” in Chinese history. My Life as an Emperor, on the other hand, is a fictional autobiography written by a deposed emperor, an imaginary
piece that nonetheless synthesizes the most cliched but realistically horrifying scenes in Chinese dynastic history.

As historical fictions, these two novels represent Su Tong's continuous effort not only to reinvent Chinese history for new meanings, but also to reinvent himself as a creative writer. In *My Life as an Emperor* the familiar locale of the South is invoked and recast in a tale of dynastic decline, whereas the confessional first-person narrative of a deposed emperor shifts the ground of a contemplation on collective destiny to a sentimental, subjective reflection on personal misfortunes. As a fictional memoir with no specific historical analogy, the novel can be read as a compact allegory of Chinese dynastic history as a whole. In *Empress Wu*, on the other hand, the author draws heavily upon traditional historiography in his portrayal of the legendary heroine. In this particular case, the concurrence (rather than difference) between historical and fictional reality, ironically, turns out to be the biggest hurdle in Su Tong's ambitious project of "telling familiar old tales in radically new ways" (*Shi ji* 88). Juxtaposing *My Life as an Emperor* and *Empress Wu*, one wonders whether the self-imposed constraint of historical accuracy may interfere with the literary imagination, since the parameters of fictional representation are mostly determined by the overwhelming presence of traditional historical discourse.
In the works of Han Shaogong, Mo Yan and Su Tong the past always invites paradoxical responses, i.e. estrangement and intimacy, sympathy and disgust, and most of all, a consciousness of time as a destructive force and a desire to resist it through narrative. If, as Hayden White says, the “ironic mode” of historical imagination (i.e., a radical historical skepticism) has been influential in the twentieth century, the same is also true for the Chinese literary imagination in recent years. There are well known historical reasons for this skepticism, if not negativity, given our knowledge of “what happened” in the past few decades, when the erratic course of “modernity” in China trampled over the old tradition without constructive clues for a genuine renewal. If the beginning of modern Chinese literature represents an initiation into the linear progress of modernity, the changing perception of history in the works of the three authors presents a more sober, and understandably more negative, vision of Chinese culture as a reaction to a century-long historical impasse.
Contemporary Poetics: The Return to/of History

The problematic relation between history (as what happened in the past) and fiction has been a privileged theme ever since the turn of the century, in the works of modernist writers in the West (most notably James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Joseph Conrad) and also modern Chinese writers of the May Fourth period and beyond (Lu Xun, Mao Dun, Zhang Ailing, and Bai Xianyong). Recently, this “obsession with history” in fiction has given rise to what Linda Hutcheon (1988, 1989) calls “historiographic metafiction” in her two studies on postmodernism. This new genre is characteristically associated with the works of postcolonial writers like Salman Rushdie (Midnight’s Children, The Satanic Verses) and Gabriel Garcia Márquez (One Hundred Years of Solitude, The General in His Labyrinth). This kind of fictional representation of history and reality overtly transgresses the boundaries between poesis and mimesis by foregrounding/fictionalizing the endless exchange between the phenomenal world (as a field of objects and events) and the human efforts to construct narratives that seek to understand and explain it (in the form of historical records, anecdotes, memoirs and fiction). As such, attention is being drawn as much to the “what” to be inscribed in the literary text as to the “how” and

---

1 Mimesis, according to Aristotle, is the “imitation of action,” i.e. verisimilitude in representation. Poesis, then, suggests the non-mimetic properties of literary language which is commonly associated with the “lyrical.” Ricoeur’s theory of narrative reinterprets Aristotle’s mimesis (and poesis) in terms of a “poetics
“why” it is carried out in the literary text as a poetic gesture toward the myriad forms in which history may appear to the human imagination. History, as represented in the literary text, undergoes an aesthetic-hermeneutic transformation that enriches human historical imagination. On the other hand, the theoretical debate over the meaning and truth-value of historiography gained momentum ever since the appearance of Hayden White’s *Metahistory* (1973), a treatise on the “tropological” (i.e. literary) nature of historical discourse (31-38). White’s theory of tropes as the fundamental modes of historical consciousness triggered a heated debate among historians and literary critics in their respective fields. Meanwhile, Paul Ricoeur further explores the problematic of narrative representation of reality on the basis of a “phenomenology” of metaphor and narrative in *The Rule of Metaphor* (1977) and *Time and Narrative* (3 vols. 1984, 1985, 1988). According to Ricoeur, metaphor and narrative understanding are the very foundation of truth claims in fiction and history, the two major categories of narrative through which human knowledge of the world is recorded and transmitted.

This chapter is intended to be a critical review of Western critical thought on the nature of, and relationship between, historiography and fiction in light of recent developments in literary and cultural studies. I will explore the ways in which theories of narrative can be usefully employed in the reading of literary texts that overtly or implicitly engage with history and historical representation on thematic, formal, as well as ideological levels. I will begin with a general discussion of the nature and problematic of narrative.” See *Time and Narrative* vol. 1.
of fictional and historical narrative as analogous and *supplementary* modes of representation in search of knowledge about the past, with special attention to the theoretical insights of Hayden White and Paul Ricoeur. The difference between White and Ricoeur regarding referentiality and truth in narrative, to a certain extent, epitomizes the controversy in modern Western critical thought concerning the nature of language, hence the possibility of knowledge about the world through language. The tension between language, especially figurative language, and its ultimate "signifieds" culminates in Ricoeur's theory of metaphor, leading to a reconsideration of the relation between *mimesis* and *poesis* in *Time and Narrative*.\(^2\) I will use this concept to try to disentangle the intricate network of associations between history and fiction, and will argue that both fiction and history *refer* to the extra-textual world and retain their claim to meaning and truth without losing sight of their fictive or metahistorical dimensions. My primary interest, however, is in the representation of history in the literary text which, I think, is by nature more disposed to confront the "bigger" problems concerning the relationship between representation and human perception of reality in general.

---

\(^2\) From *Metaphor to Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur develops what he calls a "phenomenology of time consciousness" through the Aristotelian idea of mimesis and Augustine's reflections on time. *Mimesis*, he suggests, always involves *poesis*. Narrative representation of reality, as mimesis, requires a *poetic* treatment; likewise, poesis can never be totally severed from its mimetic intention, both conceptually and semantically.
Narrativizing the past: fictional and historical imagination

Narrative is a universal phenomenon across human cultures, for it is the primary means by which humanity makes sense of reality.\(^3\) Granted, narrative is also a fundamental mode of historical discourse without which historical explanations would be impossible.\(^4\) As a kind of narrative art, historiography, according to Hayden White, is not an exact science but is a close relative of fiction in terms of its basic tropes and strategies of “emplotment.” (Metahistory 30-31). This being said, it is important to note that White’s observations, as we shall see, run the risk of a radical indeterminacy of meaning that discredits as much as legitimizes any form of historical interpretation and misinterpretation.\(^5\) However, White’s theory of tropes does illuminate the relationship between historical truths and the historical imagination of individuals (in his case the most influential historians and philosophers of history in nineteenth-century Europe) that helps discover these truths; and that between human perception of history and the kinds of tropes available for the construction of explanatory models to interpret and represent the past in a particular cultural context. White’s analysis of the modes of historical imagination in 19\(^{th}\) century Europe also suggests that these modes are literary (fictional)

---

\(^3\) Recent theories of narrative have contributed to a “narrative turn” in historical thinking; cf. White (1987), Ch. 1 &2.

\(^4\) Cf. Rosen, 11-12; Schwartz, 23-26; Ricoeur (1984), Ch. 4&5, where he emphasizes the “explanatory” function of narrative understanding which is crucial to the production of meaning in all forms of narrative.

\(^5\) Critics of White, mostly historians, have expressed dissatisfaction with his model of tropes. Wulf Kansteiner, for example, speaks about White’s “epistemological relativism” that “collapses history and philosophy” and “converges fiction and historiography” to the extent that “any link between the reality of
in nature. They are also indispensable to human perception of reality, precisely because they are virtually inevitable in any attempt to communicate experience through narration. Does it follow that every act of narration necessarily creates fictions? If the answer is "no," what, then, will be the difference between fiction and history, and what kind of interconnectedness can be established between fictional and historical representation of the past besides that they are ideologically informed textual constructs pretending to be "genuine" knowledge?

Before answering these questions, it is important to demarcate certain conceptual boundaries to avoid possible confusion. By history I mean a field of data, facts or real occurrences that is "neutral" (not to say chaotic, unformed or "unprocessed" in White's sense). Fiction is taken in the literal sense to mean the work of the imagination to create narratives or "stories" which do not necessarily correspond to facts, events or empirical evidence as such (though it may do so on purpose). Historical narrative (or historiography) then refers to works by historians in narrative form that seek to represent...
and explain "what happened" in the past based on available documentary and empirical sources. As such, it is subject to proof procedures and logical scrutiny as a measure of its truth value, while its quest for "objectivity" necessarily acknowledges the problems of objectivity in a self-reflective process of inquiry.  

This understanding of fiction, historiography and history is the basis of our understanding of the interrelationship between historical and fictional representation of history; hence the different configurations of history in different kinds of narratives. Thus an act of narration does not necessarily create fictions, nor does it necessarily represent the real as it is, or was. Conversely, narrative presents a vision of the real by means of its formal coherence (including deliberate incoherence or "formlessness"). Insofar as history is the subject of a narrative (fictional or historical), hence an "object" of representation, what is involved is a sense of reality as it is "emplotted," in Ricoeur's sense of the term, whose purpose after all is to create/discover a form out of formlessness, i.e. to make sense of the world, whatever that "form" may be.

Narrativizing the past, no doubt, involves literary imagination indispensable to both fiction and historiography; yet, the "literariness" of historiography belongs to strategy

---

7 "...precisely because history has objectivity as a project, it can pose limits of objectivity as a specific problem... to place it within the scope of a critique of ideology. This... might be called the critical reflection of historical inquiry." Ricoeur (Time and Narrative 1:176-177).

8 Different from White, though equal in emphasis, Ricoeur sees the plot as the most important element in mimesis, for it embodies the narrative time-consciousness that configures and refigures human experiences against the endless (and potentially meaningless) flux of events in time. (Time and Narrative 2: Chapter 1)

9 White's idea of "emplotment" is more formal, in the sense that the plot of history is predetermined by the
and style, while that of fiction is "generic" and intrinsic.

It follows, then, that it is possible to address the questions raised above in this way. The affinity between historiography and fiction in terms of their linguistic and tropological properties does not suggest identity or sameness. Historiography and fiction both ask and seek answers for questions on how reality (the past) is to be understood, but this is done on different epistemological and hermeneutic grounds. For one thing, history in fiction creates a past that is essentially symbolic, and its signification presumes an aesthetic distance that differentiates its world of plausible circumstances from the empirically real world, which makes up the entire field of historical research. Fiction and historical writing, then, are accorded different degrees of what I would call "mimetic advocacy," i.e. the relative creative autonomy with regard to factual data and lived experience. Yet, within the literary text, the fluid boundaries between fictive and real experiences deserve careful attention: as mere stories, fiction seeks to create meaning out of inchoate experiences (including that of the imagination as it resonates with experiences and memories of real events) by giving it an appropriate form, i.e. a beginning, a middle and an end,\(^\text{10}\) though their order in each case may vary. As a synthetic and syncretic form, fiction effects "a concord of imaginatively recorded past and imaginatively tropes available to story-tellers at a given time in a given culture. See White (Metahistory 7-11).

\(^{10}\) In this respect, White's idea of "emplotment" as a narrative device to familiarize the unfamiliar (Tropics 87) is in accord with Ricoeur's "emplotment" as an essential means by which narrative refigures human temporal experience; i.e. to create a sense of order against what Rusen calls the "structurally threatening temporal change" (12).
predicted future, achieved on behalf of us, who remain 'in the middest.' By resituating the real in the realm of the unreal, i.e. that of metaphors and symbols, fiction does not offer historical explanations as such, but consciously projects a vision of history through the fictive world it creates. Here also lies the significance of a fictional reinscription of the past, where the dynamics between what is probably true in historical accounts and what is possible and believable in fiction becomes more intriguing. For fiction initiates a process of reinterpreting the past as a rhetorical gesture, one that displaces and defamiliarizes the real so that the world of the text projects certain ways of living, or what Ricoeur says "being-in-the-world," awaiting to be "refigured" in the process of reading. In what follows, I will discuss the issue of historical representation in fiction beginning with Lukács' theory of the historical novel; I will then explore the concept of metaphor and its potential for a more inclusive understanding of historical fiction in modernist and postmodernist poetics.

**Historical Fictions and Fictional Histories: boundaries, genres and theory**

In *The Historical Novel*, Georg Lukács defines a "great" historical novel as "an

---

11 According to Kermode, literary ends in the Western tradition internalize the apocalypse and turn it into an "immanent" end. Modern literature, then, is a kind of "broken myth," the myth of ending and redemption that is perpetually postponed (6-8).

12 Accordingly, it is the "world of the work" through which "ways of inhabiting the world... lie waiting to be taken up by reading." The "confrontation between the world of the text and the world of the reader" begins the process of the third stage of mimesis or "mimesis 3" (refiguration). Ricoeur (*Time and Narrative* 2: 5).
artistically faithful image of a concrete historical epoch” (19). This groundbreaking study by one of the most important Marxist literary critics of the 20th century may seem out-dated almost three decades after its first appearance. Nonetheless, it remains groundbreaking in the sense that it constitutes a “paradigm” against which new ones have been established, albeit in very different directions. One may find his definition of the historical novel, or the great historical novels of the 19th century, too limiting for a fair assessment of equally excellent works by modern (especially modernist) writers, not to say more contemporary ones whose treatment of history is far from what the old master would agree as being “faithful” and “concrete.” Nonetheless, Lukács did make some valid claims about the representation of history in fiction that have withstood the test of time. For example, Lukács argues that good writers of the historical novel must have “a clear sense of history as a process, of history as the concrete precondition of the present” (21); that “mere representations of historical movements” are less desirable than individualized heroes: brought into a very complex, very live relationship with the age in which they live” (47); and that we can consider the “extensions of the historical novel into an historical picture of the present” as “self-experienced history” (84) because the historical novel concerns itself with “portraying the prehistory of the present” (337, italics original). Despite his skepticism and dislike of modern(ist) literature, Lukács’ study of the “great” historical novelists of the 18th and 19th century also suggests, implicitly, that the return to history in fiction is always prompted by a deep-seated anxiety and skepticism toward modernity as a global process which threatens the existing order of things, as in the case of Pushkin, Gogol and even the “progressive” Goethe. In this respect, Lukács’ notion of an “artistically faithful image” of history is also informed
by a uniquely “modern” imagination that is not too alien to what one finds in Baudelaire, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and Thomas Mann.\textsuperscript{13}

In his attempt to set out the essential criteria for the historical novel in the social (not socialist) realist mode, Lukács did indeed pave the way for a modernist engagement with history that refuses to take “concreteness” for granted; instead, meaning is \textit{created} by an active \textit{refiguration} of human experience of the past through fictional narrative. History, then, becomes a “metaphorical reference” to illuminate those aspects of reality that are not (yet) available to literal interpretation.\textsuperscript{14} \textit{History-as-metaphor}, as I perceive it, captures the “essence” of fictions \textit{about} history (and about history writing) as it makes room for a broad spectrum of texts to come under a common interpretative framework without neutralizing their diversity and idiosyncratic potentials to “redescribe” human experience in different historical and cultural contexts.

**Historical understanding and fictional truth**

It is banal but worth reiterating that fiction does make truth claims about the world,

\[\text{\textsuperscript{13} Marshall Berman (1988) has convincingly argued for the similarity of Marx, Goethe and Baudelaire with regard to “modernity” as a global historical process. Ricoeur's reading of Woolf, Mann and Proust explores the dimensions of temporal experience as representative of the modernist reaction to the flux of historical time. Ricoeur (\textit{Time and Narrative} 2: Ch. 3).}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{14} In \textit{The Rule of Metaphor} Ricoeur argues that “metaphorical reference” designates the kind of referential function of literary language and therefore reaffirms the power of metaphorical language to “ redescribe” reality; hence the value of “metaphorical truth.”}\]
no matter how dubious or doubtful such claims may appear to the critical reader. This "referential intentionality" of fiction, however, does not *supercede* the kinds of truths that history helps discover about the past for reasons given earlier. The formal affinity between fictional and historical narrative, as explicated by White and Ricoeur in different ways, can generate two possible conclusions. First, the formal and imaginative elements of both historical and fictional narrative are susceptible to the contention that historical knowledge is fictive in origin so that fiction, since it is free of the "hypocrisy" of objectivity and truth, confers a better sense of the past as a linguistic/textual construct subject to ideological and power manipulations. The second possible conclusion is that the theoretical contention between historiography and fiction over the interpretation of the past as a result of contemporary literary and philosophical rethinking cannot completely undermine the sense of historical reality as represented by historiography even though fictive "invention" of the past also constitutes a "reality" of its own. At this point it is essential to draw a line between (fictional) history and *false* knowledge of history fabricated by state machines in order to consolidate political power. (Such a distinction is crucial to my reading of historical fiction in the following chapters, for the

---

15 See, for example, Cowart (1989), especially Chapter 1, in which he says historical knowledge "with the greatest validity" concerns less "the rational judgment of the historian" than "the moral and imaginative discrimination of the artist," so that "the historically informed artist" is "the most reliable explorer of the past."

16 Historians and critics of White have attended to this latest tendency in White's thought toward a more post-structuralist approach, although they are also aware that White is struggling endlessly with his own contradictions in theory and practice especially with regard to historical writings about the Holocaust. LaCapra, for example, remarks that the "absurdist" critics whose approaches White once found unsound "actually articulate things that are 'inside' White himself." (qtd. in Kansteiner 281, n. 28.)
subversion of fabricated false histories is a central preoccupation of the "new historical fiction" in China today). As Paul Ricoeur has said, history is a rigorous discipline devoted to the "enlargement of our collective memory" and a "rectification" of it. This is done "on the basis of the presupposition that the past has left a trace ... that bear[s] witness to the past" (Time and Narrative 3: 118-119). This faith in the ontological reality of the past, hence the epistemological status of history, is built upon a non-theoretical belief in the value of history to human existence:

As soon as the idea of a debt to the dead, to people of flesh and blood to whom something really happened in the past, stops giving documentary research its highest end, history loses its meaning. (119)

Thus, the question is not whether history is merely a textual construct that bears no real relation to the past as an objective entity but whether the belief in the actuality of a past (actual existence of people in flesh and blood and the things they did) is to a certain degree still knowable and worthy of knowing, and whether such a belief can be totally refuted by the claim that one can never be sure of what happened in the distant past simply because all knowledge is a self-referring text. ¹⁷

Fiction, in contrast, has more freedom in creating a world of its own which does not

¹⁷ "...a consciousness of the past as such performs a critical function. To believe this does not require a faith in the objectivity of interpretation or a prior belief that history is the sum total of positive facts" Bromwich (203-233).
necessarily reproduce but *redescribes* the real world by projecting ways of "being-in-the-world" that produce meanings that are not (yet) articulated in ordinary, literal language. In other words, fiction refers to the real world by first locating itself in the domain of the "unreal." Ricoeur, having sensed the inadequacy of a purely theoretical formulation of this essentially "abstract" human phenomenon (albeit formulated in his own extensive and sophisticated argument), stresses that the "interweaving reference" of fiction and history (*Time and Narrative* 2: 82) is less a matter of theoretical debate than *discernment by common sense and confidence* on the part of both the author and reader of historical (and fictional) texts. "Witnesses in spite of themselves," says Ricoeur, best describes the kinds of truths made available through historical inquiry (*Time and Narrative* 3: 117-119).

So far I have examined the recent theoretical debate over the facticity and truth value of historical narrative in relation to fictional narrative, not so much for the sake of proving the "authenticity" of historical narrative as of probing the way in which fiction configures the past (lived and imagined) to create its own meaning. Let me reiterate that fiction does not and need not refute, replace or authenticate historical findings. As it is, it is a mode of imagining and apprehending the meaning of the past through a "metaphorical" reprocessing of human experiences of and sensibilities toward the past, which in turn helps situate and define the present. It therefore differs from history in terms of "intention" and "reference." *intention* because it posits itself between *poesis* (self-contained artifact) and *mimesis* (what Luckács calls a "faithful image" of reality); *reference* because it does not refer to real objects as such but creates its own reference in
the order of “seeing... as...” The tension between what “is” and what “is not,” moreover, is part of the semantic function of metaphor. Insofar as all historical and fictional representations of the past involve mimesis in one way or the other, fictional histories complicate this process by subjecting historical mimesis to a poetic or metaphorical transformation, so that history-as-metaphor (fictional history) no longer corresponds to empirical knowledge, but is meaningful as a cultural metaphor that embodies a multitude of dimensions in which the past presents itself to the human imagination in the present.

The self-conscious tension between representation and reality in all literary creations is overtly thematized in what comes to be known as metafiction, a concept that crosses over to the consideration of history-as-metaphor once our understanding of a “faithful image” of historical reality is flexible enough to embrace those images that deviate from the real in order to tell the truth. It is at this point that metafiction, metahistory and metaphor, and the interaction between them, deserve special attention. All three explicitly grapple with the problems of referentiality and meaning in language; implicitly, their conceptual presumptions bespeak the dynamics between fictional and historical narrative, thus language and its truth-content. As such, a kind of matrix is made possible by cross-referencing their respective propositions. This matrix helps situate and identify history-as-metaphor within a network of texts and inter-texts, literary and non-literary, as we shall see in the following.

\[18\] In the Wittgensteinian sense, “seeing... as...” underlies the semantic content of figurative language but
Metahistory, Metafiction and Metaphor

Hayden White’s *Metahistory: the Historical Imagination in 19th Century Europe* is perhaps the inevitable textbook nowadays in any discussion on metahistory. In fact, White’s study has enriched and radically transformed the concept by an archetypal analysis of the “linguistic protocols” (tropes and emplotment) that underlie the works of major historians and philosophers of history in nineteenth-century Europe. It has been widely acknowledged that although White’s “literary” approach to historical studies invites as much praise as criticism, *Metahistory* and other recent works by White have been received with much enthusiasm within the humanities discipline, especially departments of literature, sociology and anthropology. To the extent that White’s insights have remained largely conjectural and hypothetical rather than confirmed among historians, applications of his theory yield the most exciting results in literary studies (Vann 146-147). Later on I will examine the propositions made by White regarding literary and historical writing that are compatible with the *metafictional* approach in literary criticism. My purpose is to examine the implications of the two approaches (metahistorical and metafictional) on our understanding of representation, language and reality in general, and on the transmission of meaning in the literary text in particular. I hope to show that the common ground of metahistorical and metafictional criticism is as much their formal procedures as the philosophical and cultural assumptions behind these
does not nullify its truth content. Ricoeur (*Metaphor* 6).
procedures. Finally, I will introduce *history-as-metaphor* as a way of “seeing” (embodied in writing and reading), and its capacity to create meaning (“something”) against meaninglessness (“nothing”).

This way of reading, in the present context, is restricted to literature and more specifically to fictions about history. On the other hand, such a reading endeavors to discover those metahistorical and metafictional traits in the literary text, traits that ironically deepen, rather than deconstruct, the correspondence between representation and reality in a non-literal, non-coercive way.

The word “metahistory” invokes a series of associations with the unhistorical or ahistorical aspects of historical discourse that are not susceptible to empirical historical analysis. These include the implicitly shared beliefs and assumptions within a culture, especially those that have “universal” qualities and implications like cosmological worldviews, the concept of order (and disorder), and most fundamentally the act of narration as a means to conceptualize and make sense of the endless flux of events in time. These metahistorical elements are not exactly “new,” nor are they overlooked or suppressed by historians in order to create coherent narratives of the past. Inasmuch as the nineteenth-century view of a universal history is now found wanting in accounting for...

---


20 I owe this idea to Paul Ricoeur’s *The Rule of Metaphor* (1977), in which he tackles the problematic of language, representation and referentiality in a way that breaks away from a deconstructive “textualism.”

21 Historians and philosophers of history alike are aware of this dilemma between the historical and the unhistorical, and have always been looking for way to resolve this tension in their own works; c.f. Schwartz and Rusen. Robert Holton’s review (1994) on the development of Anglo-American historiography since the 19th century, alongside White’s on European historical thinking, explores this perpetual tension that
culturally specific historical patterns, Hayden White seeks to locate this “universal” within the literary tradition of the West to account for the different modes of historical consciousness that inform the works of historians and philosophers of history in what he calls the “golden age” of historical studies. By implication, historical consciousness does not determine but is predetermined by the kinds of tropes and plot-types available within a cultural tradition. In addition, these tropes (metaphor, synecdoche, and metonym) must correspond to the historian’s ideological orientation and “formal” argument in configuring a chosen set of events in an appropriate plot (romance, tragedy, comedy, and irony). These “pre-critical commitments” to different modes of discourse and their “constitutive tropological strategies,” in turn, “account for the generation of the different interpretations of history” (Metahistory 430).

The value of White’s theory is that it alerts us to the linguistic and cultural factors that facilitate and inevitably limit the historian’s endeavor to discover the hidden truths of the past, and that the writing and reading of history has to be so informed as to guard against dogmatism and ideological manipulations. Understanding the human past, then, has to be a self-reflective and self-critical activity, one that invokes the literary imagination for a creative understanding of the world. As many critics have pointed out,

---

22 Although the master historical thinkers in the 19th century managed to produced only “a host of conflicting ‘realisms,’” the “great poetic, scientific, and philosophical concerns of [this] gold age” can free historical consciousness from the Ironic mode that characterizes the modern age. White (Metahistory 432-434)

23 See White’s “Introduction” to Metahistory.
White's idea of historical truth as a matter of *moral and aesthetic choice* is susceptible to a radical historical relativism that promotes absolute indeterminacy of meaning rather than skeptical neutrality. White's attempt to formulate "the different possible theories by which historical thinking was justified by the philosophers of history" in nineteenth-century Europe (*Metahistory* 2), while accounting for the differences between the historians and philosophers of history in terms of their literary preferences, imposes a *tropological uniformity* on two distinct intellectual disciplines. At its extreme, White's tropological formulation sees every interpretation as equally valid, and therefore equally false, because their meaning is contingent upon the linguistic protocols that their own culture permits:

[Interpretations] as possible models of historical representation or conceptualization does not depend upon the nature of the "data" they use to support their generalizations or the theories they invoked to explain them; it depends rather upon the consistency, coherence, and illuminative power of their respective visions of the historical field. This is why they cannot be "refuted, ... Their status as models of historical narration and conceptualization depends, ultimately, on the preconceptual and specifically poetic nature of their perspectives on history and its processes (4, my emphasis).

A perhaps reductive yet possible deduction follows: the meaning of a historical text is

---

24 White's recent writings show signs of this moral dilemma, as in the case of the history of the Holocaust. Kansteiner (292-93).
always contained in the tropes used to describe or *emplot* events of the past, and the significance of historical events is a function of a finite number of explanatory models, i.e. combinations of tropes, plot-types, ideologies and formal arguments.  

I have no intention to undermine White’s achievement in bringing to light the connections between the stylistic, ideological and semantic levels of historical (and fictional) narrative, but I do want to point out the poetic aspect of White’s theory that gives the greatest force to his work. By locating the metahistorical dimensions of historical understanding within a new-critical framework of literary forms, White implicitly locates his own text within the same, for his own formal inquiry, he admits, is inevitably cast in the Ironic mode, and the choice of a particular mode is a matter of “point of view,” which is “essentially a literary ... operation” (*Content* 85). If the analysis of historical data and the “emplotment” of events into a coherent narrative is fundamentally a literary pursuit, one might say that the most valid interpretation of a historical text is also a literary one; and this is what White has attempted to do in *Metahistory* and other essays in *The Content of the Form* and *Tropics of Discourse*.  

After all, there is no denying that literary and historical imagination have some basic commonalities regarding their formal and hermeneutic characteristics, and it is worthy of our attention that fiction and history may sometimes converge tangentially in purpose and

---

25 According to White, “four principal types [of explanatory strategies] ... correspond to the four principal tropes of poetic language” (31).

26 The dilemma of this pre-disposition forces White to appeal to an “openness” that will hopefully transcend the Ironic mode that predominates modern historical thought” (434).
function. Yet, it is neither certain nor provable that metahistory “predetermines” the historical field before the historian actually begins his research. As some historians have argued, there are different kinds of metahistories at work at the same time in the composition of a historical narrative, and these metahistories might well become “historicized” as part of a developing pattern of human experience. Questions such as agency and autonomy remain at the back door of a linguistic determinism: White’s “poetic” analysis of the history of historical consciousness in nineteenth-century Europe does invite a poetic reading of itself, for White works so intensely in the realm of tropes and plots to the extent that history is subject to a metaphorical understanding that outbalances its epistemological claims. Be that as it may, this “metaphorical” quality of White’s work traverses the boundary between literary and historical thinking, while his self-conscious irony presents a case for metafiction, i.e. the self-reflexive “constructedness” of his text is at once historical and fictional precisely because it is “metahistorical.”

If metahistory in general concerns those “unhistorical” or universal forces behind a culture or a person’s historical worldview, Hayden White’s tropological analysis has redefined it as a linguistic codification that predetermines the possibilities of meaning in historical narrative. In the latter case, history should be a morally and aesthetically self-

27 See, for example, “Historical Text as a Literary Artifact” (Tropics 81-100).
28 The range of historical genres and their unique function in specific space-time within and across cultures have posed many problems to a comparative methodology. See Rusen (11-21).
29 White also sees historical narratives as “extended metaphors” and “structures of symbols” (Tropics 91).
conscious practice, its coherence the result of the formal properties of emplotment and its truth claim the consequence of tropological devices. Different as they are, these two understandings of metahistory do agree on one point, i.e. that historiography consists of a duality of consciousness. On the one hand, the past as an object of knowledge based on empirical evidence is a first principle of historical research; on the other hand, an awareness of metahistory complicates the relationship between the historian and his data, for not only the documents themselves but also the historian’s interpretative act are subject to certain culturally determined or conditioned metahistorical forces. This tension need not short-circuit the production of meaning in historical narrative; ironically, the presence of tension prompts a “historical” understanding of what is presumed to be outside and above the historical subject concerned, including the historian’s text.

These formal and cognitive procedures involving an active exchange between history and metahistory are comparable to those identified in metafiction, defined by Patricia Waugh as “fictional writing that self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (qtd. in Ng 122, n. 3). It is important to note that this skepticism of metafiction towards its referential function is an ironic self-reflection characteristic of modern (and postmodern) fiction. Posing questions, however, by no means suggests a complete rejection of referentiality. Instead, it deepens our understanding of the possible relations between fiction and reality, and therefore the meaning-effects that fiction may have upon human perception. Metafiction as a formal design has had a long history (ever since Sterne’s Tristram Shandy, for example).
However, in recent years the notion has come to be associated with postmodernism, especially what Linda Hutcheon (1988) calls “historiographic metafiction.” This “new” genre encompasses writers like Salman Rushdie, Gabriel García Márquez, Jim Coetzee, and other postcolonial writers who playfully combine historical anecdotes and fantastic tales to create a tension between fiction and history. In these stories, both form and content are part of the “reality” represented. Knowledge of the past is as uncanny as the surreal or grotesque experiences of the fictional characters. This kind of magic realism, unlike historical representation, defamiliarizes the real by familiarizing the unreal. The purpose of such a textual play, as I see it, is not to deny the actuality of history but to deepen the experience of history as a dialogue between the past and the present, the empirically real and the imagination, while the act of “looking back” is simultaneously a gesture toward the future.\(^\text{30}\) In this sense, this type of fiction does perform a “historical” function by opening up alternative ways back to a collective, immemorial past (e.g. oral histories, legends and myths).\(^\text{31}\) In Midnight’s Children and One Hundred Years of Solitude, for example, myths and fantasies ineluctably interweave with “real” historical events so that these events are reinterpreted in terms of the “unreal.”

Several questions arise in connection with this understanding of historiographic metafiction. First, to the extent that historical truth is always situated in a tensional

\(^{30}\) Both history and fiction about history perform this double movement. See, for example, Lukács and Rosen.

\(^{31}\) This cultural function of fiction is not far away from the notion of history as collective memory, c.f. Schwarz and Rusen.
relationship with the past (according to both the general and White’s tropological understanding of metahistory), how does one assess the relation between metafiction and its “referent”? Second, how do we understand the prefix “meta-” assigned to fictions that self-consciously expose their “unreality” that is nonetheless pertinent to a conception of truth? How about those works that do not overtly break the rules of *mimesis* and yet embody similar epistemological doubts (for example, Doestoevsky’s “dialogic” novels)? Finally, if we are able to talk about fiction’s referential function and truth claims at all, how do we locate these crucial moments in the process of meaning production?

The first and the last questions were immanent when we discussed Paul Ricoeur’s idea of “metaphorical reference” earlier on. According to Ricoeur, to “metaphorize” is to perceive “a previously unnoticed proximity of two ideas … despite their logical distance,” and is therefore related to “the work of resemblance.” In the Wittgensteinian sense, it is “seeing as …” that is the power of the imagination (*Metaphor* 6). This metaphorical “seeing as…” shifts its semantic value from the “form of the metaphor as a word-focus figure of speech” to “the reference of the metaphorical statement as the power to ‘redescribe’ reality.” Thus, “metaphor presents itself as a strategy of discourse

---

32 Mimesis, as Ricoeur observes, always involves a tension between “the submission to reality and the creative action” (*Metaphor* 39). Both historical and fictional mimesis, by extension, are subject to this tension in various degrees.

33 Aristotle defined metaphor as “the transposition of a name.” Ricoeur adds that its unique structure is the “transfer of meanings of words” since “… metaphor is defined in terms of movement. The epiphora of a word is described as a sort of displacement, … a process that concerns the semantic kernel … of all meaningful linguistic entities.” Ricoeur (*Metaphor* 12,17,18)
and develops the *heuristic power wielded by fiction*" (6). Later on I will consider Ricoeur’s theory of metaphor as it is related to the problematic of metafiction (and metahistory) in greater depth, but at this point one crucial insight from his analysis needs to be noted:

... metaphor is the rhetorical process by which discourse unleashes the power that certain fictions have to redescribe reality... to ground what was called metaphorical truth is also to limit poetic discourse. Poetic discourse is justified in this manner within its own circumscription. (7, my emphasis)

Here Ricoeur spells out the difficult “solution” to the problematic relationship between fiction and reality (truth) by exploiting the “split reference” (Jackobson) of metaphor which allows us to “speak of metaphorical truth” in the “‘tensive’ sense of the word ‘truth.’” At the same time, there is a need to recognize the *limits* of a discipline (like fiction or history) in order to “justify each approach within [those] limits” (7). Although Ricoeur’s study mainly concerns the nature and different conceptions of metaphor as it develops in the Western philosophical and literary traditions, his notion of “metaphorical truth” and the limits of each claim to truth does illuminate the relationship between history and fiction, and the concept of “narrative understanding” that Ricoeur develops in *Time and Narrative*.

To the extent that metaphor is a deliberate “categorical transgression” that threatens classification itself, it is also “the complement of a logic of discovery” which is also the
"power of metaphor to project and to reveal a world" (Metaphor 25-26, 93). Ricoeur's reflections on the paradoxical nature of metaphor\textsuperscript{34} throws light on the "defamiliarizing" use of memory and history in (meta)fiction. In fiction, the ontological status of the past is metaphorized in the configuration of history. Categorical transgression, which is the property of metaphor, initiates a hermeneutic process within the limits of the literary text as an autonomous world of its own. In other words, fictional narrative creates its own meaning by an intuitive apprehension of resemblance between the probably real and the imaginatively true. The heuristic power of fiction is precisely this "seeing... as...", the power of the fictive to redescribe reality by making metaphorical reference to a world outside of the literary text.

The "rule of metaphor" illuminates those aspects of fictional narrative as it "sees" reality "as..." In metafiction, self-referentiality is taken to the extreme as the text itself becomes an object of representation. Yet, a sense of reality is required to decode why and to what extent this fictive play of reference distorts and alters its (and our) perception of the extra-textual world. In historiographic metafiction, the verisimilitude of traditional historical novels is given up in order to create a sense of history that seeks to estrange us from history, as it is ordinarily perceived. This process of "making strange" is also a self-ironic move that defamiliarizes textual meaning. If meta-phor is always a movement, a displacement of meaning into a new and paradoxical context, in metafiction history is metaphorized through a "categorical transgression" of the boundaries between the

\textsuperscript{34} In Greek, para-doxa means a deviation from a pre-existing doxa. Ricoeur (Metaphor 27).
presumably real and the self-consciously false. This “double tension” of metaphorical reference in fiction, moreover, is not limited to metafiction. The complex network of meanings and illusions created by fiction always exists within this double tension that characterizes all mimetic art forms. The concept of metaphor, it seems, can mediate between fiction and metafiction without erasing their initial differences. Every work of fiction can be placed on a scale with fiction (mimesis as imitation of real action) and metafiction (shall we say “poesis”?) at its two ends, but the power of metaphorical reference is not dependent on the relative position of a text on this scale.

When Linda Hutcheon discusses the “subversiveness” of postmodern historiographic metafiction, she particularly emphasizes its oppositional value (against historiography, historical fiction and late modernist “radical metafiction”) (Politics 7). She regards non-mimetic “auto-representation” as a distinctive strategy of this kind of fiction that “problematizes the possibility of historical knowledge” with “no reconciliation, no dialectic” but just “unresolved contradiction.” Her “subversive” theory of postmodernism runs the risk of severing all the links (literary and historical) between this new genre and others, both in time and in space. In Hutcheon’s words, the connection between postmodernist and modernist texts is characterized as that between the “haunting” and the “haunted.” However, when history enters the world of

35 Or Jakobson’s notion of “split reference.” Ricoeur (Metaphor 7); cf. n.24.
36 Hutcheon (Politics 106). Hutcheon earlier had had reservations about the idea but later theorized it in her two studies on the politics and poetics of postmodernism; cf. Ng (123) and n. 21.
37 This concept of “haunting” is used to overcome the charges against the “radical break” theory and the
(meta)fiction, its existence in the extra-textual world is not denied, nor our sense of its material existence being ridiculed. Instead, history is “metaphorized” into the fictional experiences of characters, who nonetheless speak “out of context” to the extraliterary world. For example, in Midnight’s Children, the modern history of India and its traumatic consequences as they are alluded to in the literary text are far more than just a “linguistic construct.” (If this is so, why does Hutcheon interpret Saleem’s grotesque and mutilated body as “totally imprinted by history and the process of history’s destruction of the body”?)\(^\text{38}\) Instead, history’s true meaning to the Indian people and their culture is to be “recovered” in a poetic vision informed by that history (national and personal), and also by the history of cultural imagination which the narrator invokes in his fictional autobiography. In Midnight’s Children, history is both “authentic” and “fantastic” precisely because it is metaphorized to refer both to reality and to itself. In his novel, Rushdie ruthlessly mocks (and gravely denounces) the propagandistic use of news and history not to “deconstruct” history but to defend an authentic experience of history against dogmatic nonsense and complacent naiveté.\(^\text{39}\) Thus, history in this novel is as much full of irony, romance, satire, comedy and tragedy as it is in other novels which are not metafictions (for example, V. S. Naipaul’s A Bend in the River and E. M. Forster’s A Passage to India) What distinguishes his kind of writing from the “traditional” historical

---

\(^\text{38}\) Hutcheon’s quotation comes from Foucault (Poetics 118).
\(^\text{39}\) Episodes of parodic “appropriation” of historical events abound in this novel. For instance, news headlines are adapted into a letter of sexual betrayal (259), while political and war news, sanitized by the government, is accused of spreading the “disease of optimism” that leads to the disintegration of families and nations (300).
According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the prefix "meta-" means position (higher, after or beyond), change of position or condition, or a higher or second-order kind (metalanguage). These three definitions fit well with our understanding of metahistory (a position beyond), metaphor (change) and metafiction (second-order, metalanguage). White's notion of metahistory, it becomes clear, overlaps with that of metafiction as both are presumably a second-order kind, that is to say, a metalanguage. Historiographic metafiction further complicates the issue by a parodic "appropriation" of the metalanguage of two kinds of meta-narratives. It is parodic because its signification is more than a function of intra-textual play; i.e. its self-referentiality is meant to be an apparatus of historical reflections. It is possible to do so precisely because history is "displaced" (transformed, changed, moved) into the realm of metaphor where it confronts all kinds of magic, myths, legends and grotesque anecdotes that make up the fabric of a specific culture and its memory of the past. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, for example, the history of colonialism and civil war miraculously merges into a "grand narrative" of Macondo, a fictional space where angels, witches, and mutants or metamorphosed human beings co-exist. Their magical existence not only marginalizes the "real" historical events but also demands a metaphorical (or metahistorical) understanding of history as a process of decay and destruction.\(^\text{40}\) On the other hand,

\(^{40}\) In a later work, the modern history of Latin America is embedded in the twilight years of General Simon Bolivar. Márquez's combination of journalistic prose-style and magical realism in this overtly "political" novel aptly illustrate the range and possibilities of this kind of "historical fiction" as exemplified by *One
Márquez's text can be read as a kind of "fictional witnessing" that preserves the collective memory of a culture on the verge of disintegration while attesting to the atrocities of history as an amalgam of political disasters and human folly. His metafiction, being self-reflexive, finally returns to history in the form of a metaphorical testimony. History-as-metaphor, therefore, preserves the "real" in fiction by multiplying our ways of "seeing... as..." Its truth-content, as mentioned, is situated within the tension between "what is" and "what is not," i.e. a metaphorical reference to the world that bears witness to the hitherto unheard of and unsaid, i.e., undocumented human experiences that demand to be articulated and understood.

**Toward a Poetic Resolution**

In this chapter my focus has been on the theoretical aspect of historical representation in fiction and historiography, with specific reference to Hayden White and Paul Ricoeur and the interlocking arguments they have inspired among historians and literary critics. My intention has been to delineate some problematic issues concerning language and reality in general, and the implications of some recent philosophical/theoretical skepticism on the production and reception of literature and historiography in particular. I have tried to show how the concepts of metahistory, metafiction and metaphor can be usefully employed in clarifying and resolving some, though not all, of the conflicting claims of these various theoretical positions, as well as *Hundred Years of Solitude.*
to reinstate a sense of meaning that is integral to all fictional and historical narratives.

Paul Ricoeur’s idea of a three-fold mimesis, i.e. prefiguration, configuration and refiguration, seeks to explain the signification process of narrativization – a formula that incorporates the “metatextual” level of linguistic practice, the textual level of narrative meaning production and the intertextual, or intersubjective, level of narrative understanding. Ricoeur’s theory of metaphor defends the truth claims of figurative language, whose ultimate value is fundamentally (though not directly or simplistically) referential. I have used Ricoeur’s philosophical reflections on narrative and metaphor to reread White’s theory of tropes and metahistory in relation to a more general understanding of the latter term by historians, and attempted to argue for a discretionary confidence (after Ricoeur and Kermode) in the extraliterary meaning-value of historiography and fiction, whose narrative nature does not necessarily erase its referential quality, and even less so the sense of historical truth toward which it labors.

The controversial aspects of White’s theory are illuminating in another respect: White’s Metahistory lends itself to a metafictional reading that uncovers its own literariness (as a self-conscious tropological construct). It is where metaphor presents itself as a mediating concept that restores the referential value of narrative representations

41 Ricoeur and White do agree on certain aspects of the relationship between narrative and reality despite their differences, e.g. the significance of “emplotment” which for the purposes of the present discussion I have not dealt with in detail. For Ricoeur’s comments on White, see Ricoeur (Time and Narrative 3 152-54). See also White’s essay on Ricoeur in Content Ch. 7.
of history, and yet holds as valid a basic distinction between the kinds of reference historical and fictional narratives attempt to make respectively. In fictions about history, especially historiographic metafiction, one finds a fitting analogy to the dynamics between the three “meta-concepts” mentioned above; yet the literary text somehow implies an answer, however tentative, to the seemingly unresolved questions raised by critical theory. At least the fictional work is seen constantly grappling with meaning – its own meaning (or potential meaninglessness) as an artifact, and the meaning of the things it refers to as real. In fiction, history is metaphorized, in the form of narrative, and its meaning communicated through the act of reading or refiguration. Since metaphor is primarily a means to “redescribe” reality through a tensional “seeing... as...,” history-as-metaphor figures through the literary text as a “reinscription,” i.e. displacement, movement and change of meaning. This involves the operation of the paradox, in the sense of para-doxa that deviates from a pre-existing doxa (cf. n. 37). In literary terms, this involves a defamiliarizing use of history as collective and personal memory (which harks back to the general concept of metahistory that is present in both the prefigurative and configurative stages), and ultimately a refamiliarization of the unfamiliar, as in the case of Márquez and Rushdie.

To conclude, history-as-metaphor realigns fictional history with reality (or genuine history) without collapsing one into the other. While history theoretically cannot be totally free from the charge of being just a finite assemblage of documents, one’s sense of history, ironically, preserves its ontological status since human experiences, though rendered in/as texts, bear witness to the realness of the past, hence its significance to
his/her present and future existence. These undeniable “traces” of history, as Ricoeur calls it, have to be recovered if we still believe in the value of a sense of indebtedness to those who have suffered and died. If history bears witness to these traces as they really were, “fictional witnessing” testifies to the “unhistorical” and non-empirical experiences of the past in the form of “seeing... as...,” i.e. a mobilization of the symbolic resources of a culture to redescribe the past as a cultural inheritance, and therefore has to be invested with *symbolic* meaning that stays within and yet goes beyond the historical (temporal) existence of mankind.

In the next chapter, I will show how the “changing metaphors” of fictional histories in twentieth-century China bear witness to the national struggle for modernity since the May Fourth period. These metaphors are attempts to interpret and thereby “augment reality” by imposing certain “modern” visions of history in search of solutions to China’s problems. Since the creation of a new national literature was considered by May Fourth intellectuals as essential to social transformation, the “interweaving reference” between history and fiction is inseparable from the political and ideological function it was expected to perform. As we shall see, this “legacy” of the May Fourth Movement played a significant role in the development of modern literature in subsequent decades. Given the traumatic experiences of the past fifty years, history-as-metaphor remains an important means for “reinventing China” today.42

42 This phrase is from Michael Duke ("Reinventing China").
Changing Metaphors: Fictional Histories in Twentieth Century China

This chapter mainly concerns the changing perceptions of history in twentieth-century Chinese literature as a background to the fictional *topoi* of the three authors discussed in the following chapters. My discussion here is not intended to be a history of modern Chinese fiction; rather, it looks at fictional representation of history as a complex response to the challenge of the modern in twentieth-century China. To the extent that all fiction presents a certain worldview through the "world of the text" (Ricoeur) it creates, the metaphorical reference it makes to the reality outside of the text is also a certain way of "seeing... as..." that works toward a *narrative* understanding of that reality. In twentieth-century China, the tumultuous occurrences in the real world have shaken the worldviews of old, in particular the Confucian system of values identified by the forerunners of the May Fourth Movement as the ultimate reason for China's weaknesses.\(^1\) May Fourth literature thus arose out of a spiritual vacuum waiting to be filled by new ideas from the modern (and therefore powerful) West. Despite their didactic tendency, May Fourth writers do have the creative flexibility to incorporate new ways of "seeing... as..." as a means to make sense of an increasingly alienating reality, as seen in the proliferation of literary societies, literary magazines and translations of foreign authors.

---

\(^1\) This "totalistic" nature of May Fourth antitraditionalism is well-explored by Lin Yüsheng in *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness: Radical Anti-traditionalism in the May Fourth Era.*
showing a wide range of interests in European, Russian and Japanese literature. As Leo Lee says, modernity in early twentieth-century China is analogous to a "new mode of historical consciousness" that finally shaped the course of modern Chinese literary and intellectual history ("Modernity" 158-177). By creating metaphorical reference to the past, fiction imposes a frame and a focus, or frames and focuses, on its own world whose meaning and value lie precisely in its being an image of history, hence an aesthetic inquiry into human experiences of the past.

For the purposes of this study, I concentrate on fictional representations of history since the May Fourth so as to assess the contemporary significance of these literary precedents to fiction writing in China today. I propose to read the genesis of modern Chinese fiction in the May Fourth as a response to the challenge of the modern. As a matter of continuity, I venture briefly into the "aesthetics" of socialist realism under the Communist regime to look at the transformation of this time consciousness into a rhetoric of utopianism that ironically reverses the course of cultural modernity in Chinese history. The final part of this chapter concerns the changing metaphors of the 1980s and 90s, as well as the dilemmas and complexities revolving around the debate over tradition and modernity, the implications of the "cultural self-reflection" (wenhua fansi) advocated by contemporary intellectuals on the Mainland, and the reactions it provoked in literary and intellectual circles in the late 1980s and 90s. The present stage is significant primarily because, following Frank Kermode, this is the only instant we have a claim to and can act

\[^2\] For a detailed account of the literary activities from 1919 to the forties, see Leo Lee's historical account in
upon, *in the middest*, yet, it is this awareness of the fleeting present that gives rise to a consciousness of what is no longer, as much as what will be. The sense of an ending, as Kermode phrases it, is indispensable to the tradition of *mimesis* in the West; in fact, in modernist (and post-modernist) literature the intensified sense of fragmentation, disintegration and “formlessness” is also a continuation of this struggle with time and history. Without any intention to devise intercultural equations, I find in the recent emergence of the so-called “new historical novel” in mainland China an interesting counterpart to what Linda Hutcheon calls the “historiographic metafiction” as discussed in Chapter 1.

**The New vs. the Old**

Any mention of modern Chinese literature by necessity refers, implicitly or explicitly, to its genesis in 1919, when a nation-wide protest against the humiliating resolutions at the Versailles peace conference provoked reform-minded intellectuals to

---


3 Kermode suggests that the sense of an ending is necessary for “historical continuity;” for an ending is indispensable to the “order of things.” History, or historical narrative, is “a maker of concords between past, present and future, a provider of significance to mere chronicity,” whereas the novel is an “imitation” of historiography” and a “synthesizing consciousness” (56).

4 See, for example, Wang Biao (1-13).

5 The former German concessions in Shandong was handed over to Japan, leading some 3,000 university students in Beijing to hold a mass demonstration at the Tiannanmen. A boycott of Japanese goods and clashes with Japanese residents soon followed, and labor unions “joined in the broadest demonstration of national feeling that China had ever seen” (Fairbank and Goldman 267-268).
launch an all out attack on traditional culture. In fact, what comes to be known as the May Fourth Movement — generally regarded as the Chinese enlightenment — is still looked upon as the exemplary model for intellectuals nowadays. Much work has been done on the historical, cultural and political backgrounds of the May Fourth. What I propose to do here is to offer a critical assessment of the literary and intellectual reflections on Chinese modernity since the May Fourth, including works by critics and intellectuals of later generations who have made contributions to our understanding of May Fourth culture.

In his study of modern Chinese writers, Leo Lee (1973) examines the “romantic” generation of May Fourth writers and compares them to the notable romantics in the West. Later, Lee qualifies his findings by adding that attention has to be paid to the “temporal frame in which this [romantic temper] was manifested.” The temporal frame he refers to is that of modernity, which in China was loosely defined as a mode of consciousness of time and history as unilinear progress, moving in a continuous “stream” or “tide” from the past to the present; it also contained the valorized notion of the present as a new “epoch”... which leads prophetically to a purposeful future. ... Its dynamism was manifested especially among May Fourth and post-May Fourth Chinese intellectuals in an

---

6 Liu Zaifu, among others, is a diligent student of the May Fourth. He argues that the most serious problem facing Chinese intellectuals today is the decay of the “enlightenment spirit” as exemplified by their May
outlook of the ego's active fusion with the forward tide of history. ("Modernity"
164)

What this modern temporality replaces is "the traditional cyclical view ... shaped by the
alternation of the "Five elements" and the Confucian notions of dynastic cycle" (160), or
what Andrew Plaks calls the formal pattern of "complementary bipolarity" and "multiple
periodicity" as manifested in classical Chinese fiction, in which the linear and the cyclical
are not mutually exclusive (335). What complicated this contention between traditional
and modern temporality at that time was the urgency of national salvation; i.e. if China
was to survive as a nation, it had to be transformed into a modern nation-state and rank
itself as an equal among the great imperial powers of the world. Modernity, then, was
unequivocally identified with Progress, which was believed to be the key to "wealth and
power" (fuguo qiangbing, literally "enrich the state and strengthen the army"). The role
of intellectuals, then, is that of the bearer of light (i.e. the light of modern knowledge.)
From this perspective, modern Chinese literature, as the cultural embodiment of this
Faustian-Promethean spirit, was motivated by two interrelated and yet conflicting

Fourth predecessors. See Liu (250-282).
7 Yan Fu 嚴復, as Benjamin Schwartz suggests, is the most representative figure in promoting the idea of
"evolution" and "progress" as the only means to national salvation.
8 For instance, "Be there no more burning torches thereafter, I am the only light" (Lu Xun); "We have to be
the sun, ourselves the source of light." (Guo Moruo). Qtd. in Liu (254).
impulses: "internationalism" and "nationalism". That is to say, the universality of the modern has to be reconciled with the awareness of China's "belatedness" in the world historical process and the crisis of cultural identity that results. In the words of Lu Xun, this sense of "belatedness experienced by the young people of an ancient country" is the cause of an unspeakable "frustration" (kumen, in which the character ku suggests a sense of bitterness):

The intellectual currents of the world are sweeping upon us from all directions; yet we are still entrapped in three-thousand-year-old shackles. Thus we wake up, struggle, and rebel; we want to break away and participate in the affairs of the world ... but we are latecomers. Because we have no part in the affairs of the past, sometimes we have to take whatever is offered [to us] and end up in other respectable shackles. (Complete Works III: 549)

Lu Xun's diagnosis of the cultural frustration experienced by young intellectuals of his time reveals the paradoxical nature of a total rejection of the Chinese tradition (treated by

---

9 Huang, Chen and Qian (6).
10 Also collected in Er'yi ji 《而已集》 (109-110).
Changing Metaphors

many as the necessary step toward cultural modernity). The sense of universal frustration reveals Lu Xun’s apprehension of the dreadful consequences of this “totalistic” ambition: China would end up losing its cultural identity and freedom as an independent nation, for she had to compromise her political and cultural autonomy vis-à-vis the West in the process of modernization. On the other hand, the conviction that tradition is the root of all problems necessitates a self-negation that is both heroic and tragic. This sense of frustration arising from an antithetical understanding of modernity and tradition is echoed by some present day Chinese scholars as they look back into the history of modern Chinese literature:

The path twentieth-century Chinese literature took toward World Literature was one full of humiliation and pain…
There are two antithetical yet inter-related facets to Chinese literary modernity: the so-called “westernization” … and “nationalization.” (Huang et. al. 6)

二十世紀中國文學是在一種充滿了屈辱和痛苦的情勢下走向世界文學的…中國文學的現代化同時展開為互相關聯又互相对立的兩個側面：所謂「歐化」…和「民族化」

The pain and humiliation integral to the experience of modernity, furthermore, intensifies the anxiety of a collective disaster, for “in Chinese literature, the anxiety about individual destiny is always assimilated into the anxiety about the destiny of the nation.”
This inexplicable identification between the self and the nation constitutes a "tragic consciousness" (beiju yishi) that is uniquely Chinese (14-18).

