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Suspense as Method: Two Crime Stories by Shuang Xuetao in Contemporary Chinese Literature

Abstract This paper uses narratological theory to examine the impact of suspense in the crime stories by Shuang Xuetao, a leading figure among the "Neo-Dongbei writers." Drawing on Tzvetan Todorov's analysis of dual narrative structures in detective fiction, his definition of suspense form, and Peter Brooks's discussions on the "double-logic" structure in detective narratives as theoretical frameworks, this study investigates how Shuang's use of suspense differs from conventional crime narratives. It further explores the significance of suspense as a narrative device in Shuang's crime stories. The paper argues that in Shuang's tales, the detective is not merely an investigator, but an active participant who bridges the dual structure inherent in detective fiction. The open endings in Shuang's crime stories suggest that the younger generation are not passive observers of past events, but active participants in ongoing history. In this way, the suspenseful narrative mirrors emotional responses to contemporary economic changes and social developments in Northeast China, and offers a resolution to the seeming irreconcilable tension between past and present.

Keywords Chinese Northeast literature, Suspense, Shuang Xuetao, crime stories, Neo-Dongbei writers, double-logic narrative

Contemporary Northeast Chinese literature has recently been the subject of much discussion among scholars of modern Chinese literature.[1] Set against the background of the 1990s, when China began transitioning from a planned economy to a market economy, these realistic stories vividly depict the economic hardships and inner conflicts faced by laid-off workers and their families. Notably, these works often incorporate elements of crime and investigation, achieving both critical acclaim and commercial success. The film

1. In English scholarship, Wang Qi explores how Shuang Xuetao employs personal and multiple narrations to foster dialogues among people with different backgrounds, along with the use of fantastic escapes to resolve the stories (Wang 2020). Lin Shiqi uses the concept of "ruinated futurity" to argue that literature has intervened in social discourse and interacted with various media forms, thereby igniting the Dongbei Renaissance as a transmedia phenomenon in the digital age (Lin 2023). Yu Xuying analyzes the non-linear narrative structures in three crime stories by Shuang Xuetao, Zheng Zhi and Ban Yu each to uncover how buried historical facts were reconstructed (Yu 2024).

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Black Coal, Thin Ice (*Bairi yanhuo*, 2014) which follows a police investigation into a serial killer's murders in Harbin, is an example of this trend. Written and directed by Diao Yinan (1969–), the film won the prestigious Golden Bear Award at the 64th Berlin International Film Festival.

Leading figures of the "Neo-Dongbei (Northeast) Writers,"[2] such as Shuang Xuetao (1983–), Ban Yu (1986–), and Zheng Zhi (1987–), have also embraced the suspense genre in their literary works. Shuang's story "Moses on the Plain (*Pingyuan shang de Moxi*, 2015)" explores the investigation into the murder of two government officers and inspired a six-episode TV series that received a nomination for the Berlinale Series at the 73rd Berlin International Film Festival in 2023.[3] Ban Yu's short story collection *Winter Swim* (*Dongyong,* 2018) was nominated for the Blancpain-Imaginist Literary Prize in China in 2018 and sold over 20,000 copies that year, with four out of seven stories revolving around intriguing murder cases. Ban Yu also served as the literary planner for the popular crime TV drama *The Long Season* (*Manchang de jijie*, 2023). Zheng Zhi's detective novel *Victim in Me* (*Shengtun*, 2017), which recounts the tragic tale of a young woman who is humiliated and murdered in Shenyang, was adapted into the TV drama *Nobody Knows* (*Danxiao gui*, 2022).

This paper uses narratological theory to analyze the impact of suspense on the portrayals of contemporary Northeast China by the "Neo-Dongbei Writers." It specifically focuses on two of Shuang Xuetao's stories, "Moses on the Plain" and "The North Turned into Nothingness (*Beifang huawei wuyou,* 2017)." Born in the 1980s, these writers experienced similar environments growing up and during their education, witnessing their parents' layoffs and the economic downturn in Northeast China. The works of these "Neo-Dongbei Writers" often depict characters with parallel destinies and employ narrative techniques such as multiple narrators, unreliable narrators, fictive readers, and multilevel structures. Through intricately plotted narratives, they blur the boundaries between reality and fiction to reflect on the historical truth surrounding the massive layoffs of the 1990s and explore the deeper social problems stemming from the economic decline. I have chosen Shuang Xuetao because he is "one of China's most celebrated young authors" and "has been hailed for bringing attention to a time and people that China's public imagination had long written off" (V. Wang). In the English-speaking world, Shuang is also the most recognized and translated writer among the "Neo-Dongbei Writers."

2. "Neo-Dongbei Writers" refers to a group of writers from the Northeast area of China who were born around the 1980s. The representative writers are Shuang Xuetao, Ban Yu and Zheng Zhi. Huang Ping argues that they are grouped together because they share common themes and narrative styles in their works. For more discussion, see Huang (2020).

