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Articles

Huan Jin
Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

Global Ambitions and Local Water:
A Study of *All Sounds Are Still*

ABSTRACT *All Sounds Are Still* is a full-length novel written by Shandong writer Chang Fang. Compared with earlier generations, Chang Fang shows similar interests in topics such as local culture and modern political changes; however, she experiments with new literary styles, and her attitude toward the influence of the West, as mediated by nineteenth-century missionaries, is more ambivalent. Focusing on *All Sounds Are Still*, this paper explores how the author employs various themes and imageries to convey a sense of "globalness" in Luokou, a small town in northern China, and how she uses water as a phenomenon, topic, and metaphor to find unique indigenous expressions that coexisted with missionary activities. In doing so, Chang Fang creates a vision in which Luokou's local identity, as shown in its fictional hydro-environment, refuses to be subsumed under colonial or imperial discourses.

KEYWORDS comparative literature, Western missionaries, land reform, hallucinatory realism, Yellow River map, Boxer Rebellion, Shandong province, hydro-environment

INTRODUCTION

All Sounds Are Still (*He tu*) portrays everyday life and political changes that took place in Luokou of Shandong Province during the Republican Revolution (1911). It primarily focuses on the experiences of ordinary people, revolutionaries, and foreigners in Luokou before and after the twelve-day independence Shandong declared during the Revolution.[1] Revolving around stories about the Nan family, this novel presents a multi-faceted picture by bringing together memories, rumors, legends, and supernatural beliefs. In terms of its literary style and character design, *All Sounds Are Still* is strongly influenced by Gabriel García Márquez's (1927–2014) *One Hundred Years of*

1. This article is supported by General Research Fund of Hong Kong, project no. 16601623. An abbreviated version of *All Sounds Are Still* was first published in the literary magazine of *Shouhuo* (*Harvest: A Literary Bimonthly*) in 2022; the complete version of the novel was published as a book in 2023. In one of her interviews, Chang Fang says she was first intrigued by the brevity of the independence of Shandong and decided to write a novel to explore ordinary people's experiences during the Revolution ("*Changpian xiaoshuo* He tu").

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Solitude. At the same time, the concept of "hallucinatory realism" used by the Nobel Prize committee to describe the works of Mo Yan (1955–) may also shed light on our understanding of this novel.[2]

The author of *All Sounds Are Still*, Chang Fang, is a native of Shandong province. Like the Nobel Prize Laureate Mo Yan, Chang Fang uses Shandong as the background of her full-length novels, with a particular focus on Jinan, Shandong's capital city.[3] In addition to *All Sounds Are Still*, Chang Fang also created several other full-length novels, including *The Peach Blossoms and The Flowing River* (*Taohua liushu* 2009), *A History of Romance* (*Aiqing shi* 2013), and *The Fifth War Zone* (*Diwu zhanqu* 2015). As a member of the state-sponsored Chinese Writers Association (CWA) and the Vice President of CWA's Jinan branch, Chang Fang's participation in the state-related institution and concerns about "mainstream" motifs such as Anti-Japanese resistance during World War II may render her literary autonomy within-the-system questionable. However, I agree with Xu Hangping that for writers within CWA, such as Mo Yan, "literary autonomy should be understood as a spectrum of possibilities rather than as part of some sort of mechanical binary" (Xu 165). At the same time, unlike Mo Yan, who has explored various significant political movements in modern China such as the Boxer Rebellion (*Sandalwood Death*) and the Land Reform Movement (*Life and Death are Wearing Me Out*), Chang Fang's interests primarily center on the Communist Revolution and the Second Sino-Japanese War. *All Sounds Are Still* is Chang Fang's first attempt to go beyond the Communist history and discourse in the full-length novel.

With *All Sounds Are Still*, Chang Fang is described as a rising representative writer born in the 1970s in media coverage. Nevertheless, there are only a few scholarly articles in Chinese that focus on her early novels. Shanghai University hosts a workshop in which literary scholars from various Mainland universities exchange their thoughts and reflections on *All Sounds Are Still*. In this article, I show that as a productive writer in contemporary China, Chang Fang's experiments with innovative literary themes and styles both continue and develop earlier generations' ways of writing, especially those as represented by Mo Yan.