As Lin Yusheng (1973) points out, the "totalistic iconoclasm" of May Fourth intellectuals stems from their "organismic" view of culture and a belief in the power of ideas to transform social reality. Since this conception of culture comes from the Chinese tradition itself, the anti-traditional rhetoric of May Fourth immediately loses its ground when the use of modern values to attack tradition is in fact a manifestation of a deep-rooted (and therefore unacknowledged) traditional way of thinking. Alongside what Lin calls a "formalistic" contradiction is the notion of history as both a progressive and a destructive force. The urge to modernize China necessitates a cultural self-negation on a collective scale. It is "cultural" precisely because this negation was a logical outcome of the traditional "organismic" view of culture. To the May Fourth thinkers, the "survival of the (Chinese) species" depends on a totalistic negation of Chinese civilization, while the possibility of a creative transformation, an alternative favored by many Chinese intellectuals today, was left out of the debate.

An extreme example of this totalistic negation is Lu Xun’s Madman. As is well known, the Madman’s predicament comes from his "discovery" that the subtext of the

---

11 "Creative transformation" is the present preoccupation of notable Chinese scholars such as Lin Yusheng, Yu Yingshi and Tu Weiming. It involves a rigorous rethinking of traditional culture (especially Confucianism) in terms of its modern significance. See, for example, Lin Yusheng, "Zhongguo renwen zhi chongjian" (On the Revival of Chinese Culture) in Sexiang yu renwu and Yu Yingshi, Zhongguo wenhua yu
Chinese tradition is "cannibalism" (chi ren de lijiao 吃人的禮教). In "The Diary of a Madman" ("Kuangren riji") (狂人日記) (Complete Works I: 277-292), Lu Xun conjures up probably the most frightening image of traditional culture in modern Chinese literature, in which the entire society, seen through the eyes of the Madman, has since antiquity been practicing "cannibalism." As a metaphor, this story of the Madman is situated within the narrative frame of the anonymous "Editor," a representative of the cannibalistic tradition. Read allegorically, Lu Xun’s story effects a double denial by first announcing his indictment of Chinese culture through the mouth of the Madman, then framing it within the narrative of the Editor who disconfirms the Madman’s claim. It is possible that Lu Xun had in mind the political sensitivity of the problems he was grappling with at the time of writing, so that he invented the Madman character as a mask for the “prophet” underneath (Fokkemma 95). However, the Madman’s indictment of Chinese culture has procured not only the spite and contempt of others but also a maddening shock to the self, who, in isolation, fails in all attempts to communicate with the outside world. The Madman experiences the horror of knowing what he believes to be the “truth,” but this truth might just as well be his hallucination. In the narrative, the opposing voices of the Editor and the Madman operate on two different levels: the literal and the metaphorical, and it is through metaphor that the meaning of the Madman’s speech can be decoded (for the “realism” of the text points to madness as a clinical fact.) In this connection, the Editor’s notes, rendered in banal classical prose, in dismissing the Madman’s narrative as a clinical case of schizophrenia, are intended to be a decoy – a
"misreading" – that disconfirms the literal meaning of the Madman’s diary. The fantastic content of Lu Xun’s story, therefore, unlocks the poignancy of his attack on traditional culture under the disguise of madness. The last two entries of the Madman’s diary, however, reveal his own guilty conscience:

12

... 

Who’s to say I didn’t eat a few pieces of my younger sister’s flesh without knowing it? And now it’s my turn...

Although I wasn’t aware of it in the beginning, now that I know I’m someone with four thousand year’s experience of cannibalism behind me, how hard it is to look real human beings in the eye!

13

Maybe there are some children around who still haven’t eaten human flesh.

Save the children ...¹²

十二

... 

我未必無意之中，不吃了我妹子的幾片肉，現在也輪到我
自己，......
Lu Xun's concern with "saving the children" is echoed in "Medicine," ("Yao") in which Lu Xun questions the validity of revolution as a cure (a bun dipped in the blood of a martyred rebel) to China's illness (the consumptive child Xiao Shuan) (Complete Works 298-311). The failed medicine bears out Lu Xun's conviction that the so-called cure (revolution) is but a futile but costly experiment. This elegiac tale dedicated to the revolutionary martyr Qiu Jin (whose failed attempt to overthrow the Qing government led to her beheading) expresses also the historical impasse facing the entire nation. Looking back in time, Chinese history has no lack of revolutions but the 1911 Revolution brought about the most far-reaching changes in terms of government, social structure and cultural values. For a general overview, see "Introduction: Perspectives on Modern China's History" in CHOC Vol. 13.
for the Dead,” and Wei Lianshu in “The Loner”). As an archetype of Lu Xun’s alienated modern man, the loner is caught within a vicious circle of betrayal and self-betrayal: making compromises for a living is a kind of self-betrayal, but he also feels betrayed by his own idealism. In fact, Lu Xun more than once expresses his own regrets for the past:

... nowadays such saying as “save the children” has become empty of meaning even to myself. / ... In fact, all my attacks on [the backward and unjust practices of] society in the past are useless, for the society didn’t even know I was attacking [it]... / Perhaps I have nothing more to say – for I don’t know what comes after the horror ... but I am trying to save myself, too, in the old ways: one is numbness, the other is forgetting. (Eryi ji 44-45, emphasis and ellipses added)

Like his fictional characters, Lu Xun’s “horror” is the shattering of hope, a hope that when “the old [culture] dies, China will be more alive.” This “disenchantment with culture,” as it turns out, leads to a more appalling self-reflection: “Now I realize that I, too, am helping out setting the banquet [of cannibalism]” (Complete Works III: 453-54). What complicates Lu Xun’s sense of guilt is that he deeply regrets the “multiple pains” he has caused his young readers. In another essay collected in Er'yi ji 《而已集》, Lu
Xun spells out the horror he has perceived and communicated through his writing: "... China is entering a great epoch. Its greatness does not necessarily bring about life, but possibly death" (Complete Works III: 547). Haunted by the horror of collective annihilation, the writer is aware that by communicating this horror he has offended the entire society.

What is suggested here is that the burden of the past perhaps is too heavy on the fragile body of new China, and the New Culture Movement might have been yet another ineffectual cure, just as the 1911 Revolution (ironically spurred by the modern concepts of democracy, freedom and above all, nationalism) has accelerated the disintegration of the Chinese society at large. The then popular evolutionary view of history as a linear motion of Progress, moreover, is truncated by an unacknowledged awareness that history is also an alien, inhuman force. As a subtext of May Fourth antitraditionalism, this historical awareness brought about changes in the perception of reality and the way it is "seen... as..." in works of fiction. What follows is an examination of some new ways of "seeing... as..." in the development of realist fiction in modern Chinese literature.
Realism and the Negation of the Past

It is a well-known fact that realism, especially critical realism, was sanctioned by the leaders of the New Literature Movement as the most suitable form of a new national literature. In the writings of Liang Qichao, Hu Shi, Mao Dun, and Qu Qiubai, for example, the ideological (construed as the “social” and “political”) function of realism is always at the center of their aesthetics. That is to say, at the turn of the twentieth century, the adoption of realism as the ideal form of a new national literature was bound up with the crisis of national survival, a unique characteristic of Chinese modernity that harks back to Yan Fu’s promotion of Western learning in the late Qing as a prerequisite for China’s attaining “wealth and power” in the world. This “dual tendency” of cultural enlightenment and national salvation is noted by Li Zehou as the defining character of the May Fourth Movement. As Tu Wei-ming remarks on the influence of the Enlightenment on Chinese intellectuals at that time, “the Enlightenment symbolized … not liberty and human rights as ends in themselves but the ‘Faustian spirit’ unleashed by the social Darwinian quest for superiority” (105). One may

---

14 A representative example is, of course, Hu Shi’s “eight no’s” in regard to literary composition as a remedy for the subjectivist, lyrical classical tradition. The central concern of Hu Shi was literary reform beginning with the vernacular movement (baihua wen yundong). C.f. n. 15 below.

15 Liang pioneered the practice of “modern” fiction as a means to reform the Chinese mind; Hu Shi later advocated the adoption of the baihua (vernacular language) as the proper literary language of modern Chinese literature. His famous “baibu zhuyi” (principle of eight “no’s”) remains a classic example of May Fourth iconoclasm. See, for example, Lin (1979) and Lee (1973).

16 This also explains why in the twenties many Chinese writers turned to socialist realism and Marxism.
say that one important impetus behind the creation of a new national literature was social mobilization. The politicization of art (and in particular literature), sadly, was later intensified when Mao Zedong made it an official policy that "revolutionary realism" and "revolutionary romanticism" should be the future direction of literature and the arts.  

Just as the vernacular language was designated to be the "official" literary language of modern China, fiction, among others, became the most important literary form due to its easy access by the public and its modern (western) outlook. Apart from the fact that vernacular fiction in the realist mode was entrusted with the mission of educating the masses and propagating reformist and revolutionary ideals, it was also the very means by which May Fourth iconoclasts rebelled against tradition, which they blamed for all the ills China had suffered. Consciously or subconsciously, this conversion to a Western literary mode satisfies the need for a total negation of the past so that the self and the nation can be created anew. As Fokkema observes, "the realist interpretation of the world is dependent upon a consistent belief in God, or fate, or science ... [it] had an alienating effect among the Chinese [in the sense that] it destroyed the Confucian world model" (91). (Fokkemma does not elaborate on the "Confucian world model" to be destroyed by the import of realism, but one can justifiably see it as a canopy term used by May Fourth intellectuals for the entire Chinese tradition.) Corollary

See Li Zehou ("Enlightenment" 7-50).

17 After Mao's "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art," didacticism overtook individual creativity in literary production on the mainland. As Cyril Birch ironically puts it, the "post-1942 work of fiction can be assigned to the realist mode only if we accept the arrival of the millenium on the mainland."
to the realist ideal of objective representation is the eschatological and teleological view of history as a process of unilinear unfolding, i.e. the new conquering the old, the progressive the backward, the fit the unfit. This, coupled with the urgent quest for Progress, reinforced the antitraditional sentiment; i.e. the old, Confucian worldview of cosmic correspondences and cyclical patterns\(^{18}\) was effectively replaced by a linear view of history as an evolutionary process. Thus, the Chinese adoption of literary realism is also an initiation into a new temporality, the time of modernity and its concomitant disintegration of traditional values. In other words, by eulogizing the representation of the real as the now, the immediate, or one’s “epoch” against the past and the old (as Yan Fu did), the equation now becomes: the West = modernity = vernacular realism, if we were to extend the “monologic” argument of the May Fourth.\(^{19}\)

The binary opposition between old and new, past and present, China and the West, also embraces another antithetical pair: the epic versus the lyrical, as Jaroslav Prusek has taken pains to illustrate in his study of modern Chinese literature.\(^{20}\) Although

---

\(^{18}\) These are meant to be the representative and general terms that were identified with traditional Chinese worldview. In fact, it is acknowledged that conflicting models of the cosmos and human world always co-existed in the Chinese tradition. See, for example, Plaks (335).

\(^{19}\) “Monologic” is used by Lin Yüsheng to characterize the May Fourth frame of mind, whose “cultural-intellectualistic” approach to the Chinese tradition. Rooted in the Chinese tradition itself, this “simplistic approach” “had the potential to evolve into an intellectualistic-holistic mode of thinking” and contributed to the “totalistic anti-traditionalism” in the May Fourth. Lin (Crises 26-30).

\(^{20}\) Prusek uses the “epic” to designate the narrative tradition of the West, and lyric that of China. He emphasizes the superiority of the epic form: “The old literature in we-yen constituted in fact an immense
later scholars such as C. T. Hsia have disputed Prusek's view,\textsuperscript{21} it nonetheless resonates with the kind of modernist sentiment of May Fourth intellectuals in their urge to abandon the old (Chinese way of seeing) for something radically new (Western way of seeing). The immense burden of the past, it seems, forced them to make this conscious choice despite the latent awareness that such a totalistic approach might not be as viable as they had expected. On the other hand, the unwillingness of the Chinese intellectuals "to embrace fully the modern West ... as an intrinsic value," ironically, explains why they had perceived the Enlightenment mainly as a "triumph of instrumental rationality" (Tu 115). This polarization of temporal and historical concepts paved the way for a more extreme binarism in later years, when the incommensurability between old and new was used as a moral justification for the marginalization and prosecution of writers who did not conform to the doctrines of leftist aesthetics.

As far as literature is concerned, realism provides the coordinates necessary for the negation of the past through an initiation into a new conception of time and history. As this alluring, new temporality opened up a new dimension of historical experience for Chinese intellectuals, it gradually became a guiding light in political and aesthetic realms.

archive of facts, ... but not as a rule worked up into a higher artistic unity. It lacked, for the most part, epic character ... which links up ... interesting facts to a higher organic whole..." (91, ellipses added).

\textsuperscript{21} "Since he [Prusek] agrees with the 'Marxist theoreticians' that modern Chinese history is nothing but a record of the Chinese people's self-conscious struggle, under the leadership of the Communist Party, against 'the survivals of feudalism' and 'foreign imperialism' toward their full liberation ... Hence he speaks repeatedly of the 'mission of literature' [and] is apparently unaware of the danger of using the literary record merely as a record of history, as a testament to the spirit of the age." Hsia, "On the
The mutual implication of realism as a mode of fictional representation on the one hand, and a new conception of time and history as linear Progress on the other, reveals the *metahistorical* dimension of fiction writing at that time since fiction in this context is endowed with the sacred historical mission of national salvation. (Liang Qichao, for one, was both an influential historian and literary patron. For him, studying history and writing fiction, different though they are in subject matter and approach, served the same goal: national self-strengthening.)

I am not saying that all fictional works written in this period are histories or metahistories; rather, as fictions, they nonetheless participate in an ideological struggle with new ways of "seeing... as...," i.e. new ways of interpreting historical experience. A good example is provided in Mao Dun's full-length novel *Midnight (Zi ye (子夜))* in which an ancient philosophical text is destroyed by the wind and rain coming through a window accidentally left open. Mao Dun's novel attempts a panoramic representation of the political, social and moral conflicts in China in the thirties, using Shanghai as the epitome of the decadent and corrupt capitalist society under imperialist influence. The hero, Wu Sunfu, is an industrial magnate who rises from a traditional, agricultural gentry background to become the most formidable figure in metropolitan Shanghai, and falls rather unheroically, partly because of his unwitting speculations on stock prices, and partly because of the emergence of a new class of entrepreneurs who have no scruple cashing in on national disasters. *Midnight*, therefore, presents a vivid image of this

---

'Scientific' Study of Modern Chinese Literature: A Reply to Professor Prusek" in Prusek (231-268).
inhuman, profit-oriented, modern market economy that is on the verge of self-destruction. The suggestive subplot indicates that labor unrest is boiling up in the cities as a logical consequence of imperialist expansion and relentless exploitation of the working class by the petty-bourgeoisie. This brief summary of *Midnight* has left out many details, especially those concerning the host of characters who bear out Mao Dun’s social and historical vision. However, a relevant point here is that Mao Dun’s novel, as a classic example of May Fourth fictional realism, has a metahistorical quality that is Marxist in essence. This is characteristic of a great number of fictional works produced during this tumultuous period. In the case of Mao Dun, capitalist modernity is a formidable force that needs to be systematically guarded, accounted for, and finally overcome.

As an ambitious work that seeks to “faithfully depict” the social and political currents of his times, Mao Dun’s novel has been a topic of interest to many literary scholars. Theodore Huters thinks that the realist mode of representing reality was accorded a universal validity, because it was conceived as “a power that could bring into being things that had never existed before in literature.” This is also what Huters calls the “ideology” of realism that captured the entire May Fourth generation (159). In an effort to demonstrate the different modes of realist representation in the May Fourth era, David Der-wei Wang’s reading of Mao Dun leads to the conclusion that Mao Dun’s fiction belongs to the historical/political mode (apart from the lyrical/nostalgic and social/satiric modes represented by Shen Congwen and Lao She respectively) that is

---

22 For a detailed analysis of Mao Dun’s historical novels, see Wang (*Fictional Realism* 25-110).
“closely and constantly bound up with immediate political and moral demands.” Wang’s observations of modern Chinese fiction, therefore, are situated within a range of artistic possibilities within the realist genre, which he argues is far from “a unanimous discourse of critical realism” (as some critics insist) (Fictional Realism 293). Seen from this perspective, Mao Dun’s historical fiction is therefore different from the “proletarian literature” of revolutionary writers, for his “dark portraiture” of petty-bourgeois life still contains a vision of reality informed by critical intelligence and aesthetic self-consciousness.  

Revolution and Historical Fiction

Some historians have pointed out that Chinese history from 1800 to 1949 has been a “revolutionary process” (CHOC 13: 49-50) in which dynastic rule declined, was overthrown by an ineffectual Republic government that gave way to warlordism and was eventually replaced by a Communist regime. The Chinese revolutions of the twentieth-century, therefore, are culminative points of a century-long process of social and cultural change. Throughout the late Qing, intellectuals were divided on the issue of reform and revolution. As I have mentioned above, the more skeptical minds like Lu Xun abhorred the idea of a national revolution, while others were increasingly drawn toward the

---

23 “Now for the future of ‘New Literature’ – or even more boldly, the future of ‘revolutionary literature’ – the first task is to move it out of youth and students and into the petty-bourgeois masses, where it will take root. … We should not merely do didactic propaganda of new ideas but should faithfully depict the essence of petty-bourgeois life.” Mao Dun as quoted by Leo Lee (“Literary Trends” 426).
nationalist ideals advocated by Sun Yat-sen. Given the patriotic nature of the May Fourth Movement, the repercussions of this political debate were far-reaching. In fact, "revolution" (geming, meaning "changing the mandate of Heaven") in the three-fold sense of social, cultural and political action is a central preoccupation of modern Chinese fiction in the first half of the twentieth century.

Just as the Enlightenment has its own spiritual foundations which cannot be reproduced or learned by a country that has developed its own system of values and beliefs through thousands of years, realism in the West has a series of religious and philosophical underpinnings that is totally different from that in China. In the Chinese context, "critical realism" carries with it a revolutionary impulse to transform Chinese culture as a whole. Many critics have pointed out that during the May Fourth period and after, the contention between "art for life's sake" and "art for art's sake" in the literary scene was a superficial one.\(^24\) In fact, the debate over the "meaning" of art (and literature) has always led to the conclusion that art is for the betterment of life.\(^25\) Despite this "unity in disunity" in attitudes toward art and life among Chinese intellectuals, crucial differences exist in the concept of "life," hence the role of art in life. It may seem repetitive to mention this cliché in literary criticism nowadays. However, the notion of "art for life's sake" is closely connected to what C. T. Hsia calls an "obsession with China" which is a moral burden of modern Chinese literature (History 533-554). This

\(^{24}\) See, for example, C. T. Hsia's introduction to A History of Modern Chinese Fiction (2nd edition) and also Leo Li's Romantic Generation.
nationalistic subtext of the new literature facilitated the taking over of the entire literary scene by a coercive, self-effacing revolutionary rhetoric in the late thirties when Japan began its invasion of China. Thus, the preoccupation with “art for life’s sake” deserves more attention than just an aesthetic preference, for this “obsession” with the motherland has to do with one’s imagined relationship with the nation as the basis of a collective self-identity.

This romantic alliance between the individual self and the nation’s “Self” is translated into the protagonist’s self-indulgence in Yu Dafu’s semi-autobiographical work “Sinking,” (“Chenlun” 〈沉淪〉) in which a Chinese youth studying in Japan attributes his sexual frustration to the weakness of his motherland. Yu’s use of two narrating voices (first and third person) serves as an implicit self-criticism, thus creating a tension between the two subject positions: the point of view of the indulgent I-narrator and that of the implied narrator who does not share his romantic patriotism. The lack of substance of this Wertherian youth’s shallow patriotism is self-defeating enough. It remains to be seen that this romantic self-nation complex eventually found its voice in revolutionary romanticism. How, one may ask, should the self be related to the nation? If misguided patriotism can deteriorate into a pretence for self-indulgence, in what way can a “national” literature be created? As Leo Lee observes, “the clash between ... idealized images [of the self] and the increasingly somber realities incurred not a re-evaluation of the self but a reassertion of the self.” The tragic outcome of this romantic

---

25 Lu Xun, for one, insisted that literature should be about life, and should be an improvement on life.
self-reassertion is the "frenzied outburst of a collective will, guided by Mao Tse-tung, to destroy the old phoenix in order to hasten the rebirth of a new one" (*Romantic Generation* 296). This self-nation complex - manipulated by party politics - is self-evident in the so-called revolutionary literature in the late 1930s and 40s.

Ding Ling’s *The Sun Shines Over the Sanggan River* (*Taiyang zhao zai Sanggan he shang*) is a well-known example of the so-called "revolutionary historical fiction." In this novel, the "heroes" and "villains" are organized around class divisions, i.e. the landlord and the proletariat. The struggle between good and evil, in turn, is epitomized in the land reform that effectively eliminates the old gentry class. This novel not only exemplifies what Liu Zaifu calls "the hegemony of political ideology over literature" (142-169) but also demonstrates the power of ideology over the individual will of the writer herself. Liu points out that Ding Ling’s novel is written in strict accordance with the Marxist view of history as a dialectical movement of class struggles, in which black and white, good and evil are determined by class origins instead of some higher moral principle. As a revolutionary historical novel Ding Ling’s work elevates the revolutionary ideal to what Huang Ziping calls a "religious" level by adopting class values and historical dialectics as the absolute basis of morality and human values.26 The polarization of old and new, past and present, China and the West that

---

26 The "religious rhetoric" in revolutionary historical fiction is discussed in Wang Ziping, *Geming, lishi, xiaoshuo* (*Revolution, History, Fiction*): "The 'theological metaphor' involved in the word 'revolution' is that there must be some transcendent cause, will or force behind these immense, earth-shaking social changes. In Marxist diction, it is 'historical determinism.' 'Historical determinism' is the materialist
characterizes Chinese modernity is now transformed (and narrowed down) into the polarization of the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary. This parallels the historical development of the “revolutionary process” when, at this stage, social radicalism had transformed the anti-authoritarian sentiment into an overt class struggle along Marxist lines.  

This religious rhetoric is, therefore, geared toward a teleological view of history as a victorious process of class struggle. No doubt this socialist Armageddon must lead to the victory of the proletariat, rather than the ultimate redemption of individual human beings. Nonetheless, the “revolutionary time” adopted in Ding Ling’s novel is redemptive in the sense that the proletariat is the subject of the future: a collective, ideal identity is forged in this kind of fiction that eulogizes the redemptive power of revolution as a future reality. Ding Ling’s novel won her the Stalin Prize for Literature in 1951. Be that as it may, Ding Ling’s version of the revolution did not materialize in reality, and she was persecuted in 1957 for indulging in counter-revolutionary “individualism” in her novel. In what follows, I will examine the representation of selfhood and nationhood in revolutionary literature, and the way in which the rapture of revolution resulted in a rupture in the course of cultural modernity in China.

27 Class struggle was also an implicit factor of the Revolution of 1911 (CHOC 13:10), but the emphasis shifted dramatically during the Communist Revolution and continued to be the central theme of the Cultural Revolution.

28 Ding Ling was officially reinstated in 1979 but, as Yi-tsi Mei Feuerwerker points out, Ding Ling’s story also “underscores the extreme precariousness” of the writer’s vocation “in a world of radical political change.” See Feuerwerker (1-18).
In a recent study of Chinese modernity, David Der-wei Wang (1997) draws attention to the “repressed modernities” of late-Qing popular fiction. Wang maintains that these literary “modernities” were simply ignored or denied by May Fourth intellectuals preoccupied with their anti-traditionalist campaign. Wang’s study is a re-evaluation of classical fiction, where he locates the inherently “modernistic” qualities of late Qing popular literature comparable to those in the West. It is also a critical re-examination of the “legacy” of May Fourth, i.e. how and to what extent the didactic nature of its anti-traditionalism is responsible for the missed opportunities of a modern literary tradition to grow out of the indigenous culture itself. Another insight drawn from Wang’s study is that the elitist didacticism of May Fourth brought about its own demise in the wake of a fully-fledged Communist Revolution in 1949. I am not saying that the cultural enlightenment project of May Fourth is responsible for the political disasters in later years, yet the irony remains: the antitraditional temperament of the iconoclasts was caught up with a nationalistic radicalism that left no space for its practitioners to confront their own contradictions, as Lu Xun once attempted to do. As Michael Casster points out, revolution became the chosen path of many:

[The Revolution of 1911] generated not only China’s new leaders but also a mood and an attitude. Like their predecessors who concluded that the antidote to the Manchus’ failure was to strike harder and deeper, the leaders of the New Culture Movement decided that the antidote to the failure of 1911 was to strike even harder and deeper.... The Communists may be regarded as the third wave of a radicalism that with each wave resembled more closely a radicalism of
As Wang has shown, the repression of the budding "modernities" in late-Qing popular fiction was not all-out and complete in May Fourth. Popular fiction aside, the ambivalence of Lu Xun, the outright deviance of Shen Congwen, the contributions of non-conformists like Zhang Ailing and Qian Zhongshu, as well as the aborted efforts of Shi Ciqun's psychological fiction, are demonstrable exceptions to the norm. Thus, I prefer to locate this rupture in the development of modern Chinese literature not in the May Fourth, but in the succeeding Communist decades that saw an escalating, almost puritanical, pressure that decries any signs of "petty bourgeois" decadence or "feudalistic" corruption in cultural productions. Using Ding Ling's *The Sun Shines Over the Sanggan River* as an example, I try to demonstrate how this literature of rupture, in severing China's corrupt past (the force of darkness) from the socialist present (the age of light), produces a revolutionary rhetoric that runs counter to the May Fourth tenet of individual freedom and spiritual emancipation.

As mentioned earlier, modernity in China was conceived as Western knowledge and technology. The 1911 Revolution had replaced an old system of government with a modern one, but in China the social and political foundations necessary to sustain the shock of an imported modernity remained wanting. In a sense, modernity as a historical phenomenon signifies everything that is non-Chinese. To be modern, then, is to be non-Chinese. For a nation that had hitherto prided itself as being the "central kingdom"
(zhong guo), the psychological repercussions of this self-denial were beyond measure. This explains why modern Chinese literature at the turn of the century always displays a sense of belatedness in its general outlook, i.e. a sense that China is a latecomer to modern history, that time is running out for a remedy to present itself. In the works of a few exceptional writers such as Lu Xun and Shen Congwen, China’s belated modernity has a more complex meaning that tellingly suggests the potential of modern Chinese fiction to achieve higher ends, however much it has remained a thwarted potential for the better part of the twentieth century until quite recently. Apart from its didactic tendency, May Fourth literature does have a multi-vocal quality, one that was eventually discarded in the ideological battle between “art” and “life”. In the succeeding decades, the uncertainties of the earlier generation were purged; what remained of the “modern” outlook in these literary works was didacticism and a revolutionary passion fed by Maoist political ideology.

If belatedness is characteristic of Chinese modernism at the turn of the century, this ironic self-consciousness was replaced by a futuristic self-confidence in revolutionary literature. If, in the previous decades, literature was commissioned to bring about social and cultural transformation, socialist-realist fiction was primarily the vehicle for ideological persuasion and propaganda. I have stressed from the very beginning the

29 Recent scholarship has put much emphasis on the legacy of May Fourth, especially that of Lu Xun and Shen Congwen. Shen’s “pastoral” recreation of West Hunan pioneered the so-called native soil and “search for roots” fiction in China today. Lu and Shen are regarded as the most influential writers from the May Fourth period. See, for example, Widmer & Wang.
"political" nature of modern Chinese literature, and it would seem contradictory at this point to formulate an opposition between the political and the "apolitical" to characterize the change from critical realism to socialist realism. Nonetheless, a further refinement of this binary reveals a rupture within modern Chinese literature that parallels the "split" in the intellectual discourse on modernity as far back as in the late-Qing. In other words, revolution and reform – the two contending visions of China’s future – made their way into the literary imagination of Chinese writers in search of a new collective identity of the nation and the self. Literature, therefore, construes a sense of nationhood while the preoccupation with a new national literature is inseparable from the inherently "monologic" nature of May Fourth iconoclasm. As Xiaobing Tang suggests, "The cultural iconoclasm of May Fourth radicalism also called for a new culture, but the 'new' there still had all the underpinnings of a modernist desire for change and progress. ... A rhetoric of national crisis was integral to the political mobilization necessary to forge this new nationalist subjectivity and to legitimize its political sovereignty" (Tang 194-195). (What needs to be added to this statement is that it was the reality of national crisis that legitmizes this "rhetoric" in China in the first place.) When it comes to revolutionary literature, as we shall see in Ding Ling’s novel, this monologism, instead of being a subconscious tendency, is transformed into a consciously held mechanical view of history and human motivations; that is, a universal explanatory model.

30 The "monologic" character of May Fourth anti-traditionalism, as Lin Yusheng has argued, has its origin in the Chinese tradition, which Lin characterizes as "holistic-intellectualistic." See Lin, Crisis.
The adoption of critical realism bespeaks an overwhelming concern with "art for life's sake," in which "life" is meant to be an individual volition, a struggle for freedom from the bondage of the past. The collective meaning of life in this undertaking lies in one's identification with the nation. History, according to the then popular evolutionary view, propels not just the self but the whole nation into the modern epoch, and thereby into the crises of modernity. Just because the individual self is inconceivable without the larger, collective self, its "obsession with China" blurs the boundary between the private and the public, the personal and the national, so that selfhood is contained within and derives its sense of being from "nationhood." If May Fourth iconoclasm is a response to the demand for "heroic sacrifice" in the face of national crises (Tu 115), in revolutionary literature the sweeping currents of revolution ceaselessly call for a selfless devotion of the individual as a self-conscious historical subject. In the case of Ding Ling, this self-transformation signals a passage from passivity to activity, or a leap from the margins to the "center stage" of history:

I have been a keen observer of human behavior ever since childhood, simply because I never enjoyed the privilege of speaking in a feudalistic society, but only that of listening ... I was too insignificant for anyone in my family to take me seriously; they wouldn't let me participate in even the most trivial matters simply because I was a poor little girl. Thanks to their negligence, I became a clear-sighted observer of the disintegrating Old World ... I am
grateful to our present age, for it is the age of revolutions. If I cannot
go beyond this age of grandeur, I must immerse in it body and soul.
(Selected Works 1:2)

Unlike her immediate predecessors who were generally more ambiguous about
the ultimate destiny of the self and the nation, Ding Ling (and those who were equally
immersed in the “age of grandeur”) had a much more straightforward answer to the
uncertainties of the future:

[I wanted to] scream. My heart was like a volcano, seething yet
muffled. I turned to fiction because I had no other way out. I had
no idea of the so-called “art for art’s sake,” nor was I toiling after
fame. All I needed was the relief of an outburst, for the sake of
rebellion and revolution.... In China, literature and writers are
never free from politics. This relationship is predetermined by our
social existence.... [Mao Dun, Ye Shengtao and others] called for
“art for life’s sake,” [art] in the service of everyday life. Gradually
we followed their path toward the left, and finally toward Communism. (4)

Ding Ling’s preoccupation with “art for life’s sake” has several implications. First, Ding Ling’s conception of the modern age, representative of the left-wing view of history, is a far cry from that of her May Fourth predecessors, who in general were more inclined toward an evolutionary view of culture and civilization despite the conviction that China was lagging behind in the world evolutionary process. Ding Ling’s identification with the “age of revolution,” however, grows out of a conception of modernity as a global historical process that will eventually bring about the downfall of the “Old World.” Ding Ling’s literary initiation, as seen from the first quotation above, is a reflection of her self-awareness as an autonomous historical subject, a “seething volcano” yearning to break away from the old social order that silences her. In this way, she becomes fully human, an active agent embodying the spirit of the modern age. In other words, Ding Ling’s literary becoming also signals her rebirth into modern history (the “age of grandeur”). As a marginal figure, Ding Ling gradually found her way to the center of the social-political order as a creative writer. Instead of maintaining the stance...
of the alienated intellectual, this new historical subject has to identify with the “people,” learn from them, and become one of them: “Had I not been with the people, had I not been whirled into the currents of the times, my creative life would have ended at an early age” (5). This manifesto-like profession falls in line with the guidelines for a new literature for the masses set out by Chen Duxiu. More importantly, it internalizes a central doctrine of Mao Zedong’s *Yan’an Talks*: “literature and the arts come from the masses, and to the masses they must return.”

To Ding Ling and many left-wing writers in the 1930s and 40s, “art for life’s sake” is more than just an aesthetic principle, for the words “art” and “life” are but two facets of the same coin under the cultural directives of Mao Zedong. This implies that art no longer imitates nor reflects life, as it were, but conditions, redefines, and finally replaces life as the primary subject of literary representation. To modify what Theodore Huter calls “the ideology of realism” (159), the ideology of revolutionary realism not

---

31 “People” here is a political abstraction as defined by the Party, a kind of collectivity that supercedes the individual will.

32 Chen Duxiu, a leader of the Communist Party, was also an advocate of new culture. Leo Lee summarizes Chen’s “literary jargons” as follows: to create a prosaic literature for the masses, to create a fresh and honest realist literature, and to create a socially relevant literature easily accessible to the masses. See Lee (*Langman 5*).

33 Li Tuo, “Resisting Writing” in Liu and Tang (275). In an ironic twist of fate, Ding Ling was later criticized on the basis of this “principle.”

34 In the same article, Li Tuo remarks that Mao had “thoroughly integrated his writing career with his political career ... so that the two became indistinguishable,” to the extent that Mao’s writing “has become a separate genre in itself” (274). Apter and Saich also stress the importance of Mao’s “story-telling” to his rise to power.
only anticipates but also manipulates existence in real life. To be more precise, revolutionary realism aspires to dictate human experiences by prescribing formulaic patterns of behavior based on party directives. It becomes, in brief, a false romanticism. In Ding Ling's *The Sun Shines Over the Sanggan River*, there is a minor episode about a village girl's experience of a propagandistic drama. Typically, the heroine of the play suffers psychological and physical abuses from a landlord family. After watching the performance, the girl recalls that the audience experienced a kind of catharsis: "Big Sister said the play was superb. Many people were moved to tears. The woman living next door cried the most, saying that she had lived just like the girl in the play" (*Selected Works* 18).

In the novel, the class struggle instigated by the party's land reform becomes such a play, a public spectacle in which the would-be audience is given a chance to be the hero. Curiously, in their attempt to "represent the people," the "life" contained in these works of "art" turns out to be the most idealistic abstractions of a utopian ideology: the step from social realism to Communism was taken, as Ding Ling obliquely admits, at the moment the self asserted itself as a historical subject, i.e. as it gave itself up to the Party's version of history. Fictional narratives that seek to faithfully represent social reality, therefore, must adopt a temporal scheme that fits into the totalitarian vision of revolution which, in accounting for what happened in the past, always culminates in the present - "our age" - the ever contingent now.
A year passed, but there was no hope for them... Just then the situation suddenly changed. Japan surrendered and the Eighth Route Army came to their district ... everything was reorganized and the peasants clamoured to settle accounts with the landlords. Young Cheng threw himself into the movement, and it made a new man of him. He joined the militia of which he later became an officer, and that summer when the peasants' association was set up he was elected chairman.35

時間又過去了一年，毫無希望... 正是這個時候，新的局面忽然來到，日本投降了，八路軍到了這個地區...重新建立了各種組織，農民鬧起清算來。程仁卷入了這個浪潮，他好像重新做了一個人，他參加了民兵，後來又做了民兵幹事，今年春上農會組，他被選為農會主任了。

The central character, Cheng Ren, experiences a spiritual transformation at the dawn of the new Communist era. Cheng is depicted as a marginal figure in the village hierarchy. Heini, his lover, was adopted by her uncle (a local landlord) at the age of five and lives in the household as a maidservant. Like Ding Ling herself, these marginal figures are hurled into the wave of revolution and gradually find their place in the new social order. Cheng Ren, as seen from the paragraph above, is “made a new man” as he rises up as an active agent in the new age. This kind of self-assertion is indispensable to any account of the “awakening of the masses,” or the so-called “turn over” (fanshen, or revolutionary

35 Selected Works, 22. Trans. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang (24-25, emphasis added). Subsequent page references to these texts will be given at the end of the English and Chinese quotations respectively.
transformation). Zhang Yumin, another model hero, recalls his experience of a revolutionary transformation when he pours out his grievances to his commrades:

He grew up like a little ox, able to thrive as long as he had grass to eat.... As he described to them the past that he seldom liked to think about, he realized for the first time how unhappy he had been, how lonely, oppressed and downtrodden! It was very comforting to have found friends for the first time in his life, and friends who were so concerned about him. Knowing that he was loved he felt happy and eager to live a better live.

(44-45)

Cheng Ren and Zhang Yumin’s fanshen is portrayed as a spiritual enlightenment through which the self breaks away from its isolation and becomes fully human as a collective being. Again, the present is always foregrounded as the moment of spiritual rebirth. In the second quotation, the juxtaposition of the past (a previous condition of subjugation) and the present (the moment of self-assertion through solidarity) neatly demarcates two
states of being: the old self languishing and the new self flourishing. The inevitability of this transformation is justified by the supposed inevitability of revolution as the ultimate redemption of history. By implementing a reform of the system of land ownership, the State creates (or actually invents) a revolutionary class composed of the imaginary “oppressed” whose definition continues to change with the versatile political climate under the new regime. Revolution, in all circumstances, is a perpetual process of “renewal” that recognizes only the present, for it is only in the present, however fleeting and indeterminate, that revolution realizes its full potential. The past is doomed to oblivion, while the future is but a predictable consequence of the revolutionary “now”: 

A group of villagers rushed to beat him. It was not clear who started, but one struck the first blow and others fought to get at him, while those behind who could not reach him shouted: “Throw him down! Throw him down! Let’s all beat him!” (318)

One feeling animated them all – vengeance! They wanted vengeance! They wanted to give vent to their hatred, the sufferings of the oppressed since their ancestors’ times, the hatred of thousands of years; all this resentment they directed against him. They would have liked to tear him with their teeth. (318)

They intended to continue the struggle against the bad powers in the village, settling accounts with each in turn... They had the
changing metaphors

strength, as the events of the day made them realize... As the meeting broke up they shouted for joy, a roar like thunder going up into the air. \textit{This was an end, it was also a beginning.} (318-319)

人們只有一個感情 — 報復！他們要報仇！他們要泄恨，從祖宗起就被壓迫的苦痛，這幾千年來的深仇大恨，他們把所有的怒苦都集中到他一個人身上了。他們恨不能吃了他。 (300)

Here, \textit{fanshen} as a mass political movement is invested with such emotional intensity – the outburst of a vengeful malignance – that violence becomes a legitimate course of action, all because at this stage \textit{fanshen} has attained a moral dignity in itself. The fictional masses, as if under a spell, are completely overwhelmed by the power of violence. The narrator, instead of maintaining her aloofness, seems to be equally engrossed in the excitement and concludes this episode with a prophetic vision of a “new
beginning.” The grandeur of revolution, then, is given full expression by the elimination of the critical distance between the narrator and the narrated reality. The indulgence of the narrator in her subject, moreover, makes it possible to transform inscrutable chaos and apathy into a “grand narrative” of class struggle. The transitional present, in turn, construes a sense of permanence, for it is pregnant with meaning and promises for the future. It is both destructive and constructive, a frozen moment of exhilaration that is to be repeated in time to come, for it is only the beginning.

What makes this obsession with the fleeting present different from the critical realism of May Fourth is that this “present” has a definite end. The narrator, by endowing history with an absolute certainty, eschews the moral dilemmas of May Fourth writers as they pondered the meaning of cultural modernity. As a fictional representation, Ding Ling’s novel aspires to a totalistic vision of history and reality typical of revolutionary romanticism. Any cursory look at the revolutionary historical fiction pursuing this common goal will discover the contradictions inherent in this mode of representation. First of all, as Huang Ziping remarks, revolution as represented in this kind of fiction is no longer a means to an end, but an end in itself. This is further complicated by the reality of revolution as it is practiced by the government to consolidate its power. Second, since this “end” must persist, revolution becomes a self-perpetuating process. As a result, the brilliant future it promises is forever postponed as if by default. This was especially true for post-1949 China since the definition of
Changing Metaphors

revolution, together with the label “counter-revolutionary,” depends entirely on an ever-changing political vocabulary. 36

Changing Metaphors: The 1980s and beyond

Throughout the late 1980s and 90s, both Chinese writers and critics have repeatedly called for “pluralism” in literature and culture that can accommodate not only different but also conflicting views of life, art and reality. 37 This pluralistic tendency is evident in the proliferation of new terminology for innovative works, e.g. neo-realism, experimentalism, postmodernism, avant-garde fiction, new historical fiction, etc. The list can run on indefinitely as East-West cultural exchange continues. Corollary to this is reconstruction of literary discourse vis-à-vis the rhetoric of Revolution-as-Progress, the monologic voice that speaks at every level of social and cultural exchange. What is involved in this new aesthetics is that the project of cultural self-invention in the Post-Mao era and beyond inevitably goes against the grain of utopian history in its representation of reality. In this connection, the disavowal of a teleological time scheme in fictional representation in favor of individual points of view and multiple temporalities can be seen as a literary subversion of official interpretations of the past. While a major

36 The self-perpetuating nature of revolution is discussed in Huang Ziping’s Geming, Lishi, Xiaoshuo (Revolution, History, Fiction), Chapter 2. For a critique of the ideological and propagandistic distortions of history in these fictions, see Liu Zaifu’s article on the end of twentieth -century Chinese revolutionary literature. Liu (142-190).

37 Liu Zaifu, for example, uses Bakhtin’s concept of “heteroglossia” to describe the current developments
Changing Metaphors

"paradigm shift" is yet to be realized, fictional histories are an important means to demystify the official grand narrative as they create imaginative (metaphorical) accesses to the past.

Whereas the social realism of Mao Dun, and later the socialist realism of Ding Ling and others, have a tendency, a desire almost, to seamlessly incorporate into fiction historical processes filtered through the lens of a totalistic political ideology, fictional histories in the 1980s and 90s, as we shall see, make use of the symbolic resources of Chinese culture to create alternative worldviews. Because of this, history-as-metaphor always involves a self-conscious irony and skepticism that is meta-fictional in nature. Be it historical fiction or historiographic metafiction, this characteristic stems from a conception of time and history that is peculiarly modern, in the sense that time becomes more complex and multiple, while history remains an unfinished text subject to endless re-visions. Fictional narratives, as Paul Ricoeur reminds us, create metaphorical truths where nothing is offered in reality. The main difference between the historical fictions of socialist realism and pluralistic narratives is, I think, a self-reflexive consciousness that informs the latter. This self-reflexiveness is typical of the historiographic metafiction I will discuss later. As has been mentioned, the ideology of socialist realism takes literally the official version of reality, hence erasing the distance between subject and object, art and reality, fiction and history. Under the Maoist banner of revolutionary romanticism, the elimination of critical distance between the narrator and her subject helps rationalize in Chinese literature and culture. The beginning of heteroglossia signals the end of "monologism" (3-24).
violence by manipulating human emotional responses to the most unnerving incidents in life, for violence, as it were, finds its authority in revolution.\(^{38}\)

From critical realism to revolutionary romanticism, historical fiction in China has come a long way from a search for meaning and cultural identity after the breakdown of the traditional system of values to a submission of the self to a totalitarian ideology that put an end to this project. It remains to be said that Chinese history from the turn of the century to the present has had immense repercussions in the literary realm that are yet to be confronted in present-day China. Li Tuo, for one, complains about the difficulty of writing as a resistance to “Mao style.” The difficulty stems from the effects of the uncertainty that results after a powerful ideology has been discredited. In China, Mao style has dominated all spheres of human activity for several decades. Even Li Tuo, an outspoken literary critic on the mainland today, recalls that “removing [Maospeak from one’s language] felt like depriving [oneself] of the potential benefits and the important right ... to pass judgment ... renouncing not only [one’s] own long-held values related to this right, but also the system of ideas that generates and sustains such values” (“Resisting Writing” 274). To contemporary intellectuals and writers on the mainland, Li Tuo maintains, the biggest challenge is not only to resist a particular style of writing (and speaking) that has been the only permissible register, but also to do so consciously. In

\(^{38}\) The representation of violence in revolutionary literature not only “normalizes” violence as a token of good faith but also prescribes a limited set of emotional responses to violence. For further discussion on this aspect of Communist culture, see Liu (142-190). Huang Ziping, in particular, links this phenomenon to the “apotheosis” of revolution (Geming 88).
China, an experimental spirit in aesthetic and critical discourse has grown out of this new self-consciousness, as seen in the renewed interest in Western theory and, more important, “culture” as an independent subject of critical reflection. Here, one glimpses at once the similarity and difference between Chinese intellectuals today and their May Fourth counterparts. On the one hand, the renewed interest in Western thought and culture is a corollary of the “cultural reflection” movement (wenhua fansi) that seeks to end the hegemony of Maospeak. It calls for a cultural enlightenment and claims allegiance to its predecessors in the May Fourth.\(^3^9\) On the other hand, the project of wenhua fansi today is geared toward a pluralistic engagement with history in the post-revolutionary age, which includes a rethinking of the Chinese tradition in terms of its contemporary significance.\(^4^0\)

The project of spiritual emancipation, however, is always complicated by a possibly unacknowledged self-negation, precisely because the universal nature of Maospeak has become an integral part of social life. To resist Maospeak, therefore, is to resist an already internalized system of values. As such, the negation of the revolutionary tradition necessitates a critical rethinking, instead of a total rejection, of the past in order to grasp the full meaning of “what happened,” a knowledge that has been denied most

\(^3^9\) Liu Zaifu is a prominent spokesman for the “cultural reflection” movement. Younger scholars like Huang Ziping and Chen Pingyuan express similar views in their recent work. See Liu, and Huang, Chen and Qian.

\(^4^0\) Apart from the “creative transformation” project, the so-called “search for roots” fiction, for example, is engaged in such a creative reassessment of Chinese culture. Notable examples are Wang Zengqi, A Cheng,
people for half a century. After years of suffocating under an oppressive, official monologism, in which the trauma of revolution has completely overturned the anxious hope of Progress, what constitutes the “new literature” today is no longer the utopian, didactic voice of old, but an open-ended, uncertain, and pluralistic dialogue between conflicting voices, at least in the cultural sphere. If we accept Leo Lee’s view that in early twentieth-century China the concepts of aesthetic modernity and social modernity were neither clearly defined nor differentiated, a development that is totally different from that in the West, then the implications for cultural rethinking today would be the continuation of the “unfinished project” of modernity. Lionel Trilling once said that modernism in Europe was “a culture’s disenchantment with culture itself.” In the Chinese context, this modernistic sentiment is indeed an important aspect of the so-called New Literature that emerged in the mid-1980s and 90s. The “disenchantment with (dominant Communist) culture,” so to say, continues to inspire creative writers to search for alternative cultural metaphors. In fact, the term “new” takes on more complex meanings than it once did during the May Fourth and subsequent decades, when literature was largely in the service of nationalistic needs.

The so-called “literature of the wounded” (shanghen wenxue) that emerged in the late 1970s, though not a major artistic achievement, is a continuation of the critical expose fiction that deals with the traumatic experience of the Cultural Revolution. Beginning from the mid-1980s, what comes to be known as “search for roots” fiction

Zheng Wanlong and Zhang Chengzhi.
renews the effort of Shen Congwen in recreating a cultural homeland that mediates between past and present, old and new. Instead of a progressive or utopian emplotment of history, these works usually show an individualistic concern with time past, i.e. individuals in search of a personal knowledge of the past, a cultural identity, or a spiritual homeland. Meanwhile, a new generation of writers have produced highly experimental fictional works that break new grounds in the ways of “seeing... as...” Yu Hua, for example, approaches history as a surrealistic nightmare beyond human comprehension.

In “Yijiubaliu nian” (“Year 1986”), for example, Yu Hua tries to locate violence in Chinese history. The Cultural Revolution comes back to haunt the present in the person of a madman, a former high school history teacher who apparently “disappeared” after his interrogation by the authorities. Ten years after the Cultural Revolution (i.e. 1986) the madman returns to his hometown obsessed with ancient ways of torture which he inflicts upon himself with sheer delight. Violence becomes a kind of “reflex action” in “Xianshi yizhong” (“One Kind of Reality”) where it is exercised without any justifiable human motives, except that in the final episode the male protagonist, having tortured his younger brother to death, is caught and later executed by the police. His body is then dismembered by a group of doctors who need his organs probably for illegal transplant operations. The neutrality of the third person narrator, moreover, intensifies the horror by the matter-of-factness with which bodily dismemberment and mutilation are described. Although guilt or moral retribution is out of the question in this story, violence, beginning

---

41 An excellent study of Shen Congwen is Jeffrey Kinkley’s *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen.*
as a mechanical reaction to the external environment, becomes an institutionalized practice that may pass without anyone's notice in everyday life.

All these developments signal the emergence of new perceptions of the relationship between art and life in response to a changing reality. They are, in brief, products of what Hilary Putnam calls the "sensitive appreciation in the imagination of predicaments and perplexities [in life]" that are essential to "sensitive moral reasoning" (87). If fiction approaches history first as a defamiliarization, the varying degrees of strangeness (or familiarity) reveal different attitudes toward language and reality, as well as different world visions. In this chapter I have chosen texts that are thematically centered on revolution as a historical process, from the critical realism of May Fourth to socialist realism and revolutionary romanticism. These fictional histories, I believe, can be approached from two perspectives. First, fictional representation of history can be conceived more in terms of artistic design and function. That is, as an object of representation, history is part of (but not exclusively) an aesthetic experience, be it catharsis, transcendence, shock or horror. An encounter with the historical experience in the literary text may bring pleasure of understanding and comfort, or it may disturb our sense of well being and control over life, or it may do both. This perspective is relevant to our consideration of the works of many May Fourth writers who, despite their didacticism, still strive toward an individual vision in fiction (including Mao Dun at his best). On the other hand, in certain overtly ideological works, history is identified with a theoretical hypothesis like the so-called revolutionary historical novel. Given the
narrowness of its scope (in terms of aesthetic imagination), which is usually inversely proportional to its scale (in terms of the quantity of material covered), this kind of fiction usually identifies theory with reality so that the use of history mirrors not the reality as such but the theory itself, as we have seen in Ding Ling’s novel. Thus, it is also a kind of defamiliarization in disguise, only that it demands conformity rather than questions it. In the following chapters, fictional representation of history will be treated primarily from the first perspective, i.e. as self-validating works of art that question established worldviews by redefining the relationship between the imagination and (historical) reality.
History as Allegory: Han Shaogong

As one of the major writers to emerge in the post-Mao period, Han Shaogong is widely acknowledged as a leading figure in the so-called “search for roots” literature (xungen wenxue), an important fictional genre that gained its momentum in the literary scene in Mainland China in the mid-1980s. In fact, it was Han himself who popularized the usage of the term “roots” in his article “The Roots of Literature” (文學的根) (“Wenxue de gen”) in which he laments the present generation’s loss of contact with China’s cultural tradition and therefore calls for a rediscovery of cultural identity through a return to the past:

Literature has its roots and it should take “roots” in the native soil of cultural legends and folklore. If the roots are not deep enough, the leaves will not flourish. Thus “searching for roots” is a common issue among writers from Hunan today. (Selected Writings 354)

文學有“根”，文學之根，應深植於民族傳說的土壤裏，根不深，則葉難茂。故湖南的作家有一個“尋根”的問題。

1 See, for example, Joseph S. M. Lau’s “Visitation of the Past in Han Shao-gong’s post-1985 Fiction” in Widmer and Wang (19-42); also Michael Duke (“Reinventing China” 29-53).
As a Hunanese writer, Han, much in the spirit of his May Fourth predecessor Shen Congwen (whose “native soil” fiction recreates an ideal realm of the pastoral world of West Hunan) yet less optimistic about China’s future, reasserts the significance of the Chinese tradition in the creation of modern Chinese literature. While acknowledging his debt to certain foreign writers such as William Faulkner and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Han nonetheless reiterates his position as a “root seeker,” not to glorify unquestioningly the superiority of the past but to transcend the limits of these “roots”: “More importantly, the traditional culture embedded in our native soil mostly belongs to the non-paradigmatic: colloquialisms, unofficial histories, legends, jokes, folk songs, supernatural tales … when the time comes, the paradigmatic is reinvigorated by the non-paradigmatic … by means of a critical appropriation” (357).²

This impulse to rediscover China’s cultural past through a critical appropriation (literally “absorption,” *xixiu*) is predominantly historical in nature, for he sees great potential for a national literature to flourish from the “blood-soaked book of history” (*yibu xie lin lin de lishi*) (355).³ This also suggests that for Han, literature is a kind of cultural memory, or a means to preserve, rediscover and, “reinvent” China’s past as a collective cultural heritage. As we shall see, Han’s project of cultural reinvention through fiction is fraught with despair and ambivalence; yet it is through this painful process of reckoning with one’s cultural past (including its glory and its evils) that the

---

² See Duke (41 n. 11, 43 n. 16) for Han’s discussion of his literary influences.
³ This common expression in Chinese already embodies a certain collective perception of history.
self is empowered to confront the present (and the future). This is particularly relevant to Han’s well-known stories “Guei qu lai” (歸去來) (“Homecoming?”), “Ba Ba Ba” (爸爸爸爸) (Father Father Father) and “Nű Nű Nű” (女女女) (“Three Women”) which form something like a “sequence” in Han’s uniquely “magical realist” style.4

Han’s association with magical realism (mainly the kind of fiction writing exemplified by Latin American writers) bespeaks his thematic concern. As Alejo Carpentier has said, the “marvelous real” is not something imposed or “invented” as an alternative or deviance to reality but is as concrete as everyday life in the history of South America (75-88). Obviously Carpentier made this statement some fifty years ago to differentiate the kind of magical realism which characterizes Latin American fiction from its European counterpart on the basis of cultural and historical specificities. In the Chinese context, too, Han’s magical realist narratives of culture and history can be more fruitfully explored in terms of the “marvelous real” in representing and interpreting the Chinese historical experience, a reality that may look “strange” from a distance (temporal, spatial and aesthetic). As John Burt Foster Jr. argues, “Only the sufferings of the damned can capture the feel of this epoch of extremity” (Forster 277), and it is as an extension of realism that magical realism gives vent to the “new attitudes toward epistemology and historical experience” that also “transform the author’s handling of felt history” (281, emphasis added). Here the notion of “felt history” (defined as “one powerful way that literature can depict history,” “its physical impact on the body and the

4 Cheung considers “Nű Nű Nű” as the culmination of Han’s developing style and historical vision.(ix-xxi).
senses,” and “in essence... the eloquent gestures and images with which a character or
lyric persona registers the direct pressure of events” (273) is equally valid to our reading
of Han Shaogong and many other Chinese authors writing at the historical juncture of the
post-Cultural Revolution era and a new phase of China’s modernization. For their works
too “dramatize the psychic costs of social change” and “the crude impact of historical
forces [that] overwhelm the personality”(275).