3. For a detailed comparison between Shuang's story and its TV adaptation, refer to Ma Sheng-mei's article, "Sino-Noir of Serial Killers and Dismemberments." In this article, Ma discusses the reasons behind the popularity of the Sino-Noir theme of serial killers and dismemberments in contemporary China (Ma 2024).

This paper draws on Tzvetan Todorov's analysis of dual narrative structures in detective fiction, his definition of suspense form, and Peter Brooks's discussions on the "double logic" structure in detective narratives as theoretical frameworks to analyze how Shuang Xuetao's use of suspense differs from conventional crime narratives. It explores the significance of suspense as a method in Shuang's crime stories. The paper argues that in Shuang's tales, the detective is not merely an investigator, but an active participant, bridging the dual structure of detective fiction. Unlike conventional crime narratives that focus on whodunit, whydunit or howdunit, Shuang's stories often conclude with open endings. These endings suggest that the younger generation is not merely witnessing past events but is actively participating in ongoing history. In this way, the suspenseful narrative itself reflects the structure of feelings towards contemporary economic changes and social development in Northeast China, and offers a resolution to the seeming irreconcilability between the past and the present.

The Dual Narrative Structure

Tzvetan Todorov was among the first to analyze the dual narrative structure in detective fiction. This structure includes two main elements: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation. According to Todorov, the story of the crime "tells 'what really happened'" and its defining characteristic is that it is "in fact the story of an absence," as "the narrator cannot transmit directly the conversations of the characters who are implicated, nor describe their action" (46). As a result, "he must necessarily employ the intermediary of another (or the same) character who will report, in the second story, the words heard or the actions observed" (46). The second story, namely, the story of the investigation, "has no importance in itself" but "serves only as a mediator between the reader and the story of the crime" (46).

Both "Moses on the Plain" and "The North Turned into Nothingness" exhibit this dual narrative structure. "Moses on the Plain" centers around the investigation of the murder of two urban management officers (*chengguan*) in 2007. As the investigation unfolds, evidence suggests that the suspect, a laid-off worker named Li Shouren, who committed the murders, could be the same individual who assaulted a police officer in 1995, leaving him in a vegetative state, and fled with the officer's two pistols.

The story consists of fourteen chapters, each narrated in the first person by different characters in a retrospective manner. There are seven narrators in total. In order of appearance, they are Zhuang Dezeng (2, businessman, father of Zhuang Shu), Jiang Bufan (police detective, attacked and left in a vegetative state in 1995), Li Fei (4, daughter of the suspect Li Shouren), Fu Dongxin (2, wife of

Zhuang Dezeng and mother of Zhuang Shu), Zhuang Shu (3, police detective, son of Zhuang Dezeng), Sun Tianbo (clinic doctor, friend of Li Fei), and Zhao Xiaodong (police detective). The numbers in parentheses indicate the number of appearances each narrator makes.

It is evident from the list of narrators that the main suspect, Li Shouren, is absent. In addition to interpreting Li Shouren's silence as a reflection of "the silence of the working class as a historical subject" (Yu 231), I argue that the decision to exclude Li as a narrator aligns with Todorov's dual narrative structure of detective fiction. The first structure, the story of the crime, is characterized by an absence—the criminal's direct voice is missing. This means that we can only know that Li could be a criminal, but his personality and motives remain unknown. Li's tumultuous experiences and altruistic personality are depicted through the descriptions and dialogues of other characters in the second structure, the story of investigation.

In "The North Turned into Nothingness," the dual structure comprises a locked-room murder case that occurred in a factory office in Shenyang in 1997, and the adaptation of this criminal incident into two distinct crime stories by two writers in Beijing in 2012. Han Chunyan explains this dual structure through the concepts of surface and deep layers. She considers that the events occurring on New Year's Eve in Beijing constitute the surface layer, while historical mysteries from the past form the deep layer (Han 78). The surface layer serves as an extension of the deep layer. The narrative begins with a conversation between an editor of a literary magazine and a young writer on the eve of Chinese New Year in 2012. The young writer, Liu Yong, who comes from Shenyang, presents a murder case based on his childhood recollections, with the victim being his own father. To his surprise, Rao Lingling, the editor, informs him that another female writer has submitted a similar but unfinished tale. Eager to know the criminal's identity, they find the female author, Mi Li, that night, and she reveals that her sister had been an eyewitness to this very murder.

Both stories feature detectives, or characters equivalent to detectives, who link the two layers in the dual structure together. In these two stories, the main detectives were involved in the past crime case. In "Moses on the Plain," Li Shouren attacked the police officer because the police mistakenly identified him as a serial murderer of taxi drivers based on the gasoline bottle he carried in the car. In fact, the gasoline bottle belonged to his daughter, Li Fei. Li Fei had made plans with Zhuang Shu to watch fireworks in a nearby sorghum field that night in 1995. Using the excuse of a stomachache, Li Fei asked her father, Li Shouren, to take her to a nearby clinic by taxi. Coincidentally, the injured police officer was pretending to be a taxi driver to investigate the serial killer case. Twelve

years later, when Zhuang Shu became a police detective and investigated the police assault case from 1995. Li Fei found out during their conversation that Zhuang had completely forgotten about their appointment that night. Zhuang also began to feel guilty about it.

In "The North Turned into Nothingness," the writer Liu Yong claims to be the son of the victim. He was sixteen years old when the incident occurred, but he didn't witness the murder as he was outside the door. The other female writer, Mi Li, asserts that her sister was the eyewitness at the crime scene. Her sister was the victim's secret lover. To conceal their rendezvous, she hid in a cabinet, fell asleep and upon waking, saw the murderer climbing up through the ventilation duct on the roof with a rope. Mi Li claims that afterward, her sister tracked the killer for over a decade, killed him just a month ago, and then wrote her a letter detailing the process. In the novel, the stories written by Liu Yong and Mi Li contain much fictional content, but the details about the factory environment seem to confirm that they both lived there before. Therefore, regardless of whether their true identities are hidden, they both experienced the 1997 incident, and in 2012, presented the case again in the form of a novel. The presence of the detective in both stories within the dual structure implies that they are not merely passive observers during the present investigation. Instead, they are active participants in the past events. As they work to solve the case, the detective also uncovers their own past, embarking on a journey of self-awareness and personal growth.

Double Logic in the Dual Narrative Structure of Detective Fiction

Peter Brooks (1938–) builds upon Todorov's descriptions of the double narrative structure inherent in detective stories, placing greater emphasis on the significance generated by the process of plotting, specifically the story of the investigation. Brooks' concept of "double logic" in literary texts relies on the arguments of Jonathan Culler (1944–), stating that "in certain problematic moments story events seem to be produced by the requirements of the narrative discourse, its needs of meaning, rather than vice-versa, as we normally assume" (Brooks 28). In other words, unlike the traditional narratological hierarchy that prioritizes events over discourse, Culler argues that in certain circumstances, the meaning and logic of the narrative discourse guide us to believe in the events (Culler 137–150).

Brooks considers that the dual narrative structure of detective fiction can also be examined through this double logic. The story of the crime involves a chronologically arranged sequence of events and actions that represent the progression of the criminal case. This logic suggests that past occurrences

are prerequisites for subsequent events. On the other hand, the story of the investigation seeks to provide thematic coherence and a resolution to the preceding crime. It aims to create a unified and meaningful interpretation of past events. The inherent contradiction in this double logic is the question of which element instigates the creation of meaning: is it the past events leading to the present and the future, or the later interpretations that construct the past? Brooks asserts that the contradiction between these two logics is not a narrative defect or constraint but rather an essential narrative element. He suggests that this "contradictory double logic" (Brooks 29–30) allows narratives to present a complex, multi-layered portrayal of human experiences. The creation of meaning through narrative is not a simple passive reflection of events but an active and productive process. It enables us to comprehend our experiences and assign purpose to our lives.

In "Moses on the Plain," the concept of double logic is evident in the interpretation of the suspect, Li Shouren. Initially, the story of the crime portrays Li as a murderer who has killed two *chengguan* officers and seriously injured a police officer. However, as the investigation unfolds, a contrasting depiction of Li emerges. He is presented positively as an honest, justice-seeking, and empathetic figure. Li used to be "a bench worker at a tractor factory," and according to Zhuang Dezeng, Li was once impulsive by nature and had revolutionary ideals. During the Cultural Revolutionary period, to collect commemorative stamps, he did not mind "injuring quite a few people to get hold of them" (Shuang 2023, 98).[4] However, after marriage, he became much steadier. Li is depicted as both a loyal family man and a dedicated follower of Chairman Mao's socialist ideals. Li Fei recounts that after her mother passed away, Li Shouren never remarried and took on the roles of both parents to raise her (104). In Zhuang Dezeng's recounts, many years ago, after becoming very successful in business, he returned to his hometown and heard that the statue of Chairman Mao in Red Flag Square was going to be removed. He took a taxi to see it, not knowing that the taxi driver was actually Li Shouren. Li expressed his contempt for businessmen like Zhuang and mentioned that the base of Chairman Mao's statue had 29 soldiers guarding it (114). This detail conveyed Li's deep nostalgia for the Mao era. Li Shouren is also portrayed as a skilled, hardworking worker. Li Fei recalls that Li "could single-handedly assemble an entire engine with three wrenches in two minutes and forty-five seconds" (104–105). Moreover, Li was generous with his knowledge. "After getting promoted to factory supervisor, he took on two apprentices. He didn't make them pour him tea or wash his uniforms, just taught them everything he knew"(104).