This kind of magical realist fiction commonly associated with Third World and
postcolonial writers always invites an allegorical reading, by which I mean the
marvelous reality in the fictional world always exhibits in its very composition a self-
conscious engagement with history, not as a faithful imitation but as a metaphorical
reflection of history’s imprints on human life. In the magical realist text the mundane
and the magical virtually co-exist and even supplement each other in their ultimate
signification. Han Shaogong’s fictional works, too, invite an allegorical interpretation.
The fantastic or magical realities portrayed in “Homecoming?” and other stories are
noted for their allusions to the tragic experiences in Chinese history, especially the
Cultural Revolution in which Han spent his adolescent years as a zhiqing (educated
youth) sent down to remote areas in Hunan under the party’s dictum to “learn from the
masses.” Both “Homecoming?” and “The Blue Bottle Cap,” for example, are also noted
for their portrayal of “‘scarred’ victims [who are] unable to exorcise the lingering
memory of a nation paralyzed by evangelical hysteria.”5 This allegorical representation

5 Lau (29). A similar reading is offered by Martha Cheung.
of the past as found in Han’s works, however, should be distinguished from the kind of political allegory sanctioned by the party, i.e. the notion of “making the past serve the present” (gu wei jin yong), or “manipulating the past to attack the present” (jie gu feng jin), which privileges the typicality of literature as a direct reflection of social life as defined by the party.\(^6\) As I will discuss later, Han’s historical allegories are grounded in an anthropomorphic interest in Chinese culture itself, so much so that these fictional histories are always embedded in deeper philosophical reflections on the human condition, the nature of historical knowledge in general, and the collective identity of “being Chinese” as it is culturally and historically defined.

Fiction, as it were, can be read as a kind of “literary fact” vis-à-vis the historical event (Danow 5-6). Fictional histories thus give a tangible form to historical consciousness amidst the numerous transitions and ends and thereby constitute what Yu Yingshi calls the “transcendent power of culture” (13). Despite the fact that Han’s root-searching results more often in the discovery of vice than virtue in the Chinese cultural past, he is consciously indebted to the Chinese literary heritage in the vein of the “strange” (guai) and the “extraordinary” (qi) (Lau 29). Thus, it is not difficult to appreciate the tension arising from a certain duality or doublebind in his narrative reinvention of China’s past, a problematic that preoccupied Lu Xun half a century before.\(^7\) The rest of this chapter is devoted to a reading of Han Shaogong’s fictions as

---

\(^6\) The quotation is from Barme (60). The doctrine of the “typical” in socialist realism is discussed in Jie (395-397).

\(^7\) Lu Xun, despite his “totalistic antitraditionalism,” is well-known for his interest in the “non-paradigmatic” within the Chinese literary traditions. See Lee, *Voices.*
collective allegories, so as to capture the author's unique vision of history embedded in his allegorical invocation of the Chinese past. It is also an unfinished project: in Han's own words, "the vast lands of China are awaiting a miraculous rebirth... So far we can only talk about a great civilization in the East in the vaguest terms" (Selected Writings 457).

Memories of oblivion: the allegorical tales

Since the late 1970s, when the Chinese government began to loosen its surveillance and tight censorship over art and literature, many aspiring writers who spent their youth during the Cultural Revolution have engaged themselves in rigorous efforts to make sense of the past in order to situate themselves within the complex fabric of the present. Having worked in the rural areas of Hunan as a *zhiqing*, Han Shaogong's early works are mainly realistic portraits of life during the Cultural Revolution. The more noteworthy works among these are "Moving the Red Forge up onto the Mountain" ("Honglu shanghan"), "Yuelan" and "Looking West on the Hayfield" ("Xiwang maocaodi"), which he himself admits are "naïve products primarily prompted by a sense of indignation and a desire to 'speak out for the people'" (Yuelan 266, qtd. in Lau 22). In his more mature works (from the mid-1980s onward), there is an obvious and quite dramatic change in his literary style that draws attention to its modernist and magical

---

8 From Han's afterword to Yuelan. Lau's essay contains a critical overview of Han's realist works in the 1970s and early 80s.
realist traits. In these works, the relationship between literature and reality is no longer mimetic but, as Martha Cheung puts it, “dialogic” in the sense that “literature function[s] as a mediator of reality, moulding and shaping it into something that can be examined from different angles” (x). Reality, as it were, is no longer at the service of its faithful observer, but somehow becomes treacherous and unfathomable. Characters are usually caught up in increasingly inexplicable, sometimes traumatic, events in conflict with one’s sense of causation or normality. In these stories, the individual has to actively interpret experience through his subjective consciousness instead of some stable reference from without. This may sound passé to the Western reader steeped in modernist poetics; however, in the Chinese context, this is at once an aesthetic and political gesture, a literary subversion of the monologism of the so-called “workers-peasants-soldiers” literature (gongnongbing wenxue). In Han’s fictional world, the perceiving subject is always placed within unfamiliar frames of reference open to multiple interpretations.

I will begin my reading of Han’s works with his three groundbreaking stories written between 1985-86, namely “Homecoming?” “Ba Ba Ba” and “Nü Nü Nü”. These stories, I believe, embody the kind of collective allegory that characterizes his manner in the mode of magical realism as well as what Linda Hutcheon calls “historiographical metafiction” mentioned in Chapter 1. History in the first two novellas is an obscure presence in the life and experiences of the main characters who remain half-conscious or unconscious of the social and political forces behind the deadly and grotesque
occurrences around them. The third novella deals with a more concrete reality but is cast
in the same mythical mode, in which traditional virtues and political vice distort and
finally destroy a person’s sense of self. Han’s fictional narrative, in effect, conjures up an
oblique, mythical and nonetheless starkly threatening reality that looks backward to a
forgotten, timeless antiquity and forward to the present and the future. The historical
nightmare presented in these stories undergoes a series of variations in Han’s other
fictional creations discussed later in this chapter. My argument is organized around
Han’s treatment of fictional time and space as he explores the dynamic relationship
between history, cultural identity and human consciousness.

“Homecoming?”: ghosts of the past

When it was first published in 1985, “Homecoming?” stirred up heated debate
among Mainland critics due to its ambiguity and “provocative” content, as it contains
implicit yet powerfully suggestive critique of the Cultural Revolution couched in a
mythical narrative frame. It is almost irrelevant to pin down a “location” for the setting
of this fictional world, for the imaginary locale is identifiable only through its
characteristic image of a remote, ancient and isolated village on the verge of extinction,
one that readers encounter most frequently in Han’s texts. Symbolically, it can be
anywhere that haunts, or simply a nightmare that re-enacts the ghastly experiences of the
past. On the most apparent level, “Homecoming?” is a story about going “home,” but

contemporary Chinese writers and sees in Han’s works a “problematic critique of traditional culture”
this time “home” is a pure accident, a detour to a largely fabricated place of no traceable geographic or historical origin. Certain traces of past times occur here and there to suggest a contrast between now and then. The “square block house” and the “staring gun embrasures” are signs of the past as opposed to the narrator’s “present.” The village, moreover, was organized as a Dazhai, a production brigade in the Cultural Revolution when “nobody got paid anything.” Most significant is the mention of a booklet containing “a miscellany of agricultural terms, the characters ‘1911 Revolution’, Marx’s essays on the peasants’ movement, and a map.” What seems to be missing is a sense of continuity between the two temporal spheres as if a void stands between them. The vacuum, as the story unfolds, is a lapse in the narrator’s memory, a lapse that causes the disjunction between the unfamiliar reality of the present and the creeping sense of déjà vu that leads to a threatening self-recognition. “Home,” therefore, is where the narrator experiences an identity crisis.

In “Homecoming?” the narrator, Huang Zhixian (a zhiqing figure) accidentally arrives in a remote village in the mountains. He is, seemingly, mistaken by the villagers as one Glasses Ma (a zhiqing who used to teach in the village). Ma fled the place after allegedly committing a murder ten years before. Huang, though astonished, fails to clarify this “mistaken identity” and is being dragged into this strange world as time goes by. In an almost dreamy manner, he develops certain “slips” in his memory which make his new identity look real to him. He begins to cultivate a “native” intimacy with his so-

(“Reinventing” 29-53).
called relatives in the village and enjoys some petty advantages (food and shelter) posing as Glasses Ma. He comes to realize that this Glasses Ma is a controversial hero in the village. Years ago, Glasses Ma killed a notorious bully and then disappeared. Huang’s “return” to the village, moreover, is not just a “homecoming” but also a reminder of an unknown horror among the villagers. Children see “devils” in his eyes while the women are terrified without any apparent reason. It seems another history, another past, has come out from nowhere to haunt him. At the same time, his experiences in the mountain become a nightmarish reality. Not only is he haunted by the horrific shadow of Glasses Ma but he also feels that he is Glasses Ma himself and is therefore guilty of murder.

Overtaken by terror he runs away from the village probably to escape a murder charge. Whether he is Huang Zhixian or Glasses Ma we cannot say for certain because he never has the courage or the certainty to stand up for who he really is in front of the people.

The story ends with Huang talking to a friend on the phone. He is stunned upon hearing his name “Huang Zhixian” coming out of the speaker:

My friend called me “Huang Zhixian”.
“What?”
“What do you mean what?”
“What did you call me?”
“Aren’t you Huang Zhixian?”
“Did you call me Huang Zhixian?”
“Didn’t I call you Huang Zhixian?”

10 Selected Writings 17. Trans. Martha Cheung (20). Subsequent page references to these texts are given at
The most telling scene occurs when the narrator examines his naked body in the steaming bath water under the pale blue light of a lard lamp. Looking at his naked body, a symbol of the naked truth of being, Huang is taken aback by an intense sensation as if he has never really noticed its existence before. It is at this moment of nakedness and solitude that he suddenly remembers an old scar from a previous injury and gets into utter confusion:

A lard lamp hung above me, emitting a pale blue glow in the steam, giving a blue tint to my body. Before I put on my shoes, 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. I had hands and legs... I had intestines and a stomach... and I had genitals... I, too, was a bluish fertilized ovum connected to a string of coincidences... / I started to wipe dry an inch-long scar on my calf. I had received the injury in a football pitch, where I was hit by a studded boot. But, no, I was wrong, it seemed. It seemed that I'd got the scar from a nasty bite by a short, dwarfish man... He
was coming towards me holding an opened umbrella and I was scowling at him... Then he went down on his knees... He jerked and pulled at the curb-robe round his neck ... I didn’t know how long it was before [he] gave up [his] struggle and became quite still....” (13-14, last ellipsis the author’s)

Was it an injury in a football pitch or was it the scar of a real crime forgotten? His sense of self gradually dissolves as he begins to internalize the guilt of murder voluntarily. The shock of this strange encounter with the “past” prompts a swift denial: “No, I told myself with desperate finality, I’d never been here before, I’d never known any short, dwarfish man in my life. And I’d never seen any pale blue glow, not even in my dreams. Never” (14). The chain of negative statements, ironically, reinforces the weighty grasp of this unwanted past on Huang’s consciousness as he can never really shake off this memory of a forgotten past.
It seems Huang’s narrative is deliberately bleak in its vision of reality that is not without a certain melodramatic black humor. At the beginning, he already associates the landscape with a decaying body: the land was “like a body stripped of skin and flesh,” the calves “had inherited old age at birth,” and the dark walls “were the coagulation of many dark nights.” His allusion to bandit stories recalled from childhood is but an unsuccessful attempt to interpret an experience beyond his grasp. Despite his bookishness, Huang’s vocabulary is inadequate whenever it comes to self-expression, either because he doesn’t dare or know how to respond. The keen observation of details and the profusion of imagery in description, as a result, out-strip his reasoning, resulting in an imbalance between seeing and understanding. Such a disjunction can be taken as an attempt to delineate the Chinese sense of selfhood and the bigger issue of the “gigantic ‘I’” the narrative invokes in the end: “I’m tired, I’ll never be able to get away from that gigantic I! Mama!” (18)

Huang Zhixian’s predicament, as many critics have pointed out, can be read as a reflection of the traumatic experience of the Cultural Revolution. Unlike much of scar literature, Han’s story shifts its focus from the opposition of good/evil to the more complex issue of guilt. A well-intentioned murder is, after all, a murder. More important, the story raises the issue of collective responsibility: in giving their approval to the murder, are the “people” also accomplices to the crime? The role of the villagers reminds us of Lu Xun’s condemnation of the onlookers in his short stories. Pursuing this line of thought draws us closer to the Huang’s (or Ma’s) dilemma: the murder that makes
him a hero in the past also threatens to destroy him in the present. Unable to come to terms with his two conflicting identities, the narrator chooses to run away from the people to seek temporary refuge in an ambiguous present. The question remains: what should be done to remedy the damage? The story does not provide a clear direction, and it remains a central preoccupation of Han in his later works. By evading the exact when and where of the setting, Han situates this story in a timeless present that somehow prevents a straightforward allegorical reading. The enhanced sense of uncertainty, progressing through the ambivalence of time, space and finally the central character’s self-identity due to conflicting interpretations of a personal and collective past, further obscures “what really happened.” By implication, it is a literary reflection not only on the political disaster that thwarts and distorts the development of the self, but also an investigation into the “dark and evil sides of human beings” (Shi 128, qtd. in Lau 29). Nonetheless, the nightmare of the Cultural Revolution still provides the best resource for Han’s cultural exploration since it has unleashed probably the darkest forces in human nature that characterize twentieth-century Chinese history: “My experience in those years brought to me my first sensation of pain in life... Ideals had their biggest victory and also their worst defeat [in those years]” (Selected Writings 486). The ambiguous setting in the text thus enables a more complex philosophical reflection on Chinese culture and history beyond its mere political concerns.

Unlike his early realist works, and most “scar literature” (shanghen wenxue) which depicts social evils as something that can be eventually purged or overcome by
collective will, Han's evocation of the question "Who am I?" prompts a critical rethinking of the nature of this collective will as it develops through time. It is possible that the narrator's identity confusion is partly due to his lack of a reliable personal history. Symbolically, "homecoming" is a journey of self-discovery, or even self-denial in the tradition of Lu Xun. However, as the narrator returns "home," i.e. when he flees the village and returns to the city, neither of his two identities make sense to him. Huang's failure to come into being as an individual thus culminates in his exclamation "Mama!" in the end. Here, "Mama" may be just an expression of helplessness, or it may refer to the motherland that gives meaning to the "gigantic I." On a more subtle level, "Mama" implies a critique of the collective will that impoverishes the individual self. As a result, the self breaks down immediately when it confronts its own "nakedness."

"Ba Ba Ba": grotesque descent

Compared to "Homecoming?", "Ba Ba Ba" is a more sophisticated work in which the treatment of time and history embraces Han's historical vision and critique of Chinese culture. Like "Homecoming?" the story is set in a remote village in the mountains isolated from the outside world with a way of life still dictated by ancient rites and customs. The exotic, dreary landscape of Chicken Head Village is typical of Han's allegorical landscape, i.e. an unfamiliar, symbolic space where mysterious local practices  

---

11 Han Shaogong's attitude toward Chinese tradition has been regarded by many critics as negative and pessimistic in general (Michael Duke, Joseph Lau); in their introduction to the story, Wu and Cheng regard "Ba Ba Ba" as "vibrating with life" and "a brooding sense of perceptiveness and disquiet." Wu and Cheng (1).
and eccentric behavior are the norm. The combination of folklore, oral history and legends couched in an archaic dialect in this fictional history reminds the reader of such works as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Midnight's Children*, where personal/fictional history is woven into national history to create a half-real, half-imaginative world, only that Han's novella is even more obscure in its temporal and spatial references, and the “history” recorded here is only recognizable in its portrayal of human evil and cultural vices that are customarily associated with the May Fourth image of “Chinese national character.” As a search-for-roots fiction, the story presents a skewed picture of the barbaric, superstitious and to a certain extent cannibalistic ancient society that nonetheless survives the threat of extinction. As Wang Zengqi, a pioneer of search-for-roots fiction in the 1980s and a former student of Shen Congwen, remarks, this kind of “shamanistic culture,” he believes, “is a reality” in itself, and it is “a birthmark of [the Chinese] nation” (“Preface” 2). Whether or not “Ba Ba Ba” is a realistic representation of the exotic rites and customs still practiced in certain parts of China is not a relevant issue here. Instead, Wang’s comments draw attention to the diversified nature of search-for-roots fiction as a cultural phenomenon in China today. In this light, the “roots” being searched for is intrinsically varied in nature and in kind, so that any formulaic generalization about this new genre should be avoided.

Be that as it may, these kinds of literary reinvention of the Chinese cultural past do share something in common: a concern with time and history, especially when these
two concepts interact with certain cultural perceptions of reality. In presenting “Ba Ba” as a narrative of grotesque descent, I will concentrate on questions concerning the fictional creation of time and history as a thematic and schematic concern: what vision(s) of history, especially Chinese history, is presented in the story? How is it related to the cultural tradition portrayed? On a meta-fictional dimension, I also want to show how Han’s narrativizing of the past encodes in itself a strategy of interpretation that forms part of the narrated content, so that the act of historical representation is also fictionalized.

These questions are also relevant to my discussion of “Nü Nü Nü” and other stories later on.

The story of the demise of Chicken Head Village begins with the birth of Bingzai, an idiot whose father has run away allegedly due to his disgust with his ugly wife.

Bingzai’s mother (whose name remains undisclosed) is believed to have brought a curse on herself when she accidentally killed a spider while tending to the firewood in the kitchen. Throughout his life, Bingzai’s language is limited to two simple phrases: “Ba Ba” and “F_ mama” (Selected Writings 158). Chicken Head Village, as typical of Han’s mythical landscape, is far from a pastoral idyll. Its inhabitants are rigidly old-fashioned, superstitious, ignorant and self-centered (not far from Lu Xun’s portrayal in “The True Story of Ah Q”). Apparently the origin of Chicken Head Village remains obscure, but oral histories and folklore have it that their ancestors migrated from a far-off land in the

---

12 This concern with time and history explains why the treatment of time in some search-for-roots fictions very often defy the realist convention. As Wang Zengqi remarks on this issue, “time is both changing and unchanging… The main concern of search-for-roots fiction is the process of historical and cultural change” (“Preface” 4).
east centuries ago, and eventually settled in these mountains. A major crop failure shakes the entire village to its foundations. Out of panic they resort to the ancient rite of human sacrifice to the rice god. When it happens that Bingzai is chosen to be the sacrifice, he is saved by a clap of thunder, for the villagers interpret it as Heaven's dislike of this meager offering. Then a sorcerer is consulted. Finally, they decide to chop off the “head” of the Crowing Chicken Demon, i.e. the Chicken Mountain, which they believe is responsible for the bad harvests.

However, this offends the people of Chicken Tail Village and a battle is in order. The villagers hold a meeting before the confrontation. They chop off the head of an ox to predict the outcome of the battle. When the ox falls forward, they see it as a sign of victory. After successive defeats, the villagers recall that Bingzai once muttered “F_mama” when the ox fell. They carry the idiot to the temple, prostrate before him and seek his advice. Bingzai, probably distracted by a chirping bird, cries out: “Ba Ba!” Excited by this auspicious sign, the villagers set out for another battle. In the end, Chicken Head Village is badly defeated and the young adults are forced to leave the place for good. The elderly, after killing all the infants, commit suicide by drinking a toxic potion in accordance with their ancient ways. Bingzai miraculously survives, and the story ends with a resounding echo of “Ba Ba Ba Ba Ba...” In this way the entire “history” of this ancient village comes full circle: utter destruction brought about by natural and human disasters forces the inhabitants to retrace the footsteps of their

---

13 Cheung's translation uses "cock" instead of chicken for all relevant place names. In my discussion
forefathers, and Bingzai, a symbol of the “roots of backwardness” (cf. Lau 36) seems to be a self-perpetuating virus that will never go away.

The allegorical content of the tale probably lies in its depiction of the self-destructive backwardness of Chicken Head Village. Since time immemorial it has remained trapped in a complete cultural stagnation:

The village perched high in the mountains above the clouds. When you left the house, you often found yourself stepping into rolling clouds... Sometimes you caught sight of the armoured birds on the trees. Black as coal and the size of a thumb, their call was loud and clear and rang with a metallic twang. They seemed to have remained unchanged since time immemorial.

(40)

This timeless existence finally bursts apart when change becomes inevitable. Yet, change is always disastrous to a culture that is ill equipped both technically and mentally for it. This image of a backward, stagnant culture, reminiscent of Lu Xun’s portrayal of the Chinese society in “The True Story of Ah Q” and “A Madman’s Diary,” is personified in Bingzai, whose retarded growth is probably one of the most terrifying

“chicken” is used to convey the sense of humor in Han’s text.
images of Chinese culture in modern Chinese literature. Bingzai in the text is portrayed as a grotesque figure, his deformity aptly reflects the degeneracy of the entire village society:

When he was born, he showed no sign of life for two whole days ... his eyes were dull, his movements slow; and his head was big, fleshy, and lopsided, like a green gourd turned upside-down. Anyway, it passed for a head, whatever oddities there were inside it. (35)

The demise of Chicken Head Village, it seems, signifies a "new beginning" that is also a repetition of a historical cycle: the young and the able will settle somewhere, and who knows if history will not repeat itself in the future? Bingzai, as the text implies, is one such certainty. David Der-wei Wang notes that Chinese literature in the New Period (i.e. the post-Mao period) is so full of "bizarre characters" (the crippled, the mute, the
“living dead, etc.) that it transforms the once glorified Socialist Heaven into a “grotesque haven” of the psychologically or physically deformed (Heteroglossia 209). Given that the official doctrine of socialist realism sanctions only a naive theory of literary representation (as a disguise for political propaganda), the insurgence of the grotesque in recent years constitutes a “return of the repressed.” This spectacle of deformity curtly reminds the reader of the “grotesque” nature of the official, sanitized version of reality. This aspect of Han’s tale of mythical origin and decline adds another dimension to the collective allegory of “Ba Ba Ba”: in addition to a scathing criticism of Chinese culture, the grotesque deformity of Bingzai is a mockery of the “Tall, Big and Perfect” hero (an expression for the stock character type exemplified by Hao Ran’s protagonist Gao Daquan, meaning tall, big and perfect, in The Golden Road); hence the “Heaven of Socialist China” is effectively demystified. Instead of a faithful reflection, the story offers a deflection of reality that articulates a metaphorical truth in Ricoeur’s sense. In searching for the Chinese “heart of darkness,” Han’s fictional reinvention of the Chinese past (distant and recent) presents a very complex vision of his “native soil” full of despair and indignation.

“Ba Ba Ba” combines a linear time scheme with a larger, cyclical one. The story of Chicken Head Village in general follows a linear pattern from its ancestral origin to its disintegration. Within this “historical” time frame, the narrative contains numerous references to time past, including pseudo-historical anecdotes and official records from previous dynasties. However, its geographical orientation is mainly couched in the
Han Shaogong

archaic term *zhou*, an administrative unit in ancient China. The larger, cyclical time frame is also evident in the ancestral history of Chicken Head Village. We are told that the origins of the mountain settlements are unknown ("There was no knowing where these villagers had come from"), and this exotic world is shrouded in mysteries and indecipherable signs ("On the walls patterns had been carved with knives. They looked like birds, like animals, like a map, like squiggles, but they were indecipherable. Who could know what had happened there?" [43]). What is known is that the ancestors came from a far off land in the "east" and settled in mountains perennially surrounded by mist and clouds. This piece of knowledge, we are told, is transmitted through ancient folk songs that are frequently repeated in the text. Meanwhile, this ahistorical, timeless existence is disturbed by the introduction of the historical, "real" present. Land reform programs, opium trade and other signs of modernization (leather shoes, for example) appear occasionally as time-markers. These references to the passage of time, though marginal, create an uneasy tension between time past and time present within the fictional time frame.

The cyclical structure of the narrative is also evident in the repetition of songs about tribal origins and migration. Ancient folk songs, as the narrator admits, are "a more detailed and authoritative account of the history of their ancestors" (43). Through these songs the villagers preserve their cultural memory. As the story unfolds, these seemingly innocent tunes turn out to be a kind of prophecy that foretells the fate of Chicken Head Village:
Grandma led the clan, Oh, from the east afar,
Grandpa left the east, Oh, a long long line behind,
On and on they went, Oh, the mountains were so high,
They turned back to look, Oh, their homes behind the clouds,

... 

The road grew weary, Oh, was the end not near?

奶奶離東方兮隊伍長，
公公離東方兮隊伍長。
走走又走走兮高山頭，
回頭看家鄉兮白雲後。

... 

越走路越遠兮哪是頭？

As this song is repeated in the story, history also repeats itself as the descendents are forced to migrate into the unknown future. The migratory pattern of the ancestors is bound to recur endlessly in time, and is equally meaningless except for the continuation of an absurd existence. After the exodus and mass suicide, the narrator contemplates the insignificance of human life in the eternal flux of time as he changes his focus to Bingzai, the idiot and only survivor of mass intoxication (another very telling metaphor). This final note strikes hard at the absurdity of human action and deepens the irony of the story: everything vaporizes in time, leaving only the vaguest traces which will never be understood.
“Ba Ba Ba” is full of inscrutable signs whose meanings cannot be decoded, mainly because they are far removed in time and space. The narrator, instead of taking up the responsibility of deciphering, admits his own limitations. He can only approximate “meaning” through conjectures and speculations based on unreliable sources. Yet, his survey of the strange customs of Chicken Head Village is deliberately couched in an intimate tone, addressing the reader as “you” as if in a tourist guidebook or travel journal: “When you left the house, you always found yourself stepping into rolling clouds.” “If you ran into another group of peasants offering sacrifice to the rice god, they might well chop off your head and offer that as well. If you ran into bandits, you would lose not only your purse but also your boat” (40, 42). Unlike the rest of the story, the third person narrator here presents him/herself as a guide, a story-teller who will lead you through the labyrinth of a mysterious forest. As it turns out, this affected familiarity of the “insider” dissolves into the incredulity of the “outsider”: “Who could know what had happened there?” From then on, we are confronted with a timeless domain of human existence, one that is unaware of its rapid decay:

The branches fell and rotted on the ground, the layers thickening year by year. When trod upon, they oozed black slime and a few air bubbles, exuding a pungent smell of damp and rot that hung so heavy in the air it enveloped the wailings of generations of wild boars. / It enveloped the villages too, and blackened them. (43)
Despite this affected "objectivity" in description (which is not without a sense of premonition), the third person point of view is used in a very limited sense. The narrator does not presume any omniscient knowledge of his characters, nor does he interpret their inner feelings and emotional life. As the most active consciousness at work, the narrator very often leaves his interpretation unfinished, leading to more questions than answers. This foregrounding of an "unknowing" interpreter of "what really happened" and the parallel temporalities in "Ba Ba Ba" constitute the meta-fictional dimension of the story. Instead of a linear unfolding of historical processes, there are temporal fragments that make up the fictional "present" of the narrative itself. The narrator, as s/he goes through the rugged topos of the past, makes use of this incoherence to create a cyclical vision of history accompanied by the consciousness of time as a process of endless descent, an eternal and meaningless flux. This duality of time consciousness, I believe, is the result of an unresolved tension between a mythical (cyclical) worldview and a "modern" (linear) one. As a mode of historical perception, it is very much in line with his May Fourth predecessors: the inevitability of historical change and the inability of the Chinese nation to live up to that inevitability. This dilemma is further translated into the coexistence of contradictory times, the time of a "timeless" repetition of human existence and that of a linear "devolution." Read as a historical metaphor, "Ba Ba Ba" also reveals the intellectual and moral dilemmas of Han's cultural/self reinvention.
Written in 1986, “Nü Nü Nü” takes the unanswered questions about time, history and self-identity of “Homecoming?” and “Ba Ba Ba” one step further by situating the inexplicable in the familiar reality of the present: the two realms of experience are put in a dialectical relation so that they function in the text as a mutual displacement, culminating in the narrator’s apocalyptic vision that finally gives way to an ambiguous note of “transcendence” reminiscent of Zen teaching: “When you’ve eaten, you do the dishes. / That’s all” (Selected Writings 249). The significance of this story lies in its integrative capacity, for it brings together the temporal and spatial transition we have seen in the previous stories and projects through the lens of the present a cosmic vision of human existence that is uniquely Chinese. In this light I begin my critical reading of “Nü Nü Nü” before drawing some preliminary conclusions on the three allegorical tales.

As its title suggests, the story is about the I-narrator (also known by his nickname Mao Ta) and three women: Aunt Yao, Aunt Zhen (Aunt Yao’s sworn sister), and Lao Hei (Aunt Yao’s goddaughter). Aunt Yao spends most of her life as an exemplary Chinese woman: frugal, hard-working and most of all, self-sacrificing to a fault. She saves every bit of left-over food, waste paper and garbage as if they were treasures. During the Cultural Revolution, the I-narrator’s father committed suicide and Aunt Yao contributed

14 “… a monk asks a Chan [Zen] patriarch what is the true self of a Buddhist follower, the patriarch, instead
significantly to the raising of the children. Like her father and grandfather, she is half-deaf but refuses to use a hearing aid simply because it requires batteries. One day, Aunt Yao has a stroke in her bath and from then on she is transformed into a completely different person. She becomes a nasty, greedy and hot-tempered woman and her behavior becomes totally unbearable to her nephew. Desperate, the narrator sends her back to the country where her sworn sister, Aunt Zhen, promises to take care of her. There Aunt Yao's transformation takes on material form: her body shrinks, her skin roughens, and her body mutates, first into a monkey and then a fish. Not long afterwards, she dies but no one knows for certain why. There is a hint that Aunt Zhen might have killed her out of both pity and frustration. Alongside this magical story is the world of mundane affairs. The narrator is having a difficult time with the authorities probably due to his views on the city's economic development. Meanwhile, Lao Hei, the epitome of the carefree, conceited, arrogant and yet vulnerable "modern" woman, seems to be overwhelmed by her fading beauty and dwindling popularity in the circle of urban celebrities. The story ends with the parting of the narrator and Lao Hei, each heading toward their own uncertain future.

Judging from the narrator's portrayal of city life we can assume that the story is set in the 1980s. Against this background, Aunt Yao's character in the first part of the story seems to be constantly at odds with modern life. Her deafness and self-seclusion leave her in virtual isolation from the world. Her eccentricities, moreover, have much to do with replying, asks the monk, "Have you eaten?", when the monk has said yes, the patriarch says, "Then go
do with her past experiences. As a country girl she was dishonored by her inability to bear children, her deafness left her practically no company in the factory where she used to work, and it was suggested that she was once estranged from her brother (the narrator’s father) due to her husband’s political background. Despite her good will and virtues, Aunt Yao is ostracized in a society that is itself befuddled by traditional and modern (political) “superstitions” resulting in grave psychological distortions. The narrator interprets her extreme frugality and seclusion as a desire for security:

She preferred to stay in the house with the door closed so she could keep a watchful eye on the shabby furniture and the few pickle jars in the house, and to keep up the vigilance she had dutifully lived with all her life. As soon as the door was closed, her towel was safe… Safe, too, was her teacup…. Likewise, her umbrella was safe. (111-112)

This obsession with security is suggestively linked to a nightmarish experience during the Cultural Revolution, when the narrator’s father took his life under the pressure of political prosecution. Twenty years later, the narrator still refers to the incident in these
terms: “he went away in the end – for a haircut” (108). The sudden disappearance of a family member was not uncommon in those days, and a similar episode is also recorded in Han’s semi-autobiographical work “Xiepi” (Shoes) in which his father also “went for a haircut,” and his mother, traumatized, developed an obsession with shoes (which remind her of her husband’s disappearance, not death).

Paranoia, as it were, is contagious. Years after the tragedy, the narrator is still affected by a fear of people talking in whispers: “Ever since then, I couldn’t shake the feeling that whenever the grown-ups put their heads together and talked in whispers, something bad was bound to happen … For everytime I woke up, I’d hear Father and Mother whispering in their bed on the other side of the room… This gave me nightmares” (210-11). This paranoid obsession with whispers explains the seemingly unreasonable fear of death expressed by the narrator at the beginning of the story, when he suspects the noise from the kitchen is Aunt Yao cutting off her own finger: “… there was no severed finger on the floor. But just then I really believed I’d heard the sound of a finger being cut off.” Yet, the narrator seems unable to believe what he actually sees, for the cutting sound from the kitchen continues to haunt him:

It had to be the sound of a finger being chopped into pieces, of cartilage snapping, skin and flesh being torn off, and the knife catching in the joints…. Bits of bone must be flying, blood streaming; and the blood, hot, thick and steaming, must be trickling down the table legs onto the floor…. (93)
This graphic description of self-mutilation, though a psychological projection, is a close relative of Yu Hua’s “Yijiubaliu nian” (一九八六年) (“1986”) and “Xianshi yizhong” (現實一種) (“A Kind of Reality”), where scenes of killing and mutilation abound. Apart from the fact that it partakes of the “grotesque haven” mentioned above, it is thematically relevant to the overall effect of the story. The narrator’s hallucination not only betrays his undeclared feelings for his aunt (whose frugality has become pathological) but also his traumatized self. Wrapped in the safety of his education and profession (he moves in a circle of intellectuals and there are hints he is a government official), the shadow of violence looms large whenever he is not certain of what he sees.

The perturbation provoked by a sense of “not seeing” recurs many times in the text during the narrator’s journeys to his home village in the remote countryside. Like “Homecoming?”, these journeys signify a confrontation with the past, but this time the past is not a mystery but a secret, something hidden in the depths of the memories of those who “have seen” what the narrator, as an estranged descendent, cannot see or share. In the text there are two major journeys through which the time-space of the present is

---

15 Yu Hua’s use of violence is tantamount to a display or exhibition of the mutilated body, drawing attention to itself as an anti-aesthetic image.
disrupted by the intrusion of the past, a time whose reality one can only approximate in the manner of high-school history books:

An ancient river ran through a stretch of fertile mountain land. Ancient pebbles of every colour lay scattered in its bluish-green waters. It was said that in earlier times, the river was flanked by thick woodlands.... Later on – no one knows when.... a road began to steal its way into these parts.... Still later – again, no one knows when – the authorities sent people to build a wall [in order to ward off bandits], like the Great Wall in the north. (96)

These observations are immediately followed by an old lady’s “stories which seemed to have something to do with Aunt Yao.” The landscape seems to communicate another reality – its history – to the observer looking for signs of the past, be it a road, a wall or traces of those who had once passed by. The ancient landscape, likened to an old man’s face (“What had they eaten to make their teeth fall out?”), softly melts into the face of the old lady who is “half hawk and half human,” “as thin as a blade of grass,” her eyes and mouth “[look] like careless slashes made in a piece of shrivelled cassava with a knife.”

---

16 The Chinese original does not have the phrase “like the Great Wall in the north.” The analogy is made implicitly by the narrator who later refers to the boundary wall as “xiao changzheng” (little great wall).
Confronted with these unfamiliar signs, the narrator feels “strongly that [his] home village [is] real; fate, too, [is] real, and [he has] a mystical connection with this stretch of alien land” (96).

Landscape in “Nü Nü Nü” is a receptacle of the secrets of the unknown past. During his second journey, the narrator is invited by a boatman to view the “boundary wall”:

The boat rocked unsteadily as the passengers leaned over to get a better view of the little great wall. Then they shouted excitedly – Yes, I see it…. but I didn’t see it…. / …. What did they see? Could it be that their eyes were different from mine? (132)

Almost immediately afterwards, he meets a shop owner who brings him to his ancestral home. This time, he has to “see” what is no longer there, for the “grand mansion” which was his ancestral home had been pulled down to build a school. What remains now is a footpath trodden smooth by the tenant farmers in the bygone days. “I could indeed see that smooth footpath… It looked strangely familiar.” As he contemplates what might have passed in those days, he suddenly comes to this conclusion: “Ah! So that was it.
Father had always refused to let me visit my ancestral home because he was afraid I would see this footpath... it would rouse me to rebellious disobedience.” (230, emphasis added) Throughout these passages, the act of seeing constitutes the main action that unfolds the many stories of the long lost past. More important, the “epiphany” after seeing the footpath powerfully suggests the subversive nature of memory recalled. Though he does not share the memory of the past, the sight of it, symbolized by the smooth footpath, can provoke a “rebellious disobedience.” Earlier on, the narrator laments that “[e]verything the older generation in [his] family said was vague” for the sake of “the edification of the young and ... a clear demonstration of their sense of social responsibility.” (201/95) *To see what is not there*, therefore, is one way to clear away this vagueness. But if vagueness is a kind of “edification,” seeing “what is no longer there” means a confrontation with a threatening truth. This way of seeing is by nature metaphorical, a way of “seeing... as...”

What truth is it? What makes it so threatening? After Aunt Yao’s death, the narrator makes a final journey to his hometown to attend her funeral. During the funeral, the narrator, overcome by anxiety, has another hallucination. In a dreamlike manner, he sees a tide of rats swamping all over the place, sweeping away everything on their way. “Earthquake!” This sense of crisis – an apocalyptic vision of collective annihilation – intensifies with the quickening rhythm of drums and cymbals of the funeral proceeding. Gradually, the two scenes melt into one. The concatenation of music and the earth’s uproar finally explodes in a poetic outburst that is apocalyptic in nature:
The Book of Heaven had unfolded, the bows were drawn taut.
Severed buffalo heads, dripping blood, hung beneath battle standards
of warring tribes. Where would you go? ...A momentous
ejaculation in ancient times, and a shrill scream during labour, had
torn the boundaries of earth and heaven, forcing the blood of
mythical emperors Yan and Huangdi into the very foundations, into
sunless coal seams, into hieroglyphics that arrived furtively, in
conspiratory tangled whispers, and into the slashed throats and
rattling shackles of condemned rebels in prison cells, where would
you go? Oh! Oh! The deluge, the deluge! One person has died, the
earth is shaking, the walls are crumbling, no one could save her just
as none could turn the boundless universe inside your heart and mine
into mere inventory. In the end, the sun is still out of reach; the
meteor descends only in paint; an-eye-for-an-eye, murmurs,
whispers – they are ephemeral. And yet, year after year, Time
reveals eternity and the perfect harmony of the taichi in the ears of
grain – to what end? (155)

天書已翻展，弓弦已張開，血淋淋的牛頭高懸於部落的戰旗之
下，你將向哪裏去？...遠古一次偉大射精，一次划出天地界
限的臨盆嘔叫，使炎黃之血浸入牆基和暗無天日的煤層，浸入
陰謀般糾結嘶咬並繚繞而來的象形文字，浸入死囚中革命黨人
被割破的喉管種腳鐐的當當脆響，你將向哪裏去？啊啊，洪水
滔天，一個人死了，牆垮了，誰也不能救她正像不能將你和我
內心無限的宇宙變成一紙賬單。太陽終是遙遠，流星落入彩釉
，以眼還眼悄聲碎語終是須臾，惟時間在年年的穀穗上昭示永
恒和太極之圓滿究竟是爲了什麼？ (245)
As the consummating metaphor of the story, the “earthquake” alludes to the massive earthquake that struck North China (Tangshan) in July, 1976, followed by Mao’s death two months later, marking the end of “the May Fourth generation of Communist revolutionaries.” This long passage, wrought in powerful metaphors, throws into relief the tension built up so far in text. Allusions to classical Chinese literature, legends and philosophical texts flow freely with uniquely modernistic sentiments and fin-de-siècle premonitions. In one paragraph the narrator captures the universe of human experience: from myths of creation to the rise and fall of empires and civilizations, from the sanctity of life to unredeemed condemnation, from the good harvests of human virtues to the cultural wasteland wrecked by the elements, all this boils down to the questions of “Who am I?”, “Where am I?”, “Where would you go?”. The lyrical, subjective mood sustained throughout this poetic passage, moreover, strategically encapsulates the main actions of the entire narrative and carries it far beyond its supposed boundaries. Soaring up and down to embrace both heaven and earth, present and past, it suddenly gazes back to the apparently trivial figure: Lao Hei. She, too, is part of the narrator’s universe, and it is his final parting with this self-indulgent goddaughter of Aunt Yao that brings the narrative to an end:

When you’ve eaten, you do the dishes.
That’s all.

More than 200,000 people were killed and millions were injured and left homeless. As Maurice Meisner remarks, “The year 1976 marks not only the close of the Maoist era but also the departure of virtually all of the original generation of Chinese Marxist revolutionaries who had grown into intellectual and political maturity during the May Fourth Movement” Meisner (426-427).
Whether this ending is a compromise or transcendence is open to interpretation. Be it a "complete rejection of traditional Chinese culture," (Duke, "Reinventing" 52) or "an admission of intellectual impotence" (Lau 42) Han’s apocalyptic vision expresses his ambivalence toward both tradition ("the walls are crumbling, no one could save her just as none could turn the boundless universe inside your heart and mine into mere inventory") and the Maoist version of modernity (the earthquake that brings down the "little Great Wall" in his home village), an as yet unresolved dilemma that informs most of Han’s works.

Traumatic Encounters: history/memory/fiction

Like many Chinese writers, Han Shaogong’s short stories constitute a major part of his creative works. A critical examination of these prototypes and themes, therefore, is indispensable if we are to gauge the meaning and significance of Han’s fictional world from a “macrocosmic” point of view. In this section, I offer my interpretation of a number of Han’s short stories. My reading is organized around two themes. First, the

---

18 In the text, the word xu is used in the names of most women in the narrator’s home village; for example, Zhen Xu, Yao Xu, is used by the country folk for Aunt Zhen and Aunt Yao.
Memory as History/ Memory against History

A recurring question in Han’s works is the nature of memory and the way it makes the world real to us. His protagonists are always confronted with false memories, i.e. an inability to remember, or to differentiate between “what really happened” and “what makes it look better.” Sometimes, false or inaccurate memories are a result of external (usually political) pressures; sometimes, they grow out of the need to justify the present, or to get away from the grips of the past. In both cases, memory is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is constitutive of self-identity; hence the meaning of one’s existence; on the other, memory, especially when it is involuntarily or accidentally recalled, may bring along certain “evidence” that disturbs or challenges this identity and the reality it supports. If this is so, other questions seem inevitable: how does memory
shape our perception of reality? Does memory affect our understanding of history? What kind of “history” arises from our memories, as distinguished from the textbooks and official historical records? How useful is this “historical memory” in arriving at some truths that have been hidden, for whatever reasons, from us? What I am interested in here is not to discover answers to all these questions from a clinical or psychoanalytical point of view. Instead, I want to show how these questions are addressed in the literary text, and how fictional memory makes use of “history” to create a multi-faceted reality of its own.

As in “Homecoming?” memory plays a significant role in Han’s other short stories. “The Blue Bottle Cap” is a good case in point. Set in the Cultural Revolution years, it tells the story of a Chen Mengtao, whose obsession with a blue bottle cap triggers the narrator’s curiosity about Chen’s background. From his friend (allegedly an expert in popular history and family names) he knows that Chen spent some years in a labor camp where he was responsible for moving and burying dead bodies. One day, after he has removed the dead body of the guy who used to sleep next to him, Chen begins to develop signs of insanity. He becomes abnormally humble and polite, insisting to help in even the most trivial and personal matters to the extent that he becomes a nuisance to others. One evening, he is asked to open a bottle of wine for others and the bottle cap for some reason disappears. Chen, from then on, has been looking for that lost bottle cap wherever he goes. “The Blue Bottle Cap” echoes “Homecoming?” in many ways. As an examination of the traumatic effects of the Cultural Revolution, it raises
questions about guilt and individual responsibility. Chen, the victim of a contagious sense of guilt, goes insane because he feels responsible for his friend's death. This episode tellingly reveals the psychological distortion resulting from a profound sense of guilt, one that is not connected to the committing of a crime, but to the witnessing of it. What makes the matter more complex is that Chen's life-story has become a taboo to those around him, i.e. the other witnesses themselves. Why this silence? Is it because they also feel responsible for Chen’s misfortune? The narrator, a stranger in the first place, seems to be affected by Chen's story himself. In the end, he is caught speechless by his friend's story. For no apparent reason he feels unable to think or speak. The story ends with a melancholy reflection on life:

I saw again the roofs floating on the clouds of smoke rising from the kitchens. Below the roofs lived the people and their families, hundreds and thousands of them. Over the years, these roofs had sailed here from I know not where and dropped anchor, forming a market town. Maybe some day in future they would set sail again in different directions and put into port somewhere else to set up new worlds. Quietly they had come, quietly they would go.... Would they sail again in the next morning? – I studied them carefully. No, not a single word.

As if the bottle-cap had gone missing. (34)

我又看見前面那一片炊煙浮托着的屋頂，那屋頂下面是千家萬戶。穿過漫長的歲月，這些屋頂不知從什麼地方駛來，停
Again, the questions of “Where am I?” “Where would you go?” come to mind. The futile efforts to discern the future of mankind implies also the futility of human endeavors: not a single word. The comings and goings of life will, eventually, silence the disturbing noises of the Chen Mengtaos in our memory.

A psychological projection of this inexplicable guilt is given in another story “A Case of Murder,” where the female protagonist is caught in a Kafkaesque labyrinth of plots and counter-plots that finally culminate in the murder of an alleged intruder (101-117). The identity of the victim is never revealed, nor can anyone, including the heroine herself, be sure that she is the murderer. However, the overlapping of illusion and “facts” intensifies her feeling of horror and guilt. It is unclear whether she will turn herself in to the police (probably not), but it is very likely that she will remain a “murderer” for the rest of her life.
The problematic nature of memory is inseparable from the phenomenon of forgetting. Sometimes forgetting is an unconscious tactic to hold on to what we want to believe is real. In “Farewell Yesterday” (250-299), the narrator is confronted by a total stranger who happens to know him from his zhiqing years. After some soul-searching, he finally “discovers” his lost memories in his diaries, getting to “know” people he does not even recognize when seeing them on the street. His forgetfulness, as he admits, begins in 1973 (probably when he was transferred back to work in the city), and his memory of his post-1973 years has virtually rewritten his memory before that watershed year. We can infer from the text that he has totally revoked his previous political belief ever since, so much so that he is a “total stranger” to his pre-1973 self.

The portrayal of the life of the educated youth being sent down to the countryside is realistic enough: the government’s policy not only causes disruption to their education (a far-cry from the label “zhiqing”) but practically encourages a self-repression of normal human desires both material and sexual. The psychological impact of this coercive policy is all too predictable. The mutual attraction between the narrator and Ying Li is thwarted not only by their ideological differences but more importantly by their class difference or “political elements” (zhengzhi chengfen). In the text there are hints of trepidation and self-disgust on the part of the narrator who feels “estranged” from both his past and present self. Leafing through his dusty diary he is
forced to acknowledge the reality of a past he would otherwise have denied: he is who he was twenty years ago. This self-recognition is a traumatic encounter in itself. The narrator is seen actively reinterpreting his diary as if it were a mystery book of adventure, trying to find lapses and inconsistencies that might alleviate the pain. Yet, he is also reminded of the inconsistencies of his very act of re-organizing his memory of the past: “I think memory is a killer. Most of us – the revolutionary youth born after 1949 – are victims of our memory” (264). “I take a dose of civilization everyday; that’s why [my] memory is always a remake.” (276). Personal memory, against this historical context, is the effect of a collective spell – “the beauty of revolution”: “The revolutionary regime finally succeeded in confiscating all other memories, in creating a culture that produced many such diaries…” (265). The irony is that this collective or “national memory” (chuanwenxing de jiyi) is also capable of producing contradictory “truths” in time, little cracks on the icy mirror of a sanitized “reality.”

The problematic relation between memory, history and a narrative understanding of the past takes a grotesque turn in “A Bleeding Nose,” “A Prophecy of the North Gate,” and “Sounds from the Hilltop.” In all these stories, the past “returns” to haunt the present and, miraculously, transforms it. “A Bleeding Nose” is a “ghost story”: a young man helping out in the kitchen for a village commune is attracted by a photograph of a beautiful lady and
becomes obsessed with the history of her family, whose village mansion has been turned into the headquarters of the commune. The hero, Hong Zhiren (nickname "Zhizhi"), is overwhelmed by an irresistible aroma the first time he enters the house. As if under a spell, he believes that he "sees" what has happened before through the dismal objects that remain there (a mud-covered hairpin, a pale light bulb, a dried up pond). The lady in the photograph is the second daughter of a Mr. Yang, the owner of the "haunted" house. She used to be an opera singer before the revolution and no one knows if she has survived the persecution. Zhizhi gradually develops a "friendship" with the photograph, and a romantic one, too. When his "crime" (i.e. hiding a photograph of a counter-revolutionary) is criticized by the Commune Secretary at a mass gathering, blood gushes through his nose until the whole area is soaked up in blood. Several years later, Ms. Yang visited Zhizhi’s "pig-blood tofu" stall in the market. Now a complaisant and "politically correct" comrade of the Party, Mrs. Yang, in her middle age, has lost not only her beauty but also her personality as Zhizhi perceives it. The narrator does not mention whether or in what way she has been "reformed," only that Zhizhi, taken by surprise, feels a warm current stirring inside his nose again. All he can think of is perhaps he should get married.

This little "ghost story" echoes both "Blue Bottle Cap" and "A Case of Murder" in terms of mood and theme, and it contains many recurrent details
found in Han's other stories. Though it is just an imagined encounter with a
“ghost” of the past, it eventually materializes in an actual public trial, a farcical
display of violence and bloodshed. The “ghost,” finally, does not so much go
away as reincarnates in the “reformed” (hence depersonalized) Mrs. Yang.
Zhizhi’s bleeding nose therefore signals the pathetic and pathological nature of
“thought reform” (sixiang gaizao), and the melodramatic ending is a mockery
of its solemn and lofty mask. The dilapidated country mansion is a favored
symbol of the past that has been unscrupulously “erased” from history (as in
“Homecoming?” and “Ba Ba Ba”). The contemplation of historical ruins
evokes the “huai gu” sentiment in classical Chinese literature, commenting on
the present through “what happened” in the past. Thus the nostalgic theme
becomes apparent: political slogans painted on the walls of these historic sites,
like “Sweep Away the ‘Four Olds’” (hengshu sijiu) in this story, are contrasted
with the surrounding environment as an unnatural presence, a monument not of
liberation but massive destruction: “During that time, the commune did not
need to buy firewood. ‘Sweep Away the “Four Olds”’ had destroyed many
wooden Buddha statues and uncovered loads of newspapers and books ... a
huge pile thrown carelessly in front of the stove” (81).

“A Prophecy of the North Gate” recounts a history of violence that
remains a “ghostly presence.” Its time frame extends from the present to the
pre-Revolution period, when the North Gate was already well known as “a
place of killing” (56). Han’s description of a beheading is reminiscent of both Shen Congwen’s “The New and the Old” (新與舊) (“Xin yu jiu”) and Lu Xun’s “A Public Execution” (示衆) (“Shizhong”) in the bemused tone with which he portrays traditional executioners and the moral revulsion the narrator feels toward the callousness of the participants and observers. Against this background, the narrator (a civil servant involved in the project of building a chemical plant in the neighborhood) relates a “legend” he learns from hearsay about a good military officer, General Wang, in the Republican period who was put to death when he was defeated by a warlord. The public trail of General Wang not only reveals the meaninglessness of wars and revolutions, but also the futility of “educating the masses,” whose ignorance and apathy is a form of violence that indirectly legitimizes any institutional crime. Wang’s widow, having tried to stop the execution in vain, left her shoe in the middle of the street. From then on, reports of mysterious footsteps keep circulating, and the people begin to talk about Wang’s innocence. As the narrator ponders the meaning of this legend, Wang’s “ghost” reappears in the form of a stone statue in an underground tomb recently excavated by a construction team. The narrative then changes its focus to the narrator’s solitary walk along the riverbank. In a familiar nostalgic mood, he comes before the stone statues, staring hard into their inscrutable faces as if looking for some clues.
The biggest stone being was looking into the far off land, lips tightened. I guessed he didn’t want to speak about the past. I reached out to touch his legs and was scared by their icy coldness. I didn’t know who made these ancient statues; I didn’t know whose faces they were supposed to represent.

Suddenly, I could feel the icy coldness of two thousand years ago.

No matter how hard he looks into the past, he is met with dead silence: the past does not speak.

In the end, the narrator relates another story, a prophecy of an old man ten years ago: “ten years later gold will grow from the earth in this place, blood will flow in the river.” Past and present is curiously intertwined in this prophecy, for the “gold” refers to the underground tomb and the “blood” will be the pollutants emitted by the new chemical plant. There is, indeed, a note of absurdity in this final prophecy. The meaning of the underground tomb, like the pollution caused by industrialization, is calculated in terms of economic
value. The narrator's ambivalence toward modernization is also discernible in the way he visualizes its process: “The water discharged from the chemical plant was red as blood. Half the river was dyed in red. The wind was spreading red powder all over the place. Everything – walls, roads, chicken and ducks, clothes, white hair, even urine – turned red” (64). It is not clear whether this “red horror” has a political analogue. As the narrator “walked out of this red,” he can only submit himself to “the demands of the people” and carry on with his work. This ending echoes “Homecoming?” and “NÜ NÜ NÜ” in its ambivalent ending: “walking out” of a threatening present, it seems, is the only imaginable way to “carry on.” Nonetheless, the image of a world painted in red resonates with the “bloody” stories that make up the history of the city and thereby reinforces the sense of absurdity that pervades all human actions in the present. From beginning to end, the lonely figure of the narrator evokes the image of the traditional poet whose nostalgic contemplation inevitably leads to a lament on human folly and his own frustration as an intellectual. With the narrator returning to his routine life, the ending suggests once again the irresolution of the “enlightened” self. Hovering between past and present the knowledge gained of the past brings little comfort to the troubled soul, but only creates an alienating double vision of reality as a result of his grotesque (narrative) encounter with “what happened.”
So far we have looked at Han’s short stories in terms of grotesque encounters. With the exception of “Murder” and “Bleeding Nose,” the short stories examined here (and many others) are told from a first person point of view. Like Han’s other first person narratives, the narrator in these stories is always a passer-by (usually a zhiqing figure) who finds himself in a series of strange occurrences, evoking a past that he does not know but is emotionally attached to. Interpretation of these strange events goes through layers of storytelling within a narrative frame provided by the inquiring voice of the first person.