4. The English translation of Shuang Xuetao's "Moses on the Plain" is collected in *Rouge Street: Three Novellas*. The translator is Jeremy Tiang. In this paper, all my quotations from this book are based on Tiang's translation.

With a strong sense of righteousness, Li once stepped in to help a tea egg vendor who was being harassed by *chengguan* officers, even though he was brutally beaten as a result.[5] Li's warm heart, family orientation, and altruism are further highlighted through accounts of Sun Tianbo and Fu Dongxin, who recall his acts of kindness and bravery. Furthermore, detective Zhuang Shu's investigation reveals that Li Shouren's criminal actions were not driven by malice, but rather by a desire to help others. He killed two *chengguan* officers who had unjustly injured a street vendor's young daughter, and his assault on a police officer in 1995 was similarly motivated by his instinct to protect his own daughter, who was severely injured due to the officer's negligence in parking.

Moreover, the more Zhuang Shu investigates the past, the more empathy he gains. In discussing Shuang Xuetao's stories, David Wang (1954–) applies Wang Hui's concept of "transdescendence" (*xiangxia chaoyue*). Wang argues, "Bottom writing should not be confined to the themes of life instincts or superficial humanism. Food and desires are important to both workers and peasants, but they also possess emotional energies such as fear, generosity, guilt, humility, and love. These energies manifest in the hardships of their lives and can only be witnessed by those with empathy. However, the outcome of the release of these energies is often difficult to predict" (D. Wang 20). In "Moses on the Plain," the decision to portray Li Shouren, the criminal, as an empathetic man stems from Shuang Xuetao's "transdescendence" attitude towards workers.

Such a "transdescendence" attitude ultimately leads to Zhuang Shu's transformation from a detached individual to a compassionate one. Initially, Zhuang was a child who lacked affection and frequently engaged in fights. During his high school days, Zhuang was imprisoned and reprimanded by a young police officer who accused him of wasting his life. After learning that the officer had sacrificed himself to maintain social order, Zhuang Shu decided to become a meaningful person to others and himself and chose to attend the police academy. This marked his first attempt to actively connect with others and society. During his days as an intern detective, he was impressed by the fact that even murderers who had been on the run for years or decades still had family affection and remorse in their hearts. These experiences allowed him to develop a sympathetic understanding of the underprivileged, particularly "the deformed, losers, and criminals" (Wang 11). Investigating Li Shouren reminded him of his own childhood. Through his mother's cigarette box design, he came to understand her spiritual pursuits at the time and her spiritual bond with Li Fei. Step by step, Zhuang Shu became a person with empathy, developing compassion for both Li Fei and Li Shouren. Therefore, Zhuang Shu's process of investigating the case can also be seen as an enlightening journey of his own adolescence, during which he gradually gained the power and mindset of "transdescendence."

5. Li Fei at first didn't know her father was beaten by the *chengguan* officers. But she noticed that "his jaw was swollen at a funny angle, and he had a black eye" (Shuang 2023, 110).

In the story "Moses on the Plain," the second structure of the investigation constructs a noble significance by glorifying the image of the lower-class people. This narrative portrays the criminal Li Shouren as a folk hero with strong beliefs who helps the weak and vulnerable, stemming from a sense of sympathy and respect for ordinary people and the underprivileged. Consequently, this portrayal positively impacts the detective Zhuang Shu, driving his transformation and growth as he is moved by the simplicity and genuine nature of the lower class. In contrast, the second structure of the investigation in "The North Turned into Nothingness" serves to dismantle meaning. The double logic in this narrative layer highlights the impossibility of fully restoring the historical truth from the first layer. Instead, it suggests that the historical truth ultimately fragments into various stories, thereby undermining and eroding any noble significance.

In "The North Turned into Nothingness," the second layer of narrative revolves around two authors, each presenting distinct explanations for the murder of the workshop director fifteen years ago. In Liu Yong's initial account, the director, Old Dong, is a short man from the propaganda department who lacks familiarity with the production process.[6] He made a rash decision to use German-imported machines, which resulted in several accidents. One night, "he was murdered in his office, his throat stabbed with a dagger" (Shuang 2017, 183).[7] This version portrays the director as technologically inept and reckless, suggesting that the workers' vengeance for the manufacturing accidents could be the motive behind his murder.