Before turning to Han’s first (and most recent) full-length novel Maqiao cidian, I would like to summarize certain key aspects of Han’s treatment of time and history in fiction using two stories, namely “Sounds from the Hilltop” and “Youhuo” (Lure), as examples. The first one is a fictional investigation into the nature of memory, history and the cultural factors that contribute to a collective historical consciousness. It begins with, again, a ghostly encounter that unearths the long buried secrets of the past as the narrator tries to make sense of his supernatural experience. The second story deals with the present, but it is a present that yearns for its own transcendence in time and therefore is a philosophical reflection on human experience of time and history.
The narrator's encounter with the ghost of Er Laoguan (literally “second brother”) one evening on a bridge triggers off a series of questions about the dubious “truths” that remain outside of historical records. The mystery (i.e. the silence) surrounding the death of Er Laoguan has to do with the local customs that defy rational explanation. In fact, the narrator does not really see the ghost in all clarity. What he meets with is part of a decaying body: a “shadow” stretching out a hand with no fingers except the thumb. (135) When he is told that the “person” he sees died ten years ago, he tries to dismiss it as a local superstition. But the silence of the villagers about this mysterious figure arouses his curiosity. His attempt to break this silence results in a series of anecdotes about local history and customs: the people are the descendents of a major clan in ancient times. Apart from the unrecorded events of local uprising, the narrator is told that in the past the local people used to kill all their first born. Then he learns that Er Laoguan was a local bully privately put on trial and executed by his fellow country folk despite government prohibition. At some point he admits that one can never be sure of what people say, as the elders like to use this kind of fiction as a moral lesson to the young. (139) Yet, reality regresses into the grotesque once again when the narrator comes across a tomb where he discovers the corpse of a leper (believed to be Er Laoguan). Surprisingly he discovers an unlit cigarette that looks exactly the same as the one he handed to the ghost on the bridge. Like the cigarette, the ghost (and whatever it represents) remains forever on the hilltop.
What I have not mentioned so far is a scene in the middle of the story that recalls the ritual of execution (*kai kuan*). The violence and collective mania invested into the killing, ironically, reminds us of an equally horrifying scene in Ding Ling’s *Sanggan River*, only that Han’s treatment serves a very different purpose:

*Kai kuan* [i.e. the execution] always took place at night. [The local tradition had it that] all adult male members should participate… A huge fire burned feverishly when the oldest members of the village chanted the *kuan*, i.e. their family teachings. Afterwards, the parents, together with their kinsmen, would burn the condemned alive with oil or shoot him. As they put him to death, they had to shout, “You deserve it! It’s good for you!” … If they failed to do this, or showed any sign of sadness or hesitation, they would be slighted by the whole clan.

開款總是在夜間，全部成年男子參加….衝天火光中，全寨最年長的人唱款，也就是宣布家法。然後由伏法者的父母和全部嫡親行款，動手把這孽種用火油燒死或用銃擊斃。他們一邊殺自己的親人還必須一邊大叫：「殺得好！殺得好！活該！」….如果他們不這樣，如果他們臉上有任何悲戚或遲疑，他們就會永遠受到族親的鄙視。

(139-140)
Before this happens, there is a brief mention of the narrator preoccupying himself with "revolutionary novels" (138), and a local history expert who denies any truth in the villagers' account of kai kuan (139). These two details constitute a negation of the "unknown," or fantastic interpretation of the past by asserting an "objective" and "scientific" explanation of "what happened": "Since I was reading revolutionary novels at that time, I simply ignored the superstition of the peasantry" (138).

Later on, we know that the narrator, despite his skepticism (or because of it), is drawn deeper and deeper into this opaque and mysterious world, the more he admits "I don't know...," the further away he is from the world of irrefutable certainties represented by the revolutionary novels and the local history expert. Is not the ghost story, one that is retold with so much force and seriousness, a mockery of the worldview behind the "revolutionary novels"? Is not the account of an unverifiable episode – one that lives in the memory of the local people and to a certain extent still influences their lives – in itself an acknowledgement of the cultural forces that partially shape our reality?

Juxtaposing Ding Ling's description of class struggle and land reform with Han's description of exotic rites and customs, the "strangeness" of Han's magical realism seems to be a reinterpretation of the "verisimilitude" of Ding Ling's revolutionary realism. In the revolutionary novel, violence is
legitimated by a totalistic claim to truth, and everything is "scientifically" explained. In contrast, in depicting the ancient ritual, Han’s narrator has to temporarily suspend his "scientific" judgement in order to accommodate himself to uncanny events. By situating his fictional history in the realm of the fantastic and the grotesque, Han has created an alternative space for what is human. It is, in this connection, a critical re-reading of the fictions of the past (and the “truth” it represents) by reframing them within the defamiliarized context of a ghost story.

“Lure” is a philosophical engagement with time and history. It tells the story of an excursion to a legendary waterfall (the “lure”) made by a group of zhiqing during the Cultural Revolution. The protagonist, again, is the I-narrator who initiates this journey. As typical of Han, the journey is endowed with spiritual meanings. Not even an overt motive is given to the journey, only that the narrator seems to be upset by his friend’s mention of his sister (an absent character) during a conversation. It turns out that the “lure” is not so much the waterfall but what it signifies: a symbol of self-transcendence, a purgation of the spirit and a renewed relation between man and Nature. It begins with a poetic description of the natural landscape that is almost impressionistic in style. Compared to the frustration and boredom of his daily existence, the narrator develops an emotional attachment to the natural
landscape, animating it with his vivid imagination. Thus he begins his excursion as a journey into a transcendental realm:

I looked up and saw a thread of sky; a vulture flashed by... I felt that time was condensing and expanding. Everyday we look into all kinds of calendars, staring at the manmade markers on clocks and watches; we believe we have control over our time. How ridiculous! In the midst of this greenery can’t you see one moment is eternity? Can’t you see at the sound of a water drop your body has passed through ten thousand years and it will continue through thousands of years until it fills the universe?

我看見了頭上一片天空，還有一隻飄忽的岩鷹，突然感到時間正在濃縮和膨脹。我們盯着一張張人造的日曆，盯着鐘錶上人爲的刻度，以爲抓住了時間，實在太可笑了。在這片綠色中你不覺得瞬間就是永遠嗎？不覺得在那空空的一聲水響中你的身體已延續了萬年而且將要萬年地延續下去直至遍布宇宙嗎？ (44)

The desire to transcend mortal time is the motivating force behind this adventure.¹⁹ All the way the narrator is immersed in a private communion with Nature. He tries to integrate his mind with the landscape but more often he is baffled by it. The landscape, after all, remains a mystery to him, but it is this

¹⁹This echoes the sic transit gloria mundi theme in the Chinese poetic tradition.
sense of the unfathomable that confers upon Nature a transcendent appeal.

Nature, to him, is a “jade-colored fairy tale” (44). The journey to the waterfall, therefore, can be read as a journey into eternity, a timeless existence that envelops all times, all histories. The yearning for freedom is manifest in the wild horses that roam free in the forests. Unknown to men, these horses (never seen but only heard of) are in contrast to the horses tamed and used by men for centuries, suggesting the un-freedom of life under the dictates of “culture” (as opposed to “nature”). This apparently simplistic juxtaposition is, however, complicated by the discovery of a historic ruin, probably the house of a renowned family in the past. Again, the narrator’s meditation on its history evokes the mood of huai gu. “But who are these people? And where have they gone?” Looking at a tree in a barely recognizable courtyard of the mansion that looks “robust” from the outside but badly rotted from the inside, he thinks it “might have witnessed a great many things to have develop these fissures of darkness” (46). This is probably a cultural metaphor for present day China, but it also expresses an existential anxiety, an awareness of time as a destructive force. The discovery of human traces in nature leads to a further reflection on the essential “sameness” of all: “All things are but an undifferentiated whole. [In Nature] human beings get closer to other living creatures. If all depend on sunlight, air, earth and water, how can we say that these basic common needs are less important than the differences between us, between them?” (47)
When they reach their destination, that is, the waterfall, the narrator is struck by a vision of the eternal human struggle for victory. The waterfall is a display of sheer force, and it is likened to “rows of horses, their masters nowhere to be found, galloping toward an unknown and unreachable destination.” (48) Finally, the narrative redirects our attention to the human world. As the zhiqing are trying to write inscriptions on the cliffs to commemorate their arrival at the supposedly “greatest” waterfall in the region, they discover another inscription made in traditional Chinese characters. Dated July 15, 1954, it was made by a geologist called Qin Kelian, saying that the greatest waterfall lies five steps further up the river. Taken by surprise, the narrator experiences a kind of “epiphany”: he can almost feel the warmth of Qin’s presence, and yet he does not see him. Meanwhile, his friends look like strangers, “so distant, as if we were centuries apart.” (50) This sudden “enlightenment” suggests that the journey to the waterfall is also a spiritual quest. Given the immediate context of the story, we can infer that this yearning has its roots in the “unfreedom” of life, giving rise to a desire to break free from the prison house of existence and be at one with Nature. Yet, the narrator’s “natural world” is humanized by the traces of men in the past, symbolized by the ruined old mansion and the inscription on the cliff. What is lacking in this natural world, at the present, seems to be a sense of continuity, for these traces, he implies, belong to the bygone past (the inscription in traditional characters reinforces this sense of discontinuity). Thus the ending
suggests a spiritual reunion with the cultural past (the emphasis here is on the symbolic association of the traditional Chinese characters, rather than the year 1954), which in turn necessitates a self-distancing from the present.

**Cultural Lexicology: a fictional history of words**

Han’s experimental novel *Maqiao Cidian* (A Dictionary of the Maqiao Dialect) is a modern work of fiction cast in a controversial, pseudo-traditional mode. It is controversial because, as stated in the “editor’s preface,” it is intended to be a “dictionary” of the Maqiao dialect (3). Included also by the author is an index of the numerous words and expressions according to the number of strokes. Yet, the structure of the text follows a narrative pattern that gives a more or less temporal and thematic coherence to this “dictionary.” The novel, on the whole, is a hybrid form that combines the anecdotal, episodic and prose style narrative in the framework of an anthropological glossary. Similar traits can be found in his earlier stories, such as “Shiyi sanlu” (“Three Lost Records”), “A Prophecy of North Gate” and “Renji” (“Human Traces”). In fact, one can easily trace the genealogy of this “novel” in Han’s other stories that exhibit similar interests in linking word origins to distant historical events, and in constructing new historical anecdotes of the recent past by linking it to various word origins from antiquity to the present.
History of/as Language

I will first look at the various intertextual links as a background to *Maqiao Cidian*. First of all, the collage of styles in storytelling is characteristic of Han’s allegorical style. “Three Lost Records” (*Selected Writings* 51-55) is a case in point. It is a semi-autobiographical piece that deals with three personalities, namely the “hunter” (*liehu*), “secretary” (*mishu*) and “chess master” (*qiba*). The narrator begins with a short introduction to the background of his stories, an autobiographical account of his “sent down” years in Miluo County, Hunan. There is an historical account of the region back in the Spring and Autumn period (722 BC to 481 BC), plus citations from some fictive “historical records”. (As we shall see, intertextual references to historical records is also frequently used in *Maqiao*.) What prompts the narrator to write this story is the numerous “strange and marvelous” things in Miluo. Although most of these are recorded in local historical records, “there are still a few trivial matters that are not eligible for inclusion in history, but… it would be a pity to miss them.” Apart from the anecdotal style, Han’s language is typical of traditional prose with the frequent use of four-character

---

20 This is Han’s favorite locale due to its long and complex history. Han gives a detailed account of its historical origins and transformation in *Maqiao Cidian*. Han’s interest in this place has much to do with his interest in ancient Chu culture, which he considers a “non-Confucian” branch of traditional culture. See “Roots”, op. cit.
sentences and classical Chinese expressions. Despite its archaic outlook, the “trivial matters” related here are satirical in nature. The nonchalance and matter-of-factness with which the narrator approaches his subject endows the “extraordinary” (being ludicrous) with a sense of plausibility. These anecdotes are extraordinary (qi) in their own ways, for they reveal the confusion and chaos as a result of poor and ineffectual implementation of government policies that fit but clumsily into the local ways of life.

As has been mentioned, the impulse to rediscover the past by tracing the semantic roots of characters and their transformation in time is already apparent in Han’s earlier works. Here I will briefly refer back to two familiar examples as an illustration. In “Ba Ba Ba” and “Nü Nü Nü” attention is drawn to different “linguistic identities” and their implications:

I’d no idea why … there was the word “xu” in the names of most women in my home village, or why the people there addressed their wives, daughters, sisters, aunts, and sisters-in-law alike as “xu” and didn’t use the conventional terms of address which indicate their positions in the family hierarchy. Some scholars said that the practice of communal marriage in primitive times had left its mark in the language and that this was one of the surviving linguistic traces of such a practice.

(128)

21 Among these are the words “zhi” 之, “yu” 于, “gu” 故 and “ran” 然, and archaic expressions such as “wen qi yan” 聞其言, “le shen” 樂甚, “xuru” 須臾 and “yun yun” 云云, etc.
They still used a lot of archaic words – they said “watch” instead of “see” or “look”, “speak” instead of “say”, “lean” instead of “stand”, “lie down” instead of “sleep”. And they used the word “qu” as a pronoun to refer to someone nearby. They also had an unusual way of addressing their relatives. The emphasis seemed to be on ... the unity of a large family, for ... they addressed their father as “uncle”, their uncle as “father”, their elder sister as “elder brother,” their sister-in-law as “elder sister”, and so on. (43)

These linguistic habits reflect certain cultural values with regard to individual identity and the social structure that supports this identity. It is also a very Chinese way of self-perception, for the individual is always seen through the
Han Shaogong

immediate social context, identified by his or her group identity ("xu" or "qu", uncle or father, brother or sister), no matter how imprecise and confusing.

Han’s interest in the history of the Chinese language is closely related to his awareness of cultural crisis. In an article titled “The World,” Han laments the deplorable fate of the Chinese language among Chinese people themselves. “I suppose a nation’s demise begins first from its culture, from its language” (Selected Writings 455). A country’s language, to him, bears the mark of national history, like history inscribed in the great fictions about wars, resistance and slavery, thus “[m]any Chinese characters are stained with blood, but their color has faded” (456). Language, therefore, has a historical significance which can best be revived or discovered in literature, i.e., through an imaginary encounter with the faded “blood stains” which go unnoticed in our daily discourse.

*Unearthing cultural history*

In brief, *Maqiao Cidian*, a novel in the form of a dictionary, presents a person’s long-time research into the local dialect and the stories and legends from which different word-meanings are originated. Yet, it is not a person’s story, for its numerous entries find their place in a long history of cultural change, carrying with them the collective memory of those who live in that
language-world. The narrator (allegedly the editor of the dictionary) is responsible for making these word-stories alive by following, detecting and imagining their itineraries in time, so that these individual pieces finally yield a larger meaning as a whole. In this novel, Han maintains his critical stance toward traditional Chinese culture, identifying certain “roots” in the Chinese character that contribute to the misery and misfortunes of the nation in modern times. It also probes the Chinese cultural psyche by revealing the unspoken language of its thoughts, emotions, as well as moral and social values. In this section I will first look at the “earth” on which Han’s fictional anthropology operates. Then I will examine the “blood stains” Han’s narrative recovers from oblivion, mainly through the protagonists who inherit and inhabit this piece of earth, and in whom the memory of the past is, sadly, bound to be lost.

The cultural history Han’s narrative sets out to unearth begins with the Luo River (Luo “gang” in the Maqiao dialect). Symbolically, the river is conventionally linked with the “river of history” (lishi de changhe), which also implies the origin of civilization, just as the Yellow River is traditionally associated with Chinese civilization. The first three entries of Han’s fictional dictionary are an account of the historical origins of the Luo River, which was named after the ancient state “Luoguo” (“guo” means “state”) sometime during the Spring and Autumn period. According to the historical account given in Zuo zhuan (one of the key historical texts from this period), says the narrator,
Luoguo was destroyed by Chu, a much more powerful state in the southwestern part of China at that time. The people of Luo were then dispersed into the nearby areas of Xiangbei. “Rivers are named after people; thus the Luo River received its title” (Maqiao Cidian 17). The Luo River, therefore, carries with it the history of a long forgotten people, whose name is preserved only as a geographical reference. The Luo State, in ancient times, was also known as “Luojia man”, literally “the barbaric (man) Luo family.” In fact, “man” is a derogatory nickname of the people in the South. In Maqiao, we are told, male adults are habitually called “man ren (barbaric person)”, or even “man ren sanjia” (three households of man ren). This unusual expression, says the narrator, imposes upon the individual the “mark of three families,” which means “the concept of ‘individual’ is far from complete” (16). It is from these conjectures that the narrator begins his search for the legendary Luo City, a kind of diasporic settlement after the Chu invasion. However, the few pieces of historical evidence he manages to gather bear little resemblance to the present:

I couldn’t help thinking that, after a merciless persecution, a savage and bloody massacre unknown and unimaginable to us, the name “Luo” had remained a taboo here… / Frankly, their country is unredeemably lost.”
The narrator's search for history embedded in the indigenous "earth," though not very successful, explains why he slights the exhibitions in the museum: "Later on I came across some bronze antiques in a museum under high security... What's the value of all this? I could step right into the Han dynasty everywhere I go, cracking and breaking beneath my feet godknowshowmany cultural treasures" (18). This is said, of course, not without self-irony, for his personal museum, too, is bound to disappear through the many "crackings and breakings" over time.

The history of Maqiao, likewise, has left traces in the local language. We are told that the numerous armed conflicts between the Qing government and the so-called Lotus Thugs (lian fei) resulted in the massacre of seven hundred people during an uprising led by the bandit leader Ma Sanbao. Curiously enough, as he goes through the historical records of the Qing dynasty, Ma's image (a deluded coward who betrayed his family and followers) is in sharp contrast to that presented in the "New County History" sanctioned by the present government, in which Ma is a "leader of the peasants' uprising." (21) This casual reference to the discrepancies in historical representations is strategic, for this incident seems to prefigure a
more recent one, and is thus fraught with ideological underpinnings: “In the entire history of the so-called ‘Lotus State’, ... seven hundred people in Maqiao and nearby areas were killed.” Many returned from afar in order to “live and die [with their families] only to find that they had given their lives to a madman.” The uprising, the narrator believes, “is a major reason for the decline of Maqiao (22).

These ironic twists and turns of historical events are repeated in what immediately follows. We are told that in the Ming dynasty the imperial army in Hunan suppressed another peasant uprising in Shaanxi. The leader of the uprising took his revenge by launching several attacks in Hunan, randomly killing thousands of innocent people. This bloody event has a curious reversal in the twentieth century. In the 1960s, poverty and starvation resulting from the Big Leap Forward movement forced many young adults in Hunan to flee for their lives to Shaanxi. The “intimacy” between the people in these two regions, we are told, explains why the people in Hunan used to address their counterparts in Shaanxi as “lao biao”, meaning one’s cousins (23-24). History, especially national history, it seems, is always reflected in the semantic changes and innovations in language. In fact this link is utilized by the narrator to reinvent the history of Maqiao as a collective metaphor. In Маqiao Cidian, the histories of individuals and cultures are embedded in the history of a local dialect. Word origins are then treated as a repertoire of collective memories
and a basic unit for the study of human experiences, beliefs, social customs and behavior. This unofficial history, as the novel demonstrates, finds its way into the literary text as a metaphorical reference to "what happened."

"I always wanted to go beyond the plot and its causality, so that I could set my eyes on the apparently meaningless things" (88). Indeed, *Maqiao Cidian* is full of "apparently meaningless things" made significant by the stories behind their verbal expression. Among these there is no lack of apparently innocent expressions that are laden with political meanings. For example, the expression *gongjia* (public property) retains much of its "feudalistic" association, for in Maqiao plots of farmland are still identified in terms of its previous owners, although collectivization has been implemented for years. The character *gong*, the narrator surmises, is closer in connotation to "the ruler" (*jun*), rather than its modern meaning "public"; hence the habitual use of *jia* (lit. "family") as a suffix to both *gongjia* and *sijia* (private property). In Maqiao, the narrator concludes, "the collectivization of land ownership up to the early 1970s was just an institutional formality, since it had not yet matured into a personal feeling, at least not the personal feeling of all the people" (155-156).

This ironic "reading" of a common expression emphasizes the role of subjective or localized production of meaning in daily speech which, on a
subconscious level, deviates from the "official" language of the State. As a *zhijing* growing up in the turbulent years of the Cultural Revolution, the narrator is also skeptical of his "education" in a backward rural district (part of the "rustification program" of the State). This skepticism results in a self-distancing from the reality narrated despite his participation in it. As an outsider, the narrator is seen actively learning from the unfamiliar colloquialisms as expressions of a certain cultural psyche, making connections between word formations and possible historical antecedents, and turning them into a *means* to interpret his own experiences. Thus the "local" is not a political or cultural ideal (as the "rural" in Maoist discourse) but is treated as a source of new metaphors with which reality can be redescribed.

In China, the attempt to create a national language based on the vernacular began as early as in the May Fourth period. The goal was to devise a common language to educate the broad masses. Language reform has taken on an additional significance for the Communist Party because it serves both ideological and pragmatic purposes. Apart from spreading propaganda in regions of different dialects, a unified system of writing and pronunciation, especially a simplified one, makes education easier among the masses. But this pragmatic concern is to be differentiated from the rhetoric of revolution that forms part of the political content of the language reform. Revolutionary

---

22 The historical and political background of the language reform is well documented in Seybolt and
discourse, as a recent study reveals, is the “symbolic capital” with which Mao Zedong constructs his “utopian republic.”\(^\text{23}\) It is, in effect, the “emotional roots of political power” (Apter & Saich 5) whose final step is the evolution of “Mao Zedong Thought”, i.e. the consecration of Mao’s texts and the canonization of his beliefs (305-306). Powerful as it is, the lack of structural mechanisms to convert timeless principles into reality inevitably resulted in the political disasters of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, both being the means with which Mao “sought to hang on to the desired norms and behavior by preserving the power of symbolic capital” (303).

To a significant extent, this historical and political background explains Han Shaogong’s hypersensitivity toward language and the use of language in specific social and cultural contexts. The relation between word and world, says the author, is very difficult to change. “The many taboos in everyday life are accepted as the most sacred and most unchangeable products of word-meaning formation.” Any attempt to change it would provoke serious cultural and political conflicts. As such, “vernacular language becomes politics, obscure poetry becomes politics, all new novelistic forms, too, becomes politics” (“Tools” 158-159). Han’s concern over the politics of language bespeaks his own dilemma in struggling against the tyranny of a canonized set

\(^{23}\) An excellent analysis of Mao’s use of “symbolic capital” is given in Apter & Saich.
of lexicons and syntax represented by “Maospeak.” *Maqiao Cidian* therefore can be seen as a literary subversion of the “symbolic capital” of the Party State by evoking trivial anecdotes as part of collective cultural memory. By revealing the semantic disunity in language use that affects both official and unofficial languages, the trivial stories throw a critical light on the relationship between language and perception. The semantic disunity caused by the disjunction in old and new words and meanings is then rechannelled into personal reflections on history, memory and human destiny. In what follows, I will examine these “meaningless things” that disturb the coherence of revolutionary history as they are unearthed in Han’s fictional narrative.

**Personae**

I will call the first set of fictional personae to be considered here “the visionaries and the martyrs,” for they represent two extreme responses to the “unbearable lightness of being” that characterizes individual historical experience. These two personae in the novel are also set against the looming shadow of another historical figure, Qu Yuan, who took his life by jumping into the Miluo River (the present day Luo River) centuries ago. A famous poet and statesman of ancient Chu in the Spring and Autumn period, Qu Yuan has become a mystical figure embodying the ideals and aspirations of generations of intellectuals. The development of the “Qu Yuan myth” thus offers
Han Shaogong

interesting insights into the historical vicissitudes of the relation between
Chinese intellectuals and the political regime they serve. The juxtaposition of
the tragic hero, Qu Yuan, and these individuals not only reveals the dialectical
relation between the "meaningful" and the "meaningless", but also throws light
on the cultural value of personal histories (as opposed to the "meta-narratives"
of revolution).

The visionary and the martyr are, respectively, Ma Ming and Ma
Wenjie (or Ma Bazi). The visionary stands for one who resists political co-
option by a hermitic withdrawal from society. (Rejection, as we shall see, is
not the same as opposition.) The martyr, in this context, does not mean a
heroic sacrifice for the sake of truth or ideal, but one who resists the evil of his
times by taking his life as a self-redemption. Qu Yuan, in this context, is a
mediating figure, a distant echo from a distant time, a painful reminder of the
continuous struggle of men against the inhuman forces of their times. All these
figures, despite their differences, are rebels in their own ways. Qu Yuan
contended against viperous scandals and took his life when the Chu state was
destroyed. As a model of loyalty and intellectual integrity, Qu Yuan also
appeals to the popular imagination as a "good official" and becomes deified in
popular mythology. The other two heroes considered here are lesser in
grandeur, for they resist society by a total rejection, i.e. without a lingering

---

24 See Schneider's historical analysis of the evolution of the Qu Yuan myth.
Han Shaogong

sense of redemptive passion as Qu Yuan’s death positively asserts. Ironically, their historical identity lies precisely in their rejection of this identity.

Ma Ming’s background is probably as follows: he is a descendent of a local gentry family. After his family’s decline, he resides in the ancestral home which comes to be known as “Hall of the Immortals,” where he lives with three other eccentric figures. They are known as the “Four Guardians of the Buddhist Temple” (Sida jingang). He does not work, for he believes work belongs to the “vulgar creatures” (suwu); he survives on eating butterflies and all kinds of insects, for they “capture the essence of Heaven and Earth”; he sleeps wherever he likes even in the most severe weather. In effect, the Four Guardians have virtually “elevated laziness to an absolute and pure state of being” (49). The narrator first meets Ma Ming for the first time in the Hall as he tries to paint political slogans on the walls there. Upon arrival, he notices that the Hall is left to ruins, but signs of its inhabitants show their “wit” of surviving deprivation (47). Ma Ming seems to be well-versed in the classics. He likes to speak in a bookish manner and is adamantly opposed to the implementation of simplified characters, calling it “an act of treason” (48).

Despite his eccentricities, Ma Ming insists on his unique sense of morality. He never accepts any gifts or offers of help simply because he does not contribute in return. Ma Ming’s hermitic reclusion, in the end, reduces him to a “nobody” who has severed any possible link with the world. Yet, Ma Ming’s
“disappearance” from the world is also a conscious rejection of the vulgarities of a worldly existence: he has nothing to do with the public, the law, morality, and all kinds of political movements, for “these are no longer his history, but some kind of entertainment he enjoys watching from a distance” (52). By withdrawing himself completely from the world, he becomes the “highest authority” of his life:

He did not intend to be human; therefore he was more powerful than any power that exists. With a casual sleight of hand, he defeated the society’s last attempt to interfere with his life. From then on, he turned himself into “nothing,” a blank space, a wavering shadow in Maqiao.

Interestingly, there is no lack of such personalities as Ma Ming in Maqiao and the nearby villages. Most of these eccentrics are from well-off families. They are intelligent, well versed in classical literature, but are all arrogant non-conformists. It is suggested that Ma Ming turns himself into a statistical “nil” after a persecution during the land reform. By reducing himself to a simple “nil,” Ma Ming has relinquished all possible identities available in
the vocabulary of the State – the citizen, the landowner, the intellectual, and above all the “counter-revolutionary” – since he has virtually disappeared from the official records. To a certain extent he is an abomination to the existing social order, for the authorities find it hard to either incorporate or incriminate him: he is beyond classification, a non-class being, an embarrassment and a mockery to the collective will. Obviously Han is trying to create a comic modern “legend” for satirical purposes, for one can hardly imagine such a “hermit” can escape the system of surveillance and punishment of the totalitarian government. As a fictional “ideal,” he survives as an “immortal” outside of this world, outside of History.

Ma Ming’s eccentric behavior, his rejection of society by turning into a “nobody”, is contrasted with the reluctant hero Ma Wenjie. To the people of Maqiao, he is a controversial hero. He was a platoon commander under the Republican Government back in 1948, the year that marks his greatest achievement and downfall. In fact, Ma had no idea whatsoever of contemporary politics, for he was still immersed in local anti-Japanese campaigns when Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-shek (the then President of Republican China) called off their “divide and rule” negotiations. After a series of misfortunes, Ma eventually became a commander under a losing branch of the Republican army.
As could be expected, Ma Wenjie was betrayed when the Communist Party took over. To pacify him, the new government let him take charge of the provisional security committee in Maqiao, so that the local guerillas would surrender. All his former colleagues were then killed as a result. Ma committed suicide soon afterwards. As a military leader, he was reputed for his high morals and good discipline of his subordinates. Ma was also known for his Daoist practice, which he incorporated into military training. It seems natural, therefore, that Ma was regarded as a local hero in his times, combining patriotism with traditional values. Yet, he is also a reluctant hero, for his "achievements" are only the result of a series of contingencies beyond his ability to control or even understand. He reacts impulsively to external threats, relying purely on his good nature and sense of justice. It was based on this sense of justice, therefore, that he took his life, just as he once ordered the death of his subordinates for violating army discipline. After his death, Ma was labeled an "anti-revolutionary bureaucrat", for which his whole family suffered until 1982, when he was officially "vindicated".

The year 1948, therefore, has a special meaning for the people of Maqiao, something that outsiders cannot understand by consulting history books. To them, Year 1948 is not the same as History would have it remembered, for they have their own vocabularies for important times. To the people of Maqiao, Year 1948 can be one of the following: (1) the year of the
Sino-Japanese Confrontation in Changsha (while the actual battle ended six years before); (2) the year Grandee Mao became the Chairman of the Local Security Committee (although the Japanese had already surrendered); (3) the year the bamboo in Zhangjia Street flowered (the edible seeds brought relief to a food shortage); (4) the year Ma Guangfu, Ma Wenjie’s son, began his formal education (which Guangfu “postponed” to 1951 in the official records, thus confusing many who stick to this peculiar calendar); and (5) the year Ma Wenjie joined forces with the Republican army. To the people of Maqiao, “1948” is an alien word, for their memory of events does not follow calendar years (130-31). Likewise, the civil war and the major historical events that followed do not concur with their memory of “the year...”. To the narrator, Ma Wenjie’s Year 1948 “is but an empty space to me before 1982” (128). To the Liberation Army, on the other hand, their memory of Year 1948 remains “an absolute victory...”, which seems like a “short-circuit of time” (134). As the narrator remarks, time is “a prey to our sensibility” (149).

Compared to Ma Ming’s complete withdrawal, Ma Wenjie’s suicide is typical of the traditional hero who takes ultimate blame for the defeat of his army and the death of his men. A hero betrayed by his own times, Ma Wenjie has seen and lived through the Revolution, its victory being nothing but a series of intrigues, misjudgments and betrayals. One wonders what makes the difference between the visionary and the martyr when they are faced with the
larger-than-life choice between life and death? Despite their differences, both show an inclination toward a Daoist way of life, in their own ways. They, too, choose to “transcend” the vulgarities of life by self-denial. The visionary denies the world by a radical “dehumanization” so that he becomes immune to the injuries of outside forces. The martyr, on the other hand, denies the world by usurping its right of verdict. If Ma Wenjie is “realistic” enough as a fictional character, Ma Ming can be ranked among the traditional recluse, only that he takes it to a new extreme: Ma Ming simply walks out of his social existence and remains aloof to human sufferings. Unlike Lu Xun’s Madman, whose madness is required as a pretense for his condemnation of traditional culture, Ma Ming’s rejection of society does not even need a pretense at all due to the total bankruptcy of cultural values. Brought up in traditional culture, its bankruptcy means the bankruptcy of the self-in-culture, which in turns explains his conscious choice of being “nothing” as a radical form of resistance.

The stories of the two “Ma’s” are interwoven with that of Qu Yuan, whose suicidal jump into the Luo River makes him one of the most memorable legends of all times in China. In the narrator’s words, Qu Yuan is also a character who rejects the world that rejects him in the first place: “If he was not able to save this world, at least he could reject it” (59). In the Maqiao dialect, Ma Ming is a typically “awakened” (xing) person, which means “confounded”
or stupid (yuchun). In his reflection on Qu Yuan, too, the narrator uses the word “awakened” and ponders its double meaning:

In about 278 BC, the awakened Qu Yuan – at least this was what he believed – grew weary of the apathy of his countrymen. To resist the evil way, he jumped to his death in the Miluo River… In fact, this was the least suitable destination for a demoted official from Chu, for it was where thousands of Luo subjects took their refuge after a bloody massacre by the Chu army… History was repeating itself, only that the actors had changed their roles. Having wandered thus far from home, to what end do you speak of your rights and wrongs?

……

Where else could he experience a more glaring vision of “xing” [awakening]? (58)

約在公元前二七八年，醒的屈原，自認醒的屈原，不堪無邊無際的舉世昏醉，決意以身殉道以死抗惡投水自斃於汨羅江……其實這是一個楚國貶臣最不應該到達的地方。羅人曾經被強大的楚國無情地驅殺……歷史在重演，只是已經換了角色。同泊異鄉淪落，恩怨復何言？

……

他還能在別的什麼地方得到更為明亮刺目的——醒？
Han Shaogong

To Qu Yuan, the River Luo is a “mirror” reflecting the absurdity of power, the rise and fall of empires in the eternal flux of time.

Is this jump a sign of awakening or madness? In the Chinese literary tradition, madness is feigned by sages and talented officials as a “delicate weapon,” “a pose of eccentricity and a convention of passive protest” in the game of politics. As a central theme in the Qu Yuan lore, madness can be understood in terms of a “mad ardor” that invoked associations with the abandonment of public service as well as impotence and death. It is the latter that has the strongest appeal to the new intelligentsia in the twentieth century (Schneider 14-15). The significance of the Qu Yuan lore is that the multi-faceted image of Qu Yuan as it developed through centuries serves as a “mediation” of conflicting sets of values, i.e. the aristocracy and the people, sober diplomat-lawmaker and mad-genius poet, romanticism and realism (211).

History has given its evaluation of Qu Yuan’s heroic act, but it cannot tell us what he actually thinks at the time of his suicide. The narrative attempts this answer: “He must have suffered an unprecedented shock, so much so that he was suddenly overwhelmed by a great fear, a great fear of that larger life beyond life; of that larger history beyond history. He had no choice but jump into emptiness (59). Thus Qu Yuan’s madness is in fact a manifestation of his “awakening” to the painful and threatening truth of his life, or human destiny
as a whole. By jumping, Qu Yuan finally "unites the two opposite meanings of the word 'awakened'" (60). Qu Yuan, too, is a mediating figure in this novel, for he embodies the ideals of the recluse and the tragic hero. By invoking the classic legend of Qu Yuan as a prototype of his characters, the narrator (also named Han Shaogong) not only places his narrative within the tradition of the lore, but also expresses his empathy for the "counterculture madmen" in their "pursuit of the True Way" from antiquity to the present.  

The second set of personae is more down to earth in outlook. The three characters to be considered here are what I would call "victims of the collective will." The first two are the "untouchables"; while the third one is a victim of social taboo. The untouchables are ostracized from society for both cultural and political reasons; they are regarded as "incomplete" human beings and this incompleteness turns out to be both physical and psychological. The victim of social taboo is, in brief, a diligent son of New China, a promising young man who is, nonetheless, condemned by the society he dutifully serves. As a typical product of an autocratic culture, his fatal "flaw" is not deviance of, but conformity to the collective will.

Wanyu's appearance epitomizes the underdog figure in modern Chinese literature: physically weak and unimpressive, he earns his living as a handyman.

25 The most notable "follower" of Qu Yuan in modern times is perhaps Wang Guowei (1877-1927), whose
doing all sorts of odd jobs for his neighbors. If not for his occasional good
conduct, Wanyu would have been another Ah Q. The few commendable
virtues of Wanyu are his singsong voice and genuine sympathy for the other
sex, for whom he has suffered countless insults and beatings. He is, however,
most stubborn about his "art" (i.e. singing). Against all odds, Wanyu retains
his sense of humor through his erotic songs. To the narrator, Wanyu is the rare
personality who dares to challenge the puritanical culture of the New Society.
Through his passionate love songs and his extraordinary attachment to women,
we see the real meaning of "ligelang", a colloquialism referring to the
ambiguous intimacy between the sexes. Wanyu, in a way, inhabits the
"ambiguous zones" within the linguistic consciousness of his fellow country
folk (77-79). Out of instinctive disgust of the so-called "aesthetics of the
plough" (propagandistic opera), Wanyu risks his livelihood and well-being by
refusing to participate in a public performance designed to "revolutionize" the
peasants. Wanyu seems to have given up singing as a resistance to the local
commune's coercion, and there is a hint that his death is connected to this new
"aesthetics."

In the language of Maqiao, Wanyu is associated with everything "low"
\( (xia) \), as opposed to "high" \( (shang) \). In Maqiao, "low" is a verb and an
adjective referring to the sexual act. Whatever is "low" belongs to body
instincts, unconstrained desire, the less-than-human. In the novel, Wanyu (a public symbol of "lowness") is diametrically opposed to the "high culture" of the State, exemplified by the propagandistic theater from which all "impurities" (e.g. private emotions, human desire, sympathy and love) have been purged. In a way, Wanyu's insistence on his "lowness" shows his integrity as an "artist." In the narrator's words, his refusal to sing has the air of "a martyr to art", forever resisting the "so-called "art without women" (77).

What makes his case more revealing is the fact that Wanyu is a castrato. His penis was cut off years ago when his affair with the wife of a notorious bully was discovered. In the local dialect, he is one without a "dragon" (long). Given that the dragon is a traditional symbol associated with the nation in general and the emperor in particular, the ambivalence of the meaning of long in the Maqiao dialect brings the "highest" and "lowest" of all values into an oxymoronic relation. Long thus covers another "ambiguous zone" of linguistic consciousness, seizing upon the contradictory impulses underlying both the sexual and political life of the people. Wanyu, the artist, is not only castrated physically. His art, i.e. his songs of love and desire, is also "castrated" from the cultural body of the new regime.

lack of public recognition of their value and self-alienation from the masses. Schneider (94).
Yanzao, another untouchable in Maqiao, is regarded as a social abomination due to his political background. In fact, he has nothing to do with politics personally. His only “fault” is that he is his father’s son. Maogong, his father, owned a piece of land before the Revolution. During the land reform, Maogong refused to surrender his land, which the local commune leader regards as “Taiwan” and seized by force not long afterwards. Yanzao, therefore, grows up as a “traitor” from “Taiwan”, bearing the guilt of his father without knowing the exact meaning of these words. He is extra-hardworking and over-exploited by others. For the same reason, he cannot afford to get married, for no one is interested in having a liaison with the politically suspicious. Sexual and social frustration lead to a breakdown one night. Desperate, his sister offers her body as compensation, but Yanzao runs away in deep agony. Interestingly enough, his mother is believed to be a sorceress who has killed a few people by casting spells on them (167).

In retelling the Yanzao’s story, the narrator wonders whether political reform reinforces, rather than eliminates, superstition. It seems that the new political taboos invented by the government work extremely well with the old ones it condemns, resulting in more misery. As a result of forced labor, Yanzao becomes immune to toxic pesticide. Symbolically, his mother’s “sorcery” and Yanzao’s reputation as “living poison” (171) are suggestive of the political slogans “cow devils and snake spirits” and “poisonous weed” used
to accuse all class enemies. This episode recalls Bingzai’s immunity to poison in “Ba Ba Ba.” However, while Bingzai’s story is embedded in Han’s critique of Chinese culture as a whole, Yanzao’s misfortunes are attributed to social ignorance and government policies, the combination of which destroys the individual. What makes matters worse is that Yanzao internalizes this “guilt” as if his social labels are a hereditary disease and turns dumb all of a sudden. Like Wanyu, his silence is both a sign of resistance and withdrawal. He, too, is a “castrated” figure, an incomplete human being who is marginalized both socially and sexually.

Compared to Wanyu and Yanzao, Fucha represents not the marginalized but those at the center of the social system. He is a bright young man whose high-school education has won him much respect and trust in the local community. Well-groomed, well-behaved and closemouthed, he is both sought after and cursed by the village girls whose seductive overtures have all been met with Fucha’s cold shoulders. As the accountant of the People’s Commune, he dares to challenge his elders for any discrepancies and misconduct. Like Ma Wenjie, everything goes well until he violates a local taboo – using a most dangerous curse upon a village elder. “Zuisha” (literally “killing mouth”) means the worst and the last thing a man ever says to his folk. Fucha, in a fit of anger, commits a “zuisha”. Curiously enough the old man
Han Shaogong

dies of rabies soon afterwards. Fucha, probably due to the pressure of public
contempt, gradually loses his spirit, his career and his life ruined.

This episode can of course be considered an example of the violence
inherent in the cultural tradition itself. Yet, it also betrays the power of
language, construed as an expression of a collective will that destroys the
individual. For the violence of the collective will is so subtle that even a
person brought up by a supposedly modern education has to succumb to its
authority. Language, as a vehicle of emotions, serves contradictory ends.
“Language signifies the supremacy of human beings” and yet “animals will
never suffer the sad fate of Fucha for a random howling” (306). Indeed, certain
traditional beliefs have transformed what we think of as “absurd” into the
“sacred” (such as “zuisha”), yet, to “eliminate superstition” in the name of
“science” (a kind of scientism), the new regime has invented another belief,
another absurdity, that throttles human sympathy for things that used to be
regarded as sacred, such as life:

...if we encouraged every person or child to kill at random... every living creature that can be eaten; if we watched without a
pang of conscience a kid perform this bloody act of ecstasy,
there will no longer be any hypocrisy and absurdity. And yet,
would life be lacking in something? / What else can we do?
Should we tell children not to eat meat or even anything [that
lives], or should we ridicule and therefore throttle their
sympathy for the living beauty of life – the kind of sympathy preached by Confucius, the Buddhists, and other sages who came before us?

如果我們鼓勵每一個人乃至每一孩子大舉屠殺…一切可吃的活物，如果我們看到一個孩子在進行這種血淋淋的狂歡，沒有半點心靈的悸動不安，荒誕和虛僞誠然沒有了，但生活是否同時也缺少了什麼？／我們能怎樣做呢？是讓孩子不吃肉甚至不吃任何東西，還是嘲笑和消滅他們對任何美麗生物的同情？這種來自孔子、來自佛教以及來自其他文化前輩的同情？(307)

Fucha’s predicament, says the narrator, is both “absolutely unreasonable” and “absolutely reasonable” (307-308). Without further hint or elaboration, this ambivalent remark seems to suggest the narrator’s own frustration and despair. As a diligent son of the New China, Fucha’s reaction to local taboos seems unreasonable. Yet, his action can also be interpreted as the failure of his “modern” education to provide him with the necessary moral values and open-mindedness to contend against social ignorance.

In this fictional dictionary, the stories of Wanyu, Yanzao and Fucha exemplify the peculiar way in which political jargon and traditional taboos together create a greater superstition that inhabits the “ambiguous zones” of a culture’s linguistic consciousness. If “Taiwan” and “sorceress” betray the violence of undiscriminating ignorance, “dragon” and “ligelang” are a mockery
of the ultra-conservatism that pervades both the old and the new social orders, for both are yet to acknowledge the ideological "blind spots" inherent in the linguistic tools with which cultural values are monitored. Fucha, condemned by the public, surrenders to the collective will that he has hitherto served in good faith. As an educated youth, he probably does not believe in the mysterious power of "zuisha". Yet, the collective will, in the form of "zuisha", turns upon him when those he serves impose on him a belief that he does not share as a man of reason.

The dialectics of "return"

I would like to use the ending of *Maqiao Cidian* to conclude my discussion of Han Shaogong. Strictly speaking, the end of this fictional dictionary consists of the last three entries, namely "Gui yuan"<M> (returning to end/begin), "Bai hua"<S> (plain language), and "Guan dao"<M> (official passage). To begin with, "Gui yuan" is not strictly speaking the end, but it is the precursor to a literary return in the final entry "Guan dao". Indeed, the "official passage" mentioned here no longer exists. It is but an image that lingers on in time, a borrowed concept from China's imperial past when roads were built by the government to facilitate the transfer of civil servants and information. From "returning" to "plain language" to "official passage", I believe, Han gives a summary of the text in
light of his numerous discoveries about the intricate relationship between time, history and language. Here I will go through this “passage” to the end in order to return to Han’s fictional world.

In “Gui yuan” the narrator seizes upon the Maqiao pronunciation of two Chinese characters to elaborate on his own views of history. In Mandarin, the word *yuan* 元 means “returning to a pre-existing or original state.” It does not carry the meaning of “coming to the final stage”, which is rendered in a different character pronounced as *wan* 完. However, the pronunciation *yuan* in the Maqiao dialect corresponds to both *yuan* (meaning “beginning”) and *wan* (“end”) in writing, so in Maqiao there is an ambiguity in the spoken form of *gui yuan* (427). Inspired by this phonetic affiliation, the narrator ponders on the double meaning of *yuan* as expressing a dual temporality constitutive of both historical and fictional time:

The optimistic observers of history believe in the absolute difference between *yuan* (as ending) and *yuan* (as beginning). They see history as a linear straight line along which victories and defeats, glories and humiliations, gains and losses will receive their fair and final verdict... for the pessimists, they believe in the undifferentiated unity of *yuan* and *yuan*, so that history is an endless repetition, so that human beings go backwards as they move forward, gain as much as they lose. To them everything is meaningless and futile.
Han’s formulation of the “optimistic” and the “pessimistic” views of history may be seen as an internal debate between his conflicting historical visions. Obviously, Han is not on the side of the optimists, if it also suggests the kind of utopian optimism embedded in “Sweep Away the Four Olds.” However, he is also hesitant to embrace the opposing view of cyclical descent (but which he has definitely drawn upon in the allegorical tales such as “Ba Ba Ba”).

Han’s formulation is better understood as his contemplation of the duality of time as it is registered in human consciousness, what Paul Ricoeur identifies as the “long-time span” and the “brief event” (Time and Narrative 1: 224). The long time-span belongs to the time of nature, the geohistory of Maqiao as an eternal presence of mountains, rivers, rocks and earth. Maqiao, therefore, has been “the same” for tens of millions of years. From the perspective of the “brief event,” however, the reality of Maqiao is but a momentary impression, in the appearance of a wrinkle, in a withered hand turning cold, in the long line of faces that never come back “like a series of notes rising and falling on the strings of a violin” (428).
Ricoeur’s formulation of the two temporalities of history aptly sums up the fictional time in *Maqiao Cidian* and Han’s other stories discussed in this chapter: “If the brief event can act as a screen hiding our consciousness of the time that is not of our making,” says Ricoeur, “the long-time span can, likewise, act as a screen hiding the time that we are.” Either way, the consequence is “disastrous” because it means an inability to comprehend the full range of the meaning of human existence.

This dual temporality is also implicit in the preoccupation with word origins. The dictionary meaning of words provides a macro (long-time) perspective that is to be modified by the “brief event” of contextual, idiosyncratic interpretations. It is the interlocking histories of lexical roots presented in this novel that conjure up the many brief events (fictional histories) so that the narrator can arrive at a narrative understanding of the past. In “Plain Language”, the second to last entry in his dictionary, the narrator spells out his theory of fiction – as both “plain” language and “strange” language, as differentiated from the lofty, the serious, and the “absolute” (429-430). Because of this “low” or humble origin, says the narrator, fiction can never be taken seriously, for the world simply carries on with its bloodshed and violence with or without reading Goethe, Dostoeyevsky and Cao Xueqin (431). Is it an elegy to the art of fiction, or is it a “resistance to writing” as Li Tuo puts
it? By diminishing the contribution of fiction in augmenting reality (Ricoeur’s view of metaphor), Han seems to espouse a contradictory attitude toward the role of the writer in the Chinese society not unlike what Wendy Larson has discovered in her study of literary authority in modern Chinese autobiographies:26

[To the people of Maqiao,] true knowledge has to be conveyed in a higher, mysterious form of language that is beyond their grasp... [in this way] they have forfeited the highest sovereignty over their own language to some strangers and quietly go on with their lives until the very end... / ... All languages are... but signs describing some kind of reality, like clocks and watches telling time... but they are never Time itself... In the strictest sense, all languages are “plain speech” (bai hua), so its function should not be overstated.

[對馬橋人來說] 真正的知識似乎得用另一種神秘的深不可測的語言來表達....他們出讓了語言的最高治權，出讓給他們不知道的人，然後埋頭走完自己的生存....所有的語言也不過是....一些描述事實的符號，就像鐘錶只是描述時間的符號....但鐘錶依然不是時間....所有語言也是嚴格意義下的「白話」，作用也不應該誇大。(430-431)

26 See Wendy Larson, Literary Authority and the Modern Chinese Writer, in which she says “by the late 1920s... writers of the May Fourth generation were constituting textual work and specifically literary work negatively [but] writers and scholars continued their work and thus suffered under a contradiction between the socio-material authority which they ostensibly desired and the reality of their [academic and literary] careers” (4).
On another level, Han’s “dictionary” can be viewed as a distraction from the rigid codification of language during the Cultural Revolution and beyond.

On the whole, Han’s writings bear the imprint of the writer’s paradoxical reasoning and rationalistic approach to reality. The sense of being trapped within an unresolved (and unresolvable) dilemma, as one critic points out, is both the driving force and limitation of Han’s creative writings, for his indulgence in dialectical reasoning very often leads him into a state of indetermination, which in turn provokes further debates within the self. “As an attempt to understand his subject matter, a writer’s creation is a success, but it is also a failure. Thus he realizes he has lost his way, and has led his reader astray. But this sense of loss is the starting point and motivation for a new search...”27 As we have seen in Han’s short stories, his main characters are less individuals than metonyms of the Chinese cultural psyche (as in “Ba Ba Ba” and “Nű Nű Nű”). His I-narrators, on the other hand, are similarly lost in the labyrinth of time and memory (as in “The Blue Bottle Cap,” “North Gate Prophecy” and “Yesterday Farewell”) without a plausible way out.

The last entry in this fictional dictionary is “Guan dao”, an imaginary passage which the narrator takes to return to time past: “Step by step, [I] went into the unfamiliar” (435). This act of returning is precisely what he calls “gui

27 Han’s interview with the press as quoted in Shu (69-75).
yuan”, as a cyclical overlapping of beginning and ending. Returning as ending, ending as beginning: this is the essence of gui yuan, a return to an original state of being that is strategically placed at the ending of his fictional lexicology.

Han’s narrative return to the past, as seen in the novellas and short stories discussed above, always involves a magical encounter with mythical origins; very often the unfamiliar is perceived in terms of a déjà vu. These are not destinations, however, but points of departure that open up the ending of many such fictional journeys. To return to begin, to begin to end, to end, finally, to get going again: this pattern of movement can roughly summarize the treatment of time and history in Han’s major works. If this can be construed as Han’s treatment of the “long-time span”, the stories of individual characters can be regarded as the numerous “brief events” that intercept the impersonal flux of time. These characters are, moreover, cultural metaphors in Han’s fictional anthropology. From Bingzai, Aunt Yao, to Chen Mengtao and others one notices a sustained effort to delve deep into the Chinese cultural psyche for clues to its decline. The I-narrator, on the other hand, is always a zhiqing figure engrossed in his perturbed conscience as a result of a fragmented memory of “what happened” in the recent past (especially the Cultural Revolution). All these stories exhibit a self-conscious fictionality that forms part of the narrative itself. This, coupled with the overt reference to autobiographical details (as in “Shoes” and Maqiao Cidian) helps thematize fiction as a medium of knowledge, as a metaphorical “seeing... as” that is both
Han Shaogong

its force and its self-imposed limitation. By reiterating its own uncertainty about the “reality” it describes (e.g. the gaps in causality and the numerous “I don’t know’s”), Han’s fictional world projects what is unknown onto the surface of known reality. The past, therefore, is first defamiliarized (as unreal, strange, and threatening) in order to project a sense of reality in the form of metaphor.
Heroes, Bastards and Fictional Homeland: Mo Yan

In the prologue to his first major novel Honggaoliang jiazü (Red Sorghum Family) Mo Yan unreservedly pays tribute to his ancestors: “With this book I respectfully invoke the heroic, aggrieved souls wandering in the boundless bright-red sorghum fields of my hometown. As your unfilial son, I am prepared to carve out my heart, marinate it in soy sauce, have it minced and placed in three bowls, and lay it out as an offering in a field of sorghum. Partake of it in good health!” (4) This deep reverence to his ancestors thus sets the tone of Mo Yan’s nostalgic recreation of the past in Red Sorghum, an imaginative history of Northeastern China in the thirties that some critics see as being a modern “epic.”¹ Mo Yan’s romantic idealization of the heroic past, however, is balanced with a realistic vision of human nature, so that the heroes, unlike the revolutionary stereotypes, are simultaneously heroes and bastards, knights and knaves, martyrs and bandits, as the narrator proudly announces in the opening pages of Red Sorghum.

Born into an agricultural family in northeastern China in 1955, Mo Yan’s family was classified as “upper-middle class peasant” under the government’s land reform

¹ See, for example, Zhou Yingxiong (499-519).
program. Economic hardships and political bias ensured a deprived and lonely childhood. He was forced to give up his studies at the age of twelve and worked as a farmhand and cotton factory worker. In order to break away from this miserable life and continue his education, Mo Yan joined the People's Liberation Army at age twenty. He began writing in 1978 and produced officially sanctioned works that he obviously does not think much of. In 1984 he entered the People's Liberation Army Academy of Arts to study literature and later the Lu Xun Academy of Literature in Beijing and obtained a master's degree in literature.

His truly creative phase began in 1985, with the publication of some of his finest short stories “The Crystal Carrot” (‘Touming de hongluobo’), “Dry River” (‘Ku he’) and “White Dog and the Swing” (‘Baigou qiuqian jia’). As Michael Duke points out, Mo Yan knows peasant life inside out and his portrayal of village life during the Cultural Revolution directly confronts the utopian image of the peasantry in revolutionary literature (“Past, Present and Future” 49). Mo Yan's emotional attachment to his hometown, Gaomi Township in Shandong Province, is translated into the colorful, multifaceted fictional homeland Gaomi Dongbeixiang (Northeast Gaomi Township) where men and women, heroes and bastards, animals and monsters, ghosts and demons act out the social, political, sexual and moral conflicts arising from the turmoil in modern Chinese history.