In contrast, Mi Li's account describes the director as "short yet kindhearted" (Shuang, *Feixing jia* 195). She emphasizes that the German machinery was used only in Old Liu's workshop because the factory was on the verge of closing down, and the other workshop directors only cared about their own interests: "They waited for the factory to shut down so that they could transfer the new machines to their own small workshops, intending to lay off two-thirds of the workers" (Shuang, *Feixing jia* 195). Although both authors describe the workshop director's appearance similarly, suggesting he is a real person, their evaluations of him are completely opposite. In Mi Li's version, the director is devoted to the factory and its workers, trying to protect their jobs. His murder is prompted by his threat to the factory management group's interests, as he intended to report four individuals, including the head and deputy head, for embezzling national assets and misappropriating workers' pension funds to purchase land in rural areas for personal use.

As the workshop director's son, Liu Yong is inclined to believe Mi Li's version, finding solace in her story's ending, which claims that Mi Li's sister avenged his

6. In this story, the names Old Liu and Old Dong are used interchangeably, both referring to the same person. The writer Liu Yong initially named the victim as Old Dong (Lao Dong). Later he revealed that Old Dong is actually his father Old Liu (Lao Liu).

7. "The North Turned into Nothingness" is collected in *Feixing jia* by Shuang Xuetao. In this paper, all English translations of this story are my own.

father by killing one of the culprits. However, the veracity of Mi Li's account cannot be confirmed. In her story, her sister only witnesses the killer leaving the scene. Furthermore, the crime scene's description is highly dramatic: "That day, Old Liu returned to his office very late. Perhaps he opened the cabinet, found her sleeping soundly, and chose not to wake her. He then began writing the report letter at his desk. The murderer silently descended from above and stabbed him to death immediately. After retrieving the letter, the killer climbed back up along the rope. When my sister awoke, she saw that the person had already returned to the ceiling" (198). These exaggerated details cast doubt on Mi Li's portrayal of the victim's death, leaving readers questioning the validity of her narrative.

In this story, the literary magazine editor Rao Lingling assumes the role of a detective fiction reader, thereby adding the narrative with elements of metafiction. Having grown up in Nanjing, Rao does not have firsthand experience of life in Northeast China. In contrast, Liu Yong, similar to the actual author Shuang Xuetao, is a Beijing-based writer originating from Northeast China. Within the story, Rao criticizes Liu Yong's Northeastern tales from the perspective of a Southern China reader. For example, she finds these stories overly dramatic, stating, "I don't believe what you write about the Northeast, but I cry, which is why I became an editor of your books" (181). Liu Yong's narratives focus on childhood memories, leading Rao to remark, "Apart from your childhood, you can't write anything else. You are narrow-minded" (182). Liu Yong concedes that his previous works "aren't very long, perhaps due to my consistent use of short sentences" (183). These observations and linguistic styles serve as a form of self-ironic humor by Shuang Xuetao. As a reader, Rao Lingling makes her own judgement about the murder case. For example, she thinks that it is a locked room murder in which only the narrator "I" could have executed the crime. However, upon receiving an alternative account from Mi Li, Rao begins to question the veracity of Liu Yong's narrative.

In the conversation among the three characters, Rao Lingling insists that certain elements of the narratives are fictional, such as the specific detail in Mi Li's account where "a black cat walked up to the front of Old Dong's office on the third floor, wanting to be fed" (186). Rao argues that this detail is too realistic to be believed. However, Liu Yong refutes this conclusion, verifying the presence of the aforementioned cat. At the same time, both Liu Yong and Mi Li prove to be unreliable narrators. Initially, Liu Yong establishes the first-person male narrator "I" as the son of a bench worker, only to later admit that he is actually the son of the victim. Similarly, Mi Li initially claims that the white cross on the red door of the workshop was sprayed by the first-person female narrator "I." However, upon meeting Liu Yong, she reveals that the cross was actually the work of her sister, a misaligned crucifix, as their family is Catholic.

In their subsequent discussion about the murder case, both Liu Yong and Mi Li continue to embellish other details. Liu Yong fabricates the appearance and speaking style of Mi Li's sister, drawing inspiration from Mi Li's own characteristics. Meanwhile, Mi Li adds details concerning her sister's acquaintance with Old Liu. This dialogue deliberately highlights the process of crafting fiction, as evidenced by the following exchange:

> The girl (Mi Li) says, you're a writer, so what would you write at this moment? (...) Liu Yong says, perhaps I should write about this girl? (...) The girl says, alright, tell me how she and Old Liu got to know each other. Liu Yong says, hey, after all, I am Old Liu's son, it is somewhat morally inappropriate for me to make up this plot. The girl says, are you a writer or a son? Liu Yong says, both. (196)[8]

Within this conversation, there is a noticeable shift in the speakers' identities. Mi Li asserts that her sister bore witness to the murder; however, when Liu Yong fabricates a fictitious image of her sister based on Mi Li's traits, she consistently responds with "okay." As the victim's son, Liu Yong believes that he cannot objectively describe his father's relationship with another woman in the same manner as a writer. The fluctuating identities of the story's narrators, their admissions of occasional unreliability, and the commentary and skepticism from the reader's perspective, embodied by Rao Lingling, all contribute to the structure of the investigative story lacking a stable meaning and authoritative voice for interpreting the murder case. Consequently, the significance of the "North" becomes fragmented. The story's title, therefore, may also be understood as the meaning of the North dissipating into nonexistence.

Suspense as Solution

Todorov categorizes detective fiction into two types based on the reader's interests: curiosity and suspense. Curiosity "proceeds from effect to cause: starting from a certain effect (a corpse and certain clues) we must find its cause (the culprit and his motive.)" (Todorov 47). Suspense, on the other hand, moves "from cause to effect: we are first shown the causes, the initial données (gangsters preparing a heist), and our interest is sustained by the expectation of what will happen, that is, certain effects (corpses, crimes, fights)" (47). The whodunit usually stresses the curiosity while the thriller often emphasizes suspense. And there is the third type of form, namely, "the suspense novel, which combines both of their properties" (47). Conventional detective fiction usually ends with a full closure, where the detective ensures the safety of

8. In Shuang Xuetao's stories, a distinct characteristic of dialogue punctuation is the use of comma rather than double quotation marks to start the conversation between characters. Through this stylistic choice, Shuang deliberately blurs the boundaries between past and present temporal and spatial dimensions.

everyone, including themselves. However, such assurances could be temporary, depending on whether the story has sequels. In both of Shuang Xuetao's crime stories, suspense, however, lasts until the very end and remains unanswered. In other words, suspense becomes a solution.

In "Moses on the Plain," after all the evidence points to Li Shouren as the murderer, the story ends suspensefully. At the end of the story, Zhuang Shu arranges to meet Li Fei. Before their meeting, Li Shouren gives Li Fei a gun for self-defense. They each row a boat and meet on the lake. Zhuang Shu tells her that he is a police officer and asks for Li Shouren's hideout. He invites her onto his boat, and they go ashore together. Li Fei makes a request: She says that if Zhuang Shu can part the lake waters like Moses did, she will accept him and go with him. Zhuang Shu responds that although he cannot part the sea, he can turn the lake into a plain and let Li Fei walk ashore. Li Fei agrees. Zhuang Shu takes out a box of Plain brand tobacco, which has a picture of twelve-year-old Li Fei on it. The cigarette box floats on the water, and the image of Li Fei drifts towards the opposite shore.

Zhuang Shu and Li Fei's characteristics resonate with those of the previous generation, specifically Zhuang Dezeng and Fu Dongxin. They also exhibit new changes and bring new hope. Several instances in the narrative suggest this parallel. Zhuang Dezeng, a former Red Guard, killed a professor during the political movements of the Cultural Revolution. In his earlier days, Zhuang Shu inherited his father Zhuang Dezeng's violent disposition. He frequently engaged in fights and inflicted serious harm on other students during his school days. Meanwhile, Fu Dongxin, after learning that Li Shouren saved her father during the Cultural Revolution, expressed her gratitude by becoming Li Fei's mentor. She provided Li Fei with spiritual guidance through Bible stories. Influenced by Fu, Li Fei developed an interest in reading literature and philosophy as she grew up. Zhuang Dezeng's first date with Fu Dongxin took place on a boat in a lake, where "she was sitting across from me in a red scarf and black cloth shoes" (Shuang 2023, 96). Towards the end of the story, after Zhuang Shu discovers that Li Shouren is the culprit, he meets Li Fei on two separate boats on the same lake, with Li "wearing a red coat, a black scarf, jeans, and brown shoes" (135). Although both generations have taken the boat, the details consciously highlight the differences and changes between Fu Dongxin and Li Fei. For example, Fu's red scarf symbolizes her connection to the Cultural Revolution, while Li's black scarf represents her desperate mood and gloomy future. Fu's black shoes reflect her calm and detached personality, whereas Li's brown shoes, in contrast to her black scarf, add a touch of warmth, hinting at a possible hope for redemption at the end.

However, unlike the complete lack of spiritual understanding between Zhuang Dezeng and Fu Dongxin, the story's ending implies the possibility

of a change in the relationship between Zhuang Shu and Li Fei. When Li Fei asks Zhuang Shu if he could create a miracle like Moses, Zhuang Shu proposes a poetic solution: "I reached into my jacket, past my handgun, and got the packet of cigarettes. That was our plain. There she was, eleven or twelve years old, barefoot and smiling, staring into space. The packet floated on the lake, its plastic wrapper glinting in the sunlight, the northern afternoon breeze tugging at her, wafting her gently back to shore" (137). Here, the younger generation, compared to the older one, has the possibility of spiritual communication and reconciliation. This evolution suggests the potential for overcoming the past's limitations and finding new paths toward understanding.