---

2 Biographical details are based on Mo Yan's “Preface” to Shen liao (Tales of the Supernatural) (神聊); Zhong Yiwen, Chapter 3; Michael Duke, “Past, Present and Future in Mo Yan’s fiction of the 1980s” (47-
In this chapter I will examine Mo Yan's four major historical novels, namely *Red Sorghum*, *Shicao jiazu* (The Grass Eaters), *Jiu guo* (*The Republic of Wine*) and *Fengru feitun* (Full Bosoms, Fat Buttocks) to trace the writer's developing style and, more important, his still on-going inquiry into the Chinese cultural character and its inevitable decline, or in his own words "devolution of the human race" (zhong de tuihua). In *Red Sorghum* and *The Grass Eaters* this motif is presented in the two extremes of Mo Yan's historical vision: a romantic, idealized image of the past is juxtaposed with the mediocre, mundane and lack-luster present of the unfilial descendant who is also the I-narrator. Mo Yan's narrative alternates between the intensely nostalgic and the skeptically ironic; whereas the conscious play between fiction and history is both a rhetorical device and a complex mode of cognition and signification. *The Republic of Wine* is an ambitious experimental work that is overtly metafictional in formal design combining social satire, autobiography, the detective story, and elements of popular horror and fantasy fiction. Beginning with a police officer's investigation of a most unnerving criminal case – baby eating – the novel uses the culinary culture of China as a frame of reference to locate evil in human beings, unleashed by the unequal distribution of freedom and wealth in a utilitarian, pseudo-modern society and multiplied by a sudden release of long suppressed appetites for money, sex and material possessions. The contemplation on devolution in this work takes Lu Xun's metaphor of cannibalism to a new extreme. Finally, *Full Bosoms* signifies Mo Yan's return to the human
humane) realm, reasserting his deepest reverence for the human spirit he hopes to revive through the provocative image of “full bosoms, fat buttocks.” In this two-volume novel, Mo Yan pays tribute once again to his heroic ancestors very much in the manner of Red Sorghum, only that this time history is symbolized by Mo Yan’s idiosyncratic mother prototype. The tumultuous history of China’s nation-building is sidetracked into extraordinary stories of powerful women, whose breasts are the source of passion and love. While The Republic of Wine shows a growing interest in the strange and obscene as part of Mo Yan’s vision of the real, Full Bosoms is a further refinement of his vision of art and reality, especially art (fiction) as a kind of spiritual redemption against cultural dispossession.

As we shall see, Mo Yan’s fictional histories, taken as a whole, exhibit a yearning for innocence as a life-giving force against the dark currents of the present. His works, moreover, demonstrate a persistent search for new forms and new voices to accommodate his increasingly complex aesthetic and cultural ideals.

Family Saga: Imaginary Homeland and Inevitable Descent

In his “Preface” to Shen liao (Tales of the Supernatural), Mo Yan describes his creative career as “primarily a weaving of dreams, first for oneself and then for others… like singing a sad song, going here and there searching for a lost home” (2). In searching, says the author,
I realize that my own history is part of the history of the universe and is also overwhelmed by it. As a result, the history of the self is so insignificant, and yet it is boundless... I want to locate this self in a small social circle, to magnify it [so that] those who are interested in the emotional life of their predecessors may have a more lively specimen.

The piece of earth where his creative works are rooted is the “black soil” of his home country, the “arid land” which provides “fertile soil” for “the seeds of emotions.” His devotion to his homeland is almost religious, for he believes “in the black soil are buried countless bodies and thoughts; of course it begets more bodies and thoughts... / Buried in the black soil is my happiness, and hopefully my ultimate destiny” (2-3). In fact, from the “black soil” of his imaginary homeland – Gaomi – arise the most powerful “bodies and thoughts” (and emotions and actions) that make up the fictional worlds of Red Sorghum and The Grass Eaters, among others.

In what follows, I will examine the historical dimension of these two novels through the “bodies and thoughts” inhabiting these fictional worlds. In so doing, I hope to delineate the itinerary of Mo Yan’s continual dialogue with the past, and with himself, regarding his perception of history as a process of inevitable descent (“devolution”).
Whether his literary reinvention of the past intensifies or to some extent resists this deterministic impulse will be my preoccupation throughout this chapter. Nonetheless, these two novels are good starting points in this connection.

The Ideal World of Herpes and Bastards

Red Sorghum, a long novel comprising five chapters revolving around certain key episodes in a not-so-distant past (the 1930s), is Mo Yan’s first attempt to present a panoramic view of his fictional (spiritual) homeland. It tells the story of the struggle of men and women for freedom in the midst of national wars, foreign invasion and social conflicts. Unlike the pastoral beauty of Shen Congwen’s West Hunan, Gaomi is characteristically a land of extremities: burning heat in the summer and freezing cold in the winter, regularly visited by great floods, snowstorms and hailstorms. In this unique universe, bandits, heroes and ordinary people (laobaixing) co-exist in an unusually “ordered” manner, for they sometimes straddle different realms of existence and know their positions well vis-à-vis one another. They are, in a way, natural units of a unique universe unfettered by the more “civilized” values of the cities (represented by the narrator):

Northeast Gaomi Township is easily the most beautiful and most repulsive, most unusual and most common, most sacred and most corrupt, most heroic and most bastardsly, hardest-drinking and hardest-loving place in the world. They killed, they looted, and they defended
their country in a valiant, stirring ballet that makes us unfilial descendants who now occupy the land pale by comparison. Surrounded by progress, I feel a nagging sense of our species’ regression. (4)

Thus, Mo Yan’s idealized homeland is where contradictory “virtues” co-exist not only among but also within individuals. In *Red Sorghum*, the main protagonists, Yu Zhan’ao (“my grandfather”) and Dai Fenglian (“my grandmother”), are outstanding examples of the “Gaomi species”. It is also noteworthy that in this short paragraph the narrator has already drawn a clear boundary between the past and the present, not just in terms of temporal distance but also in terms of states of being: if the narrator stands for the living present (the modern), he also represents the “unfilial descendants” who feel ashamed even in memory of the extraordinary character of the dead. It is in this sense that regression or “devolution” is understood: recalling the heroic past, the narrator feels alienated from his own family history which otherwise should be his heritage. On the other hand, this feeling of unworthiness drives him further into the past to recapture his ancestors’ legendary lives.
The story begins with an anti-Japanese counter-attack led by the narrator’s grandfather, Commander Yu (a well-known and respected bandit leader) in 1938. Betrayed by the leader of another platoon, all except Commander Yu and his son (the narrator’s father who was fourteen at that time), were killed. Dai Fenglian (“my grandmother”) was also killed. What follows are constant flashbacks of the early life of his grandparents juxtaposed with the struggle for survival of father and son in the wilderness. We are told that Dai was a beautiful village girl who was forced to marry a rich winemaker’s leper son in 1923 (when the Republican government began its negotiations with the Communist Party). She fell in love with Yu who saved her from a bandit on her wedding day. Having successfully rejected the sexual advances of her husband for the first three days of her marriage, Dai and Yu made love in the wild sorghum fields. A few days later, Dai returns home to discover both her husband and father-in-law killed, the murderer at large. Yu then became Dai’s new husband. Meanwhile, the Japanese army has invaded northeastern China and began a series of ruthless killings in the region. Villagers are taken as forced laborers to construct new roads to facilitate the transportation of Japanese troops and army supplies into the interior. When an old servant in the family, Great Uncle Luohan, violates the orders of the labor camp, the army officers put him to death by forcing a local butcher to peel off his skin and make a public spectacle of the process. Dai and Yu’s vow of revenge is the primary motive of their involvement in guerilla warfare.
Within this narrative frame, the narrator moves to and fro in time and space, filling in gaps and making conjectures about the emotional life of his ancestors from different angles. The story reaches its climax during the anti-Japanese war in the late thirties and early forties, and ends with the death of the narrator’s grandfather in around 1976 (which also marks the end of the Cultural Revolution.)

As historical fiction, *Red Sorghum* is based primarily on the first person point of view of the I-narrator who was allegedly born in 1956. This implies that he does not really “know” most of the events in his narrative. Yet, as he says, he wants to write a family history as a tribute to their heroic deeds during the war. Interestingly, the tentative tone of the first person narrator at the beginning of the novel (“Some say the shepherd boy [who urinated on my father’s tombstone] was me, but I don’t know if it was or wasn’t me.” [4]) is gradually transformed into a self-confident voice that amounts to third-person omniscience. He even gets into people’s consciousness to reveal their inner thoughts, just as he “listens” to his grandmother’s plea to Heaven before she dies:

Heaven...[h]ave I sinned? ....What is chastity then? What is the correct path? What is goodness? What is evil? You never told me, so I had to decide on my own. I loved happiness, I loved strength, I loved beauty; it was my body, and I used it as I thought fitting....I did what I had to do, I managed as I thought proper. I fear nothing. (172)
This self-conscious fictionalization allows the narrator to travel freely between fact and fiction (he frequently quotes from local legends, folklore and local historical records), juxtaposing past and present, the imaginary world and the real world so that history (the external events) gives way to an aesthetic vision of the “inner events” that make up the “felt history” of the past (Forster 277).

As Dai’s final plea to Heaven (quoted above) shows, what is most forcefully felt by the narrator as the guiding spirit of his ancestors is a passion for individual freedom and the courage to live and die in the name of freedom. Great Uncle Luohan, we are told, risks his life going back to the labor camp (after he has escaped) in order to free his two mules. When the mules treat him as a stranger and refuse to go, he is furious at their “cowardice” and kills the animals with a hammer. In another episode, Commander Yu executes his own uncle Big Tooth for raping a village girl. At the height of his powers, Yu could easily sidestep military law and impose a less severe punishment, for his sense of justice, the narrator suggests, is rooted not in the modern sense of law and order but in

---

3 As Korean author Richard Kim describes his blending of fact and fiction in *Lost Names.* (Masalski 23-27)
the traditional character of *haohan* (lit. an upright man). Apart from its association with the traditional hero in classical fiction (such as *The Water Margin*), *haohan* also finds its prototype in the Confucian concept of *junzi* (a man of virtue). In *Red Sorghum*, this applies also to the convicted Big Tooth, who faces his death with exceptional courage and dignity characteristic of the Gaomi species (70-72).

In this light, the contradictory “virtues” mentioned earlier can be seen as manifestations of Gaomi’s unique, idealized moral universe where the highest law is spontaneous goodness. This may not be *the* ideal mode of social existence in a practical sense, nor is it a realistic picture of the past. However, it is this heroic quality that marks the difference between the present and the bygone age as perceived by the narrator. In the novel, spontaneity is closely connected to nature. Red sorghum is repeatedly described as “wild”, “mad” and emotionally sensitive to the human world. It thrives in the most severe weather conditions and is the source of the celebrated tradition of winemaking in Gaomi. The aroma of wine fills the entire area with a euphoric glamour, and the annual ritual in honor of the wine god brings together the spiritual, sensual and aesthetic aspects of traditional winemaking. It is also believed that the most exquisite type of wine, the so-called Eighteen Miles Red, was created by accident when Commander Yu, then a poor village rogue, urinated into a wine pot out of spite.

The use of the traditional hero image in *Red Sorghum* has been noted by critics before. Zhou Yingxiong, for example, perceives a resemblance between Mo Yan’s
heroes and those in the classical Chinese novel, especially *The Water Margin* (Zhou 501). The reader is repeatedly reminded of the sharp contrast between the narrator and his legendary ancestors. The temporal gap between past and present, therefore, is qualitatively defined: between ancestors and descendants, city and country, modernity and tradition:

For [twenty] years I had been away from my village...affecting the hypocritical display of affection I had learned from high society, with a body immersed so long in the filth of urban life that a foul stench oozed from my pores. (356)

On a formal level, Mo Yan’s seemingly casual use of traditional prose and singsong lyrics within an essentially modern narrative framework reinforces this sense of “no longer.” Mo Yan’s nostalgic imagination of a legendary past does not aim at a pastoral ideal or “golden age.” Rather, he frequently draws attention to the character flaws of his protagonists as an integral part of their heroic stature. As such, the stereotyped hero in revolutionary historical fiction is turned upside down. Idealistic though they may seem, Mo Yan’s heroes are humanized by their weaknesses. Their

---

4 “Ten years” according to Goldblatt’s translation, but it is “twenty years” in the Chinese original.
patriotism, likewise, is closely connected to their spontaneous goodness. Sworn to avenge the death of Great Uncle Luohan, Commander Yu and Dai Fenglian organize a local guerilla force with tragic results. Like many heroes in the Water Margins, the rashness with which Commander Yu and others act upon contingencies in life is characteristic of their instinctive heroism. This is the kind of “innocence” at the heart of Mo Yan’s hero:

At that moment, Granddad looked benumbed, his thoughts were riveted on a single point…. He was blind to all other sights, deaf to all other sounds. This problem – or characteristic – of his would grow more pronounced over the coming decade. He returned from the mountains of Hokkaido with an unfathomable depth in his eyes, gazing at things as though he could will them to combust spontaneously. (177)

As such Granddad is destined to be both a war hero and an outcast, while the narrator’s father lacks “this degree of philosophical depth”:

He never did figure out the relationship between men and politics or society or war, even though he had been spun so violently on the wheel of battle. He was forever trying to
squeezing the light of his nature through the chinks in his body armor. (177)

他一輩子都沒弄清人與政治、人與社會、人與戰爭的關係……雖然他的人性光芒總是力圖衝破冰冷的鐵甲放射出來。(227)

This difference between father and son is a subtle sign of “regression” that will grow more pronounced in the grandson. Compared to his grandfather, the narrator’s father is said to be more “rational” at critical moments, but his sense of reason is largely the result of his dwelling on “the surface of things” (227). As Zhou Yingxiong observes, the history of three generations of the red sorghum family is a process of gradual “devolution” (519), at least in the sense of the “heroic temperament” that the narrator identifies as the spirit of his family tradition.

As the central image of the novel, red sorghum personifies the Gaomi people and participates in human history. On the other hand, it also stands for a certain ahistorical force that shapes human destiny:

The sorghum stalks, which had undergone such suffering, [stood speechless]. Grain fell sporadically like glistening tears. (175)

多災多難的高粱們在月光中肅立不語，間或有一些高粱米墜落在黑土上，好像高粱們晶瑩的淚珠。(224)
Years later… these sorghums continued to flourish in distinctive colors. Life pulsed through their waxy-green stems that look like the genitals of male animals.\(^5\)

The passionate, masculine nature of red sorghum is also constitutive of the feminine in the novel, hence uniting the "men and women" of Gaomi within the same natural universe. As Dai Fenglian breathes her last, red sorghum appears to her as a messenger from Heaven. As if having an epiphany, Dai makes her final peace with Heaven now that she has transcended her worldly self (91-2). The complex image of red sorghum consists of both feminine and masculine traits as Mo Yan’s ideal heroic character exemplifies: it stands for the procreative energies of Dai Fenglian (closely connected to “mother earth”) and the uncouth, hot-headed passion of Commander Yu.

Toward the end, the narrator once again stands before his ancestors’ graves, reflecting on his family history. As he laments the extinction of the “pure sorghum” of old and its replacement by a despicable crossbred grain, he sees the apparition of his second grandmother. The “ghost” exhorts him to return to his birthplace as a self-

\(^5\) My translation: this sentence is not included in Goldblatt’s translation.
Mo Yan

redemption. She orders him to dive into the Black River to eliminate the smell of the “tamed rabbit” on his body. There is still one grain of pure sorghum remaining somewhere in the mountains, she says, and he is to inherit this pure grain, for it will guide him through the “weeds and thorns” of this world and protect him from the “tigers and wolves” everywhere on his way. This pure sorghum, after all, is “the totem of [his] family’s glorious past and the symbol of the cultural tradition of Gaomi” (496). This amounts to a vow to revive the spirit of a heroic past, to raise up the only remaining pure grain sorghum as an armor to resist the “taming” temptations of the modern world. Red sorghum in this context has a religious connotation. The “baptism” in the river and the totemic symbol of pure sorghum confer upon this fictional history not only an elegiac quality but also the sense of a ritual of self-renewal. The narrator’s (and I believe the implied author’s) disgust with crossbreeding (hybrid sorghum in this case), associated with modernization and industrialization, as we shall see, is intensified in Mo Yan’s later novels. This, in turn, provides a clue to our understanding of Mo Yan’s notion of heroes and bastards as both agents and victims of history.

Before turning to The Grass Eaters, in which Mo Yan continues to grapple with his “devolution” complex, I would like to consider the narrative structure of Red Sorghum that adds a formal irony to this self-conscious fictional history. Throughout the novel, narrative tension is intensiﬁed by the circular movement of the I-narrator’s memory. It seems that the narrator has to retell the stories of his parents and grandparents from different (imagined) angles, ﬁll in the gaps between the layers of narratives in the
form of oral tales, others' memories and the narrator's imagination ("My imagination closely follows [my father's] imagination, [my father's] imagination closely follows grandfather's thoughts." [233]) In a way similar to what Salman Rushdie has done in *Midnight's Children*, albeit not as magical, the I-narrator conjures up a multi-angled representation of the past by entering the consciousness of his characters (including plants and animals), making use of constant flashbacks and deliberately surreal imagery (like the "Dog Ways" chapter). This nonlinear, repetitive narrative attempts to recreate the past in all kinds of possibilities; i.e. to make the past *speak* through the long silence time imposes on the "bodies and thoughts" of those whose voices go unrecorded in historical documents.

The five chapters of *Red Sorghum* were first published as a series of short stories, a fact that partially explains its circular structure. As Mo Yan remarks in the epilogue to the novel, he was experimenting with a "formula" of writing long novels at the time of compiling the present volume. As a result, the five chapters that became the final work are a kind of harbinger for more to come. To him, the novel then has opened up "an opportunity to represent the [red sorghum] family in its totality" in the future.6

Perhaps due to its "composite" nature (resulting in a sense of incompleteness), the narrator seems over-eager to assimilate other voices and other memories into his own at

---

the expense of formal unity and coherence. For example, the bloody warfare of “the
ninth day of the eighth month of the lunar calendar in 1939” that makes up the powerful
beginning in Chapter 1 is repeated in Chapters 2 and 3, and fragments of similar incidents
appear frequently throughout the text. “Dog Ways” (Chapter 3) both elaborates and
parodies the anti-Japanese campaign and the bloody massacre that follows, but the main
plot scarcely moves beyond the massacre one week after the crucial date in 1939.
Chapter 4, “Sorghum Funeral” takes up from the funeral of Dai Fenglian in April 1941,
which coincided with the Japanese invasion of Gaomi that calls an end to the bandit
career of Yu (then the leader of a powerful local triad society). The final chapter returns
to the mid-thirties, when Commander Yu was at the height of his powers. It introduces
another persona, Passion (Lian’er), Commander Yu’s concubine. She dies soon after
being raped by Japanese soldiers and the chapter is devoted to the mysterious and
supernatural occurrences surrounding her death. Interestingly enough, Passion,
characterized as a meek opposite of grandmother Dai, is the honored ancestor whose soul
is summoned in the end to give the final sermon to her grandson, the narrator, exhorting
him to “return” to his ancestral roots. After all, she is commemorated as

...the woman whose short but magnificent life constitutes a page
in the most heroic and most bastardly history of my hometown.
Her eerie, supernatural death had awakened in the soul of
Northeast Gaomi Township a mysterious emotion that
germinated, grew, and became strong ... that fortified us and
made us capable of facing the world of the future. (356-357)
This repetitive pattern reinforces the feeling that the narrator is reluctant to leave the scene; his nostalgia and curiosity prolongs the search for a spiritual home that drives him further into an imaginary past. As a result, the narrator can participate, as one voice among many, in his self-created fictional history so that he can claim his heritage in that imaginary, idealized world. On the other hand, the narrator’s lingering to and fro in time creates a tension between the narrating voice and the temporal scheme of the plot, which branches out into several independent stories within more or less the same time frame. If one is to locate a central thread that helps unify the five chapters, my suggestion is the narrator’s fictional memory provoked by a pensive awareness of historical decline— or the “devolution” of the human species. In this light, narrative repetition taken as a whole reveals a “linear” movement that is regressive rather than progressive. As such, the formal irony of Red Sorghum constitutes a nonlinear narrative tracing the inevitable, linear decline of human civilization.

While time is perceived as destructive and linear, fictional narrative (as in Red Sorghum) seeks to resist time by an imaginary revival of the spirit a past era—a search for continuities within discontinuities. Nevertheless, Mo Yan’s concern with history as a destructive force poses the question of human responsibility against a possible cultural
determinism. The contrast between city and country, present and past, is the inevitable development of modernization. The replacement of pure sorghum by the much loathed hybrid sorghum is also a product of this process. The tension between material progress and human degeneration, by no means a new discovery, is crucial to the notion of "human devolution" in Mo Yan's works. As a "tamed rabbit" of modern life the narrator in Red Sorghum expresses a yearning for the purification of the soul by baptizing himself in the river of time past. This desire for self-redemption, no matter how distant a goal, is inscribed in the narrative as a resistance to time and a reassertion of cultural heritage. In Red Sorghum, natural disasters are seen as part of the cycle of life, and are therefore less destructive (in the "devolutionary" sense) than human failures. Memories of the heroic past thus aptly fill the spiritual vacuum the narrator is experiencing in the present, for it is something that will "fortify[us and] make[ us] capable of facing the future" (493). This also suggests that the seed of historical decline is neither hereditary nor "natural", but is to be found in the cruel twists and turns in human history over which individuals have no control.

I mentioned earlier the integration of local cultural traditions in invoking the past in Mo Yan's historical novels.⁷ As one critic points out, "peasant consciousness" is an important aspect of Mo Yan's art. To Mo Yan himself, certain virtues of peasant life have become "an important source of spiritual support." I believe this spiritual intimacy

---

⁷ The importance of popular culture to Mo Yan's aesthetics, especially the local folk art traditions of northeastern China, is discussed in Zhu Hengqing (40-42).
is what energizes the severe criticism of the same "peasant consciousness" in his writings. Typical of most search-for-roots writers, Mo Yan's interest in popular cultural traditions contributes to the strong presence of local folk art and story-telling traditions in his fictional works (Zhu Hengqing 41). This "traditional" element in his style bespeaks Mo Yan's ambition for an integrative art form in which past and present, glory and shame, the highest and the lowest, the most beautiful and the most ugly, the sacred and the profane conjure up a "totality" of fictional reality. Gaomi, therefore, is the fictitious realm of heroic bastards where the writer experiments with his paradoxical notion of "devolution" as both a historical determinant and a collective moral predicament.

_Ancestors with Webs on Their Hands and Feet_

If the elegiac mood of _Red Sorghum_ is partially relieved by the hope of renewal symbolized by the pure sorghum, the six stories in _The Grass Eaters_ constitute a regressive look at the "biological" origins of one's ancestry that goes back and forth from time immemorial to the present. Beginning with "Red Locusts" the I-narrator traces the history of the Grass Eaters through a series of dreamlike narratives (in six parts playfully titled "Dream One", "Dream Two" and so forth) in which he encounters his web-footed ancestors and virtually participates in the mysterious events of the past. "Red Locusts," the most "realistic" in tone and setting, recounts two incidents of locust attack in the narrator's native country, Gaomi. It is followed by another five dreams, namely "Rose,

---

8 See Mo Yan's article "Wode nongmin yishi guan" ("My Understanding of Peasant Consciousness").
Rose, Fragrant Rose”, “Revenge”, “Second Aunt is Coming Soon” and “A Horse Crossing the Marshland” that are only tangentially related in content, and largely independent in terms of plot, setting and temporal frame. Be that as it may, from Dreams Two to Five the narrator encounters various characters with web on their hands and feet who claim to be his “web-footed ancestors”. This leads to the final vision in Dream Six, where the narrator tells the story of the mythical descent of his family and reveals the secret behind the grass-eating tradition that has been taken for granted for centuries.

Written between 1987-1989, *The Grass Eaters* represents Mo Yan’s “wish to purify the soul through grass-eating,” his “reverence and worship of Nature,” his “fear of webs”, his “attitudes toward sex and violence”, his “understanding of legends and myths,” as well as “the beautiful and ugly, manifest and hidden, bright and dark sides” of his soul. Going through the six “dreams” in the novel, it is not difficult to identify the above motifs that give these loosely connected narratives a sense of coherence. In “Red Locusts” the narrator, a researcher in the “Locust Research Laboratory” in the city (probably Beijing) goes back to his native town Gaomi on hearing news of a major locust attack, the first of its kind in fifty years. Typically Mo Yan, the journey home draws attention to the opposition between city and country:

[My old home] is a special place. It is a land of vivid colors where flourishes and multiplies a family whose feces does not stink (?)

---

9 Author’s preface to *The Grass Eaters*, *Mo Yan wenji*, (Collected Works of Mo Yan) 《莫言文集》 Vol. 4.
The human race (?) high quality (?) low quality (?) Living in a city where stench has tainted the sky, I am tortured by shit as hard and sharp as a knife cutting bamboo... I long for my lovely old home just as I long for...the odorless shit.

Once again we witness Mo Yan's unique sense of the "beautiful" and his integrative vision of Nature and human life. Nonetheless, his ideal vision of life in Nature is tempered with an apprehension of its potential danger and corruption within the human realm. In a dreamlike manner, the narrator juxtaposes the present with scenes from the past that reveal the numerous sex scandals and moral failings of his grand uncles who are no less corrupt than the "silver-headed professor" who seduces young female students in the city. It is due to his awareness of the complex unity of the best and the worst "virtues" in his family that he proceeds to discover the "monstrous scandals, heart-rending performances, important landmarks" and "insipid regression" deeply buried in the "red mud" of his native country (38). Compared to the lack-luster life of the present, the past is a "colorful age" "when locust attacks went hand in hand with mutinies and battles," each having an aura of its own (40).
The natural history of locust attacks shows a cyclical pattern that somehow reverberates in human history: in Gaomi, we are told, locust attacks occur every fifty years. Going through his family history, the narrator visualizes the important personae in his family who played a key role in fighting locusts during the two major attacks in this century. In fact, the timing of natural destruction coincides with that in human history. If we assume that the narrating present is sometime around 1987-89, the previous locust attack occurred at around 1937, the year of Japan’s invasion of China. Yet, the narrator sidetracks these political events and directs our attention to the complex character of his Fourth Granduncle who falls in love with a beautiful widow, kills his wife’s lover, divorces her and as a result is tortured by a deep sense of remorse. In a mood reminiscent of Red Sorghum, the narrator defends the “moral integrity” of his granduncle and vows to build a 10-meter high memorial in his honor:

Fourth Granduncle, don’t be afraid, don’t regret…. It was a time of wars and chaos when you did this. In a lawless age those who abide by the laws are no good…You killed people to clear the way for love. By comparison you are a respectable character…You have been saving lives and healing wounds all your life, practicing revolutionary humanism, doing good more than evil. You shouldn’t feel guilty about anything…

四老爺，您不要怕，不要內疚….您干這事時正是兵荒馬亂的年代，無法無天的年代守法的都不是好人….您殺人是為了替愛情開劈道路，比較起來，您應該算作人格高尚….您一輩
Mo Yan

子救死扶傷，實行革命的人道主義，行善比作惡多，您滿可光
明正大地活着.... (80-81)

In a half-serious, half-joking way the narrator indulges in his “memory” of Fourth Granduncle’s heroic fight against locusts some fifty years ago. The overlapping of two locust attacks reinforces the sense of degeneration in both the human and the natural realm. Fifty years ago, the “red locusts” were of a “spiritual” kind associated with the “red mud” of the earth. (The locust attack a hundred years ago is even grander in scale and is associated with the sky or Heaven.) Obviously, this interpretation of natural phenomena arises from the primitive spirituality of the villagers whose religious nature turned a major disaster into a ritual. In this way, misery and loss becomes bearable.

The narrator’s “memory” of the past, while expressing incredulity, retains a sense of pride so that the red locusts become another myth, a liberating force that is lost to the present generation. Against this background, the present fight against pestilence is reduced to a mere fact, in news reports, scientific research and experiment. Yet both the army relief force and the scientists cannot alter the course of events: “I feel sorry for their shallowness. Only the locust attack fifty years ago can be regarded as a locust attack! As the human species degenerates, locusts degenerate, too.”

---

10 This dating of events probably alludes to the Taiping Tianguo Rebellion (1850s – 60s) and the Boxer Uprising (1899). The founder of the Taiping Tianguo (Heaven of Peace), Hong Xiuquan, declared himself the brother of Jesus, while the Boxers belong to a popular cult whose members claimed to have magic powers that made them invulnerable to all kinds of arms.
Nevertheless, the history of the Grass Eaters is full of tragedies and madness, like "the knight-errant" guided by his own "lunatic absurdity" (108). In the name of this "lunatic absurdity", the narrator continues his dream narratives of the past. Thus in the first "dream" Mo Yan has already laid out the basic motifs in the novel: man and Nature, sex and violence, legends and myths, as well as the bright and dark sides of the self are incorporated in the stream-of-consciousness dream narrative of this chapter. More important, all these are part of the I-narrator’s reflection on his family history, culminating in a pensive apprehension of "devolution". In what follows I will examine the remaining five "dreams" in light of the recurring motifs in *The Grass Eaters*.

At the end of "Dream One", the narrator expresses his wish to write a "real drama" where "dream and reality, science and fairy tales, God and Devil, love and prostitution, the adorable and the vulgar, beauty and excrement, past and present, gold medals and condoms" are interwoven to form an undivided world (123). I believe this is what Mo Yan tries to do in the "dreams" that follow. In "Dream Two: Rose, Rose, Fragrant Rose" the I-narrator (known as Jindouzi or Golden Pea Boy) listens to his Little Uncle's stories of his illegitimate birth. It turns out that Little Uncle’s mother (Golden Pea Boy’s grandmother) comes from "the other side of the river" (where the Grass Eaters live). She was already pregnant when she married Yellow Beard, Little Uncle’s father. She was then taken away by an army officer and bore him a child (Golden Pea Boy’s mother). Yellow Beard took his revenge by putting pins into the harness of the officer’s
horse, Red, and as a result the officer lost his bet with his General whose "prize" is Rose, Little Uncle's mother. As Golden Pea Boy sinks deeper and deeper into his uncle's memories, scenes of the past become part of his "dream" of a beautiful lady and a red horse on which a "pure black boy" is riding through an endless expanse of rose bushes.

Whether the black boy stands for the narrator or someone else, or whether the red horse symbolizes the mother is uncertain, only that toward the end the narrator repeatedly calls for "Ma! Ma!" (English spelling used in the text), which signifies both "horse" and "mother". It is, in the narrator's words, "a very distant call" that feels so intimate and strange.

This story of illegitimate sex and birth is a prologue to the dreams that follow. In "Dream 3: Ancestors with Webs on Their Hands and Feet" the narrator follows his three-year-old "red-haired" daughter (ironically named Qing Gou'er or Green Puppy) into the mysterious Red Forest where he once again falls into a labyrinthine dreamscape. His daughter has the attributes of a witch. She speaks the languages of animals, plays with magic and is known for her skills in torturing small animals to death. Green Puppy is kind only to one kind of creature, the so-called Little Talking Wolfies (xiao hua pi 'er). Inside the Red Forest the narrator is led by a mysterious woman (who turns out to be his Grandaunt) into an "underground palace" where he attends a banquet held by his ancestors. There he re-experiences scenes from both the "real" and the imaginary past and is eventually captivated by the President of the Red Forest, probably a satiric reference to the Liberation Army: "‘Dear Child, don't cry. You're about to see our
President, so you have to carry a smile on your face and pretend that you’re very, very
happy and satisfied.’ This sounded familiar to me, and I believe this is a universal
principle” (218). “I saw a huge stone monument densely engraved with praises to
Commander Pi [who] was like the sun shining over the history of the Grass Eaters” (222).
Pi, which also means “skin”, might just as well be Chairman “Mao” (literally meaning
“hair”). It turns out that Pi has ordered the systematic elimination of all “webbed”
offspring of the Grass Eaters in order to put an end to “human devolution”. For four
consecutive years, the narrator is told, forced castration has been performed on four
hundred children (227-8). Thus it is possible that this scary dreamscape is intended to be
a political allegory: if Pi caricatures Mao, the red-haired Green Puppy and the Little
Talking Wolfies who “parrot human speech” are arguably the Little Red Guards
mobilized by Pi (Mao) to destroy the “old world” and its “webbed” descendants. In the
end, the narrator is found guilty of illegitimate sex and dies at Green Puppy’s
condemnation as a “counter-revolutionary”.

Political connotations abound in “Dream Four: Revenge,” where government
officials are satirized as licentious morons very much in the manner of President Pi. It
tells the story of two brothers who come back to take the life of Secretary Yuan for raping
their mother years ago. The narrator, who also participates in the action, hints that Yuan
may also be the father of the brothers. It happens that Yuan is brought down in a power
struggle and the brothers, as his former “victims”, only manage to amputate his legs
before they run away in horror (306). By this time, the narrator has been killed by a
gunshot. As a wandering spirit, he witnesses the bloody killings possibly connected to a revolution. That night, everyone is still haunted by the vision of the legless Yuan calling out to his two sons. As if to cast away their fear, people begin to talk about an ancient legend of two brothers taking their revenge in the village.

The theme of revenge is taken up in the next dream. In “Dream Five: Second Aunt is Coming Soon” the narrator retells the story told by his father about his Second Aunt’s bloody revenge on her own family. Born with webs on her hands and feet, she is an abomination in the family because the birth of infants with webs always brings disaster to the entire clan. It turns out that the baby grows up as a fearsome creature who eventually kills her father and disappears. Years later, Second Aunt sends her two bastard sons, Heaven and Earth, back to conduct a massacre of the Grass Eaters. Heaven, the elder brother, is a typical Westerner whose elegant body, golden hair and blue eyes are in direct contrast to his younger brother, Earth, an ugly hunchback with yellow teeth, the stigmatized image of the Chinese. Despite their differences in appearance, they carry out random killings as if they were robots controlled by a mechanical will. Shamefully enough, the narrator’s father, then a teenager, betrays his family and sides with his two formidable cousins. Then comes a series of scenes in which bodily mutilation and dismemberment is described in graphic detail. In a scene reminiscent of the skinning of Luohan in *Red Sorghum*, the children threaten a butcher to perform the same ritual on their Grandaunt (339). The time is 1947, the year when Lin Biao (a general of the Communist army) launched a powerful attack on the Nationalist forces in northeastern
Mo Yan

China. In this decisive battle, the CCP won the Northeast and continued to unite the populace in a "patriotic war" under "the claims of nationalism and social revolution" (Fairbank and Goldman 335). Heaven and Earth, thus, signify the comprehensiveness of this "victory" and the nature of its destructive consequences. The violence with which this "victory" is won has another dimension: the sense of power associated with acts of violence captures the immature minds of the young who becomes intoxicated with this revolutionary euphoria: "Only by plucking out your eyes can I prove my courage and loyalty" (317).

In this fictional history of the Grass Eaters, "felt history" (fiction) does not "replace" or "subvert" history (if history is not limited to Communist ideological persuasion and propaganda); rather, as Zhang Dachun observes, narrators of the fantastic or supernatural "must make use of non-magical reality as the basis of the aesthetic principle 'Only the magical is beautiful' ... for people always rely on [their experience of] reality to create their aesthetic experience of the magical" (15). As the narrator in Dream Five says, from his attempt to edit or amend family history he derives the "happiness of a creator" (325). His portrayal of the "webbed ancestors" does not aim at "physical resemblance" but a "likeness of the mind" (318). It is this "likeness" that is offered up for the reader's critical judgment.

From a yearning for the purification of the soul to the discovery of the "dark sides" of human nature, the many dreams that make up the "historical account" of the
past centering upon the ominous "webs" on the human body present a very complex vision of "human devolution". It is only in "Dream Six: A Horse Crosses the Marshland" that the mystery surrounding the narrator's "webbed" descent is revealed. Yet, it is rendered in a fairy-tale like story told by a nameless "black man" to "the famous little bastard in the age of webs" (358). The little bastard is told that the family of Grass Eaters is the offspring of a boy and a horse. They are the only survivors of a group of migrants. As they are making their way across the marshland, the red horse falls in love with the boy and turns into a beautiful lady. They get married, settle in the marshland and have children. Then the curse comes upon the couple when the boy, now a grown man, discovers his children are committing incest. In anger he kills them and mentions the forbidden word – horse – to his wife, who immediately turns back into a horse and disappears forever. From then on, the offspring of this family begin to grow webs on their hands and feet, and their half-man, half-horse descent is the origin of their grass-eating tradition.

Up to this point we can draw some conclusions on Mo Yan's notion of "human devolution" and the role it plays in his fictional rewriting of the past. From Red Sorghum to The Grass Eaters, we see a complex network of metaphorical meanings surrounding the natural and human locale of Gaomi. In both novels, the sense of devolution is conveyed through a juxtaposition of past and present, one's ancestors and their unfilial descendants, city and country, as well as "natural" and "artificial" conditions of existence. Red Sorghum presents a more idealized vision of the past, an ideal tempered
with the narrator's unique sense of good and evil, sacred and profane, hero and villain, culminating in the final message of a potential self-redemption through the pure sorghum, a totemic symbol of the narrator's cultural heritage. In *The Grass Eaters* Mo Yan seems to have adopted a more deterministic view of historical descent, represented by the last dream about the origins of a "deformed" lineage. Arguably the final dream abruptly undercuts the narrator's attempt to "purify" his soul in the first dream, and the ominous atmosphere systematically built up through the dreams in-between conjure up a hostile and inhuman universe in which individuals simply accept the political and social evil as a code of human conduct. The sense of spontaneous goodness, prominent in *Red Sorghum* and still implicitly present in "Dream One," is lost.

By comparison, Mo Yan's use of the fantastic\(^1\) is more intense in *The Grass Eaters*, while in *Red Sorghum* there is a tendency to present the "strange" in the familiar mode of *chuanqi* (tales of the extraordinary) or *yanyi* (historical fiction) in the classical Chinese tradition.\(^2\) This is not the place to discuss in detail the similarities and differences of these fictional modes. What I see in their use in Mo Yan's two novels discussed here is that the fantastic is geared toward concrete and *tragic* historical experiences that are otherwise "unspeakable" for political and psychological reasons. If

---

\(^1\) Definitions of the fantastic vary from a general feature in all imaginative literature to a specific mode where two contradictory levels of reality, the supernatural and the logical coexist, resulting in "an illogical, disconcerting worldview". According to Amaryll Beatrice Chanady, there is a fine line to draw between the fantastic and the marvelous (or magical realism) on the basis of "resolved" (magical) and "unresolved" (fantastic) antinomy. For the purpose of this discussion, I am more inclined to see the fantastic in Mo Yan's fiction in the latter sense.

\(^2\) Mo Yan's inclination toward the *chuanqi* is noted by Zhang Dachun and Zhong Yiwen. This tendency is most evident in his short stories in *Chuanqi Mo Yan* and *Shen liao*. 
there is an analogy between “devolution” and “revolution” at all, it can be found in *The Grass Eaters* in which Communist Revolution and the Cultural Revolution are schematically placed within the cycle of locust attacks that frames the entire history of Gaomi in the twentieth century. Like the Little Bastard in “Dream Six”, the curious, hot-tempered “little lads” produced by the “revolutionary tradition” always like to interrupt every narrative, which is also “a form of expression” handed down from this tradition.

(358) The narrator’s search for historical knowledge, moreover, brings home an awareness of a collective predicament:

The female founder of the Grass Eaters in Gaomi Northeast Country is a red horse; therefore red horse has become our totem, our ideals, our symbol of love.

高密東北鄉食草家族的女祖先是一匹紅馬駒，所以馬駒成了我們的圖騰，成了我們的理想，成了我們愛情的象徵。(367-368)

On the one hand, this lofty ending of the novel parodies the sentimental language of revolutionary literature; on the other hand it expresses the narrator’s ambivalence toward the still powerful “totems”, “ideals” and “symbols” inherited from the past. In this light, Mo Yan’s love of paradoxes – or simply his paradoxical aesthetics – can be seen as a “writing back” to this tradition of fiction-making. In terms of both formal design and the textual hints examined so far, the fantastic in *The Grass Eaters* (and to a certain extent in *Red Sorghum*) invites an allegorical reading of the novel as a whole.
Also worth mentioning is the shift in the role of “bastards.” In *Red Sorghum*, the crossbred sorghum provokes a sense of disgust, and the narrator, unworthy as he may be, is relatively more self-confident in his resistance to “hybridization” by the “thorns and weeds” of modern life. In brief, the narrator in this novel is, to a certain extent, contaminated by modern culture (as seen from his disgust of the filthy, “excremental” city life that has turned him into a “tamed rabbit.”) Yet, the hope of self-renewal still exists, as in the image of baptism at the end. In *The Grass Eaters*, the narrators themselves are bastards in the literal sense. (I use “narrators” because the I-narrator’s voice always incorporates other voices posing as “I”). They are, first of all, descendants of illegitimate children, and the entire Grass-eating clan is the offspring of a mystical union of horse and man. In “Dream Three”, the narrator’s daughter is a red-haired witch named Green Puppy, and she turns out to be a genuine “bastard” with monstrous potentials. As we shall see in *Full Bosoms*, Mo Yan’s bastards are once again the problematic heroes in his fictional history of modern China.

**The “Spirits” of Modern China**

*The Republic of Wine* is Mo Yan’s ambitious reworking of well-known cultural metaphors from classical to modern times. First of all, the title apparently invokes the traditional association between wine and literature only to invite the reader to witness the most obnoxious practice of baby-eating, allegedly the exclusive culinary extravaganza of
the rich and powerful in Liquorland. Frequently in the novel Mo Yan has no scruples in alluding to the “banquet of cannibalism,” a metaphor for Chinese traditional culture Lu Xun once popularized during the May Fourth. One of the narrators (also a dramatic persona) overtly identifies himself with Lu Xun when he “gives up alcohol for a writing career, to use literature to transform society, to transform the Chinese sense of nationhood” (53). Wine, on the other hand, consists of a metaphysical substance that makes it “a spirit, a belief, a sacred belief.” (35) The discovery of wine also marks the “glorious age of civilization” (282); while “[t]he liquor of Liquorville is the liquor of history...soaked in the classics of Han culture” (318). Liquorland, we are told, is part of “Greater China,” an exemplary model of the national modernization imperative where “dialectical materialism” has been long replaced by “utilitarian materialism” represented by the charismatic politician Diamond Jin (Jin Gangzuan, meaning Gold, Steel and Diamond).

Mo Yan’s paradoxical explication of the metaphors associated with wine, on the other hand, goes beyond social satire and allegory. _The Republic of Wine_ is made up of at least three stories embedded in three different _kinds_ of narratives. For ease of recognition, I will use “Republic of Wine 1,” “Republic of Wine 2” and “Letters” in my discussion of the three major clusters of narratives. “Republic of Wine 1” is a detective story in which a celebrated policeman, Special Investigator Ding Gou’er, is sent to Liquorland to investigate the alleged crime of baby-eating among the high officials and city tycoons. “Republic of Wine 2” consists of nine inter-connected short stories about
Liqorville (all related to Liquorland) supposedly written by Li Yidou, a wine expert and an admirer of Mo Yan. “Letters” is the correspondences between Mo Yan and Li Yidou (also known as Dr. Wine), supposedly the flesh-and-blood authors of “Republic of Wine 1” and “Republic of Wine 2” respectively, in which they communicate their thoughts and experiences of wine, literature, and life. These three interlocking parts finally culminate in the meeting of Mo Yan, Li Yidou and their protagonists in Liquorland in the end, which Mo Yan finishes off in a five-page-long labyrinthine stream-of-consciousness one-sentence passage. Given this intricate network of texts and contexts, The Republic of Wine is characteristically a metafiction, especially when Mo Yan and Li Yidou openly comment on each other’s work and preferences for different kinds of fiction (e.g. realism, critical realism, neo-realism, revolutionary realism, reportage, etc.). The text itself is a hotchpotch of narrative styles and genres: social satire, detective fiction, epistolary novel, horror, reportage, autobiography, historical anecdotes, as well as the popular Chinese martial arts novel (wuxia xiaoshuo). In his confession-like finale, Mo Yan overtly admits his indebtedness to the master of this novelistic style, James Joyce in Ulysses (in addition to the more familiar Faulkner): “For many years the struggle between sex and morality has been a tangle causing much suffering split personality Faulkner learned from Joyce’s Ulysses can’t I also learn from you This is the only way it can be done…” (353).

Apparently a work of fantasy, The Republic of Wine presents a panoramic view of “Greater China” engrossed in the rigorous and demoralizing pursuit of “modernity,” narrowly defined by its people as an unrestrained hunt for money, power and material
possessions under the leadership of the symbolic Diamond Jin. However, the liberalism of the economy as a national policy in Liquorland is enforced by a highly conservative and bureaucratic government, run by corrupt officials and perpetuated by a largely uneducated, complacent populace. Driven by extreme poverty and material deprivation, these people will sell their infants to the state-run Institute of Cookery as a kind of livestock (rouhai, lit. “meat babies”). As one critic points out, the eccentric and bizarre stories of *The Republic of Wine* can be read as social allegory and a reaction to the “heightened control of political discourses, the tightened censorship of literary activities, and the lack of freedom of expression” (Ng 125). In his epilogue, “Random Thoughts after Drinking Wine,” Mo Yan admits that he has tried to avoid politics but failed, for nowadays “drinking wine has become a struggle [for success] … going deeper into the world of wine [you will] discover all the secrets of this society” (424).

For the purposes of my discussion, I will focus on three aspects of *The Republic of Wine* that throw light on Mo Yan’s changing historical metaphors: the image of the hero/bastard, the allegorical dimensions of wine and the Chinese culinary tradition, and finally the critical examination of the “writing self” as both an agent and victim of time.

In *The Republic of Wine*, all the “heroes” are “bastards” in the moral sense. Ding Gou’er starts off very much like a Sherlock Holmes (or Detective Hunter, as he himself imagines). In his forties, he has solved some of the most difficult cases in the country. Nonetheless, his success in career is ironically prompted by defeats in private life.
Almost fifty, his married life seems to bore him endlessly. He has a mistress but the idea of divorcing his wife, though appealing, is not completely convincing. He loves his life but he is also sick of it. In short, he has trouble being decisive (14). On his way to Liquorland, he is sexually attracted to the female driver the affair with whom eventually destroys him. As he says, cracking a tough case is the only thing he is not tired of, for it gives him the much-needed sense of certainty nowhere else to be found in life.

Ding’s arch-enemy, Diamond Jin, on the other hand, is the “rising star” of Liquorland. He is the Deputy Director of Propaganda and is in charge of almost anything of concern in his “kingdom.” He is portrayed as charismatic, sociable and most of all indecipherable. He commands both fear and respect among his “subjects,” including Ding Gou’er himself. In an address to students in the Brewer’s College, Jin tells his audience he was conceived in his mother’s womb forty years ago (i.e. around 1949) “in a state of wild ecstasy” (33). It is typical of Mo Yan to use incomplete or semi-precise dates in private life to allude to significant events in history (e.g. “the ninth day of the eighth month of the lunar calendar in 1938” in *Red Sorghum*). As the exemplary model politician of New China in the late 1980s, Diamond Jin is more than a caricature, for he is the archetype of the modern bureaucrat embodying the spirit of the “Four Modernizations.” “I am a materialist, through and through. I will always and forever hold high the banner of ‘Material goods first, spiritual concerns second.’” Jin’s charm is said to be so captivating that his young audience worship him as the glory of Truth (34-36).
The third and final candidate is the infamous Yu Yichi (lit. one-foot), a dwarf one foot tall who grows from a shabby proprietor to the owner of the most luxurious hotel in Liquorland. Ironically, Yu’s ultra-capitalism wins him the “Model Laborer” award. Due to his inferiority complex, Yu swears to fuck every single beautiful woman in Liquorland, using his wealth and power as bait. In fact, Yu’s sexual largesse is the crucial link between our three heroes. The female driver with whom Ding Gou’er falls in love turns out to be Diamond Jin’s wife, and she is also Yu’s “Concubine No. 9”. It is Ding’s uncontrollable jealousy that kills all of them, except the formidable Diamond Jin.

Thus, Mo Yan, in his ambiguous role as the implied, dramatized and flesh-and-blood narrator, has created a spectrum of anti-heroes ranging from the grotesque figure of the dwarf to the charismatic, Faustian villain Diamond Jin, with Ding Gou’er standing in between as the half-comical, half-romantic, confused and conceited modern man caught in a mid-life crisis. Throughout the novel our understanding of the dwarf and the villain are primarily based on Yu and Jin’s autobiographical accounts and Ding Gou’er’s point of view. Both Dr. Wine and Mo Yan remain reticent about their understanding of these characters. Ironically, in a chapter devoted to the dwarf titled “Yichi the Hero,” Yu Yichi overtly comments on this notion of “heroism”:

[A] rotten scoundrel is just the person to write my life story. It takes an evil genius like [Mo Yan] to understand an evil hero like
me.... I doubt there’s another person on this earth who knows him as well as I.” (179)

只有他這種邪惡的天才，才能理解我這種邪惡的英雄....世界上只怕沒有第二個人，能像我這樣了解他了。(216)

Allegedly this is the reason why Yu Yichi commissions Mo Yan to write his biography (217). Yet, what follows is Yu’s own account of his life, especially the mysterious circumstances leading to his final success. In Yu’s account the young dwarf is very much like the hero in popular martial arts fiction (wuxia xiaoshuo). He was born with a “liqor moth” inside his belly that will magically produce wine. When his secret was discovered, the liqor moth was eventually taken by the wineshop owner he used to work with as a boy. All this, according to Dr. Wine’s findings, is made up by Yu, who has probably come across some fantastic stories in Strange Events in Liqorland (Jiuguo qishi lu), one of which is quoted in Dr. Wine’s self-professed “reportage fiction.”

Comparing the heroic figures of the dwarf and the villain, there are at least two similarities despite their manifest differences. First, both Yu and Jin show a penchant for fictionalizing their personal histories to the extent that biographical data are obscured or rendered irrelevant. Second, their extraordinary potentials and ambitions are part and parcel of the utilitarian ideology enforced by the State, which they manage to exploit to legitimize their illicit desires. If Mo Yan’s satirical motive is self-explanatory, these characters are also projections of Mo Yan’s vision of “human devolution.” By turning the hero into a dwarf (and the dwarf into a hero), the “rising stars” of the socialist
paradise are shown to be morally bankrupt, i.e. dwarfs in spirit. Having suffered psychological distortion and physical deprivation, Yu loses his life as his sexual revenge takes a sour turn. Diamond Jin, on the other hand, continues to rise in the social and political system precisely because of his successful image packaging. His ability to turn evil into awe is both telling and terrifying. Apart from the “meat babies”, his victims are mostly unconscious of the gravity of the crime to which they are accomplices. In the end, even “the famous detective Ding” acknowledges his utter defeat. He plunges to his death into a huge open-air privy which he mistakes for a floating restaurant:

It was a fertile ground for all sorts of disease-carrying bacteria and micro-organisms, a paradise for flies, Heaven on earth for maggots. Feeling that [this was the best place for his final rest, the investigator hurried a smile] just before his mouth slid beneath the warm, vile porridge. The pitiless muck sealed his mouth as the irresistible force of gravity drew him under. Within seconds, the sacred panoply of ideals, justice, respect, honor, and love accompanied a long-suffering special investigator to the very bottom of the privy... (330)\(^\text{13}\)

13 My interpolation is a literal translation of the Chinese original. In Goldblatt’s translation, the sentence reads: “Feeling that this was not the place where he should wind up, the investigator announced loudly, just before his mouth slid beneath the warm, vile porridge, ‘I protest, I pro –’” (330, emphasis added).
Ding’s epigraph, included as a prologue to The Republic of Wine, further deepens the irony of his life: “In an age of chaos and corruption, my dear fellows, do not judge our own brothers.” (“在混亂和腐敗的時代裏，弟兄們，不要審判自己的親兄弟。”)¹⁴

This declaration of solidarity or human bonding is very different from that in Red Sorghum and The Grass Eaters. In the earlier novels group identity is fostered respectively by an austere moral code (manifested in patriotism and spontaneous goodness) and a common mythical heritage (manifested in a sense of collective responsibility and repentance). In The Republic of Wine, not only Diamond Jin and Yu Yichi but also all the inhabitants of this fin-de-siècle world exhibit neither the depth nor complexity of a moral being. This is not to say they are simply “flat” characters or caricatures in E. M. Forster’s sense. Rather, their formidable character adds horror to Ding Gou’er’s journey into this modern “heart of darkness.” It is not improper here to compare Jin and Yu to Conrad’s Kurtz, only that in The Republic of Wine the victims are not the “brutes” whom Kurtz once wanted to exterminate: the “brutes” are out to exterminate their own brothers! In The Republic of Wine, not even the high-sounding principle of civilization is required to justify instrumental efficiency. Everyone, including numerous celebrities and political leaders around the world has been served the

¹⁴ It is not included in Goldblatt’s translation.
“banquet of cannibalism.” Unlike the perturbed Marlow, Ding Gou’er has no message to pass on or conceal. He dies sluggishly, uncomplaining, surrendering himself to the filth that buries all dreams, ideals, justice and love. If this is Mo Yan’s dialogue with Lu Xun concerning the “cannibalism” of traditional Chinese culture, The Republic of Wine is a modern version of Lu Xun’s nightmare in “Diary of a Madman.” The Madman’s desperate “Save the children!” here is transformed into Mo Yan’s “braised meat-babies.” It is both a parody of the old master’s anti-traditional iconoclasm and a furious indictment of the moral degeneracy of the Chinese society in his own age, overflowing with excrement, filth and all sorts of waste into which all beauty and goodness will eventually sink.