This ending leaves many mysteries unresolved. Will Zhuang Shu, as a police detective, capture Li Shouren after Li Fei tells him Li's miserable history? Will Li Fei betray her father and subject him to the law? Will Li Shouren flee or willingly surrender for his daughter's happiness? What does the future hold for Li Fei and Zhuang Shu? These questions remain unanswered due to the irreconcilable double logic within the narrative, which creates a clash between law and ethics, as well as between judicial justice and poetic justice. As a murderer, Li Shouren deserves legal punishment, most likely the death penalty. However, the investigation portrays him as a virtuous and honorable individual. Zhuang Shu, an enforcer of the law, experiences mixed feelings about arresting Li Shouren due to the "transdescendence" power he acquired after he grew up. Consequently, he meets Li Fei alone and refrains from informing his colleagues.

Li Fei asks Zhuang Shu to perform a miracle akin to Moses, yet she is aware that such power is unattainable in reality. The fact that her father is a murderer and she is now disabled creates an insurmountable barrier separating her from Zhuang Shu. Moreover, in 1995, Li Shouren's encounter with the police occurred because Li Fei deceived him by faking a stomachache, leading them to take a taxi to the clinic. This realization intensifies her guilt and moral dilemma, preventing her from handing Li Shouren over to the law. Zhuang Shu's proposed solution employs literary metaphor as a means to address the challenges posed by reality, transforming harsh reality into a poetic landscape. The Plain brand cigarette box symbolizes the Northeast plain, while the image of young Li Fei signifies her adult self in reality.

In his analysis of Rousseau's *Confessions*, Peter Brooks wrote: "The only ordering or solution to the problem in understanding Rousseau has set up here is more narrative. No analytic moral logic will give the answer to the question" (Brooks 32). This insight into the power of narrative, in my opinion, can also be applied to explain the significance of the suspenseful ending in "Moses on the Plain." Shuang Xuetao demonstrates that miracles can only be realized in narrative terms.

Ultimately, who is Moses in this story? Huang Ping argues that Li Shouren embodies the core values of this novel. Like a young Moses, Li Shouren represents a spirit of resistance, standing against the oppression imposed by the powerful on the insulted and injured (Huang 15–16). Yu agrees with Huang's interpretation of Li Shouren as Moses and further elaborates on the dual aspects of Moses: the angry Moses and the messenger. Yu asserts that these aspects correspond to the spirit of Mao's "broken soldiers," of which Li Shouren is one. He symbolizes a steadfast belief amid the current chaotic world (Yu 232–233). Unlike these views, I do not see Moses in the story as corresponding to a specific character. Instead, I perceive Moses as a symbolic power of redemption. However, the question remains: who can wield this power, and how can Li Fei and Li Shouren be redeemed? This inquiry remains unanswered. If we accept Brooks' viewpoint on narrative, Moses can be considered a form of narrative as well, more specifically, the embodiment of suspense. This notion is supported by the fact that suspense represents an unresolved literary narrative, encompassing uncertainties and diverse possibilities. By framing Moses as a metaphor for narrative suspense, Shuang Xuetao emphasizes the idea that true resolution and understanding can only be achieved through the unfolding of the story, rather than through definitive answers.

Similarly, "The North Turned into Nothingness" also concludes in an unresolved manner. Mi Li tells Liu Yong that her sister recently exacted vengeance upon one of the culprits, and continues to say: "But after she (Mi Li's sister) takes some rest, she will continue her journey. She will finish them one by one. Is it right? They will be treated equally" (Shuang 2017, 199). This sentence indicates that the cycle of revenge will continue. Rather than addressing Mi Li's prediction of continued vengeance, Liu Yong responds: "Your story is a good one (…) If Old Liu was still alive, he would also think that this is a good story" (199). After their conversation, Mi Li says farewell to Liu Yong and Rao Lingling without telling them her address, and she "pushes the door open and walks out without looking back" (199). Liu Yong observes the girl's departure through the window, noting the darkness outside, punctuated by two young girls setting off fireworks. The description of this scene, with the girl holding the ignited fireworks and the flames illuminating the dark night, creates a vivid image. Fireworks are a recurring metaphor in Shuang Xuetao's stories. In "Moses on the Plain," Li Fei also planned to set off fireworks for Zhuang Shu when they were neighbors during their childhood. Li Fei's longing for light and fire symbolizes her yearning for beautiful things and a passionate life, in stark contrast to her current monotonous, miserable, and impoverished existence in Northeast China (Yang 176–177). In "The North Turned into Nothingness," the two young girls playing with fireworks

at the gate can be interpreted as symbolic representations of the Mi Li sisters, who, amidst the oppressive reality, fervently seek light and passion.