Compared to Red Sorghum and The Grass Eaters, the degeneration of the Chinese race is much greater in magnitude and worse in kind. There is no reference to an ideal past but only historical evidence full of stunning similarities to the evil of the present. Apart from the strange tales in Strange Events in Liquorland, allusions to the Chinese culinary tradition, especially its exotic cuisine and special recipes, are given as pseudo-historical accounts. The practice of mutilating live mules for instant consumption, cutting off horse ankles and bear palms alive, etc, is allegedly part of the Chinese culinary tradition that seems to serve as a “prologue” to meat-babies. As a cultural metaphor, The

---

Republic of Wine presents a menu of cliched images of Chinese culinary art as viva exotica:16

Donkey Avenue is Liquorland’s great shame as well as its great glory... [Donkey Avenue] boasts the shops of twenty-four donkey butchers. Ever since the Ming dynasty, owners of these shops have butchered their way through the entirety of the Manchu dynasty, plus all the years of the Chinese Republic.... anything that can be eaten in this world of ours – mountain delicacies and dainties from the sea, birds and beasts and fish and insects – you’ll find right here in Liquorland. (139)

Ironically, we are also told that in Liquorland good food and fine wine have not led to the desired result. Its inhabitants are largely “drunkards who steal their wives’ savings to buy their next drink,” “hooligans who resort to thievery, mugging, and every imaginable form of trickery to the same end.” (168/138) The authorial comment in the Chinese text, moreover, is a far cry from the optimistic notion of social evolution: “Give

---

16 This piece of “historical account” is hard to verify, but there are well-known analogies in reality like “bear palms” and “monkey brains”. Though much condemned and by no means popular nowadays, these rare dishes are still sought after by some adventurous gourmets.
it another two thousand years and these people will still be around.” Later on this elaborate allegory is translated into explicit political satire:

> When Mao drank Maotai, his mind was sharp as a tack and full of strategies… So Maotai liquor played a key role in the Chinese revolution. (245)

毛澤東一喝茅台酒，滿腦子神機妙算….茅台酒為中國革命立過大功。（292）

Yet, to read *The Republic of Wine* as a modern version of May Fourth anti-traditionalism or the social exposé novel runs the risk of over-simplification. Political satire and social criticism, as one critic points out, have to be situated within the “strained relationships among the longing for creative autonomy, the Party-state’s ideological inhibition, and financial pressures on writers” underlying the “subtle association between literature and reality” in *The Republic of Wine* (Ng 133). After all, what makes *The Republic of Wine* a modern allegory is its self-reflexive, self-critical mode of representation that overtly challenges the authority – and integrity – of the flesh-and-blood novelist himself. In “Letters,” “Mo Yan” and Dr. Wine as dramatized narrators openly admit their practical concerns as creative writers. While Dr. Wine likes to identify himself with Lu Xun in expressing his literary ambitions, Mo Yan poses as the clumsy, middle-aged writer suffering an identity crisis. He is “fat and clumsy”, half-bald, with a pair of small eyes and warped lips. This self-portrait has a striking resemblance to
that of Ding Gou’er, a middle-aged policeman who has no certainty or principle in life other than solving criminal cases. On his way to Liquorland, the novelist reflects:

Mo Yan is the raingear that protects me from storms, a dog hide to ward off the chilled winds, a mask I wear to seduce girls from good families.... This Mo Yan disgusts me, that’s the truth. At this moment its brain is a swarm with bizarre events:....royalties, trips abroad; cursing people out ... What pleasure can he get from the jumble of thoughts filling his mind, I wonder? (331-32, last ellipsis the author’s)

His predicament as a creative writer is echoed by Dr. Wine, who believes his work is hard to get published since it “interferes with social life” (302). In their own stories, both Dr. Wine and “Mo Yan” are ready to compromise their aesthetic and moral principles in order to gain patronage from Yu Yichi, their one-foot hero. In the final chapter about the author’s visit to Liquorland, “Mo Yan” steps into the fictional world of Dr. Wine, meets with his own characters and is led into a deceptive realm of carnal extravagance. Getting drunk at Yu’s banquet, the flesh-and-blood author re-experiences the “detachment of consciousness from the body” he once had his protagonist Detective Ding go through. In a dreamlike manner, “Mo Yan” finishes off his narrative in a five-page long one-sentence paragraph in which repressed thoughts and feelings are
articulated in a furious outburst. In this muddle of mental images, past and present, reality and fiction, life and death, morality and vice are summoned and discarded in quick succession. Hallucinating, "Mo Yan" identifies himself with Ding Gou'er and is finally killed by Ding, now his alter ego who also commits suicide. As promised, the novelist has invented an ending for his ironic hero that is "better than drowning in a dung pit."

"Mo Yan" 's expression of solidarity with his fictional creation, again, echoes Ding's epigraph mentioned above. It is not certain whether "Mo Yan" has been treated to the same "banquet of cannibalism" by Yu Yichi. Yet, Mo Yan (without quotes) has written into the novel his own self-conception as a novelist through his two protagonists, Dr. Wine and Detective Ding. If Ding represents the frustration and helplessness of the writing self crushed by life's pressures from all directions, Dr. Wine complicates this self-image of the high-spirited writer by dramatizing the disjunction between theory and practice. In "Republic of Wine 2" Dr. Wine has tried out as many fictional modes as can be found in China since the May Fourth, and he makes it the highest ambition of his life to reform the Chinese national character through literature. "Mo Yan," at first, tries to dissuade his admirer from pursuing a literary career. In his correspondence with Dr. Wine, the novelist criticizes the latter's work as "too fanciful, too out of control," an accusation his own critics have used before (214). Despite their apparent differences in age and aesthetic temperament, "Mo Yan" and Dr. Wine turn out to be kindred spirits in their "real" life. Good food, fine wine and generous patronage seem to be their common goal. Thus anti-traditionalism, social criticism and political satire are funneled through
an ironic, self-reflexive narrative frame in which all attempts to relieve the moral and aesthetic tension are consciously rejected. Given the metafictional import of this novel, the deprecating image of the writer only increases the emotional intensity with which "Mo Yan" seeks the undoing of the writing self in a literary suicide.

In the nightmarish decadent world of *The Republic of Wine*, the opposition of past and present, hero and bastard, city and country, nature and culture as found in *Red Sorghum* and *The Grass Eaters* has disappeared. The ruthless process of modernization, in the form of a hypocritical pseudo-modernity perpetuated by the ideology of the Party-state, has effectively eliminated the "countryside culture" as a source of spiritual renewal as in *Red Sorghum* and *The Grass Eaters*. Moral degeneration in China today is seen as a ubiquitous ever present that only changes its appearance under different political climates. This is the kind of historical vision Mo Yan projects in this grotesque modern allegory:

...I have too many regrets [in writing this book]. The history of the past five thousand years, in a certain sense, is like a history of wine. Wine has accomplished many good things, but it has also destroyed many good things. Drinking, our predecessors lived their dignified lives and created many glorious poems. Drunk, I can only look on coolly and write this book.

遺憾太多，過去五千年的歷史，從某種意義上說幾同
一部酒的歷史，酒成就了多少好事，也壞了多少好事。古人
Thus The Republic of Wine can also be read as Mo Yan’s reflection on his literary heritage through which he tries to overcome his own predicament as the “unfilial descendant” of a once glorious cultural tradition. His fictional alter egos, Dr. Wine and Ding Gou’er, in this light, have acted out his inner fears and anxiety as a modern Chinese writer who, having learnt the lesson of the May Fourth, is also a witness to the waves of political and social turbulence that have swept through China in the past few decades.

Full Bosoms, Fat Buttocks and the Sanctification of Life

So far I have attempted to outline Mo Yan’s fictional family of heroes and bastards and trace the itinerary of their “historical” descent; from the idealized world of passion and spontaneous goodness in Red Sorghum, to mythical origin and inevitable descent in The Grass Eaters, and finally to the excremental world of moral decay in The Republic of Wine. These novels, written at a time when China’s Open Door Policy was fervently pursued nationwide, represent a writer’s effort to “take stock” of Chinese history of the past one hundred years. It is in this context that Fengru feitun (Full Bosoms, Fat Buttocks) impresses upon the reader Mo Yan’s indomitable spirit in finding new metaphors for his stock of historical and cultural visions. As has been mentioned at
the beginning of this chapter, *Full Bosoms* signifies Mo Yan’s return to the human and humane realm where he rediscovers the equally indomitable human spirit in the image of the mother. It is not the usual kind of praise offered to the traditional mother figure. Nor is it just a renovated allegorical lighthouse of the Motherland. Instead, this long novel is the product of Mo Yan’s painstaking effort to capture in fictional language his personal convictions of the meaning of history and human existence. As if inevitably, it culminates in an image of a cosmos of breasts as the embodiment of the most sacred and enduring human values.

The time frame of *Full Bosoms* spans some seven decades from 1939 to the mid-1990s. The chief protagonist and narrator, Shangguan Jintong (Golden Boy) is a bastard son of his mother and a Swedish pastor in Gaomi. The ninth and only male child of an ironsmith in 1939, Golden Boy is the twin brother of his eighth sister, Shangguan Yunü (Jade Girl) who is born blind. On the day of his birth, the Japanese army marches into his home village in Gaomi and massacres hundreds of people, including his father and grandfather. His mother and the newborn are saved by the calculated mercy of the Japanese army for the sake of war propaganda. His seven older sisters are sent to catch shrimp in the river and escape the carnage. Thus, only the women and the infant boy in the Shangguan household survive the massacre. This dramatic opening is followed by the successive decades of foreign invasion, civil war and

---

17 Japanese occupation of Shandong began in 1938, one year after Japan took over Manchuria in 1937 and set up a puppet Manchu government there.
political and social revolution in modern Chinese history up to the nineties. For the purpose of my discussion, I will briefly outline the major events in the family history of the Shangguan’s in terms of decades.

Following the dramatic birth of Golden Boy, the Shangguan household is visited by a loosely disciplined guerilla troop which resembles more an *ad hoc* alliance of ex-bandits. His mother, surnamed Lu, is gang-raped by a group of such bandits when she visits her lover, Pastor Ma Luoya in the local Catholic Church. The pastor (the real father of the twins) commits suicide out of shame. China’s war of resistance in Shandong brings in different and more often competing guerilla armed forces that promise not peace but intensified local conflicts and depredation of the local people. It turns out that Lu’s eldest daughter, Laidi (lit. next comes a brother) falls in love with a local guerilla commander, Sha the Moon and elopes with him. Not long afterwards, her second daughter, Zhaodi (lit. inviting a brother) runs away with a local gentry leader Sima Ku who has joined the Republican army’s anti-Japanese campaign. Golden Boy passes the first year of his life well-fed and protected by his mother’s fertile breasts. Later on, Lu is entrusted with the care of two more infants, the son of Sima Ku and the daughter of Zhaodi and Sha the moon.

The Second World War and the civil war in 1940s completely shatter the Shangguan household. Lingdi (lit. leading a brother) falls in love with the bird expert Niao’er Han (lit. birdie Han) who is eventually captured by the Japanese and sent to a
labor camp in Hokkaido. Lingdi is allegedly transformed into a bird spirit and remains in a half-deluded, half “spiritual” state until her suicidal jump down a cliff in the late forties. At about the same time, fourth sister Xiangdi (lit. thinking of my brother) sells herself to a brothel in the city to save her family from stravation. Without hope of a timely relief from privation, Lu is forced to give away her seventh daughter Qiudi (lit. praying for a brother) to a Russian woman. The coming of the Communist army in 1947 sees the demise of Sima Ku and also the betrayal of the Shangguan family by fifth sister Pandi (lit. longing for a brother) who runs away with the scheming Communist officer Jiang Liren. Sha the Moon commits suicide soon after his arrest, and Laidi is deranged by grief. Sixth sister Niandi (remembering my brother) dies with her American husband in a cave after their escape from a Communist raid. Many children of misery are born in this decade. Two sons by “bird spirit” Lingdi (who is raped by a dumb villain named Sun) and two daughters by Zhaodi and Sima Ku are openly executed by Jiang Liren during the land reform for their “landowner” and “counter-revolutionary” background. Pandi and Jiang Liren’s daughter, Victory, is safe due to her parents’ party membership. The family connection between the Shangguan and Sima households guarantees their prosecution by the new regime.

In the 1950s, when Sun the dummy returns as a “super hero” to his hometown and is married off by the Party to Laidi, the Shangguan family experiences a decade of “prosperity” and Golden Boy resumes his high school education with flying colors. Then comes the Cultural Revolution in 1966 during which the Shangguan family is completely
devastated. Golden Boy is reunited with his seventh sister in a work camp only to witness her being raped by the kitchen supervisor who has already sexually exploited the other women in the camp. Golden Boy makes love to the dead body of a deranged spinster out of sympathy and is sentenced to a labor camp for fifteen years. Laidi falls feverishly in love with Niao’er Han and together they are sentenced to death for killing Sun the Dummy. Meanwhile, fourth sister Xiangdi returns after years of working as a prostitute. Her life’s savings are confiscated by the government. She is badly tortured during a mass gathering and dies not long afterwards. Hoping to relieve her mother from the burden of feeding her, Eighth sister Jade Girl commits suicide during the great famine in the sixties. Meanwhile, Pandi and her husband Jiang Liren are killed as they lose favor with the revolutionary masses.

When Golden Boy returns home after a fifteen-year term in a labor camp in the North, he is already in his forties. Having been cut off from the society for more than one decade, Golden Boy cannot make much sense of his new “freedom.” He soon has a relapse of “lactophilia” (a kind of psychosomatic syndrome from the time of his birth) and rejects all food or liquid except women’s milk. Desperate for a cure, his mother asks an old acquaintance for help. Golden Boy then has a brief affair with his new obsession, a middle-aged woman called One-Breast Goldie. At this point it becomes clear that Golden Boy’s abnormal attachment to women’s breasts is inversely proportional to his sexual desire. For the rest of his life Golden Boy remains impotent. The Shangguan family is reunited with Sima Ku’s son, Sima Liang who has disappeared after his father’s
public execution. Now a billionaire from Korea, Sima Liang reciprocates Lu’s love and kindness by establishing Golden Boy in a trendy boutique specializing in bras and women’s lingerie. Meanwhile, Parrot Han, the son of Laidi and Niao’er Han, inherits his father’s gift and is in the process of founding the Oriental Bird Heaven. Victory, on the other hand, leads a successful career in politics and finance and later becomes the Mayor of Gaomi.

As usual, Golden Boy is dragged into a series of personal and political intrigues and loses all his fortune in the end. With the exception of Sima Liang, whose whereabouts remain unclear to the end, the children of the Shangguan and Sima families all fall victims to problems of their own making. Parrot Han is a pragmatic soft-voiced coward ready to give up his principle for practical (usually financial) advantage. His talent in training birds to speak human languages is left to waste when his aggressive wife’s intricate network of bribery and fraud breaks down. Victory, the prototype of modern-day career women, receives a death sentence for bribery and corruption when her political mentor falls from power. Sha Zhuhua, Laidi and Sha the Moon’s daughter, grows up to become a legendary thief in the country. She jumps to her death when Sima Liang doubts her virginity. As for Golden Boy, he accidentally discovers that Pastor Ma, his biological father, has another son who is now the priest of the local Catholic Church. The story suggests that Golden Boy, a lonely, homeless bastard approaching his twilight years and whose only anchorage in life has gone with his mother’s death, will take his refuge in the Church where he will serve as a doorman for the rest of his life.
Given the extensive host of characters and events of the novel, my synopsis above is but a skeleton of the work itself. What needs to be added is that the novel ends with a final chapter recalling Lu’s life from childhood to motherhood, from which we know that not just Golden Boy and Jade Girl, but also their siblings, are illegitimate children from different fathers. Lu was a country girl born at the dawn of the twentieth century (1900), in the final decade of dynastic history in China. Orphaned at six months old when her parents were killed by German soldiers, she was brought up by her aunt and uncle as a traditional lady. Changing fashion and standards of feminine beauty render her exquisite bound-feet and social manners out of date. She was hurriedly married to an iron smith who is sterile and sexually abusive. As her mother-in-law puts all the blame on Lu for not bearing children, Lu’s aunt simply lets her husband take over this “duty.” In the subsequent years, Lu seized every opportunity to make herself pregnant in the hope that a son would be born. It was not until she meets Pastor Ma that her prayers to Heaven are answered.

This striking revelation gives a whole new interpretation of motherhood, filial love and ethical conventions, as the controversial title of the novel suggests. The juxtaposition of male and female sexuality in Full Bosoms has an ethical implication. Almost all the female characters from the grandmother to the granddaughters are matriarch figures who preside over all important matters in the family, and rise up to defend their children much more courageously and effectively than their weak-kneed
husbands. Lu’s attempt to bear the Shangguan family an heir has therefore to be understood on a deeper level of moral consciousness. She is not exactly a traditional woman, for she dares to defy the strictest moral code in order to break the cycle of physical and psychological abuse of the Shangguans. Tellingly enough, the God she has been praying to grants her a son only when she finds her love in Pastor Ma, a most unsuitable choice in the conventional sense. Mo Yan’s sense of irony and humor, and also his humanity, is conveyed in this extravagant display of illegitimate sexual liaisons. Despite its overt erotic symbolism Full Bosoms is intensely moral in essence. I will explore this moral dimension in the following terms: the image of the mother, erotic and sexual desire, and finally the notion of hero and heroism. These three aspects, moreover, are integral to our understanding of Full Bosoms as fictional history.

As its title suggests, the female body is the primary symbol that unites the various themes of the novel. Before looking at the key image of the mother, it is necessary to first examine the narrative framework within which the mother figure is created. The story of Full Bosoms is told primarily from the point of view of Golden Boy, who begins his recollection on the very day of his birth. Like the I-narrator Saleem in Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children, Golden Boy is a near-omniscient narrator only occasionally interrupted by the voice of a third person that is mainly a decoy. Golden Boy, I believe, is the expected descendant from the lineage of narrators in Mo Yan’s fictional world.

---

18 Fengru feitun was under severe attack by left-wing and conservative critics for its display of “eroticism” and “sexism” when it was first published in 1995. Mo Yan suffered a mental breakdown which put a halt to his creative writing for nearly two years. See Mo Yan’s foreword to his most recent collection, Hong
From the ironic voice of the nostalgic grandson of the red sorghum family to the ironic
"unfilial descendant" of the Grass Eaters to the impotent, ineffectual bastard who has
remained a psychological infant in *Full Bosoms*, one finds a gradual transformation of the
self-image of the I-narrators. In *Full Bosoms*, the prophetic vision of the hybrid is
realized. Shangguan Golden Boy is a bastard in the literal sense, and his good-looking
European appearance is both his greatest asset and his greatest curse. Worse, this good-
looking bastard is born with an abnormal appetite for milk, i.e. what comes to be known
as "lactophilia" (*lianru kuang*) or "lacto-anorexia" (*lianru yanshi zheng*). As the "hero"
of the novel, Golden Boy is by birth destined to be a misfit in the social, political and
cultural sense. As a mockery of the conventional hero, Golden Boy has never made any
conscious decisions in his life. His addiction to women’s breasts and his mother’s milk
further thwarts his attempts to make good. Thrust into the fierce currents of historical
contingencies, Golden Boy relies primarily on his instincts in reacting to the tragic events
in life. Nonetheless, Golden Boy is gifted to tell the stories of others from the inside,
which he attributes to the miracle of breast-feeding.

By choosing this character as the principal narrator, the implied author is free to
explore the "forbidden zones" of literary discourse in a matter-of-fact manner, for Golden
Boy has little moral or ethical preconceptions or convictions except his extreme
sensitivity to women’s breasts. The unsuitability of Golden Boy as a reflective
consciousness at the center of complex historical events is, however, compensated by his

*erduo* (Red Ears) 《紅耳朵》(31).
unique position in Mo Yan’s Gaomi narratives. In this broader framework, the bastard figure in *Full Bosoms*, as the center of consciousness, plays the role of the interpreter of history from his infancy. As a marginal figure, he also has the privilege of being marginal, i.e. no one takes him seriously, hence his relative freedom to “see” reality “as”, making arbitrary connections between the outside world and his imaginary world of breasts and buttocks. By using Golden Boy’s point of view as a buffer, both the reader and the implied author are distanced from the immediate reality of the text, and yet also gain access to the “aesthetics of breasts” on which Golden Boy develops his philosophy of life. A few examples from the text will illustrate this point:

From the time I could think consciously, I realized that the beauty of breasts is boundless; it is no easy task to tell if a breast is ugly, but it’s very easy to tell which one is beautiful.

Golden Boy’s precocious sensitivity to breasts later becomes his “aesthetics” and philosophy of life:

Mountains are the nipples of the earth.... Words are the nipples of thought.... The sun is the nipple of the universe...... Let everything be summarized in breasts. Connect the entire material world with
nipples: such is the freest and most stubborn spirit of the mental patient Shangguan Golden Boy.

山是地的乳頭....語言是思想的乳頭....太陽是宇宙的乳頭......把一切都歸結到乳房上，用乳頭把整個物質世界串連起來，這就是精神病患者上官金童最自由也是最偏執的精神。(614, last ellipsis the author’s)

One wonders whether the above manifesto of a lunatic masks the real aesthetics underlying *Full Bosoms*. In any case, the moral dimension of this maternal symbol is explored thus:

Breasts are the result of human evolution.... A society that has no concern for breasts is a barbaric society. A society that does not care about breasts is an inhuman society.... Don’t be ungrateful. To forget your mother’s breasts means losing your humanity.

一個不關心乳房的社會，是野蠻的社會。一個不愛護乳房的社會，是不人道的社會....不要忘本，忘記了母親的乳房就意味着喪失了人性。(627)

The accusation of eroticism and sexism in this novel by some critics on the Mainland is thus valid only on the most superficial level of the complex network of associations. In *Full Bosoms*, the elaborate imagery of femininity, conveyed through the
imagination of a psychological cripple, serves as a link to “connect everything in the entire [fictional] world”, culminating in the narrator’s vision that “breasts are.... the origin of the world, a manifestation of the true, the good, the beautiful [and the virtue of] selfless sacrifice of human beings” (627). In the end, Golden Boy lies on the ground before his mother’s grave and reflects on his life. There he envisions a universe of breasts in a variety of shapes and colors. Gradually, these breasts are conjoined into “the highest peak in the world, standing mightily between heaven and earth” (754). Thus, the meaning of breasts is both sexual and moral, erotic and ethical.

This eccentric combination of contradictory values and impulses is noted by some critics as a subversion of socialist aesthetics. On a more subtle level, the purpose of subversion goes beyond politics or cultural politics (understood here as a contention against a dominant ideology) to shed light upon certain cultural values that define common humanity. In Mo Yan’s case, this is to be attained by “shock therapy”, i.e. by a radical distancing from familiar reality through an extravagant spectacle of sex, violence, taboos, illicit desires and vulgarities wrought in a half-real, half-fantastic fictional landscape. One of the effects is the emotional distance created for both the implied author and the reader who thereby gain a wider leeway for critical self-reflection. (Ironically, this is also a political gain vis-à-vis the highly sentimental and self-indulgent socialist-realist historical novel.)
In the half-deluded world of the bastard, breasts are an expression of the most "sacred" passion of individuals. From infancy Golden Boy habitually associates his mother with the Virgin Mary and the Chinese goddess of mercy, Guanyin. Indeed these two religious figures share many similarities: graceful, peaceful, innocent and pure:

Mom had almost the same look as the half-naked Sacred Mother called Maria hung on the wall. Dignified, melancholy, peaceful, uncomplaining, [she] sacrificed herself out of her own will. This is religion.

Given the upbringing and life experiences of his mother, such a religious image seems to contradict the conventional sense of purity and innocence. She has consciously violated the moral code of a dutiful wife and virtuous woman. She has had sexual relations with seven men other than her husband. She has been gang raped by unruly soldiers. In a desperate move to rescue her little daughter, she has even murdered her lunatic mother-in-law out of rage and fear and lived in intense self-rebuke ever since. In many ways, she is more than a conventional victim of an unjust, sexist society. In fact,

---

19 This characteristic of Mo Yan’s style is sometimes associated with Bakhtin’s idea of the “carnivalesque”, as discussed in Zhong Yiwen, Kenny Ng, and David Wang’s “Preface” to Hong er’ duo (9-27).
Golden Boy’s narrative has revoked this verdict by locating the rare, innate virtues of this extraordinary woman in her indomitable spirit and passion for life, her sense of justice and readiness to defend it at all costs. Lu, as the mother prototype in *Full Bosoms*, is constantly associated with life. Her breasts have nurtured both her children and grandchildren. Her procreant femininity is, furthermore, the basis of her spiritual life, for her conversion to the Catholic faith is both a spiritual and sensual experience. The discovery of love in Pastor Ma is a redemption of body and soul (709-710). When the Communist Party once again takes control of Shandong in the late forties, a mass gathering is held where the rich and the counter-revolutionary are put on trial, most of them tortured to death. Everyone is shaken by fear but “mother was extremely calm”: “in front of the austere VIP, mother kept knitting her hemp ropes which made her all the more eye-catching….the VIP fixed his creepy eyes on her face for a very long time” (294). She is nearly killed trying to save her grandchildren from the bullets of her Communist son-in-law. During the Cultural Revolution, Lu jumps out of the parade of counter-revolutionaries (the “cow-demons and snake-spirits”) just to rescue a local scoundrel from drowning. Golden Boy surmises this old widow must have “forgotten she was in a public parade of criminals” (525). She is badly beaten by a Red Guard enraged by her “hypocritical” act of mercy. All this is done out of her simple, rustic wisdom: “to die is easy; to live, not…. If you’re not afraid of dying you should struggle to live” (422). This image of the woman echoes that in *Red Sorghum* where, in the end, Second Grandma is described as “liberal, dignified, and richly resilient, yet serene and firm” (357).
The historical significance of this mother prototype, first of all, is suggested by her birth in 1900, and her death in the late 1990s. Spanning nearly the entire twentieth century, Lu’s life story naturally encompasses all the major political events in times of great transitions – the late Qing, the Republican Revolution, the Communist Revolution and the numerous political movements under the new socialist regime. By the time of her death Lu is, so to say, as old as modern China herself. However, it is not easy to pin the label “motherland” on this woman (or other female figures in the novel) of supple breasts and fat buttocks. At least the mother is constantly seen standing against the excesses of nationalist sentiments.

At this point one must take note of the shift in focus from Red Sorghum to Full Bosoms to account for the irony of the latter. If the anti-Japanese campaign is a screen on which the heroic spirit of Red Sorghum is projected, in Full Bosoms the major villains are neither German nor Japanese, but Chinese (although foreign aggression in the history of Gaomi is also vividly presented). Golden Boy’s family history is made up of numerous civil wars and internal conflicts between and within local political powers represented by people fighting ruthlessly for their selfish interests under the banner of patriotism and nationalism. Tellingly enough, four daughters of the Shangguan family are married to soldiers or guerilla leaders belonging to opposing camps. In the midst of all this, the center of Golden Boy’s narrative is, still, the family, one that is dominated and preserved by women whose life and death completes the history of the Shangguan family. The
absurdity of politics, revealed in the endless cycles of destruction, directly contributes to
the disintegration of the family, whose spiritual and material interests always go against
the grain of political ideology.

It is justifiable, therefore, to locate the meaning of the mother prototype in the
private realm of human experience, not just within the “family” as a narrowly defined
social unit but also in the sense of common humanity in general. In this light, the
provocative imagery of breasts and buttocks can be seen as an extenuated effort to
defamiliarize traditional symbols of nationhood and those of the “pure and innocent” by
uniting them with the private, sensual and erotic. This observation is in line with Mo
Yan’s paradoxical aesthetics noted in Red Sorghum and The Grass Eaters. The female
body in Golden Boy’s idiosyncratic definition is both the locus of bodily desires and
source of spiritual strength that account for much of his mother’s life story. In fact, his
mother is also a storyteller. It is her stories told on countless winter nights that make up a
significant part of Golden Boy’s “memory” of the past. In this sense, Golden Boy can be
seen as an “agent” through whom his mother speaks:

Chinese demons and foreign gods, the living and the dead, stories
we knew and stories we didn’t know kept streaming through
mother’s mouth. Understanding my mother’s murmurs during her
illness is the same as understanding the universe; recording my
mother’s murmurs during her illness is the same as recording the
entire history of Gaomi.
Compared to Han Shaogong’s three female prototypes in “Nü Nü Nü”, Mo Yan’s construction of the mother figure here strikes a more positive note. It echoes the kind of heroism in Red Sorghum guided by spontaneous goodness and a deep reverence for life in the broadest sense. The ideal world of the red sorghum family is partially present in Full Bosoms. Based on his mother’s recollection of the distant past, Golden Boy retells the story of the ancestors of the Sima and Shangguan family, both being martial arts masters and patriotic heroes back in the Qing Dynasty. Perhaps Sima Ku, the libertine, most resembles the hero prototype in Mo Yan’s corpus. He already has three wives before he marries Zhaodi. His charismatic appearance is matched by his energy and leadership in the military. But this seems to be a discontinued lineage, for most of the male descendants in these two families are either morons or cowards. If the heroes in Red Sorghum still preserve their independence of will even in death, their public failure exonerated by their individual honor, the male protagonists in Full Bosoms, whenever they participate in a war, are co-opted by the powers that be and greatly compromise their heroic stature. Golden Boy, the last in line, is an impotent bastard, a man-child who never takes up responsibility for his life. Thus, a critical difference between Full Bosoms and Red Sorghum lies in the psychological and intellectual strength of the I-narrators. In
the latter case, the “unfilial” grandson shows a strong sense of belonging and identity toward his heroic ancestors. This enables him to envision the many ghosts and spirits that lead him to an understanding of the past, and to imagine a future, albeit distant and vague, when the self is purified and renewed. Golden Boy’s final resort is retreating to the Church where he will work as a doorman for the rest of his life. This suggests also that there remains no redemption for Golden Boy, who can only mimic a few biblical phrases without real conviction.

Golden Boy’s vision of a universe of breasts transforming into a lofty mountain between heaven and earth hints at a “revelation” that somehow delivers him from his personal plight:

These treasures, these spirits were performing flying parade and exquisite dance on his face... There are treasures in heaven: sun moon stars and constellations; there are treasures on earth: full bosoms fat buttocks. He had given up trying to capture them because that’s impossible.... Now, he was happy observing them attentively.

這些寶貝，這些精靈在他的面上表演着特技飛行和神奇舞蹈... 天上有寶，日月星晨；人間有寶，豐乳肥臀。他放棄了試圖捕捉它們的努力，跟本不可能捉住它們... 他只是幸福地注視着它們。(754)
Right before his flight of fancy, he notices a red flower growing at the back of his mother’s grave. As he tries to eat it, he feels the taste of blood full in his mouth. Suddenly he realizes that “it’s all because the earth is soaked with human blood.” It is not clear whether Golden Boy has surrendered himself to the pull of gravity and drowned in the middle of the marshland where his mother is buried. But this is the most significant moment of self-reflection in his life. Breasts and buttocks, mother, family, the past: everything is consummated in a totemic imagery of the lofty mountain between heaven and earth. If this ending seems pathetic, it also contains Golden Boy’s final tribute to his mother and to the fictional history of Gaomi.

From *The Republic of Wine* to *Full Bosoms*, Mo Yan seems to have come a long way to confront his complex feelings about China. After a radical critique of human degradation and “cannibalism,” the author seems eager to articulate his unreserved admiration of the “pure”, “innocent” and “sacred” within the human spirit as a resistance to the destructive forces of history. On the other hand, from *Red Sorghum* through his major novels to *Full Bosoms*, Mo Yan’s works demonstrate a growing pessimism in his historical vision despite his deep reverence for the sanctity of human life and nostalgic idealism implicit in the heroes and heroines in his fictional world. As one critic observes, the “absurd” and “grotesque” in his fiction might well be a way to relieve the sadness of remembering the painful experiences in the past, and translating the same into fiction
Mo Yan (Zhu Hengqing 40). It might also be a need to accommodate contradictory impulses and as yet unresolved psychological tensions that give rise to the author’s unique worldview and aesthetic temperament. Whether this is the case, “devolution” is the prevailing mood in Mo Yan’s historical fiction. As the above examples show, “devolution” is less a natural, biological process than a cultural-historical one. The cause of cultural decline is always the result of moral failings of human beings on a collective scale. The fantastic and grotesque used to describe these historical events, on the one hand, are a way to confront the horror of history (as perceived reality); on the other hand, they serve to distance the literary text from its immediate social and political reality to create a multidimensional historical metaphor, i.e. a spiritual homeland where cultural and aesthetic ideals are tested against even the darkest and gloomiest vision of the human condition.

Pitting levity against gravity, as Rushdie says, while the totemic symbols of the pure grain sorghum and of the gigantic breast metamorphosed into a lofty mountain between heaven and earth are not a complete resolution to, but at least a temporary relief of, Mo Yan’s pensive apprehension of “human devolution” as the inevitable outcome of modern Chinese history, his outrage against the moral degeneracy of Chinese society today, and his melancholy toward his own art as a novelist: “I wish to... write some more stories to cheer up my friends and upset the heroes. The problem is my true friends are as scanty as butterflies in the snow; but those heroes who hate me are like mosquitoes
in the summer. What comforts me is that butterflies surviving the snow must be an extraordinary species…. I would rather be a piece of dog-shit fertilizer than cosmetics on heroes’ faces” (*Hong erduo* 31).

---

20 "To be born again… first you have to die… To land upon the bosomy earth, first one needs to fly… How to ever smile again, if first you won’t cry?” (*Satanic Verses* 1)
Su Tong's Topos of Desire

Born in Suzhou, Jiangsu Province in 1963, Su Tong belongs to the younger generation of writers whose experimental spirit in creating “new languages and literary forms in order to provide new meanings for society” (Li Tuo, “New Vitality” 76) has earned them the status of the “avant-garde” on the Mainland. He began publishing poems and short stories in literary magazines in the early 1980s. His tour de force in the West, Raise the Red Lantern: a collection of three novellas (1990), originally titled Qiqie chengqun (A Profusion of Wives and Concubines), won him international acclaim, especially after director Zhang Yimou’s film rendition from which the book derived its English title. Notably one of the most prolific writers in Mainland China today, Su Tong has published four novels, three collections of novellas and seven collections of short stories to date. Many critics have commented on Su Tong’s “decadent” style, particularly “decadence” as a subversive gesture toward the utopian rhetoric of revolutionary literature sanctioned by state ideology.¹ Like their Western counterparts, these avant-garde writers usually exhibit a fin-de-siècle consciousness, or what Arnold Hauser calls “the feeling of doom and crisis,” “the consciousness of standing at the end of a vital process and in the presence of the dissolution of a

¹ The subversive nature of “decadence” in Su Tong’s fiction is discussed in Knight. See also Robin Visser (113-137).
Su Tong civilization" (Hauser 185, qtd. in Knight 92). Apparently, this apocalyptic temperament finds a not so distant echo in non-avant-garde writers like Mo Yan and Han Shaogong, whose sense of “devolution” and cultural decline provokes a literary reinvention of the past as a resistance to (and sometimes redemption of) the flux of time. As David Der-wei Wang observes, Su Tong’s depiction of Maple-Poplar Village, his fictional homeland, is a nuanced continuation of the “imaginary nostalgia” in modern Chinese fiction championed by Shen Congwen and Lu Xun decades ago, only that in Su Tong’s case the “return” to the past is fraught with incomprehension, revulsion and disgust, while the predominant movement is, ironically, “escape.”

What further differentiates Su Tong’s “nostalgia” from search-for-roots fiction is that his imaginary homeland is a self-conscious fictional construct concentrating on the dubious and demonic aspects of “home”. The I-narrators in Yijiusansinian de taowang 《一九三四年的逃亡》 (“1934 Escapes”) and “Feiyue wo de fengyangshu guxiang” 《飛越我的楓楊樹故鄉》 (Flying Over to My Maple-Poplar Home Country), for example, try to rewrite their family history by overtly creating the characters, setting and action as a kind of psychological quest for meaning and self-knowledge. Be it Maple-Poplar Village (the country) or Fragrant Cedar Avenue (the city), the decadent South is shrouded in an obscure atmosphere (oppressively moist, exotic and opaque) that illuminates the inner world of emotions and desire of its inhabitants. History, says Su Tong, is “a heap of paper scraps” from which he constructs his fictional world, in which

---

2 See Wang’s discussion in Fictional Realism, Chapter 7. See also Wang’s “Introduction” to Tianshi de
both the author and the reader are to discover the “defects of history” and the “defects of mankind in history” that constitute the world of fiction. It is this concern for the defects of mankind and history, I believe, that prompts him to explore different possibilities of fiction writing, from metafiction to neo-realist fiction, from fatalistic predestination to more open-ended melodrama, and from the twentieth-century to ancient dynasties.

In this chapter I attempt to read some of Su Tong’s major texts that deal with my general theme: the para-doxa (categorical transgression) of the meta-phora (change, displacement, movement) of history in the literary text and the kind of fictional truth (“felt history”) thus obtained. The first part concerns the fictional topos of the South – Su Tong’s imaginary homeland – where most of his fictional narratives of the past take place. The second part is a close reading of those fictional histories of the South that exhibit a recurrent pattern of escape and return in relation to home (and homelessness), of sadomasochistic cultural/self-destruction, and of history as a source of self-knowledge that always returns with the narrative. The final part of my reading consists of the most overtly “historical” novels by Su Tong, *Wu Zetian* (Empress Wu) and *Wo de diwang shengya* (My life as an emperor). I will look at the emplotment (i.e. narrative framing and points of view) of these fictional histories in accounting for the themes of dynastic decline and the fatalism connected to kingship. By establishing some intertextual links between these two texts and others, I want to show

---

*liangshi* (The Food of an Angel) (11-36).

3 See Su Tong, “Preface: A Flowing Homeland” in *Tianshi de liangshi*. 
how Su Tong’s venture into China’s dynastic past is part of a bigger network of the metonymic signs of “the South”.

The Lure of the South: Fictional Landscape

Su Tong’s fiction of the South is generally referred to by critics as the Maple-Poplar series. The South, as it were, has become the “hall mark” of Su Tong’s new historical fiction through which the decadent world of Maple-Poplar Village and Fragrant Cedar Avenue comes to life as a horrid, perverse, and yet alluring realm of human experience:

I have never depicted my birthplace, Fragrant Cedar Avenue, with so much love and affection. Nor have I praised that pallid, callous gravel street, those two rows of dilapidated old-style houses that have neither beginning nor end, the mossy air full of mosquitoes, and the dwarfish, sordid-looking figures of my neighbors appearing and disappearing in the dark windows. I was born in the South without any choice, like a grain of seed dropped from the mouth of a swallow, but my disgust with the South has had a long history: Fragrant Cedar Avenue has left its indelible mark on me.

我從來沒有如此深情地描摹我出生的香樟樹街，歌頌一條蒼白的缺乏人情味的石硌路面，歌頌兩排無始無終的破舊的舊式房屋，歌頌街上蒼蠅飛來飛去帶有霉菌味的空氣，歌頌出沒在黑洞洞的窗口裏的那些體形矮小面害猥瑣的街
The South signifies “a corrupt yet seductive existence.” It is also “an ideal setting for movies about the river country of the South” (73-74). Indeed, in the Chinese literary tradition, the South is associated with romance, decadence, extravagance and ruin. As some critics observe, the literary landscape of the South in Su Tong’s fiction is invariably gloomy, humid, filthy, smelly, corrupt, and mysterious; it is this unique physical and cultural climate that defines Su Tong’s aesthetics (Mo and Shi 15). As a metaphorical space, the decadent South consists of two distinct yet interrelated places: Fragrant Cedar Avenue and Maple-Poplar Village representing the city and the country respectively. In the following, I attempt to map out the fictional “geohistory” of these two places that constitute the locus of desire in Su Tong’s fictional histories.

_Fragrant Cedar Avenue: Past and Present_

As the epitome of Su Tong’s southern city, Fragrant Cedar Avenue is comparable to Mo Yan’s Liquorland:

---

4 This “literary geohistory” is noted in David Wang, op. cit, p. 13-16. The division between “north” and “south” continued in the May Fourth debate between the “Beijing School” and the “Shanghai School”, in the attack on Shanghai literature in the 1930s. This kind of division, or distinction, is also discernible in the “regionalism” of xungen writers.
The river thus flows along the north front of Fragrant Cedar Avenue as it has for centuries. In winter it is icy blue-green. Nobody knows why it becomes blackish yellow in spring and summer.... There is no longer any fish in the river. Barges carrying coal and cement pass by everyday. Oil, garbage and dead rats float on the water....The scenery of the olden days is fading away bit by bit, but it has left its traces in Fragrant Cedar Avenue.

The contrast between past and present seems to imply a critique of modern life. The “colorful” pollutants from the chemical plant are like a sedative to human sensitivity, while modernization, symbolized by the barges carrying coal and cement, has destroyed the natural scenery and habitats. This nostalgic tone, however, is offset later when the narrator discovers the untold secrets of the past. Just as Mo Yan’s “Strange Records of Liquorland” leads to some stunning discoveries of China’s culinary tradition, the “Unknown History of Fragrant Avenue” in “Nanfang de duolo” (The Decline of the South) contains equally unnerving anecdotes of murder, adultery and violence since antiquity: “Since time immemorial the world has been full of all kinds of dark secrets and crimes, and Fragrant Cedar Avenue is no
exception” (109). “Even now, what happened centuries ago still happens in every corner of the street. In reality and in dreams, sex and murder overflow our everyday life” (112). The dilemma of writing about the past sometimes results in self-loathing: “In exposing vulgarities I have become vulgar myself.” The narrator’s ironic self-distancing thus makes the “indelible mark” of the past even more prominent as he seeks to undermine it.

Similar portraits of the city abound in Su Tong’s fiction. As a recurring image of the urban space, Fragrant Cedar Avenue is the prototype of Su Tong’s cityscape even when its name is altered:

One rainy morning Lingfeng arrived at Fengming Road... the wooden buildings on both sides of the street were shabby and run down. It seemed they were slanted in the same direction.... garbage, dead rats and human feces floated on the water pits.

The air in the squalid northern district, home to the city’s poor, stinks of excrement and decay. Apart from the hum of spinning wheels in nearby textile mills, the deserted streets are silent as death. (Rice 2)
The squalid cityscape prefigures the public and private lives of the inhabitants. They are gossipy, cheeky, violent, adulterous, and above all lacking any moral awareness or sense of shame. It is also a self-enclosed world where characters are trapped within their self-created spiritual prison. The spinster sisters in “Cixiu” ("Embroidery") submit themselves to a life of self-confinement in the attic room of their father’s sauce and pickle shop long after it has been confiscated by the State. The owner of Mei’s Family Teahouse in “The Decline of the South” has terminal cancer and lives like a zombie in his second-floor bedroom until he dies, while his wife indulges in debauchery downstairs. The listless youths in Chengbei didai (The Northern District of the City) are trapped in a meaningless cycle of gang fights, looting, lust and vengeance. Fragrant Cedar Avenue, it seems, is a bed of evil, the home of murderers, miscreants and scoundrels who are, ironically, the “heroes” of Su Tong’s fictional homeland.

The oppressive atmosphere of the city is matched by the prevalence of evil in a claustrophobic space. Every attempt to break away is doomed to failure or disgrace. “Everything makes me vomit. This is the reality of the gentle, beautiful ‘South’ people used to imagine…. I admit I am an unfilial offspring of the South, I hate it because it is humid, filthy and overcrowded” (“Decline” 95). Unlike Mo Yan’s narrator in Red
Sorghum, the sense of being “unfilial” is positively affirmed as a rebellion against the sordid reality of the South rather than a nostalgic yearning for a lost connection with the past. And yet, this fictional setting of the southern city also contains a negative charm that appeals to the imagination of Su Tong’s I-narrators whose moral (and physical) revulsion, for reasons unexplained, seems to effect a compulsion to narrate:

I am disgusted with the reality of Fragrant Cedar Avenue, but I have no choice but to give it an objective description.

我厭惡香椿樹街的現實但是我必須對此作出客觀的描寫，這是沒有辦法的事情。(80)

If I could, I would rather die than watch this kind of stupid drama, but I did, and very much enjoyed it.

我要是有意識，寧死也不會去看這種庸俗的鬧劇，可是偏偏我又看了，而且從頭至尾看得津津有味。(94)

This ambivalent impulse, the simultaneous sense of revulsion and attraction, is characteristic of the I-narrator’s fictional memory. Corollary to this paradox is the tendency to escape from the haunting nightmare of the past. At the end of “The Decline of the South”, the narrator is exhorted by the familiar voice of a dead man to run for his life: “‘Run, child!’ Therefore I ran. I could feel the familiar noise of the South chasing after me like the soul of the wrongfully accused” (118). Unlike Mo Yan, whose narrators lament the inevitable loss of cultural inheritance, and Han Shaogong, whose critical gaze
Su Tong

at his cultural roots alternates between disillusion and awe, Su Tong’s fictional homeland is more a display of extravagance than revelation of deep meaning. By turning the *xungen* motif of “root searching” upside down, Su Tong has initiated a counter-movement, a *meta-phora* that displaces the “imaginary homeland” into a condemned (and self-condemning) living hell.

If, as Su Tong’s narrators insist, the South is such a plethora of evil, how does one account for his obsession with the “scenery of the olden days”? And why do they return time and again to this filthy, humid and disgusting world of the South? Is it simply because, as his narrators confess, one was born in such a place, without a choice and therefore “fated”? After all, in what way should we understand the “fatalism” and “decadence” so self-consciously displayed in these fictional narratives of the past? In order to answer these questions, one has to dig deeper into the meaning of the South as a historical and cultural metaphor.

*Maple-Poplar Village: Omens, Disasters and Death*

Su Tong’s Maple-Poplar Village is, first of all, a radical deviation from the image of the countryside in most modern Chinese literature. It defies the formulation of rural-urban opposition in most native soil fiction since the May Fourth, and most notably the ideological glorification of rural life in socialist realism. It does not contain any hint of a possible self-renewal so powerfully invoked in *Red Sorghum*, or even the problematic
Su Tong

indeterminacy in “Nü Nü Nü” and A Dictionary of the Maqiao Dialect. Instead, the bipolar movement between city and country in Su Tong’s Maple-Poplar series dramatizes the “fundamental similarity of the [two] spaces” (Visser 136). Thus Maple-Poplar Village (the rural space) and Fragrant Cedar Avenue (the urban space) can be seen as metonyms of the complex universe of the South:

Chencao’s feelings were confused as he stood there facing the blood-red opium fields and the tenant farmers.... “This is my family’s opium; this is the opium plant that always remained outside of the botanical curriculum; it comes from father’s land, but it can turn your face ghostly pale and make you feel as though you’re floating in a nightmare.” The sweet, pungent odor of opium poppies rose up from every corner of the fields....there is only that murderous odor penetrating your lungs. (“Opium Family” 192-193)

沉草面對紅色罂粟地和佃戶時的表情是迷惘的....那就是我家的罂粟，那就是遊離於植物課教程之外的罂粟，它來自父親的土地卻使你臉色蒼白就彷彿在惡夢中浮游。田野四處翻騰着罂粟強烈的熏香....唯有那種致人死地的熏香鑽入肺腑深處。(92-193)

The historical significance of opium in China does not need further elaboration here. By evoking the deadening effect of opium on a fragile young man who is eventually destroyed by his shameful heritage, however, this initial image of rural life subtly prefigures the doom of the entire clan. The sense of premonition is intensified by the
recurrent vision of the “star of evil” (zaixing) variously associated with different main characters (e.g. Grandmother Jiang, her eldest son Dingo, and the sexual pervert Chen Wenzhi in “1934 Escapes”; and Liu Chencao, the accursed descendent of the decadent and exploitative landlord family in “Opium Family”). In fact, decay and decline is like a curse cast upon the far from ideal countryside:

“Star of evil, where’s the star of evil?”... Thousands of Maple Village residents appeared before the black-robed sorcerer that day, kowtowing and seeking the spirits, hoping that he could reveal to them the cause of the plague devastating the countryside.... “Just look, all of you.” The crowd stood on tiptoes and gazed off to the southwest. All they saw was a dense milk-white vapor rising over a far-off stretch of hillside.... Only a single black brick building could be seen crouching there like some huge beast lying in wait for the people of Horsebridge. (“1934 Escapes”147)

「災星，災星在哪裡？」....那天數千楓楊樹人向黑衣巫師磕拜求神，希望他指點流行鄉裡的瘟疫之源....你看啊。人群一起跪而站立，遙望面南方何。只見遠處的一片土坡蒸騰着乳自的氣霧....一棟黑磚樓如同巨獸蹲服着，窺伺着馬橋鎮上的這一群。人。 (51)

The sense of omen, again, prefigures the human and natural disasters in both Yingshu zhijia 《罂粟之家》 (“Opium Family”) and “1934 Escapes”, where epidemics and floods
Su Tong seem to be predestined by an unknown Fate. However, human evil is a more destructive force. Adultery and incest beget feeble and deformed children; moral degeneracy and sexual perversity make neurotic self-destruction inevitable; economic and psychological exploitation initiates an endless cycle of hatred, violence and revenge. These, without exception, are common denominators of the South where a pervasive sense of doom infiltrates both the rural and the urban space.

Ironically, the narrator in “Opium Family” reckons that Maple Poplar Village is a “typical southern village”, while “the soul of the countryside” makes it impossible to avoid “the history of flourish and decline of the big black house” of the opium family (85). Thus the “soul” of the past in the countryside is as powerful as that hovering over Fragrant Cedar Avenue. Unlike Mo Yan, Su Tong’s narrators do not have that deep reverence for their ancestors, nor are they tortured by a deep sense of guilt and an unsatisfied desire for self-renewal. If fictional Gaomi is a cultural symbol of the past that stands proudly against a decaying present, the South in Su Tong signifies a spiritual vacuum as a perpetual state of being where the formal differences between the rural and urban landscape are undercut by their essential similarities. As we shall see, the characters that inhabit or move between these spaces are usually caught within a vicious circle of psychosexual desire. As such, the fictional configuration of the South is a lyrical and haunting presence in which history unfolds in the most bizarre tales of human perversion. The “decline of the South” metaphorically encompasses a vision of human historical experience that hinges on fatalism. As Wang Biao observes, “fatalism” in new
historical fiction is the result of the distance between the narrator (narrating present) and the narrated past, the bleak and melancholy apprehension of providence or "inevitability" as one looks back in time (Wang Biao 6). However, it is precisely this sense of accursed destiny that provokes a devious gesture to "escape" from history, or from the haunting premonitions and prefigurations that result from such a conception of history. On the other hand, as some critics have pointed out, decadence and fate are closely connected to a desire to break away from the dominant discourse of history of the State, so that a literary escape frees the imagination to reinterpret reality in the form of "seeing... as...", i.e., to effect a para-doxa through a metaphorical transformation of the real. As David Der-wei Wang observes, Su Tong's fictional histories expresses a desire to "escape from", as opposed to "escape into", a deterministic historical pattern ("Introduction" 19). As the primary motif of Su Tong's fiction (and fiction writing), escape takes on a duality of meaning through the multiple narrative "returns" to the South. That is, the inner logic of escape necessitates "return" as a complementary move precisely because escape in this sense will be meaningless or at least incomplete if it does not enable a creative revisioning of the past. The intricate relationship between decadence, fate and escape will be further explored in the following.

5 See, for example Knight and Visser, op. cit.
Su Tong

**Family History: home as nightmare of escape and return**

As in many post-colonial writers, the family in Su Tong’s fiction is the center stage on which national history is re-enacted as an amalgam of private, most often illicit, desires and personal and social disaster. The nuances given to historical interpretations in new historical fiction are dependent upon the positioning of the narrator’s temporal presence and point of view vis-à-vis the narrated past, which usually creates a sense of “providence” or fate. In Su Tong’s fiction, as we shall see, the traditional belief in providential predestination is used with an ironic twist that conveys a negativity toward both fatalism and the ideological narrative of historical progress. Like Mo Yan’s Gaomi and Han Shaogong’s Hunan, Su Tong invokes the South – its past and present – as the imaginary homeland for his idiosyncratic “historical” research. However, in Su Tong’s narratives of the South his spiritual home commands neither respect nor sympathy. Instead of a paradoxical impulse to return (to discover, to embrace, to revere, and most of all to identify with), escape is almost a compulsive act. Yet, escape is also a paradoxical gesture, as the narrative always gravitates toward home as the ultimate source of meaning. In this sense, nightmare is not only inescapable but also desirable. Since the family is traditionally regarded as the most fundamental aspect of life as a whole in China, the anxiety about home thus participates in a collective cultural self-reflection. Family history, as a result, is both the “privileged” point of departure and the destination of an imaginary homecoming.
Part of this sub-heading is derived from what David Wang calls the “pre-history of the People’s Republic” as a defining characteristic of Su Tong’s historical fiction which depicts the “moist, erotic age that gives out a tantalizing scent of opium,” i.e., China around the 1930s (“Introduction” 11). Indeed, in Su Tong’s major works the scent of opium is almost synonymous with the scent of women and rice. This sensual seductiveness is characteristic of the fictional histories in “Opium Family”, Rice, “Wives and Concubines,” “1934 Escapes” and other short stories of the South. Schematically woven into the family tragedies unfolding in this fictional world, the indulgence in sensual – or carnal – pleasure sometimes works toward the emptying out of whatever spiritual meaning a character might have learned from his or her suffering.

In “Opium Family”, the rise and fall of the Liu family is coterminous with incest, adultery and opium as the political history of China marches on to conclude the fate of Liu Chencao, the “last landlord of feudal China.” With the exception of Chencao – the illegitimate son of his mother Cui Huahua and the lascivious male servant Chen Mao – all other men in the family are notorious womanizers and hedonists. Chencao’s father Liu Laoxia swallows up his younger brother’s fortunes in a land deal completed in a brothel. As a ruthless opportunist Laoxia converts all his lands into the biggest opium poppy plantation in the South, which ironically becomes his greatest legacy in modern Chinese history. Soon after he returns home, Chencao kills his idiot brother Yanyi one
day while playing with him in the back yard when Yanyi suddenly loses his temper and
attacks Chencao with a knife. From then on Chencao is haunted by the vision of his
brother’s blood-dripping head. Born with a fragile physique, Chencao gradually picks up
eating opium poppy powder, possibly due to his pessimistic withdrawal from life as a
result of his guilty conscience and disgust with his family’s moral degeneracy. Ten years
later, the Communist army finally takes over the South, and Chen Mao, now a
“revolutionary,” takes the lead in the persecution of the landlord family. Chen Mao is
soon criticized by Lu Fang, the Communist work team leader and former schoolmate of
Chencao, for raping Laoxia’s daughter. Laoxia commits suicide with his wife after his
daughter’s death and Chencao, who has long given up his hope in life, is shot dead by Lu
Fang in an opium crock where his idiot brother used to sit and play, thus ending the
history of “the biggest landlord family in Maple Village” (158).

Throughout the story, the narrator (posing as “I”) frequently invokes “fate” as a
prefigurative device. This is, technically, a “device” because the reference to fate is of
themetic as well as structural importance to the fictional history as a whole. Expressions
such as “prefigure” (yushi), “intimations of destiny” (mingyun de anshi), “inevitable”
(biran), and “fate” (ming) occur frequently referring either to the protagonists’ inner
thoughts or the narrator’s comments on what should or would happen next.
Thematically, fate seems to be the mysterious force behind events in life:

His father took Chencao’s arm, and they walked through
an unforgettable moment in Liu family history. As they walked
out of the big compound, a bell was ringing somewhere far away from Maple Village.... They walked through an unforgettable moment in the Liu family history toward the Liu family’s ancestral temple. The ancestors’ platinum keys clinking together weakly in front of them sounded just like his father’s pulse. That was an extremely weak sound, and it announced the end of something.... This was our ancestral temple; this was where our ancestors concealed themselves; they gave us our lives and they control our thoughts from the netherworld.... he heard the creaking sound of approaching calamity descending upon his head (222-23)

爹牵着沉草的手穿越一段难忘的時光。走出大宅的時候有一只鐘在離楓楊樹很遠的地方敲響....他們穿越一段難忘的時光徑劉家祠堂走。祖先的白金鑰匙在前面衰弱地鳴叫，聽起來就像爹的脈息。那真是一種衰弱的聲音，它預示結局將要出現....這是我們的祠堂，這就是我們祖先藏身的地方，他們給予土和生命在冥冥中統治着我們的思想.... [他 ] 聽見某種災難的聲音吱吱叫着往他頭頂上墜落。(118-19)

The pace of history soon catches up with Chencao’s premonition, and time in the narrative moves quickly over to the brief “era of Liu Chencao,” on whom weighs the heavy burden of his ancestral heritage “like a shooting star falling out of the sky.” The rapid twists and turns of events beginning from 1948 mark the final stage of the Liu family history, the end of which seems to concur with the “signs” of providence that thread together the numerous tragic events in the story.
Of critical interest here is, I would argue, the strategic deployment of "fate" as a prefigurative device that serves to undercut providential predestination as the ultimate explanatory model of human experience. That is, the overt prefiguration by narratorial intrusion works toward metafiction that frames the story within the boundaries of self-conscious fictionalizing, and thereby distances itself from the narrated world. As such, metafictional-formal prefiguration adds a self-conscious critical dimension to literal-contextual predestination by incorporating it within the act of story telling. Generally speaking, it is story telling as a whole that provides an interpretative framework for an understanding of "fate" in metafiction, especially in historiographic metafiction. The tension between fictional content and metafictional framing can be seen from the two levels on which providence or fate is used in the narrative. Chencao, for one, has a tendency to resort to fate as the cause for his predicament. When he makes his first journey home after finishing high school, he already interprets the objects he sees on his way as ominous signs of the future. Toward the end, as he goes into the mountains with his parents to seek help from the bandits, he "felt he was walking along trapped inside some sort of mysterious cage; he was powerless to walk out of the cage, and was so confused he did not know how to make it back" (246). Throughout the story the narrator frequently alludes to "fate" as a frame of reference shared by many in Maple Poplar Village:

They said that Chencao's birth was a turning point in the fortunes of the landlord's family, a defining moment that led to the decline and destruction of the house of Liu... They said
Chencao’s birth heralded the physical decline and death of Liu Laoxia; their assertion was based on the dialectical relationships between a multitude of karmic elements that I am powerless to explain fully; all I can do is honestly and realistically describe the unfolding of events in the Liu family history. (255)

他們說沉草的誕生就是造成地主家庭崩潰消亡的一種自動契機....他們說沉草的誕生預示着劉老俠的衰亡，這裏有多種因果辯證關係，我無法闡述清楚，我只能向你們如實描繪劉家歷史的發展。(147)

Here one perceives an obvious skepticism in the narrator’s “historical account.” He neither approves nor disapproves of the fatalistic logic of the people but merely restates the popular belief in fate, adding only a remark on his inability to produce an alternative explanation. Yet, the narrator’s voice remains calm and neutral even when relating the most disturbing events, such as patricide. Toward the end of the story, Chencao is urged by his aggrieved father (Laoxia) to take revenge on Chen Mao, his biological father. The fatal meeting between father (Chen Mao) and son is retold as if it were someone else’s bad dream:

You have to believe that fate had arranged for the meeting in the Straw Pavilion that day....[Chen Mao] scratched his face and asked, “Chencao, what are you doing?”

“They told me to kill you.”

“What did you say?”

“They told me to kill you.”

“Don’t listen to them. Chencao, haven’t you ever heard, I’m your real father?”

“I’ve heard it said, but I don’t believe it.”
“If they want to kill me, let Liu Laoxia do it; you can’t do it.”
Yes I can; I’ve already killed one person.” (263-64, emphasis added)

In a half-dreamy, half-conscious manner, Ghencao fired two shots, one at Chen Mao’s eye and one at his penis. After his immaculate performance, Ghencao regrets that Chen Mao’s penis remains erect on his body: “Couldn’t shoot it off.” It is not certain whether or not Ghencao is convinced of his true relation with Chen Mao, but after the killing Ghencao feels a deep sense of relief, his mind “as clear and bright as the deep blue sky over his head” because he has “finally spit out that rotten odor” that has become unbearably oppressive. It seems that the mention of “fate” at the beginning of this fatal encounter is not intended to be an explanation of what is going to happen in Straw
Su Tong

Pavilion. Likewise the direct address to the reader does not create any sense of horror or suspense. Instead, the direct address to the reader is underscored by an implied incredulity built into the sentence “You have to believe that fate....” without the slightest hint of why. Is it fate? What is fate? Are we supposed to follow the narrator’s intuitive command?

If we go beyond the literal-contextual use of “fate” to the formal-metafictional level, it becomes clear that “fate” is a prefigurative device that frames, structures and helps interpret the chaotic events that shaped the history of Maple-Poplar Village (and China at large):

It was my family’s storehouse: a deep, dark, unfathomable space. Grandmother’s spinning wheel was still hanging there in the air, the wheel and the spokes wrapped all around in webs of gossamer. *Yanyi thought* of that spinning wheel as a huge spider...forever looking down at the tops of people’s heads.

---

6 All the italics in these quotations are mine.
[Yanyi] picked up a staff made from a tree branch and thrust it at the maid’s stomach... *(This action will be repeated later.)* (180-81)

…演義抓起一根雜木樹棍頂在女傭的肚子上…（這個動作以後將重複出現。）(82)

The baby born at the beginning of the story will become the central protagonist when he grows up; this is [sic] a *self-evident truth* in a clan history. (190)

誕生於故事開首的嬰兒一旦長大將成爲核心人物，這在家族史中是不言而喻的。（90)

*I knew* that [Chencao’s] first fainting spell was the beginning of a tragedy; it determined the course of the Liu’s family history. (193)

我知道那次暈厥是一個悲劇的萌芽，它奠定劉家歷史的走向。（93)

Chencao was undoubtedly an anomaly in the Liu clan, and that was *inevitable*. (194)

沉草在劉氏家族中確實與衆不同，這也是必然的。（94)

*Grandsons told their grandfathers,* “What did Liu Chencao give you? He didn’t give you land, *he gave you a curse*; he’s got you tied up with no chance of escape until your blood and
sweat are exhausted and you die of old age working in the fields.
You should hate him; why is it to this day you still can’t forget 1948?” (227)

孫子對祖父說：「劉成武給了你什麼？給你的不是土地而是魔咒，你被它套住再也無法掙脫，直到血汗耗盡老死在地裡。你應該恨他，你為什麼直到現在還念念不忘一九四八年？」(121-122)

The above examples, by no means exhaustive, are textual hints that guide us through the web of historical events leading to the demise of the opium family. First of all, the bleak opening of the story introduces the “unfathomable space” of a family’s past which the narrator sets out to explore. The image of the spider web, on the other hand, seems to embody the idea of fate or providence within which human beings are forever trapped. Yet, the narrator carefully locates this fatalistic vision in the consciousness of an idiot (Yanyi) whose sole vocation in life is eating steamed rolls. Since this ironic allusion to “fate” virtually begins the story, its significance is both thematic and strategic, especially when the idea of fate is subtly undercut by the distance between the narrator and Yanyi’s point of view. The three quotations that follow further illustrate the ironic use of prefiguration as a formal-metafictional device that appropriates and reinterprets the meaning of fate by situating it within the overall design of the text itself. In the second and third quotations the narrator overtly plays with the reader’s (conventionalized) expectation of plot development and incorporates it as part of the story itself. The assertions “I knew” and “that was inevitable” in the next two quotations are deliberate
contradictions with what we have known of the narrator’s skeptical neutrality so far, given the fact that the narrator derives his knowledge of the past mainly from hearsay (“Grandfathers told grandsons…”). In this light, the rebuke of the grandfathers by their grandsons in the last quotation reinterprets the meaning of “accursed destiny” by locating it in immediate socio-political circumstances. According to the younger generation, the generosity of Liu Chencao in assigning lands to his tenants becomes a “curse” as the beneficiaries are forever tied to an outdated traditional hierarchy. As the story unfolds, the land reform enforced in 1950 by the Communist Party overturns the traditional system of land ownership, implying that landowners big and small are subject to persecution. Finally, the immediate cause of Chencao’s demise is political, as Lu Fang and his team organize class struggle among the poor, and as people like Chen Mao gain power without knowing how and why they can exercise that power, one crucial aspect of class struggle deliberately overlooked in revolutionary literature.

In this connection, Su Tong’s ironic use of prefiguration in “Opium Family” throws light on the subversive nature of his fictional histories. As has been mentioned, Su Tong’s “escape into history” should be read as an “escape out of” a mechanical view of historical progress propagated by the State. Fate is evoked in this novella as an alternate worldview that is also subject to critical scrutiny. On the other hand, the formal-metafictional use of prefiguration runs head-on into the meta-narratives of history in the form of a self-conscious parody. Years ago, when Chencao felt himself threatened

---

7 The significance of the year 1948 has already been noted in my discussion of Han Shaogong’s A
Su Tong

by the “rhythm of hatred” of the laborers in his family, he was warned by Lu Fang (then his classmate) that “hatred can only disappear when everyone is equal”: an idea Lu learned from Karl Marx’s communism (196). However, the reality of Maple Poplar Village during the land reform is a mockery of Lu Fang’s assumptions, for the landlord’s tenants remain steadfastly unenlightened. To further the irony, Chen Mao (whom Lu Fang once praises as the most advanced and self-conscious peasant-revolutionary) turns out to be quite immune to the sublime motif of class struggle. To him, “revolution” means earning the right (equality) to sleep with the landlord’s daughter. As in Mo Yan and Han Shaogong, the mass gathering episode in “Opium Family” is a counter-narrative to the official version of “what happened” dutifully replicated in revolutionary literature. Instead of the impoverished and enraged masses seeking revenge on their “feudal” class enemy, the clueless masses simply follow their instinct in the course of action when the landlord offers a sack of rice for the capture of Chen Mao, the “revolutionary”:

“A sack of rice – I’ll tie him up!” The hungry army jumped up and went into action…. “Pull off Chen Ermao’s pants!” A happy band of tenant farmers laughed uproariously as they carried Chen Mao into the Straw Pavilion and right up in front of the Liu family father and son. (229)

「一袋米，我來捆！」飢餓隊伍都跳了起來....「把陳二毛的褲子扒下來！」愉快的佃戶門一邊瘋笑一邊把他抬到蓑草亭子裡，抬到劉氏父子身邊。（124）

Dictionary, and also the cycles of locust attacks in Mo Yan’s The Grass Eaters.
This embarrassing farce of course does not ensure "victory" for any party. In the end, it is by brute force that the revolution in Maple Poplar Village is completed when "[o]n December 26, 1950, the biggest landlord family in Maple Village was destroyed by a shot from the gun of work team commander Lu Fang." Up to this point it seems historical reality looms large on Su Tong's fictional history, but Chencao's death, too, casts a shadow over Lu Fang's victory. Dying in an opium crock in his family's storehouse, Chencao mysteriously announces his future "rebirth" (probably during the recurrent waves of political campaigns in the Cultural Revolution.) Chencao's enigmatic announcement is perhaps the reason why Lu Fang is still plagued by the scent of opium years after the incident, something that has got into his skin and will never wash off.

It becomes clear that fatalism and prefiguration (literal-contextual and formal-metafictional) are two aspects of Su Tong's polemical aesthetics vis-à-vis the socialist mode of fictional/historical representation. Working closely with the elaborate display of decadence, they help create an alternative – metaphorical – world of historical experience by crisscrossing paradoxical notions of causality and human destiny. By displacing crucial historical events into the exotic-erotic realm of sex and opium, and by a creative appropriation of the "fatalistic logic" to re-imagine the past, Su Tong's fictional history is a showcase of the aesthetics of experimental fiction in contemporary China. So far I have examined the dynamics between fate, decadence and the creation of family history in Su Tong's fictional narratives of the South. The recurrent motif of home, escape and return will be my next focus.
Wives and Concubines: Family Sexual History

The creation of the South as an alternative "center" of Chinese history naturally requires an alternative realm of human experience other than the socio-political nexus along which both social and socialist realism labor. The South as fictional homeland is a deviation from the usual practice of native soil fiction. It is also a variation on the ironic, self-reflexive search-for-roots fiction exemplified by Mo Yan and Han Shaogong, among others. In Su Tong the South as a cultural/historical metaphor is founded primarily on the basis of private, illicit desire and a craving for morbid satisfaction that reveals grave psychological distortions traceable to some deep-rooted cultural and historical crises. As such, the alternative realm of human experience that is to be the "other" nexus of Su Tong's southern narratives is, understandably, the family, and more specifically the sexual history of one's ancestors. In this part I will look at the representation of history as the unfolding of traumatic, psychosexual drama within the family. Most of these fictional histories take place in the 1930s and 40s, such as "1934 Escapes," "A Profusion of Wives and Concubines," and Mi 《米》(Rice). Also included are two more recent novels that deal with the present, namely The Northern District of the City and Pusa man 《菩薩蠻》(Bodhisatva Barbarian). Reflecting on his "habitual pattern of writing and thinking," Su Tong remarks:
Just as history deserves our respect, reality [i.e. the present] always demands our attention and concern as well... I like to indulge myself in the past, but at the same time I also worry that the journey into the past is getting shorter and shorter. In trying to come to grips with reality, I find my own shadow pacing back and forth at crossroads.

This implies that one cannot think of history without a sense of the present, and vice versa. The historical past, moreover, also confers a kind of presentiment that the reflective mind is unable to resist. Thus finding one’s shadow pacing back and forth at crossroads also suggests the nature of Su Tong’s literary journeys into the past: it is not so much a search for destination as a recognition of self at the crossroads of an uncharted course of adventure in time and space. Indeed, many such “shadows” inhabit the rugged topos of Su Tong’s fictional world. They belong to both the past and the present, a concatenation of voices that animate the decadent, erotic and misty world of the South.

As in “Opium Family”, Su Tong’s fictions of the 1930s and 40’s are almost synonymous with the sexual histories of his chief (usually male) protagonists. Apart from “Opium Family”, the other two novellas in the Raise the Red Lantern collection seek to reconstruct the past through a reenactment of sexual conflicts within the family.
Generally speaking, "1934 Escapes" and "A Profusion of Wives and Concubines" (hereafter "Wives") represent two distinctively different ways of representing the past. They are technically different in terms of point of view, structure and style, but thematically there are points of convergence. I will attempt to delineate these differences and similarities as a first step toward an understanding of Su Tong's creative "deconstruction" of the past through a subtle manipulation of the "home" or "home-as-nightmare" theme.

"1934 Escapes" exemplifies what Linda Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction" by constantly drawing attention to its own fictionality and by incorporating the writing process as part of the story itself. Reading the narrator's fictional narrative of his family's past the reader is also engaged in the process of writing (or re-writing) that past in the process of decoding. The outspoken efforts of the narrator to recreate historical "characters" and their inner worlds of thoughts and emotions are paralleled by his deconstructive mode of narration. He frequently confesses his ignorance of the past, which subtly undermines the "reality" of his own making. As a result, this self-reflexive text generates contradictory meanings on multiple levels. First, his family history, as he says, is a story of escapes: from poverty, famine, epidemics, sexual and psychological exploitation, and most of all, the "shadow" of the rural past. The self-reflexive nature of the text is made explicit at the beginning, where the narrator, in a confessional tone, tells

---

8 The difference between historical fiction and historiographic metafiction, says Hutcheon, is the fact that the latter "incorporates, but rarely assimilates" historical data; rather, "the process of attempting to assimilate is what is foregrounded." See Hutcheon, Poetics of Postmodernism, Chapter 7.
about his obsession with his own shadow and his desire to escape from his father’s shadow. Hereafter, the narrator proceeds to reconstruct his family history beginning with Grandfather Chen Baonian’s escape from Maple-Poplar Village to the city seven days after his wedding. His grandmother, known to others only by her maiden name Jiang, gives birth to Father in 1934, during which a cholera epidemic devastated the entire village, forcing almost every male inhabitant to escape to the city. The text is basically focused on the events of this crucial year, when children were born and lives were lost, when Jiang’s eldest son Dingo was sexually abused by the vampire-like landlord Chen Wenzhi, when sickness and natural disasters descend upon the poverty-stricken village community. It was, after all, a “year of disaster” when Father was born, the origin of the “shadow” that gives birth to this imaginative history.

The imaginary past, fictional as it is, frequently refers to the recent experience of the Chinese people as a whole: in 1934 Mao’s “land investigation campaign” was resumed, which was in fact a mask for the “red terror against landlords and rich peasants” (CHOC 13:116). The narrator’s story does not directly address this historical incident. Rather, economic exploitation is sidetracked by sexual violence and moral depravity as the roots of evil. In a playful manner, in relating the story of a mysterious sorcerer who instigates the villagers to burn down the Chen family granary, the narrator finds striking resemblance between this incident and Mao’s “Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan.” This amounts to revealing the identity of the sorcerer at the core of the mystery:
The year I was eighteen, pouring over the classics of Mao Zedong in my family’s attic, I immediately associated his *Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan* with the residents of Maple Village burning down the Chen family granary. Looking way back in time to my grandmother Jiang’s 1934 transformation into a Fire Goddess, I believe Grandmother Jiang’s revolution against the rich landlord Chen Wenzhi will one day become a glorious page in the history of my family. Like Grandmother Jiang, I, too, miss that mysteriously magnificent black-robed sorcerer. Who was he? Where is he now? (149)

By conjoining fictional fantasy with an actual historical event, the narrative, as metaphor, reinterprets history by way of a categorical change, i.e. para-doxa, which in turn reinstates a sense of reality within a highly imaginative fictional context. Maple-Poplar Village is the fictional homeland of the most bizarre and “elemental” human desires and practices. It is a metaphorical space whose semantic density both reflects and defamiliarizes the past. By displacing the real into the “unreal,” the narrative dramatizes the process of decoding or interpreting history to reveal the many erasures performed by
the official chronicles of the past (such as "the classics of Mao"). The prophetic
announcement at the beginning ("nineteen thirty-four is a year of disaster") thus carries a
double meaning: the fictional disaster is a projection of the psychological truth of the
actual disaster of 1934.

In addition to the displacement of "official" history into private, personal histories
of earlier generations, a defining characteristic of Su Tong's works and in general of new
historical fiction in China today, I would like to draw attention to the symbolic
significance of childbirth, a recurrent motif that runs through several of Su Tong's family
histories. Quite frequently, childbirth (including the failure to give birth) is endowed
with a demonic quality that incurs tragic results. It is a point at which social and sexual
abnormalities are entangled and mutually reinforced. As the narrator draws a diagram to
represent the "sexual history" of the opium family, he is astonished to find that it bears
striking resemblance to the female sex organ (103). Hence childbirth is another
subversive aspect of Su Tong's fictional histories vis-à-vis the traditional concept of the
family, to which I will return later.

The momentous event of Chencao's birth in "Opium Family" and its schematic
significance to the story as a whole is echoed in the other two novellas collected in Raise
the Red Lantern. In "1934 Escapes", the narrator, haunted by his own shadow in the city,
sets out to rewrite his family history by half-researching, half-imagining the
circumstances leading up to the great exodus of villagers during the great flood of 1935.
The momentous birth of his father in the rice field in 1934 lifts the curtain on a traumatic historical drama that causes numerous deaths and the eventual dispersal of the narrator’s family. Year 1934, moreover, is repeatedly referred to as “the year of disaster.” More importantly, this ominous sign does not refer to just one disaster, but several: from the cholera epidemic in 1934 to the great flood in 1935, the entire village languishes in a perpetual state of poverty and hunger; Grandmother Jiang loses all her children except the narrator’s father, is raped by the lecherous landlord Chen Wenzhi, and secretly induces the abortion of the child of Huanzi, her husband’s concubine in the city. As a revenge, Huanzi takes away Jiang’s only remaining infant boy (the narrator’s father) when she escapes back to the city. It is the same year when the anguished villagers, prompted by the mysterious sorcerer, burn down Chen Wenzhi’s granary. Year 1934 is also a year of escapes. Excited by the news of Chen Baonian’s (Jiang’s husband) success in the city, the men in Maple-Poplar Village launch a massive “escape” to the city while their wives and children languish in the countryside. Dingo, Jiang’s firstborn son, escapes to his father’s notorious bamboo workshop after being sexually abused by Chen Wenzhi. Even rats are driven out by the fear of impending natural disasters. It is more than coincidence that in both “Opium Family” and “1934 Escapes” childbirth is always a signal of calamity. More importantly, it is also a pretext for another kind of escape, i.e., the narrative return to the past, or the “shadow” of the past:

9 The political significance of this year is its coincidence with the Communist Party’s Long March, as noted by Michael Duke, “Walking Toward the World” (392).
Last winter I stood under a streetlight in the city examining my shadow. I realized this was to become a habit that would grow and spread throughout my body.... I was being followed by my shadow.... I saw that in the dead of night in the city it took on the image of a fugitive. Some sort of congenital fear and trembling made me cover my head and scurry away. I am like my father. (102)

The horror comes from the realization that his shadow is also his father’s shadow: “Perhaps my father is a mute fetus. His profound reticence left my family shrouded in a murky gray fog for fully half a century. ... perhaps I was also a mute fetus. I, too, am profoundly reticent.” Running away from the shadow, says the narrator, is equal to running for his life, and this is the first time he “escapes” (15). As he says in the end, the story he has told is, after all, a story of escapes: “These escapes began, and were carried out, very early in just this manner” (77). And it might well be continuing in “just this manner.” His escape from the dead silence of the shadow is achieved through summoning the imaginary voices of the past, which are then subject to a poetic transformation: “I also wrote a poem that I intended to insert between the pages of the leftover history book of my youth” (16).
The birth of the narrator’s father in 1934 foreshadows the death of Grandfather Chen Baonian, who dies in the same year of an “unknown illness” after someone pours three buckets of cold water onto his body as he comes out of a brothel. Chen’s death is preceded by that of his eldest son, Dingo, who dies shortly after his hope of having sex with his father’s concubine is shattered. The unusual, almost fatal proximity of birth and death is reinforced at the beginning when Chen Wenzhi, hiding in his black mansion with a pair of Japanese binoculars, has a sexual orgasm as he watches Jiang give birth in the rice field. Later on, in order to collect the semen of virgin boys which his family traditionally uses as a longevity elixir, Chen Wenzhi performs the ritual on Dingo by force. Superstition, it is suggested, becomes a kind of perversity when it gets to the extreme, and that is partially responsible for Dingo’s death, for Dingo from then on is tortured by his own immature yet unquenchable sexual desire that finally destroys him. It is also suggested that Chen Baonian might have committed incest with his sister, who, after marrying Chen Wenzhi, gives birth to grotesque and deformed baby boys, all buried alive by Chen Wenzhi.

For the sake of comparison, it is worth mentioning that the “reality” of “1934 Escapes” is principally rendered in internal monologues to project individual consciousness on an “objective” context. The logical flow of events therefore is an interaction of different centers of consciousness, most noticeably those of the dramatized narrator, his grandmother Jiang, uncle Dingo, Chen Baonian, and to a certain extent his concubine Huanzi. Insofar as all these characters are expressly “created” by the
narrator in an attempt to retrieve some truth from a silent past, “1934 Escapes” can be seen as an imaginative psycho-history in metafictional form. The overall effect is the intensification of a subjective perspective from which time and history are reconfigured to create the effect of *meta-phora*. Su Tong’s metafiction, therefore, is an excellent example of his experimental style: between construction and deconstruction, reality and fantasy, knowing and not knowing, there exists a hermeneutic gap that defers a final or conclusive reading. The exploitation of textual paradox, i.e., narrative construction as a form of “deconstruction,” interpretation as problematization, escape as a kind of return, is congenial to the philosophical skepticism of Han Shaogong as well as the ironic heroism of Mo Yan. What needs to be added is that Su Tong’s experimental spirit is at work precisely when the writer consciously mixes the “conventional” and the “unconventional” in story telling, as we shall see in the following.

“Wives” tells the story of a young schoolgirl Lotus who, after being married into a large family as the fourth wife of the fifty-year-old patriarch Chen Zuoqian, becomes insane within one year of her marriage. Apparently Su Tong has adopted a fictional formula very much in line with critical realism, for it exposes the ills of the traditional patriarchal family, particularly sexual inequality and polygamy. However, Su Tong’s historical fiction differs from the conventional realist mode in one crucial aspect. The third person narrator’s omniscience is largely limited to the representation of one mind, Lotus. The narrative, therefore, is primarily focalized through Lotus’ point of view except a few descriptive sketches of the setting and background details of the main
characters. Without losing sight of the larger moral underpinnings of the text, I read “Wives” as an inquiry into the subjective consciousness of an intelligent woman of extraordinary character who, despite her crafty maneuvers, fails to come to terms with what she has made of her life.

First of all, Lotus is not a conventional female victim. No doubt her family circumstances partially justify her misfortune: her father dies without leaving an adequate financial provision, while an unloving step-mother forces her to choose between poverty and a marriage contract. All this might have inflicted hardship but Lotus was initially given a choice whether to marry a rich old man or go independent without family support. Her deviant character is shown early in the text when she deliberately washes her hair in the pond where her father committed suicide. However, though a university student, Lotus is not positive about her future “independence.” In fact, Lotus’ independence and strength of character seem to have misguided her into the inopportune marriage with Chen. As the story unfolds, we see Lotus first as the rising star in Chen’s family; then she becomes aware of the meaninglessness of a life wasted in endless gossip and petty incriminations among the exclusive circle of wives and servants within the walls of the Chen household. Gradually a claustrophobic atmosphere starts to build up. Lotus becomes disgusted at the hypocrisy and rigidity of the patriarchal family, and her desire to break away soon overwhelms her otherwise scrupulous self. This is suggested by her growing intimacy with Coral, the third wife and ex-Peking opera actress who is

---

10 Su Tong remarks that in “Wives” he is more interested in “why four women would tie themselves to one
later executed for committing adultery. Lotus’ last hope of escape is shattered when Feipu, the eldest son of Chen, confesses to her his “inability to love women.” As a major turning point in the story, Feipu’s confession virtually extinguishes the little light that remains in her life. Lotus begins to withdraw from reality and her inertness to the external environment increases as she sinks deeper and deeper into melancholy and despair.

Up to this point enough tension has been built up for the heroine’s complete breakdown at the spectacle of Coral being drowned in a well as a punishment for her shameful crime. Earlier on we see Lotus, rebellious and undaunted, playing with the idea of the well as haunted by ghosts and cherishing the idea of an apparition resembling her father’s hand in the pond. From these textual clues it seems Lotus is “destined” for the well, not to be drowned but forever haunted by it. Nonetheless, the narrator subtly suggests that her destiny is partly of her own making. Among her miscalculated intrigues is the fatal mistake of a fake pregnancy that renders her completely out of favor with her aging husband whose fear of impotence helps multiply his rage and shame. Here, the failure to bear children is as crucial to the protagonist’s demise as childbirth in “Opium Family” and “1934 Escapes.”

Among the wives and concubines the ability to produce offspring, especially a male heir, to the family is always a trump card in the game of power. Having children, man” instead of how a man can take advantage of the “feudal” family tradition to control and manipulate
therefore, is the best security against fading beauty. As such, childbirth is one of the “knots” by which these women are tied to their husband. Cloud, the second wife, turns out to be the vile architect of terror who engineers the downfall of both Coral and Lotus. It is no coincidence that Cloud, despite her sinister eagerness, fails to give birth to a son, but only two girls. Cloud’s antagonism against Coral and Lotus, thus, is a symptom of her paranoiac craving for security and self-protection in the enclosed kingdom of the Chen family.

Apart from its obvious social criticism, “Wives” is also a superb study of the psychosexual dynamics within a patriarchal family. Since the concept of the family is so central to Chinese culture as a whole, the story cuts into the heart of the family system to reveal the internal contradictions beneath its orderly, hierarchic façade. It is no coincidence that in all the three novellas discussed here the family as a social unit, in its “naked” form, is also the center of nightmarish experiences. All the protagonists suffer more or less a kind of psychological distortion regardless, and according to, their respective roles in the family. Chen’s moral coarseness is proportional to his sexual appetite, and it brings a curse upon his wives and his children. Feipu’s dread of women suggests that his homosexuality is as much a relief as a burden to him. His affection for Lotus is hampered not only by social decorum but also a deep sense of guilt that is more vicarious than personal. His predicament, in essence, is a psychological distortion arising from the horror that ironically “unites” his family. He is perhaps the only family member
who retains his sanity and humanity in the end, but this is achieved by running away from home and from his moral responsibilities. His escapism, perhaps, is the true cause for his impotence (both physical and psychological), hence his inability to genuinely break away, and help others break away, from the “family” that imprisons all. The ending of the story suggests that Lotus’ insanity is the beginning of another cycle of self-destruction: Chen takes a fifth wife whose appearance reminds Lotus of her arrival a year ago. The young girl is attracted by Lotus who, circling the well, keeps saying “she won’t jump into the well.”

The centrality of the family as a locus of desire (and evil) in these stories, as indicated earlier, is a subversion of the traditional notion of the family and the cultural and moral values implied. However, I believe that this “anti-traditional” stance has to be understood in terms of cultural resistance to ideological co-option, an important factor of different kinds of literary and aesthetic subversion in China today. In the Confucian tradition, family as the pivotal unit of the social and political hierarchy bespeaks its special status in the moral tradition of China as a whole. The family, therefore, is where the most important human virtues are preserved, transmitted and realized. In other words, it is also the final stronghold where these virtues are defended against the corrupting forces from without.

11 Ren (benevolence) as a Confucian ideal is realized in filial love (xiao), while ren is the ultimate realization of human perfection. Li Zehou, Reading the Analects Today (18).
In Su Tong, the family as the traditional center of moral and ethical values is replaced by the family as the locus of instinctual and primal desires. Hence, the family as a human and humanizing force turns out to be corrupt and dehumanizing; i.e. what makes men human now makes them bestial. This iconoclastic element of Su Tong's family motif, however, is not merely an echo of Lu Xun's "Diary of a Madman", nor is it just an expression of anti-traditionalism as is generally attributed to modern Chinese literature during the May Fourth period. Following the duality of the use of fate discussed above, the family is, similarly, a two-edged sword that points in two directions: a distrust or lack of faith in cultural rejuvenation and human progress, and a struggle for freedom (aesthetic and existential) in the midst of the perceived ruins of everyday life. The creation of the private, subjective realm of the family therefore embodies the dual movement of escape and return: an escape out of a predetermined mode of historical representation by a narrative return to the past; while the return to the past (real and imaginary) is also an escape into a freer world of "felt history." This partially explains why sexual history is coterminous with social and political history, and to a certain extent underwrites it in these stories.

The dismal, bizarre and horrific incidents that pervade social and family life in these stories seem to concur with the "new realism" in contemporary American fiction, where Su Tong finds the "finest literature" of the world today. According to Winifred Fluck, the fundamental difference between "traditional realism" and this "new realism" lies in the attitude toward "the power of experience to provide knowledge." Since the
realist text “promises to provide a more truthful and relevant version of that experience” (like Hemingway’s crises and catastrophes) it “represents crucial moments of initiation for both characters and readers in which a rare moment of authentic experience and existential truth is reached.” What Fluck, among others, discerns in contemporary American “new realism” is that “the skillful insinuations [once found in] Hemingway … no longer offer such promises of a ‘deep knowledge’ [since] crises and catastrophes are not heroic moments valued for their potential to reveal an existential truth but accidental occurrences in a dehierarchized sequence of daily events.” As such, experience “has no redeeming force of initiation or transformative potential for the weak identities” of the characters to whom experience “remains embedded in, and defined by, a stream of contiguous circumstances in which the banal and the unusual are indiscriminately juxtaposed” to the extent that “the banal always threatens to become the unusual” (71-72).

This observation, though made in a different cultural context, is relevant not just because Su Tong seems to have been influenced by American realist and neo-realist novelists12 but also because this character of American new realism addresses issues that are pertinent to my discussion of fictional histories. Su Tong’s works seem to fall in line with much of the above observations of new realism (and so his “neo-realist” style is aptly named), and this aspect of his aesthetics makes worthy comparison among the three

12 Among them are Faulkner, Hemmingway and Salinger. See Su Tong, “Answers, Questions (in lieu of a preface)” (答・問 (代序)) in Qiqie chengqun (6).
authors discussed in this study, to which I will return in the conclusion. Meanwhile I would like to continue my discussion of Su Tong’s “neo-realist” fiction in light of his nuanced approach to historical reality, i.e. personal and collective experiences and the potential for meaning (fictional truth) to emerge out of these experiences. The texts I have chosen for this purpose encompass both the past and the present, namely Mi (Rice), Bodhisatva Barbarian and The Northern District of the City (hereafter Northern District). My purpose is to assess their continuities and discontinuities with existing and pre-existing literary forms, and also with the writer’s developing style as a whole.

By nature of its title alone Rice evokes a number of associations that make up the cultural metaphor that is the novel itself. Rice is not only the most common staple food in southern China but here it is associated with poverty, hunger, and material and moral depravity as a result of poverty and hunger. In the eyes of Five Dragons, the chief protagonist, rice expresses the most sacred, though unarticulated, yearnings of life. However, due to his innate moral and psychological deficiencies, Five Dragons develops an obsession with rice that finds its immediate expression in a feverish sexual appetite. As a country boy who flees his Maple-Poplar home country to the city for food and shelter in the city, Five Dragons begins his “new life” as a helpless victim of physical and psychological abuse. Tortured by the irresistible temptation of rice, Five Dragons willingly, and willfully, subjects himself to a miserable livelihood as a manual laborer in the Great Swan Rice Emporium run by Proprietor Feng. As an outsider Five Dragons first suffers all kinds of injustice and injuries under the Feng household who regards him,
literally, as a dog. As the story unfolds, Five Dragons’ frustrated desire for food and sex turns into a misguided self-empowerment and justification for revenge.

The moral decrepitude of the city is epitomized by three characters in the story: the powerful ringleader Sixth Master, his concubine and Feng’s eldest daughter Cloud Weave, and Abao, Sixth Master’s second-hand who is brutally murdered when his affair with Cloud Weave is revealed. To Five Dragons Sixth Master and Abao are his archenemies and rivals, for they personify the kind of “success” a poor country boy can ever dream of: a license to kill anybody and have sex with any woman they please. Together with Proprietor Feng, these three male characters personify the “crown” of masculine power that Five Dragons will give anything to have. Meanwhile, he is tortured by his sexual relationship with Cloud Weave who intends this relationship to be Five Dragons’ reward for remaining silent about her dangerous secret.

Five Dragons’ first sign of victory comes with Abao’s downfall. No one but the former country boy knows that he plots the exposure of the affair. Cloud Weave is by now pregnant with Abao’s child. As a measure of contingency, Proprietor Feng arranges for a hasty marriage of her daughter and Five Dragons, the only remaining option for a publicly disgraced concubine. Five Dragons’ victory, however, only intensifies his rage, for Cloud Weave is only a substitute for his inexplicable vengefulness. Later on Cloud Weave, after giving birth to a son, is taken away by Sixth Master who is still lacking an heir. The death of Proprietor Feng signals the second stage of Five Dragons’ rise to
power. He forces a marriage with Cloud Silk and becomes the proprietor of Feng's business. Ten years later, Five Dragons' symbolic usurpation of power is completed when he explodes the underground arsenal in Sixth Master's big mansion. From then on Five Dragons becomes the ringleader incarnate, notorious pilferer and veteran brothel patron. Five Dragons' tyranny comes to an end when he dies of gonorrhea on his final but never-ending journey home.

What we witness here is more than just a story of self-destructive lust and deadly struggle for power. Technically, *Rice* exhibits the “cyclical” pattern characteristic of Su Tong’s fictional histories. In narrating the personal tragedies of Five Dragons and the Feng family, the narrator weaves into the main plot the dynamics of escape and return as a psychological (even pathological) compulsion that is potentially futile as the protagonist remains captive to his primal obsession with rice, which I take to be his private symbol of the self: “The me in this shop is false. The real me is steeping in the floodwaters of Maple-Poplar Village. Which means I'm not real” (142). This sense of unreality is at the core of Five Dragons' identity crisis and the misguided means he uses to forge a new identity that he hopes will overcome the sense of homelessness. Since he can never come to terms with the values represented by the city (which he regards as “an immense, ornamental graveyard” that is created “for the sake of the dead”), Five Dragons’ only passion in his self-created universe can be nothing but hatred, and this hatred he inevitably directs toward his loveless family, and ultimately toward himself:
He was like every other man, yet different, for he was no longer whole: The light had gone out in one eye, he was missing a toe, and his life was threatened by the ravages of a dark disease. But his depression was only temporary, for now it was time to reflect on the mistakes he had made. He had always been contemptuous of the city and of city life, yet was drawn irresistibly to it.... He realized he had come to grief not because of women, but as a result of the life-style he had chosen and the dream he had pursued. (199)

這個形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丢失整個生年？在一陣黯然神傷之後，五龍冷靜地找出了他的不可饒恕的錯誤，他的心靈始終仇視著城市以及城市生活，但他的肉體卻在向它們靠攏、接近....他並非被女人所貽害，他知道自己是被一種生活一種夢想害了。(222-223)

Five Dragons’ confession, however, does not result in forgiveness or redemption, for he remains an anguished, antagonized and alienated figure in an existential wasteland that reaches far beyond the city and into the depths of his being:

Suddenly Five Dragons felt surrounded by strangers, and wondered if any of this family business was real. Maybe the rice emporium was nothing but an illusion; maybe the only reality was his penis, germ-infested and itchy. He had shed his identity as a pitiful young clerk in a rice emporium years before, only to suffer new forms of torture now. (200)
The torture of being “incomplete” – physically mutilated and psychologically disfigured – is not only irreparable but self-debilitating, for it eliminates whatever there remains of Five Dragons’ sympathy and capacity to love and forgive. Instead, it turns inward into a self-lacerating morbidity exemplified by Five Dragons’ “heroic” act of pulling out all his healthy white teeth in exchange for a set of gold teeth, and that, he reflects, is the greatest comfort in life. To the end of his life he remains a fugitive going nowhere, destined to remain forever in “the inside of a railroad car”. To such a person escape is a perpetual state of being: “After all these years, I’m still floating on water. Why is that? ….a nameless fear gripped him…” (194). “Journeying is home”: as Salman Rushdie curtly captures the dilemma of the cultural migrant, we are also reminded of the existential emptiness of the spiritual vagabond.

Compared to “1934 Escapes” and “Opium Family,” history as a destructive, impersonal force in Rice plays a less significant role in shaping the destiny of individuals. That is to say the historical context provides the immediate setting for the unfolding of certain a-historical, instinctual forces within the individual as he reacts to external realities driven by these forces. This can be seen from the relative weight of different historical events on the main action of the story. The time frame of the story is from
around the 1920s to the late 1930s, during which two big famines occurred in southern China, causing large populations from the rural areas to migrate to the cities for survival. Five Dragons is among those who escape the apocalyptic deluge in Maple-Poplar Village in the early twenties. Toward the end of the story, another famine attacks the southern rural areas, but this time natural disaster coincides with the Japanese invasion that wrecks havoc on the entire nation. Throughout the story Five Dragons is repeatedly haunted by his memory of poverty, hunger and the great flood in his home village, while refugees and rotten corpses from the countryside are swamping the city margins. This unidirectional flux of calamity, however, is not a determinant of the main action, which remains focussed on Five Dragons’ personal tragedy. Yet, it does foreground the psychological complexity underneath Five Dragons’ insatiable carnal appetites. For rice not only signifies an overcoming of hunger but is also a symbol of purity and life:

Everywhere he saw the victims and perpetrators of death; all around him were poverty and looting. Penniless people hunted desperately for distant stores of rice. Me, I found one, an endless supply of snowy rice, but with such a long road ahead, I wonder when and where I’ll find rest in the grave. (238/212, emphasis added)

這條路上到處都是死屍和殺人者, 到處都是貧困和劫掠, 飢寒交迫的人們尋找著遙遠的大米垛。我找到了一座雪白的經久不衰的大米垛，但是我不知道這條路有多長，我不知道這條路將把我帶到哪裏棲息並且埋葬。
In the Chinese original, Five Dragons has in mind “a gigantic mound of snowy rice that is everlasting” (一座雪白的經久不衰的大米垛), thus endowing the image of rice with a metaphysical meaning. Given the context of Five Dragons’ reflection, the significance of rice is its symbolic power to elevate the self from its immediate, disgusting circumstances. But Five Dragons is far from the ideal hero who learns from his sufferings. The “purity” connected with rice (being snowy white) soon degenerates into a perverse sexual impulse that directly contributes to his final undoing. Not only does rice arouse his sexual desire but it is also the ultimate source of satisfaction. While he enjoys the tantalizing mixture of sensations (“A merging of odors: the subtle fragrance of raw rice and the strong scent of a woman’s sex, which achieved a wondrous unity on the palms of his grimy hands”); he can only find peace in rice (“Resting against the mound of rice was like lying in a big cradle. Rice must be the best sleeping potion in the world… certainly more effective than a woman’s body”) (92-93). In this sense, rice to Five Dragons is comparable to opium to Chencao in “Opium Family,” and both die surrounded by their cherished symbol of “life.”

Taken together, the three novellas in *Raise the Red Lantern* attempt to locate the space of human agency within the apparently impersonal flux of history. What we have seen in these three novellas is, first, a historical curiosity provoked by a skeptical questioning of the authenticity of self-identity, and thereby self-knowledge, as the I-narrators set out to create their own vision of the past by conscious fictionalizing. This skepticism, I must add, is directed not so much toward the past as envisioned but to the
Su Tong

present with its many "shadows" and silences. Second, the ironic use of fatalism and prefiguration, on the one hand, creates a tension between the literal-contextual and the formal-metafictional levels of signification; on the other hand, the juxtaposition of the two levels frees the narrative from being fixated on either grounds, thus charging the text with a special "subversiveness" vis-à-vis the existing modes of historical representation (i.e. the "official" mode of socialist realism and the more conventional modes of social or critical realism.) Third, the multiple escapes and unfulfilled hopes of return, always centering upon the family as a locus of evil and illicit desire, provide the basic rhythm for the "historical" drama in which individuals struggle against, or in many cases simply submit themselves to, a predetermined "fate" of their own making. Also, if the proliferation of human perversion and moral depravity radically defamiliarizes the historical reality presented in the text, references made to actual historical events and the use of realistic details reintroduce a sense of familiarity, or at least that of déjà vu, into the reader's refiguration of fictional reality, the final stage of narrative understanding according to Paul Ricoeur's three-fold theory of narrative representation. Finally, the sadomasochistic impulse that runs through the history of the family, hence the dynamics of escape and return, is better understood metaphorically; i.e., as an aesthetic encoding of what Han Shaogong calls the "cultural factors that constrain man" in the process of experiencing the world. The claustrophobic spaces of the South, the family and the individual self are perhaps the best demonstrations of Su Tong's experiment with this
kind of aesthetic encoding. As Su Tong remarks, the origin of disaster is “from within our hearts.”

Past Upon Present: Ghosts and Scoundrels

Like many of his contemporaries, Su Tong’s critical gaze at Chinese history is anchored in the present. It is in this light that I am going to discuss Bodhisatva, his latest novel, as a reflection on the aftermath of history, i.e. the post-Cultural Revolution generation. Together with Northern District, Su Tong’s vision of the present can be compared to those of Han Shaogong and Mo Yan dealing with similar themes, i.e., social and cultural degeneration and the consequent spiritual emptiness brought about by the historical nightmare of the 1960s and 70s. Yet, Bodhisatva also signals a change in Su Tong’s fictional style with its melodramatic façade and satiric tone of voice. Here we are no longer confronted by the voice of an ironic, self-reflective narrator, but that of a mediocre “ghost” who possesses neither supernatural power nor a magical wand, but remains a helpless observer who gradually learns the truth of his life, years after his death. As we shall see, this seemingly light-hearted allegory is informed by a bitter awareness of the gravity of the situation that confronts the Chinese people today.

---

13 Su Tong, “Say as I think” (想到什麼說什麼), introduction to Xiangxin de wudao 《傷心的舞蹈》(The Sad Dance) (14). This is echoed by Five Dragons’ eldest son in Rice: “It was a sound he had grown up with…. He was convinced that a core of darkness lay at the center of his family,
First of all, the positioning of the dramatized narrator—a ghost—is a far cry from what is usually expected of either realism or neo-realism. The narrative begins with a dialogue for a court trial. The defendant, Gold Peck, is accused of arson. He is an uneducated factory worker who comes from a typically “red” background: poor-lower-middle class peasant. His so-called self-defense turns out to be nothing but a joke making fun of the so-called “peasant revolutionary consciousness”. Here we learn that Gold Peck has burnt down a factory where his wife, Phoenix, has committed suicide for unknown reasons. The trial before the Revolutionary Committee provides the setting for the rest of the story:

Prosecutor: Your name?
Gold Peck: Hua is my last name, my first name is Gold Peck.
People in our factory say it’s the name of a landlord, but my family are not landlords. It’s officially poor-lower-middle peasant.

Prosecutor: My question has nothing to do with your class background. Your age?
Gold Peck: My nominal age is forty-three. I was born in the year of the Hog.

Prosecutor: Race?
Gold Peck: What? I have no idea! The same as yours, I guess.
So I believe it’s Han, yes, the Han race, I mean.

 darkness that thrived in an atmosphere of anger and insult.” A literal translation of this “darkness” is “the darkness of the heart” (huian de xinling) (165).
Prosecutor: Whether you are a good or bad person is not for you to judge. Just confess your wrongdoing to us.

Gold Peck: I don’t know what to confess.... I’m dying of regrets and you still want me to confess, confess, confess. Confess to your mother’s X!14

審訊員：姓名？
華金斗：姓華，名字叫個金斗，我們廠裡人說是個地主名字，可我家不是地主，是堂堂正正的貧下中農。
審訊員：沒問你成份，年齡？
華金斗：虛歲四十三了，屬豬的。
審訊員：民族？
華金斗：什麼？我不知道呀，我跟你一個族吧。對，漢族
就是漢族。

審訊員：好人壞人不是由你說了算，你只管坦白你的問題就行了。
華金斗：我不知道還有什麼可坦白的....我都後悔死了，你們還要我坦白，坦白，坦白，坦白你媽個X呀！
(5-9)

After this “grand opening”, Gold Peck takes over the narrative as a wandering ghost on Fragrant Cedar Avenue. The story moves on as Gold Peck watches his children grow up under the care of Big Aunt, his self-sacrificing sister who remains a spinster due to her stubborn sense of responsibility toward the Hua family. Big Aunt reminds us of the
female protagonist Aunt Yao in Han Shaogong’s “Nü Nü Nü,” who is also a pathologically self-effacing woman until her stroke. Big Aunt does not suffer any bizarre metamorphosis as much as she does the misfortune that befalls her and the Hua children, partly due to her ignorance and partly due to the character flaws of others. The “magic” of the story, however, is reserved to the end, when Big Aunt dies in front of the prison gate making a plea for Lone Tiger who has been arrested for soliciting a prostitute. On her way to heaven, she is reunited with Gold Peck and is allowed a “ninety-nine-sentence conversation” with him before she ascends to Zone One, the highest honor to all spirits. Big Aunt, he is informed, was originally a fairy, and to his astonishment his wife is in fact the spiritual mule who has been with him all the time. The ending leaves Gold Peck standing alone in mid-air, having lost all his hopes and ties with both Heaven and Earth. As a measure of self-reproach, he rushes down to Hell, his final and least preferred refuge where he hopes no permit is required to enter.

The Chinese title Pusa man borrows from a popular tune for lyric poetry (ci) in the classical poetic tradition. Lyrics composed to this tune are mostly popular homages to the South. The choice of title may also be connected to the Buddhist god, Pusa (Bodhisatva) who refrains from entering Nirvana in order to remain with and benefit

---

14 Originally a popular tune for lyric poetry, Pusa man is also translated as “Deva-like Barbarian”. Here I adopt Stephen Owen’s translation. Cf. n.15 & 16 below.

15 Stephen Owen, An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911. The following lines by Wei Zhuang (ca. 836-910) are a good example: “Everyone says that the Southland’s fine, / in the South the traveler should remain till old and gray/....Never go home until you are old, / for if you go home, it will break your heart.” Owen (566-567).
mankind. Such a tenuous connection between the novel and the classical tradition on the one hand, and that between the plot and the religious legend on the other, not only creates a unique "literariness" but is also suggestive of the kind of metaphorical reference it intends. The discrepancy between the implied meanings of the title and the content of the novel, moreover, draws attention to the aesthetic self-consciousness in making this reference as it helps establish the ironic stance with which the implied author approaches his subject. This is supported by the use of character symbolism in the text.

All the characters in *Bodhisatva* have symbolic names that are explicitly allegorical. The surname Hua is, as in Lu Xun, synonymous with the Chinese race. Gold Peck, as he is aware, is an auspicious name favored by traditional agricultural families. His wife, Phoenix, is associated with the legendary bird that rises from death through a burning flame. The daughters, New Plum, New Orchid, New Chrysanthemum, and New Bamboo, represent not only the four traditional plants of the four seasons but also the "new life" of the modern nation. Obviously these characters and their names are meant to be ironic. Gold Peck has never met with any good fortune both as a human being and a ghost. Phoenix commits suicide out of shame. What happens to their daughters is sardonically at odds with the implied meanings of their names: New Orchid dies during an illegal abortion, New Orchid's haughtiness ensures an unhappy marriage ending up in her husband's paralysis, and New Chrysanthemum and New Bamboo are not likely to do better than their cosmetics, fashion and gossip.

---

16 The meaning of *Pusa* is based on the Matthews' Chinese-English Dictionary.
The story of Lone Tiger, the youngest and only son, also bears out the jarring contrast between appearance and reality. For all the special privileges and favors he enjoys in the family as the only male heir in the bloodline, Lone Tiger is a thoroughly depraved young man who has neither compassion nor sympathy toward his family. As a person, he is a complete wretch: a good-looking dandy, playboy, bully and coward. Gold Peck's disillusion is total when he learns, during a street quarrel between his son and a long-time enemy of the family, that Lone Tiger is the illegitimate son of his wife and a notorious dandy. Now both Gold Peck and the reader realize the irony of Lone Tiger: his name is not only incoherent with the rest of his family (i.e., not a “dragon”) but also indicates an inherent deficiency—“lone” (du) in Chinese is the opposite of the auspicious sign xiang, meaning “double” or “pair.” To the extent that Lone Tiger is devoid of moral and emotional depth, he reminds us of Lu Xun's Ah Q as a caricature of the “Chinese character,” only that this fashionable young man has little excuse for indulging in his own depravity. Unlike Ah Q, who experiences a near-epiphany when he is frightened by the horrible gaze of the crowd just before his execution, Lone Tiger shows no signs of remorse or awakening after he is badly beaten up in prison. If Chencao and Five Dragons are the decadent heroes of the pre-Revolutionary age, Lone Tiger and his like are the prototypes of the present generation and a continuation of the cultural inquiry into the “Chinese character.”
As the principal narrator, Gold Peck is given limited omniscience that allows him a close observation of the private life of his family members from the outside. As an observer, Gold Peck’s “objectivity” is restricted not only by his being a ghost, but also by his intelligence. Throughout the story, his knowledge of his characters is no more superior than that of the reader, and his comments on reality never go beyond the simple logic of an uneducated peasant as demonstrated in the dialogue above. Having posed so many restrictions on his dramatized I-narrator, the implied author can then maintain his aloofness from the fictional reality by a highly effective “absence.” Due to this affected objectivity, the unreality of the ghost story is given a high degree of credibility through a realistic portrait of mundane details in everyday life. The irony is that the narrative point of view from which inconsequential everyday life is observed always concludes with banal conclusions:

I don’t have any gender bias, but I think it would have been much better if I had four sons and a daughter instead of four daughters and a son. If I was so blessed, I wouldn’t have to hang myself on a tree like Lone Tiger. If I had four sons, the Hua family would not be so quiet: four sons would at least bring me two grandsons, two grandsons would bring at least one great-grandson, and who cares what next…. Just like the production line in my factory. If you fasten your screw in the front, you don’t care what people do next. I am not responsible for defective products anyway.
Yet, given the mediocrity of Gold Peck’s “critical” insights, he is occasionally struck by intense emotions which he expresses quite succinctly:

I can never forget the moment when my younger sister breathed her last. Putting one hand on her plastic bag, [she] stretched out the other hand as if she wanted to pull something back…. “Pull harder, sister,” I said, “Pull them back – my children, the past, let us all go back to the past… when all of us were so peaceful and happy…. Then we will be babies again. No, even then we have to grow up and suffer. It is not worthy at all. Let us just return to our mothers’ wombs and never come out. No one can hurt us anymore. Think about that, how nice!”

我忘不了我妹妹在人間的最後姿態，她的一隻手按着塑料袋，一隻手向前伸出去似乎想要拉住什麼東西….我說妹妹你用力拉，把他們都拉回來，把時光也拉回來！回到過去的年代有多好….那個年代我們家太平無事全家快樂….那我們就回到光屁股時代了，我說乾脆我們連孩子也不做，做個孩子總是要長大，長大了就要受罪，那多不合算，乾脆我們就鑽回到娘肚子裡，躲在那裡不出來，誰要讓你受苦都辦不到，仔細想一想吧，那有多好！ (268-269)
Sinking deeper and deeper into nothingness, Gold Peck bids farewell to the world (and to the reader) not without a touch of the tragic hero:

They were all gone when I came back, leaving me with this boundless sunset sky, the sun, the moon, and numerous dubious looking stars.... I knew the weather would be brilliant tomorrow, but what had that to do with me? .... I don't want to tell you my story anymore.... Everybody just leave: go to heaven if you're lucky, to hell if you're not.... So be it. While the sky is still dark.... you can still go to hell.