The narrative leaves several questions unresolved. Are Mi Li and her sister the same person? Is her sister's revenge legend true or false? Is her path of vengeance ongoing? Where did Mi Li go? These enigmas contribute to the persistent suspense within the story, reminiscent of the deadlock in Li Shouren's case. When the law proves insufficient in addressing such matters, poetic justice may be the only recourse. However, the female knight-errant approach to vengeance stands in contrast to modern jurisprudence. As a result, narrative becomes a solution, with revenge being transformed into a literary account. Literature serves as the true manifestation of poetic justice. It is the fireworks in the dark. The North becomes a fictional construct, persisting through the medium of literary narrative. Yet the North gains power through this narrative machine, as Brooks observes on narrative, "Any time one goes over a moment of the past, the machine can be relied on to produce more narrative—not only differing stories of the past, but future scenarios and narratives of writing itself" (Brooks 33).

To conclude, both stories—"Moses on the Plain" and "The North Turned into Nothingness"—utilize unresolved endings to evoke a sense of ongoing narrative and suspense. These endings emphasize the limitations of legal and moral justice, suggesting that true resolution can only be achieved through the power of storytelling. By transforming acts of vengeance and longing into literary metaphors, Shuang Xuetao highlights the enduring impact of narrative as a means of exploring and understanding complex human experiences.

Conclusion

Suspense is an essential element in the narratives of "Neo-Dongbei Writers." The unique weather conditions in northeast China, such as heavy snowfall, conceal footprints and enhance the hide-and-seek plots of suspense stories. Elements such as snowstorms, frigid temperatures, darkness, abandoned factories, nightclubs, and freight trains generate suspenseful atmospheres and serve as social metaphors, adding an ironic layer that transcends ordinary criminal cases. The vanishing footprints after a snowfall metaphorically represent the ephemeral and ghostly nature of individual existence. The once-bustling factory furnaces and coal-laden green trains, once symbols of industrial prowess, have now transformed into grim instruments for disposing of corpses. As Mao Jian observes, this noir style distinguishes northeast crime works from those produced in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou (Mao). The juxtaposition of presence and absence, former splendor and current decay, interweaves dark humor with violence and expresses the feelings of bewilderment, despair, isolation and absurdity experienced in contemporary Northeast China.

This element of suspense is evident not only in the settings but also in the dual structure of the genre. The "Neo-Dongbei Writers" employ suspense to explore the history and consequences of the massive layoffs in Northeast China since the 1990s. They act like detectives, using the narrative form of the suspense genre to dig into the history of northeast China. During the era of the planned economy, Northeast China was a major industrial base supported by its abundant mineral resources and aid from the Soviet Union. However, since the economic reforms began in 1978, the region's economy has significantly declined while coastal regions have surged dramatically. This economic disparity led to a rise in crime as the gap between the rich and the poor widened. The largest wave of layoffs in the 1990s resulted in widespread poverty, leading to numerous family tragedies and social problems. The crime stories by the "Neo-Dongbei Writers" are grounded in reality, highlighting the social implications of these economic changes.

The suspense in both "Moses on the Plain" and "The North Turned into Nothingness" highlights the complex interplay between law, ethics, and personal history. It emphasizes the complexity of human experience and the multifaceted nature of truth. In these stories, laid-off workers, even those who engage in criminal activities, often receive sympathy from the author. The real villains, however, are often individuals from the business class who have given up traditional working-class virtues such as hard work and kindness. These recurring themes of resentment towards the affluent and powerful in the works of "Neo-Dongbei Writers" reflect a critical attitude towards capitalism and a humanitarian inclination to empathize with the weak, aligning with the traditional chivalrous spirit.

Moreover, unlike conventional detective fiction that provides a satisfying resolution, Shuang Xuetao's crime stories consistently maintain suspense in their conclusions. By leaving these questions unanswered, Shuang Xuetao emphasizes that resolving such deep-seated conflicts can only be approached through narrative and metaphor, rather than straightforward moral or legal logic. These suspenseful endings acknowledge the subjectivity and challenges in interpreting the past from the present. They not only emphasize the irreconcilability between the past and present but also reflect an enduring belief in the narrative's ability to continually generate meaning, even when the reality or fate of Northeast China seems to be mired in a deadlock.

Suspense, as a method, allows the "Neo-Dongbei Writers" to deeply explore the social and personal complexities of life in Northeast China. By using suspense not just as a literary device but as a tool to provoke thought, evoke empathy, and offer new perspectives, these writers enhance the thematic richness of their works. The unresolved endings and persistent suspense highlight the power of storytelling to explore and understand deep-seated social dilemmas and human

emotions. This approach emphasizes the crucial role of narrative in making sense of multifaceted truths and social issues in contemporary Northeast China.

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