等我回來她們已消失得無影無踪了，她們給我留下了一片無邊無垠的黃昏的天空留下了一個太陽，一個月亮，還有滿天鬼鬼祟祟的星星....我知道明天會是一個風和日麗的好天氣，可是好天氣與我有什麼關係？...我再也不想跟你們說我的故事了....大家都走吧，幸運的去天堂，不幸的去地獄....這就不錯了，趁着天黑....你還能去地獄。(272)

Gold Peck's mock-heroic plunge to his second death thus wraps up the past twelve years of his family history. Precisely because this anti-climactic "ghost story" is overtly allegorical, it is also self-evidently satiric. The passing away of the first generation of New China signals not a succession but the disintegration of the Hua family; hence symbolically the nation as a whole. While the traditional family values represented by Gold Peck and Big Aunt no longer apply to the changing realities in the present, the new, or "modern" social order is revealed to be no more coherent than the old one. In place of duty, love and filial piety, human relations in the new society are defined
primarily by an “economic logic,” i.e., good will is optional and contingent upon supply and demand driven by pecuniary motives. These are perhaps the stark realities that infuse the verisimilitude of this ingenious ghost story. Su Tong, it seems, has ventured into the fantastic and the magical in search of new voices in story telling. Compared to the characters in *Rice*, among others, the protagonists in this novel are far less self-conscious and self-reflective. They are closer to the drifters that Fluck sees in new realism to whom experience no longer “connects the individual with a world whose underlying laws are thus revealed” (77). In *Bodhisatva* the center of consciousness (and conscience) is relegated to a ghost who has problems himself in connecting with reality, not to say interpreting it, and everywhere the rustic simplicity and self-sacrifice of Big Aunt is seen to be at odds with modern times. More often her goodwill brings more disasters than blessings to herself and to others. In the end, the traditional theme connected to the title *Pusa man* is turned inside out: remembrance is too painful to bear, and the experience of “homecoming” results in a resolution to leave home forever.

Su Tong’s earlier novel *Northern District* is also a comment on contemporary realities and the impact of recent history on the present generation. In this novel the four main protagonists – Dasheng, Red Flag, Virtue and Little Cripple – are youngsters who never make good out of their endless mistakes in life. Red Flag serves a life sentence for raping Meiling, a girl living next door. Virtue elopes with a neighbor’s wife who also has an affair with his father. Little Cripple is a thief who becomes a socialist hero after incriminating an innocent elderly man of treason. Finally, the central character, Dasheng
(promising life), picks a fight with a powerful gang just to prove that he is not a coward and is beaten to death. In between these stories are anecdotes of family conflicts, adultery, petty crimes, and an endless stream of gossip that defines human relationships in Fragrant Cedar Avenue. These “everyday tragedies” seem to be a way of life, and surreal details such as the mysterious snake magician and the ghost of Meiling serve more to intensify the horror of everyday life than reveal any hidden truth or psychological depth of the characters, for the lack of self-consciousness is proportional to the lack of a genuine sense of guilt capable of a final redemption.

On the whole, Su Tong’s depiction of contemporary life is anchored in an historical awareness not unlike that of Han Shaogong and Mo Yan. The impact of the Cultural Revolution is still deeply disturbing, but only to those who remember or empathetically share this memory. As in Bodhisatva, albeit less magical, the third person narrator in Northern District gives minimal comments on characters and events, maintaining throughout an emotional detachment and neutrality that dramatizes the hollowness of human experience. The use of unverified hearsay further trivializes the human tragedy encountered everywhere in the text. The youngsters’ search for a non-existing martial arts master, a hero-prototype, suggests a collective predicament of young people in China today, but unlike their predecessors, they cannot even sustain the illusion of an ideal hero, for what is revealed to them is a decrepit, bed-stricken skeleton of a man bearing the same name. The meaningless death of Dasheng further empties out this idealism, and in its place we have a nihilistic dread that underscores the artificial
neutrality of the text. In *Northern District*, moral degeneracy goes side by side with chemical pollution, which has already become part of the “natural” landscape of the South. The neutrality of the narrative tone subtly echoes the “neutralized” ethics of the fictional world, where moral judgements are expressed in empty political jargon. The diversity of characters, moreover, hints at the universality of moral indifference. As a present-day panorama of three generations since the 1949 Revolution, both *Bodhisatva* and *Northern District* exhibit a compelling sense of “getting nowhere.”

If these are the “continuities” of literary reflection on modern Chinese history in the post-Cultural Revolution era, one discerns in these novels variations on certain traits of the May Fourth generation. The emphasis on the corruption of the young, for example, is a distant echo of the “save the children” plea of Lu Xun. Dasheng, for one, is blamed since childhood for his father’s death. His aimless rebellion can therefore be interpreted as an immature reaction to a guilt he does not admit but the immensity of which he subconsciously shares. The only voice of conscience in the novel is Old Kang, a former gentry class shop owner condemned by the authorities. His presence in the city is a reminder of the bleak reality of the past everyone seems to be eager to forget. Old Kang’s appearance is more or less that of a “ghost” whose only message to the world is “sinful.” If Old Kang’s demise symbolizes the disintegration of traditional values, the female cast is a plethora of female archetypes: Plum (Dasheng’s mother) is a widow reputed for her chastity, Meiling is the classic victim of sexual violence, and Golden Orchid is easily recognizable as the evil seductress, or even a disgraced *femme fatale*. 
What is lacking here is perhaps Lu Xun's agonized lone hero figure, or an overbearing impersonal narrator as the voice of moral conscience. Thus the "higher ground" of reality that connects the fragments of human experience to reveal some general laws is absent in Su Tong's novel.

Compared to his fictional histories of the pre-Revolution period, *Bodhisatva* and *Northern District* foreground a "present" that is cut off from time past, i.e., a fragmented, discontinuous and, ironically, amnesia state of perpetuity so that the past is reduced to a ghostly voice of no practical significance. In these two novels, as in Su Tong's other southern narratives, the central motif of escape and return is anchored in the central image of home, or the family, as the "other" center of historical experience that results always in death, insanity or "muteness." Like fatalism, escape can also be an aesthetic gesture, a formal design that gives a sense of coherence to the apparently chaotic occurrences in the fictive world on the level of metaphor. If ever "escape" as an action suggests a passivity that renders the human agents powerless to resist,\(^\text{17}\) "escape" as a metaphor reintroduces into the text a measure of autonomy as an inadvertent and contentious mode of fictional representation. This kind of "escapism" is by no means romantic. Instead, its "darkness" and pessimism is the result of an aesthetic encoding that brings home new ways of "seeing... as..."

\(^{17}\) "Su Tong himself is also a fugitive [*taodunzhe*], at least a fugitive in the world of literature. [His] passivity seems to be even stronger than we expected. It is hard to say whether the direction of his flight is determined by his own cultural ideals and aesthetic impulse, but most probably it is determined negatively by those factors that make escape inevitable [i.e. politics, utopianism, the art of brightness and idealism]." (Mo and Shi 14-15, my italics) While this observation hints at the external forces necessitating a "flight,"
The Majestic Realm: Dynastic Elegies

Being a writer extremely conscious of his “style” (fengge), Su Tong frequently expresses the anxiety of being trapped in “a pair of small shoes” of his own making (i.e., a certain way of writing.) On the other hand, his concern for a personal “form” (xingshigan) requires that a good writer constantly instill into his work “a concrete spiritual being” (jingshen shiti) to give a deeper meaning to stylistic innovation (“Preface,” Hongfen 10). Just as his indulgence in time past always leads to reflections on the present, Su Tong’s venture into China’s dynastic history is an attempt to discover new possibilities in fiction writing. This is at least what he had in mind when he was working on Wu Zetian (Empress Wu): “[I] intended to write an extraordinary story, to use new methods to retell a well-known ancient tale.” (“Epilogue,” Shiyiji 188). Empress Wu is preceded by Wode diwang shengya (My Life as an Emperor; hereafter Emperor), an earlier historical novel about the life of an imaginary monarch.

To Su Tong himself these two novels about China’s dynastic past are quite different in form and in conception. While Empress Wu is a conscious (and somewhat “revisionist”) reworking of a well-known historical legend, Emperor is “a free run in

---

there is always a degree of autonomy involved, not only in the posture but also the ultimate manifestation (i.e. direction) of escape.

18 See Su Tong’s preface to Qiqie chengqun (8-9).
[the] world of imagination” (“Preface,” Emperor 3). While Empress Wu portrays the life of Wu Zetian, the legendary empress of the Tang dynasty in the eighth century who usurped her husband’s throne to become the first and only “female emperor” in Chinese history, Emperor is a fictional autobiography of a deposed monarch, an imaginary life story intended to be a personal testimony to the rise and fall of dynasties. To Su Tong himself, Emperor seems to be a more successful work than Empress Wu, which he regards as the most demanding task he has ever set for himself, and the reward does not seem to match the efforts (“Epilogue,” Shiyiji 188-189).

My discussion here will begin with Su Tong’s treatment of the themes of dynastic decline and kingship in Emperor to provide a ground for comparison. Then I will look at the portrayal of Empress Wu as a fictional character to reveal the dilemma Su Tong probably faced in retelling her life story. By comparing the two novels, I hope to reveal the aesthetic and cultural factors that contribute to the creation of Su Tong’s historical personae, and to what extent these two “traditional” stories embody the tension between certain historical preconceptions and fictional representation. This tension can also be construed as that between historical “facticity” and literary “fictionality”.

The Legend and Legacy of Kingship

As a fictional autobiography, Emperor covers the time between the I-narrator’s ascension to the throne at the age of fourteen to his downfall and eventually becoming a
Buddhist monk some sixteen years later. The fifth son of his royal father and Lady Meng (his father’s concubine), Duanbai is a spoiled boy who has neither ambition nor expectations in life. His succession to the throne is the result of a bitter power struggle between his grandmother and the empress who intends her eldest son Duanwen to be the new ruler of the Xie State, thus paving the way for the growing antagonism between the new ruler and his brothers who finally overthrow him in a coup d'état. From the beginning Duanbai is haunted by an omen he learns from a demented palace servant, who prophetically predicts, “Calamity is coming upon Xie!” This mysterious forewarning of disaster once again invokes Fate as a historical force. Yet, the portents perceived by Duanbai are largely the young emperor’s subconscious apprehension of the real dangers that befall his country. At the time of his succession the Xie state is already in decline, threatened internally by famines and plagues and externally by foreign invasion. Within the imperial court, the young emperor is simply a puppet manipulated by his influential mother and grandmother. Yet Duanbai is not an innocent victim, for he, too, inflicts random sufferings on his subjects as a convenient channel for his own frustrations. All this suggests that the dynastic cycle is heading toward a catastrophe.

Su Tong’s tale, however, goes further than retracing the dynastic cycle. After Duanwen’s coup, Duanbai is demoted to civilian status and goes into exile. As he travels south with Swallow, a faithful eunuch and his only true friend, Duanbai finds himself passionately drawn to the art of ropewalking, a favorite game since childhood that soon becomes his new profession. Later on, he leads his troupe back to the capital
under the name “King of the Ropewalk.” It is at this moment that Xie is conquered by a foreign invader and the entire Xie court is brutally executed. Duanbai loses all his fellow acrobats in a massacre in the capital, thus ending his second “regime” as the King of the Ropewalk. Stripped of all his worldly ties, Duanbai remembers his teacher’s advice years ago. The Buddhist monk, symbolically named Juekong (realizing the emptiness of all things), has built a temple in the mountains for his unenlightened student. Eight years previously the monk predicted that Duanbai would one day “return” to where he belongs to continue his unfinished education in the Confucian classics.

The fatalistic, fin de siècle sentiment of “Opium Family,” strikes a similar note: both novels exhibit an overbearing sense of predestination on the thematic and structural level, and end with the destruction of an old “empire.” The state of Xie, in many ways, resembles the South in modern times. Away from the imperial palace, there are rice fields, water channels, teahouses and brothels. In the heat of the summer mosquitoes and insects join the army of fugitives fleeing from natural and human disasters:

Fragrant County is a small city with a long-standing reputation as a place of debauchery in the history of Xie. Even in turbulent times you would find red lanterns hanging high from the brothels, while music of flutes and strings kept wafting through the air…. The pimps liked to wait at street corners for young patrons from rich families. When they had time to spare, they would hurry back to the brothels to drive away beggars and homeless refugees sleeping in the doorways.
On the other hand, the downfall of Chencao’s opium country is paralleled by the fall of Xie at the hands of a foreign invader, a familiar pattern in China’s dynastic history. What Su Tong has attempted here is a condensation of certain aspects of “several thousand years of Chinese history.” What emerges from this imaginary historical anecdote are the manifold realities of the human world, or what the writer perceives as “the interpenetration of joy and suffering,” and the “organic unity of fire and water, poison and honey” that makes life “perfect” (3). This kind of perfection, or this sense of perfection, I must say, is more difficult to attain in life than in art. Even Su Tong’s emperor is but one of those rare survivors of human and natural disasters. This is probably why Su Tong has eschewed any specific references to the historical past, moving the time back to an unspecified “presence” where a deposed emperor gives his personal testimony to the downfall of a dynasty. Here political history and personal history exist on the same plane to the extent that they become indistinguishable. Instead of a self-doubting narrator in search of knowledge of the distant past, the emperor speaks to us from the inside, not as a “historian” but as an ordinary human being. Given the emotional intensity of his first person narration, this is something “new” in Su Tong’s fiction, something necessitated by the conception of the novel as a legend, or more
Su Tong

precisely an elegy to a glamorous and decadent by-gone age that can be made perfect through a metaphorical transformation.

Like many of Su Tong’s heroes, Duanbai is a “weak character” who drifts passively through the contingencies of life. Yet, Duanbai’s autobiography also reveals a highly complex character who, despite his royal birth, tries to find his place in the world not as an emperor but as a human being. In this sense, he is also a fugitive in life, for he never finds himself truly at home either in the palace or as an itinerant acrobat. His last journey to the capital signifies a “return,” or a desire to “return” home with a new identity, ironically named “King of the Ropewalk.” Duanbai does not know why he is such a gifted ropewalker, but he does indicate that walking on a rope gives him a sense of freedom, like a bird flying in the air:

I had divided my life into two halves: the one, an emperor had turned into fallen leaves silently decaying under the walls of the Palace of Xie; the other, being a master acrobat, was born like a wonder on the rope hanging nine feet above the ground. What did I hear up there? I heard the north wind weeping and rejoicing, I heard my former subjects crying out loud in ecstasy...I saw my real shadow magnified rapidly by the setting sun, a beautiful white bird taking flight from the depths of my soul. Freely and arrogantly it brushed pass the top of people’s heads and the vast unlimited sky. / I am the King of Ropewalk. / I am a bird.
Su Tong

我把的一生徹底分割成兩個部份，作爲帝王的那個部份已
經化為落葉在大變宮宮牆下悄然腐爛，而作爲一代絕世藝人
的我卻在九尺懸索上橫空出世。我站在懸索上聽見什麼？我
聽見北風的啜泣和嘆息，聽見我從前的子民在下面狂喜地叫
喊....我看見我真實的影子被香縣夕陽急速放大，看見一隻美
麗的白鳥從我的靈魂深處起飛，自由而傲慢地掠過世人的頭
頂和蒼茫的天空。/ 我是走索王。/ 我是鳥。 (229-230)

This subconscious drive to “take flight” thus prefigures his final journey to the temple,
where he spends the rest of his life reading the Analects, a task he never finished in the past. Ironically, his teacher has left him his true inheritance: as the “King of One Plot” overseeing a small grassy field outside his master’s temple.

Su Tong’s treatment of his character plays on several conventional themes: the cycle of prosperity and decline, the tragic love between a monarch and his favored concubine, the theme of initiation, and finally hermit-like withdrawal as a form of transcendence and dénouement. The combination of these thematic elements gives this fictional memoir a pervasive sense of nostalgia. Nonetheless, the historical vision projected from an apparently “conventional” theme is extremely modern, in the sense that its analysis of the nature of power associated with kingship reveals the complex and rigid network of relations behind power itself. Apart from the familiar “dynastic cycle” that characterizes Duanbai’s reign, this fictional memoir creates the character of the monarch as an ordinary person capable of love and hatred, cruelty and kindness, and above all, repentance:
I kept looking as I walked. I was looking at my hands. They had the color of dried blood. In vain I tried to wipe it off. I knew it was the blood of others. It would not go away.... I knew [their blood] had turned into a special line carved into my palms. Why had Death forgotten me when it sent out its invitations? When had it forgotten a condemned sinner? .... I was struck by a sudden wave of grief. I found myself weeping with the wretched survivors of the massacre in the capital. A tear drop ran down my face – for the first time ever in my civilian life.

This side of the (historical) reality is precisely what Ray Huang tries to capture in 1587: a Year of No Significance. His study of this apparently insignificant year in the Ming Dynasty reveals not only that the power of the emperor is largely limited by a two-century old bureaucracy that has grown in scope and in scale to become virtually invincible as a collective political force; but also that the emperor, as “a prisoner in the Forbidden city,” is an “institutional requirement” whereby the monarch is best devoid of
personality and feelings to fulfill his obligations as the symbolic head of state. Huang's study reveals the emperor in such a system to be a prey to the ambitions of his ministers supported by a powerful bureaucracy, the tedious conventions, ceremonies and formalities, and finally the domestic disharmony as a result of his lack of freedom to deliberate on even his own personal matters. The emperor's power therefore is largely derivative: first from the established hierarchy of the monarchy (with the support of powerful ministers and royal families), then from ossified social conventions to which even the Son of Heaven must succumb disregarding his personal feelings and desires.

This portrayal of a weak emperor overwhelmed by the pressing demands of his times fits well with the crisis-stricken reign of Duanbai. Being intelligent, sensitive but irresolute, Duanbai, like Emperor Wanli, resorts to passive resistance, or simply indifference. Of this Duanbai is not unaware: "What kind of emperor was I? I was the most useless and pitiful emperor in the world." (154) The Mandate of Heaven, it seems, is falsified from within at the very beginning, for Duanbai is deeply troubled by his precarious position as a "fake monarch of Xie" hooked to the strings of his powerful grandmother Lady Huangfu, the puppet master. In fact the entire royal family can be seen in this way, for they are bound to their respective roles, a kind of "fatalism" that is not mythical but ideological. In the eyes of the mature Duanbai, the worship of the emperor is "an ancient trap," "a deception that had blinded many." (235) After all, his popularity as King of the Ropewalk is also an effect of this deception: "since the King of the Ropewalk was a

---

19 Huang also portrays Emperor Wanli as a "flesh-and-blood" human being whose individuality was crushed by a rigid hierarchy of power.
20 These include the choice of the crown prince, pleasure travel and the arrangement of his own burial. See Huang, Chapters 1 and 4.
deposed monarch, he appealed to the people whose curiosity was better satisfied than watching a drama.” (234) The omens of calamity frequently invoked in the text are therefore more an expression of Duanbai’s melancholy and helplessness as a passive agent in a rigid political system than the ultimate cause of historical change. In this connection, all characters are implicated in what I would call a “determinism of role play” necessitated by an ossified political institution founded upon the notion of kingship and the Mandate of Heaven.

The Femmie Fatale as Historical Persona

Unlike the subjective first person narration in Emperor, Empress Wu approaches the legendary life of China’s first and only “female emperor” from different narrative points of view. In fact, the difference in the use of narrative voices in these two novels creates an interesting case for our consideration of historical representation in Su Tong’s fiction. First and foremost, the apparent “multiplicity” of points of view in Empress Wu is an indication of Su Tong’s effort to seize upon the ambiguities surrounding the career of his formidable heroine, a notorious and controversial female usurper who has left an indelible mark on Chinese history. As opposed to the first person narration in Emperor, the story of Empress Wu consists of a number of third and first person narrators whose testimony to the Empress’ character and dubious conduct helps to create an image of the heroine as she is observed from a distance. The significant absence of the Empress’
personal voice in telling her story, then, is what we have to consider in this fictional biography. As we shall see, this absence signifies not only a self-conscious play with points of view and the notion of representation itself, but also – probably – an authorial reticence toward conventional historical interpretations of the Empress as an anomaly in an essentially patriarchal political system. This reticence, I believe, is attributable to an uneasiness toward these interpretations and the relative difficulty in writing against them for the sake of an alternative (more original) interpretation. This also explains why Su Tong feels uneasy about his second attempt to rewrite Chinese dynastic history in fictional form.

The narrative introduces Wu Zhao as a young and resourceful girl of middle class origins. After being chosen to be a concubine of the aging Tang emperor Taizong at the age of fourteen, she soon realizes the gloomy future that awaits her. She is scared by the sight of the older concubines who have wasted their lives like the emperor’s plants withering in the palace courtyard. Her failed attempts to win Taizong’s affection further reinforce her feeling of disgust and determination to break free from this living hell. This sympathetic portrayal of Empress Wu’s early life ends with Taizong’s death. As a rule all his concubines are sent to a monastery where they are to remain Buddhist nuns for the rest of their lives. By this time Wu has already captured her first prey, the Crown Prince Li Zhi who succeeds Taizong as the new Tang emperor. Li Zhi is so infatuated with Wu that he eventually summons her from the monastery to become his concubine. Told from a third person point of view, this first chapter sets the stage ready for Wu’s systematic
reach for power. Like Lotus in “Wives,” Wu Zhao’s extraordinary character is considered to be a threat to the patriarchal system where social and sexual inequality are written into the social code. The narrator has subtly indicated the psychological complexities that contribute to Wu Zhao’s political ambitions and self-conception. It is suggested that Taizong’s caution toward Wu has something to do with the supernatural: sometime during his reign he was alerted by an oracle predicting the usurpation, and in a rage he ordered the execution of all suspicious officials associated with the surname Wu. All but one escaped the emperor’s eye, and she proves herself to be the ominous “star of Venus” (taibai jinxing) in the end: “It is I who have protected myself…. I know I was the star of Venus” (19).

The rest of the story alternates between first and third person narration covering the entire career of the Empress. She successfully eliminates all her rivals for the emperor’s affection and starts interfering in political affairs. Her husband, Emperor Gaozong, is portrayed as an indecisive, sickly character too weak to resist his wife’s manipulation. As a first step to consolidate her power in court, she kills her infant daughter in order to incriminate the then Empress Wang. As a mother, Wu plays the infallible matriarch controlling the life and death of her children. The first person narrator in “Prince Hong” recalls the circumstances leading to his murder by the Empress and gives this final warning to his siblings: “Be careful of the Heavenly Empress. Be careful of Mother” (61). Like his elder brother, Prince Xian dies also in suspicious circumstances associated with his diabolical mother.
The “reign of terror” of the Empress is mostly rendered in third person narratives, where historical sources are frequently cited. This citation of sources further removes the narrator (and the implied author) from the inner life of his heroine. The resulting “objectivity” is achieved, therefore, at the cost of psychological depth and emotional immediacy, a “privilege” that fictional biography has as a rule over historiography. This life story of Empress Wu ends with her death soon after her removal from the throne in a coup d'état launched by a prime minister who remains faithful to the Tang court. Her death is nonetheless dignified, for she is not subject to any grave penalty typical for most usurpers. She is given the “Shangwang” (grand emperor) title and is left undisturbed until her death. Even the narrator in the “Epilogue” continues to address her as nü wang (female emperor): “For thousands of years the story of female emperor Wu Zhao is unique. Who will forget female emperor Wu Zhao? Who can imitate female emperor Wu Zhao?” (234) All this points to the inevitable conclusion that Wu remains, after all, a controversial and mysterious figure unmatched by any in Chinese history.

Indeed, the unique position of the Empress in Chinese history has been widely recognized by historians both in the past and in the present, for she was the only woman who could ever usurp the throne and establish a new dynasty, albeit a short-lived one. Thus, the first and only “female emperor” is not only an exception but also an embarrassment to the entire social and political tradition that is basically patriarchal in nature. Traditionally, this view is predominant among the circles of scholar-officials:
The woman Wu, who has falsely usurped the throne, is by nature obdurate and unyielding, by origin truly obscure... she brought disorder to the palace of the crown prince... she usurped the pheasant regalia of empress and entrapped our ruler in incest. / Then, with a heart like a serpent and a nature like that of a wolf, she favored evil sycophants and destroyed good and loyal officials. She killed her sister, butchered her elder brothers, murdered the ruler, poisoned her mother. She is hated by gods and men alike.\textsuperscript{21}

Traditional historiography, while maintaining a larger degree of objectivity in describing her usurpation, differs more in tone than in basic valuation:

\ldots whenever the emperor attended to business, the empress then hung a curtain [and listened] behind. There was no matter of government, great or small, which she did not hear. The whole power of the empire passed into her hands; reward and punishment, life and death, she decided. The emperor folded his hands and that is all. In court and country, they were called the Two Sages. (Guisso 20)\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{21} An indictment written by the Tang poet Lo Binwang, quoted in Guisso (5, first ellipsis mine). Guisso sees it as representative of "the reaction of the Confucian mind against a woman who had not only betrayed such cardinal virtues as humanity and wifely submission, but in so doing had challenged an ancient tradition which guaranteed worldly (sic) harmony and gave both livelihood and self-respect to the Confucian scholar-official... in order to defend the state system."

\textsuperscript{22} Guisso’s quotation from Sima Guang, Zizhi tongjian (The Comprehensive Mirror) 205: 6509-6510.
What draws attention here is that the portrayal of Empress Wu in Su Tong’s novel seems to concur with the conventional attitude:

I am Li Hong, Crown Prince of the Eastern Depot. Whenever my father was ill I would take care of his duties in the Gate of Light or the Hall of Prolonged Blessings, but [I could feel] my mother extending her iron wrist through the bead curtain to grip me. I was in her hands, the entire court was in her hands. I clearly saw the big white hand of hers stretching and grasping in every single place... The hand....had ensnared my royal father, her puppet.

Su Tong has obviously consulted a variety of historical sources to gain access to the Empress’ life. On several occasions references to historical sources are integrated into authorial comments as if they were indirectly authenticated by the implied author:

[My mother] won her first victory in a battle among powerful rivals. It is so recorded in all major history books: “Empress Wu became a dictator in court ever since.”
On the second day after the deposition of emperor Zhongzong, Prince Dan, the Lord of Xiang, succeeded his elder brother as the new emperor of Tang. He was known to later generations as Ruizong... Everyone knew he was the gentle, unambitious "shadow" emperor.... Generations later historians discovered that in AD 684 the emperor’s reign title was changed three times.... It clearly revealed the mastery and ambition of the woman behind the curtain.

中宗被廢的第二天相王旦順理成章地接過了胞兄的皇冠，世人稱之為睿宗。....那也是世人皆知的溫厚而淡泊的影子皇帝。....後代修訂史籍的學者們發現公元六百八十四年三度改元....它們充分顯示出簾後的那個婦人運籌帷幄舉棋左右的心境。 (122-23)

I am not prepared to cross reference Su Tong’s fictional history with the possible sources he might have used. The concurrence between this fictional history and traditional historiography, as seen in the frequent references to well-known historical records, unofficial histories and speculations, bespeaks the difficulty of Su Tong’s task. The “burden of the past” presents a technical challenge here as the burden of the conventions against which the past is to be understood. Consciously or subconsciously, these conventions get in the way of fictional representation. Just as R. W. L. Guisso has pointed out, traditional interpretations of the Empress’ usurpation are influenced by
Confucian ethics, while the concept of a “female son of Heaven” is “a semantic and cultural violation of the Confucian tradition to which the elite ... gave perhaps their deepest loyalty” (Guisso 127). In Wu’s case, says Guisso, the source of her legitimacy was personal, i.e., the female emperor was accepted as long as her performance concurred with her charismatic image (128). In fact throughout her reign the Empress proved herself to be a better qualified candidate given the unimpressive character of her heirs. Moreover, she remained popular among her subjects and less orthodox commentaries gave her credit for exceptional ability as a ruler.

It is unfair to measure the success of this novel against rigorous historical scholarship. The point of raising this issue is that Empress Wu as a fictional character – indeed the central figure of the novel – seems to lack the kind of imaginative autonomy and versatility that characterize Su Tong’s powerful heroines (e.g., Lotus, Grandmother Jiang, Huanzi, and the prostitute Qiuyi in “Rouge”). What is most extraordinary in Su Tong’s rendering of Wu’s legend is perhaps the discrepancy between the narrators’ observation and their knowledge of the heroine. As seen from the above, the multiple points of view are less conflictual than collaborative; for they constitute a coherent picture of Wu Zhao – as seductive, unscrupulous, deviant, autocratic, adulterous. In short, she is an archetype of the Chinese femme fatale akin to the witch-mother figure in popular literature. In the opposing camp are the male characters who are little more than her hand puppets. Empress Wu thus invites comparison with such well-known heroines

---

23 Ray Huang notes that Li Zhi (Li Chih) 李贇, a Ming scholar known for his non-conformist behavior,
as Lady Macbeth, except that Wu lives a longer life and apparently does not suffer any significant retribution. And yet, the narrative avoids a direct confrontation with the Empress as an abomination to the political and cultural order of her times. Instead, it creates Empress Wu as perceived by those who share similar assumptions about her life. This explains why in the end the Empress remains a “mystery” unsolved, an indication that the implied author may not be totally convinced by what he has constructed from the “grand narratives” of the past.

Compared to the heroine (and the fearful empress dowagers in *Emperor*), the dramatized narrators in the novel are more complex and original as fictional characters. The first Crown Prince Li Hong resembles Chencao in “Opium Family,” a pale, fragile and sensitive young man struggling in vain to rectify or dissociate himself from his family’s disgraceful past:

I was curious about everything in the history of the Li family, and secretly I had given a fair judgment on every ancestor.... Well before the now well-known banquet in Jade Unity Palace, I had foreseen the fatal bed of disease in my family. The origin of disease was my royal mother Wu Zhao.

我對於李姓家族所有歷史都充滿好奇之感，內心對每一位祖輩都作出了隱秘的公正的評價....在著名的合璧宮

repeatedly remarked that Wu was a “saintly empress” who was “ten times better than T’ang Kao-tsung [Gaozong] and myriad times better than T’ang Chung-tsung [Zhongzhong].” Huang (208; 257 n. 75).
I thought my illnesses were the result of the incestuous blood and semen of my parents.... A life begotten in sin was doomed to be fragile and miserable. This I thought was in accord with the law of Heaven and Earth.

His brother Li Xian, the next Crown Prince in line, is allegedly the illegitimate son of Gaozong and Wu’s sister, Lady Han. He lives a life of debauchery, and it becomes an obsession with him when he discovers the secret of his birth. In order to test his royal parent, he composes a highly subversive poem incriminating the Empress in the murder of Prince Hong. His passive strategy finally brings a curse upon himself. The Empress, unsettled by Xian’s hostility, eventually orders his suicide. Xian’s unsuccessful revenge is not without a Hamletian trait. He is “a sensitive child who would doubt anything,” but his intelligence and arrogance fail to reverse the course of events; and needless to say does not achieve “poetic justice” in the end.

The second I-narrator is Li Dan (later emperor Ruizong). His narrative covers the story of his brother’s deposition and the death of his literary friend, Wang Bo, a famous poet in the early Tang period. Unlike his elder brothers, Li Dan is a meek and timid
character who is terrified by the prospect of being an emperor. His recollections of the past are so full of misery and horror that he prefers to remain silent on the subject: "I liked to tell my children about my acquaintances with literary men. I liked to remember them instead of the history of my royal family... because [it] had the smell of blood" (190-191). Li Dan's reticence is of the same nature as the "muteness" of the I-narrator and his father in "1934 Escapes." In this light, can we interpret the implied author's reticence about the inner life of his heroine as an awareness of the same predicament as the I-narrator in "1934 Escapes"? The superstitious, melancholy and skeptical narrators in Empress Wu, I would argue, exhibit an exceptionally "modern" consciousness compatible to those in Su Tong's narratives of the South, only that these diverse centers of consciousness seem to be underdeveloped in this "traditional" historical fiction.

What remains to be said is that Emperor and Empress Wu occupy the two poles of Su Tong's fictional creation. While Emperor is a highly imaginative, lyrical invocation of time past rich in symbolic meaning, Empress Wu is a circumscribed, seemingly more "referential" text that incorporates conventional historical moralizing within a literary frame. Reading Empress Wu one wonders whether certain historical preconceptions have shaped and thereby confined the writer's creative transformation of "what happened," while the relative insignificance of these preconceptions in Emperor results in a more original and multi-dimensional vision of the past that still informs our consciousness of the present.
My reading of Su Tong begins with the South as a metaphorical space where "felt history" (as opposed to documentary history) is re-enacted in the form of para-doxa. The histories of the South are focused upon the "other" realm of historical unfolding, i.e. the family. In these stories, the family as the fundamental unit of society in the Chinese tradition is systematically "deconstructed" into a nightmare. In these stories, history is not a given, but something to be decoded, or a silence that has sealed up decades of dark secrets. This conception of history necessitates a fictional form that can accommodate the contradictory impulses of escape and return, i.e., to escape from pre-existing modes of historical representation in order to "return" to an imaginary home of the past. Like Han Shaogong, this imaginative "homecoming" is neither romantic nor idyllic, but more often frightening.

I have tried to show how the notion of fate and the repetitive, almost compulsive, cycle of escape and return can be understood in terms of a formal-metafictional device that ironically undercuts the fatalism on the literal-contextual level. This in part explains the prominent presence of omens and oracles as a kind of aesthetic encoding in Su Tong’s fictional histories, especially in the two dynastic histories where the historical cycle is most vividly present.

The allegorical meaning of Emperor, however, goes beyond the cyclical view. More significantly it questions the notion of the Mandate of Heaven by creating a hero out of a fake emperor who realizes in the end the whole enterprise of kingship is – to him
Su Tong

—a deception. *Empress Wu*, which tells the story of a historical *femme fatale*, turns out to be a surprisingly “traditional” novel that bespeaks the difficulty of attaining “novelty” in reworking familiar, if not clichéd, historical themes. It is possible that the amorphous collocation of established points of view in *Empress Wu* is targeted at the “new” interpretations of Wu Zhao by some Marxist historians on the Mainland, but in any case Su Tong is less inventive when he tries to authenticate his fictional “seeing...as...” by sorting out historical “facts.” And so, of the two dynastic novels, *Emperor* is clearly closer to the kind of subjective presence that enlivens his fictional South, a fin-de-siècle world at the end of time. The breakdown of empires and individual worlds, after all, are reflections of the metaphorical escapism of a writer “at the crossroads” of history.

---

24 One such viewpoint holds that Empress Wu’s case represents the success of a class struggle in imperial times; others praise her for her achievements in bringing about social and economic progress. See Guisso (6, 202 n. 47).
Conclusion

My study of the fictional representation of history begins with a discussion of Western critical thought on the nature of, and relationship between, historiography and fiction as the two primary types of narrative through which human experiences are recorded, interpreted and communicated. Using the theoretical insights of Hayden White and Paul Ricoeur as a point of departure, I have shown how fictional and historical narratives are analogous and supplementary modes of representation in search of knowledge about the past and the present.

White’s notion of metahistory is based on a theory of tropes, i.e. the literariness of historiography and historical consciousness, and poses questions about the nature of historical truths as products of the human (literary) imagination. As such, the human perception of history is largely conditioned by the kinds of tropes available for the construction of explanatory models to interpret and represent the past in specific social and cultural contexts. I have argued that White’s theory, as put forward in his *Metahistory*, runs the risk of a radical indeterminacy of meaning that may legitimize any form of interpretation and misinterpretation. The main contribution of White’s theory of tropes is the discovery of the proximity between literary and historical imagination, and their *formal* similarities that enable us to reconsider both fictional and historical representations of the past with a greater degree of critical skepticism.
My reading of White is further refined through Ricoeur’s theory of metaphor and narrative, in which he convincingly argues for the “tensional” truth obtained by “narrative understanding.” Metaphor, says Ricoeur, is inevitable in all kinds of mimetic activities. It makes reference to the extra-textual world by a paradoxical unity of two logically distant entities or ideas in the form of “seeing... as...” that gives meaning to human experience (Rule of Metaphor 12-18). The power to redescribe the world rests with the ability of metaphor to produce meanings that are not yet articulated in ordinary, literal language. In putting forward the “interweaving reference” of fiction and history Ricoeur’s theory of metaphor reasserts the “heuristic power of fiction” to refer to the extra-literary world. The resulting concept of “metaphorical truth” then can be seen as a resolution to the dilemma inherent in White’s theory of tropes. The tension between “what is” and “what is not” in fiction, then, is part of the semantic function of metaphor, since fiction’s primary activity is to “metaphorize” reality by shifting its semantic value from the “form of the metaphor as a word-focus figure of speech” to the “reference of the metaphorical statement as the power to ‘redescribe’ reality” (7).

Building upon these theoretical reflections by White and Ricoeur, I proceeded to treat my subject matter in terms of “history-as-metaphor,” i.e., the way in which fiction subjects historical mimesis to a poetic, metaphorical transformation to create cultural metaphors embodying multiple dimensions of meaning. Working within the boundaries of literary representation, this formulation enabled me to discover metahistorical and
Conclusion 352

metafictional traits in the literary text, the effect of which is a deepening, rather than deconstruction, of the correspondence between representation and reality in a non-literal, non-coercive way. It also enabled me to read metafiction not as a rejection of referentiality but a productive questioning of the possible relations between the literary signifier and its referent, intended or unintended. Understanding metaphor as *meta-phora* (a movement, a displacement of meaning into a new and paradoxical context) has the advantage of grasping the defamiliarized content of metafiction in terms of a categorical transgression or para-doxa, whose signification ultimately works toward a refamiliarization of the estranged reality in the literary text.

I then went on with the common denominator “meta-” in metahistory (a position beyond), metaphor (a change in position) and metafiction (a second order, or metalanguage) to illuminate certain aspects of historiographic metafiction: a parodic appropriation of the metalanguage of two kinds of metanarratives (metahistory and metafiction). I argued that history as represented in this kind of fiction is displaced into the realm of metaphor where it confronts all kinds of magic, myths, legends and grotesque anecdotes that make up the entire fabric of a specific culture and its collective memory. I concluded that the past as fictionally imagined is essentially symbolic, and its signification presumes an aesthetic distance that differentiates its world of plausible circumstances, or “convincing impossibilities,” from the empirically real world (the primary field of historical research). Fiction and history, then, are accorded different
degrees of "mimetic advocacy" based on the relative creative autonomy with regard to factual data and lived experience.

I began my discussion on the changing perception of history in twentieth-century Chinese literature with the ideological import of modern Chinese literature at the dawn of the twentieth century. From the oppositional aesthetics of critical realism of the May Fourth era to the leftist politicization of literature in the 1930s to the changing metaphors of the 1980s and 90s, there are continuities, as well as discontinuities, in the conception of modern Chinese literature as a complex product of nationalism and anti-traditionalism. This is evident in the works of writers as diverse in aesthetic and intellectual temperament as Lu Xun, Yu Dafu, Mao Dun and Ding Ling. Despite their ideological differences, these writers nonetheless exhibit similar sentiments with regard to the urgency of national self-renewal.

This understanding of the itinerary of modern Chinese literature still concerns many critics on the Mainland today. The ideological implications of this nationalist/anti-traditionalist complex are well demonstrated by the leftist aesthetics that held sway from the 1930s on, and its eventual political victory in 1949. This is not only the hallmark of socialist revolutionary literature that dominated cultural production in the subsequent decades, but also, in a negative way, the historical origin of literary subversion in the post-Mao era and beyond. The polemic against Maospeak and the historical utopianism
propagated by the State, as documented by Li Tuo and Liu Zaifu, becomes the central force of a new era of cultural politics on the Mainland today.

I have shown how political ideology gained momentum and turned itself into a religious fervor (i.e. the bearer of Truth) in my reading of Ding Ling’s *The Sun Shines over the Sanggan River*, where political idealism overwhelms the better judgement of an indulgent novelist toeing the Party line to create a “socialist Armageddon” out of class struggle and political persecution. This novel demonstrates how the sober aspirations of Mao Dun in *Midnight* can be pushed to unprecedented extremes. This overview of the development of modern Chinese literature provided the background against which the “new aesthetics” of Han Shaogong, Mo Yan and Su Tong were examined.

One salient feature of what is now widely known as the cultural self-reflection movement beginning in the mid-1980s is a critical reexamination of Chinese history and culture in light of the legacy of the May Fourth Movement, which is still generally looked upon as a crucial moment of China’s cultural enlightenment that is not yet complete.\(^1\) The repercussion of this “culture heat” in intellectual circles finds its echo in the emergence of search-for-roots fiction, a new genre that seeks to reestablish a dialogue with China’s cultural past in a critical but non-didactic way. If “monologism” applies to May Fourth antitraditionalism, pluralism is at least the collective goal of the present

---

\(^1\) The existence of contending viewpoints on the May Fourth spirit or May Fourth culture among contemporary scholars aptly illustrates the significance of this historical episode. See, for example, Tu Weiming, “The Enlightenment Mentality,” Lee Ou-fan, “Modernity and Its Discontents,” Liu Zaifu,
generation, for the old binary between tradition and modernity is gradually being dissolved by the multiple "small narratives" offering different, even contradictory, interpretations of this tensional relation that has plagued generations of writers and intellectuals for more than a century.

The above reflections on the theory and practice of fictional representation of history formed the framework within which the works of Han Shaogong, Mo Yan and Su Tong were discussed. First, I sought to locate the "interweaving reference" between history and fiction in terms of "history-as-metaphor," which helps capture the semantic function of fictional (narrative) understanding of the past and reconnects the "unreal" with the real through the refamiliarization of a defamiliarized referent in the process of metaphorical signification. Second, by situating the ways of "seeing...as..." in modern Chinese fiction within the socio-political and intellectual contexts of twentieth-century China, I demonstrated how fiction participates in the process of nation-building and modernization by projecting certain perceptions (and preconceptions) of reality in the hope of augmenting that reality and creating a "new" society. This being said, the present stage is set on the threshold of the twenty-first century. When ideological control and political surveillance on the Mainland are softening, individual creativity is rekindled in literary production and the interests in China's cultural traditions recharge the near-exhausted fictional imagination with new intensity and aesthetic sensitivity.

Farewell to the Gods, and Li Zehou, Reading the Analects Today.
My discussion of the three authors has shown how this new sensitivity can be fruitfully employed in re-imagining the past, even though the resulting metaphors may be gloomy, threatening, or ambivalent. Han Shaogong’s collective allegory, originating in his consciousness of his cultural “roots,” is always engaged in a philosophical debate within the self. His fictions of the past, such as “Homecoming?,” “North Gate Prophecy”, “A Case of Murder” and “Farewell Yesterday” always underscore the inadequacy of memory (collective and personal) in the construction of self-identity. His concern for the collective destiny of the Chinese people inevitably leads to inquiries into the historical roots of the present state of cultural decline, which sometimes lead to very pessimistic conclusions as in “Ba, Ba, Ba” and “Nü Nü Nü.” Yet, Han’s cultural vision is also informed by an awareness of the cultural and historical value of language as a repertoire of meanings. In A Dictionary of the Maqiao Dialect, for example, myths and legends, social taboos, religious beliefs, political ideologies and personal memories interact in a concatenation of voices. Language, to Han, is not just a means but an end in itself; it is also a crucial factor of a people’s cultural identity. Because it is continuously created by an amalgam of forces and influences, language both articulates and distorts meaning, constructs and obliterates identities. Ironically, this is also the reason why language is treated as a source of historical truths, a field of anthropological data awaiting to be explored. Corollary to this conjecture is the implicit reference to the century-old debate over language reform that finally materialized in the adoption of simplified characters and the so-called Mao style or Mao genre (Mao wenji), as Li Tuo puts it. The language reform in China after 1949 has not been a smooth and unimpeded process, for
within the party as well as on different levels of the Chinese society, there have been divisions and disagreements as to the ideal form and procedure of reform. Against this historical context, I argued that in *A Dictionary* Han attempts to mobilize the "disunifying" elements in a local dialect (one that has its roots in the cultural traditions of ancient Chu) to inject a degree of plurality into the grand unifying language of the State.

To the extent that Han's first person narrator plays the role of the story-teller confidante vis-à-vis the reader with his moralizing wit, Han, in searching for "non-paradigmatic" (i.e. non-Confucian) cultural traditions as an alternative to past and present paradigms, also participates in the Confucian tradition that emphasizes the social function (didactic, moral, cognitive) of literature as a whole. Han's "dictionary," nonetheless, ends with an ironic remark on language that seems to offset the transformative power accorded to it previously. The dismissive statement on "plain speech" undermines not only the present work, but also Han's undertaking as a fiction writer. Han's ambivalence toward his work and his role as a writer is symptomatic of the predicament of the traditional literati with regard to literary authority. As Wendy Larson observes, the literati's contradictory impulse of self-assertion and self-dismissal has for centuries been a crucial dilemma for Chinese intellectuals.² In Han's case, his rationalistic approach to art and life can also been seen as an echo of this "traditional" sentiment.

² See Larson, *Literary Authority and the Modern Chinese Writer*. 
Compared to Han, Mo Yan is a more “romantic” writer whose vision of “human devolution” is vividly captured in his florid, extravagant prose. His overt fictionalizing of an ideal world of the past is an attempt to create a personal inheritance that will salvage the hope of spiritual redemption, in art if not in life. This cultural idealism is, however, punctuated by a pensive apprehension of the irretrievable loss of innocence as a result of the human “descent” from the past to the present, a recurrent image in Mo Yan’s fictional histories. After Red Sorghum, the romantic, idealizing vision of the past gives way to a more pessimistic vision of “devolution” in The Grass Eaters, which traces the genealogy of a hybridized semi-human lineage through the allegorized “historical” context of pestilence and revolution. Be that as it may, Mo Yan’s fantastic reinvention of this bestial heritage constantly refers to concrete historical realities in the past century. The extravaganza of talking beasts and webbed humans — a radical break from both social and revolutionary realism — can be interpreted as an outburst of long suppressed fury and passion against which the “truth claims” of the fictional past are measured.

Mo Yan’s critical gaze on the present in The Republic of Wine still bears the mark of this peculiar historical consciousness, as the reader is invited to a spectacle of human degeneration symbolized by the feast of “braised meat babies,” a hyperbolic projection of Lu Xun’s critique of “cannibalism” as the subtext of the Chinese cultural tradition. This extreme negativity bespeaks Mo Yan’s frustration and melancholy both as a writer and as a descendent of the Chinese race. Like Lu Xun, Mo Yan is aware of his own share in the “feast of cannibalism,” as the fictional novelist bearing his own name tellingly suggests
in *The Republic of Wine*. This self-debilitating negativity can only be brought to an explosive emotional relief in the writer’s fictional death that is no less than “a play to end all plays.” This suicidal passion is, nonetheless, attenuated in *Full Bosoms, Fat Buttocks* through the image of the Mother as an incomplete “resolution” to the paradoxical vision of imaginary redemption and pessimistic self-annihilation. Unlike the I-narrator in *Red Sorghum*, the bastard hero in *Full Bosoms* cherishes no hope of self-renewal, but retreats into an imaginary world of maternal love that embraces Heaven and Earth, his temporary shelter from the slings and arrows of life. The literary journey of Mo Yan thus signifies a continuous *mediation* between the self and the world as perceived, or more precisely between the self and the historical vision of “devolution” that triggers a series of reactions from imaginary self-assertion to nihilistic self-destruction.

Analogous to Han Shaogong’s Hunan and Mo Yan’s Gaomi, Su Tong’s southern homeland sets the stage for a radical rethinking of history against the spiritual homelessness of the present. In my discussion, two interrelated aspects of Su Tong’s fictional topography were examined, i.e. the South as a symbol of decadence and the notion of Fate on the metaphysical and metafictional levels in constructing narratives of escape. Taken as a whole, they link the present with the cultural past, endowing these stories with a nostalgic flavor that co-exists with a spectacle of decadence and moral degeneration. Characteristic of Su Tong’s tales of the South, the transformation of the family into a living hell from which all human evils spring changes the focus of historical unfolding from the public, political realm to the private, personal one. While this is a
common tendency among contemporary writers, Su Tong’s image of the family, by nature of its centrality and obsessive presence in his fiction, overtly “deconstructs” the fundamental unit of society together with its implied ethical values in the Chinese tradition. The portrayal of sexual and moral perversities within the family, first and foremost, defamiliarizes history by displacing it into the private space of illicit desires accentuated by monotonous and unreflective daily occurrences. As a cultural metaphor, the family is negatively asserted as the primary force of human history. Taken as a whole, the dynamics between Fate, escape and the family constitute the subtle textual irony in Su Tong’s fiction that shows a heightened degree of aesthetic self-consciousness arising from his anxiety about home and the “shortening path” toward the past.

Su Tong’s venture into China’s dynastic past, however, yields mixed results. On the one hand, the fictional autobiography in Emperor successfully creates the deposed monarch as an individualized character apart from the cultural stereotypes of the Son of Heaven. It probes the historical and existential meaning of dynastic rule, power and most of all individual volition and human destiny against the impersonal flux of time. On the other hand, the portrayal of the “female emperor” in Empress Wu seems to bear the imprint of centuries of formed opinions about the Empress (as an anomaly to the Confucian social and political order). The heroine is largely seen from the outside, her voice circumscribed by that of three different narrators (her two sons and the third person narrator) who speak from the same historical tradition and are therefore strikingly similar in both perspective and judgment. While this overt maneuvering of points of view
initially promises to destabilize the insider/outsider, subjective/objective representation, Empress Wu as a fictional character pales in comparison to Su Tong’s more fascinating heroines in “1934 Escapes,” “Rouge,” “Embroidery” and “Wives” in terms of individuality and psychological depth. In rewriting the legend of the only “female emperor” in Chinese history, Su Tong has ironically given his subject a traditional interpretation. His sympathy for, and fascination with, his female characters is partially distracted by the difficulty of recreating his fictional character against the preconceptions and judgments that might have subconsciously interfered with the creative process.

Despite their differences in aesthetic style and regionalistic outlook, all three authors share a greater concern for the recent past, i.e., the Republican and Communist revolutions, the Sino-Japanese War and the numerous political upheavals leading up to the Cultural Revolution. Chinese history from the 1930s to the present is a series of human and natural disasters – floods, draughts, famines, massacres, and political and social revolutions. Writing in the post-Mao era, these authors, like their many contemporaries, inevitably find themselves “at the crossroads” of history. That is to say, the complete rejection of the Maoist utopian vision of history has liberated the creative imagination of these writers, but it has also intensified the sense of uncertainty, of being adrift in a perpetual transition. The renewed interest in China’s cultural past can be seen as a collective effort in anchoring the seemingly disjointed present in the continuum of history. It is no coincidence that historical traumas are re-interpreted through individual tragedies in stories like “Nǚ Nǚ Nǚ,” Full Bosoms and Rice. The potency of these
historical metaphors lies in their ability to go beyond, positively or negatively, simple praise or indictment to capture the general thrust of historical vicissitudes in which "felt history" is revitalized as a source of self- and cultural knowledge.

In the works examined in the previous chapters, fictional representation of history is always a paradoxical gesture - the paradox of attraction and abhorrence, estrangement and intimacy, sympathy and disgust, and most of all, a consciousness of time and a desire to resist time through narrative. In all three writers, history is generally perceived as traumatic and destructive. If this overwhelming pessimism seems to be over indulgent and obsessive at their darkest moments, one may ask why, and to what purpose, this pessimism is so pervasive in the fictional worlds of these writers. In my view, this pessimism, as a way of "seeing...as...," is not only an expression of political and cultural disenchantment but also an attempt to account for its consequences. To a significant extent, the negativity of these writers toward Chinese history bespeaks a collective anxiety about the future. That is to say, the spiritual vacuum caused by the disintegration of the traditional culture at the beginning of the twentieth century is yet to be filled, and the erratic path of a state-controlled modernization since 1949 has created a new void in the social and cultural orders, as what we have seen in A Dictionary of the Maqiao Dialect, Pusa man, The Northern District, The Republic of Wine and Full Bosoms. Juxtaposing the utopian optimism of Maoist propaganda, pessimism can perform a critical function, i.e., as a critical tool to navigate the vast and uneven landscape of Chinese modernity. Whether it be Han Shaogong's rationalistic indeterminacy, Mo
Yan's aesthetic redemption, or Su Tong's ironic escapism, to take stock of the past necessitates a confrontation with the darkness of the past, however that darkness is conceived. In this connection, the historical value of these fictional works is their contribution to an understanding of the imprint of history on the Chinese cultural imagination.

In the Chinese tradition, history is a privileged mode of human understanding, and it was from historical narratives that xiaoshuo or fictional narratives were derived. In modern times, fiction as a self-conscious art form complicates this historical lineage of xiaoshuo by asserting its creative autonomy vis-à-vis the extra-textual reality. History-as-metaphor, therefore, is understood in terms of the tensional relationship between fictionality and referentiality; it can also be understood as an endless wrestle with time, in time, and reflects the "classical dilemma" of literature itself. As a "time art" literature aspires to a timelessness that transcends time. In fictional historiography, then, this rupture between literature's nature and its ideal becomes a perpetual dilemma, a self-conscious irony or even a moral predicament that keeps provoking the imagination.
Bibliography

Primary Sources


-----. *Han Shaogong zuopin zixuanji*. 韓少功作品自選集 (Selected Writings of Han Shaogong) Guilin: Lijiang chubanshe, 1997.


-----. *Yexingzhe mengyu*. 夜行者夢語 (The Dreamtalk of a Nightwalker) Shanghai: Shanghai zhi shi chubanshe, 1993.

-----. *Youhuo*. 诱惑 (Hunan: Hunan wenyi chubanshe, 1986.


-----. *Shenliao.* 神聊 (Mystery Tales) Beijing: Beijing shifan daixue chubanshe, 1993.


-----. “Yuanyi” (Gardening). *Ciqing shidai*, 7-84.

**Secondary Sources**


Cheung, Martha. “Introduction.” Han Shaogong, *“Homecoming?" and Other Stories,* ix-xxi.


Han, Shaogong. “Gongju yoshi yeshi jiaji” (Tools are also Value Sometimes). *Jintian (Today)* 1999.1: 155-159.


-----. *Pangwang* 《彷徨》(Wandering), Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 1999.


-----. Xiaoshuo zhongguo: wan Qing dao dangdai de zhongwen xiaoshuo 《小說中國：晚清到當代的中文小說》(Narrating China: Chinese Fiction from the Late Qing to the Contemporary Era). Taipei: Rye Field, 1993.


Zhu Hengqing. “Mo Yan chuangzuo xinquxiang tan yuan – jian tan changpian xiaoshuo
Shisan bu” (New Directions in MoYan’s Fiction – with some reflections on

Zhu, Shuiyong. "Lishi chuanqi: shizhuan chuantong yu shishi moshi" (Historical Novel:
Traditional Historiography and the Epic Form) 《歷史傳奇：史傳傳統與