The English and Chinese titles sum up the multiple directions Chang Fang explores in *All Sounds Are Still*: the modern and the traditional, the global and the local, and the acoustic and the visual. "All sounds are still" may refer to a moment of suspense before the total collapse of the Qing empire; this sense of

2. Mo Yan's "hallucination realism" is described by the Nobel Prize committee as merging "folk tales, history and the contemporary" (Nobel Prize, 2012). In *All Sounds Are Still*, Chang Fang also merges folk tales and fantastic imaginations with history.

3. Jinan is the backdrop of several of Chang Fang's full-length novels. In *All Sounds Are Still,* Jinan also frequently appears as the capital city that is adjacent to Luokou County.

stillness with great anticipation is heightened at the end of the novel, after the twelve-day Independence of Jinan fails. The Chinese title of the book, *He tu*, literally means "the map of the Yellow River." Borrowed from *The Book of Changes*, the map of the Yellow River is said to have originated from the legendary figure Fuxi and reveals the fundamental cosmological principle of yin and yang (Hellmut and Jung 309). In early Chinese thought, when Heaven brings out the map of the Yellow River, it is an auspicious sign that celebrates the rule of the Sage. Another interpretation of "the map of the Yellow River" may be the modern map(s) the Westerners make to chart the Yellow River, and by extension, the geography of China, for explorative and colonial purposes. Therefore, the Chinese book title has dual meanings that point to conflicting epistemological frameworks, respectively traditional and modern. In addition, while "all sounds are still" imagines an acoustic environment, "the map of the Yellow River" creates a visual effect, so these two titles also conjure up pictures that appeal to different senses.

Taking my departure from the contrasting yet complementary meanings of the English and Chinese titles, I first explore the novel's representation of the global on a local scale, and then study the author's usage of water as a topic, symbol, and metaphor in her representation of local identity. In the first part, I compare *All Sounds Are Still* with Mo Yan's *Sandalwood Death* (2001) in terms of their usage of language, representation of elements associated with modernity such as the Westerners, the train, Christianity, and the revolution. The second part of the paper discusses how water functions as a key element in the novel from literary, female, and indigenous perspectives. Through the mediation of water, the novel brings together divergent experiences and discourses from the traditional to the modern, and from the local to the global. Ultimately, the novel's representation of Luokou's hydro-environment and people's hydro-memories through the lens of "hallucinatory realism" constitutes an indigenous resource that appropriates, subverts, and resists discourses of colonialism and globalization.

Representations of the Global on a Local Scale

In one of Chang Fang's interviews, she describes her intention for *All Sounds Are Still* to be "presenting a Jinan that stands in the middle of the world stage;" additionally, she would like the novel to not only record historical vicissitudes of Luokou but also collective memories about Europe, America, and Asia.[4] Therefore, Luokou in the novel may be understood as a "contact zone" which Mary Louise Pratt defines as "where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other,

4. Chang Fang highlights the juxtaposition of Chinese and Western worldviews in *All Sounds Are Still*, suggesting that from an either local or global perspective, her story is simultaneously about Jinan and the world ("*Zhuanfang zuojia Chang Fang*").

often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination—like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they lived out across the globe today."[5] Set in a similar historical and geographical context, Mo Yan's *Sandalwood Death* offers an intriguing comparative perspective to Chang Fang's ambition laid out above. *Sandalwood Death* tells a story of how foreign and domestic oppressions made Sun Bing, a local opera singer and leader of the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901), subject to torturous death carried out by his daughter's father-in-law, a superb executioner endorsed by the Empress Dowager. Despite their similarities in temporal and historical settings, these two novels take different approaches in representing the local and the global, as shown in their language style, character design, and attitude toward the Westerners.

Sandalwood Death uses multiple linguistic registers and local dialect in dialogues and the narrative prose, but *All Sounds Are Still* uses Mandarin Chinese influenced by Anglophonic syntax. For example, in *Sandalwood Death*, the self-referencing pronouns include both "*yu*" and "*an*": the former conveys a sense of formality and literary refinement, but the latter is used in ordinary life, often by less-educated characters. With these pronouns, Mo Yan distinguishes the voices of characters from various social classes and in different contexts of speech. In addition, the characters' emotions and concerns are mediated through lower language registers such as vulgar expressions, dialect, and lyrics from local opera, occasionally mixed with refined language meant to offer ironic contrast. The narrator's voice, often making humorus and satirical remarks, further enhances this heteroglossia. As Chen Sihe points out, the multiple narrative perspectives further enrich the narrative content (Chen 348–349). However, as Zhu suggests, such an emphasis on the vernacular in *Sandalwood Death* may also be read as a representation of the local as an "other" from a postcolonial perspective (Zhu 86). In comparison with Mo Yan's interests in fashioning a local identity through vernacular language and dialogues, *All Sounds Are Still* experiments with linguistic strategies that seem more "modern." For example, in the latter, the standard modern Chinese pronoun "*wo*"is used by all characters, and the narrative prose features long sentences with multiple clauses and modifiers, a language style which may be called "Europeanized."[6] Is this language style rid of "postcolonial" influences for which *Sandalwood Death* is criticized, or is it under a new form of "colonialism" called "globalization"? It is possible that the novel internalizes Europeanized language style as an indication

5. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 4.
6. Long Qilin at Shanghai Jiao Tong University also notices the uncommon sentence style in the novel. He proposes that this style implies other cultures' curious gaze at China. Wang Yumeng at Shanghai University confirms the linguistic style and thinks "it is not necessary for full-length novels about a particular locale to be constrained by dialects" ("*Chang Fang Changpian xinzuo* He tu"). These may be one way for us to understand the linguistic characteristic of *All Sounds Are Still,* but I suggest there are other interpretative possibilities, which I will explain in the next section.

of its "global" ambition, but it experiments to find a unique expression of local identity through a different medium. As I show in the next section, this medium is water.

Sandalwood Death and *All Sounds Are Still* show different attitudes towards the colonial history in Shandong through their representations of the foreigners. Throughout *Sandalwood Death*, the anticolonial sentiment is unambiguous. In this novel, German soldiers and officials are a devilish presence oppressing local villagers through political influence and exploitation. Their sexual violation of Sun Bing's wife directly causes Sun Bing's attempted revenge, subsequent imprisonment, and eventual death, executed with the demand and presence of the German general. In comparison, the foreigners in *All Sounds Are Still* are cast in a less hostile, sometimes even positive light, especially as providers of fresh perspectives and scientific knowledge.[7] There are humanistic understandings towards foreigners and foreign cultures in the novel, but at the same time, the foreigners are fundamentally "outsiders" who are immune to local revolution. This ambivalent attitude is exemplified by the character David, an American anthropologist and engineer who keenly keeps records of local people's everyday life and customs while participating in constructing the railway bridge.[8] David's intrusive questions for the villagers are indicative of his identity as an indifferent observer of the "object" he studies. At the same time, David and his wife are also observed by local people with keen curiosity. Therefore, gazes at the "cultural other" circulate between the foreigners and the locals. Further complicated by his secretive mixed-race ancestry, the character of David brings a piece of American history to Luokou. Therefore, compared with that in *Sandalwood Death*, the image of foreigners in *All Sounds Are Still* is more multi-dimensional.

In both *Sandalwood Death* and *All Sounds Are Still*, the train is an important symbol of modernity and colonial power. During the Boxer Rebellion, the setting for *Sandalwood Death*, the railway system is a threat looming in the future. However, *All Sounds Are Still* is set at a time when the railways have already become a reality people struggle to make sense of. In their representations of the train, Mo Yan and Chang Fang use different writing strategies. When creating *Sandalwood Death*, Mo Yan finds his first draft opening with an elaborate description of the train "too Western" and gives it up (Mo and Zhang 71). He chooses to begin the novel with the protagonist Meiniang's internal monologue and thereby sets up a main narrative perspective. Though the train symbolizes colonial power in *Sandalwood Death*, it is never foregrounded as a central image. In comparison, *All Sounds Are Still* opens with a stark contrast between the

7. Cong Xinqiang discusses missionary Charlie in *The Fifth War Zone* in "*Geti xushi, jiating lunli, Zhongguo gushi*," 201.

8. According to Chang Fang, this character is designed partially based on her great-grandfather's interaction with a German geologist ("*Chang Fang Changpian xinzuo* He tu").

train and donkeys that respectively represent modern and traditional means of transportation. Chapter 1 of *All Sounds Are Still* associates the train with rumors about several local women's madness and death, making it a modern symbol unambiguously associated with gender, sexuality, and desire.[9] In *All Sounds Are Still*, the train is foregrounded as not only an object in reality but also a mythical and ominous presence in people's imagination. One description about the steam emitted by the train goes, "At first, two-thirds of Luokou people secretly fear the white gas gushing from the locomotive. They say 'evil gas gushed from the devil's mouth'" (Chapter 1). Unlike Mo Yan, who shies away from Western influence in his writing about the train, Chang Fang uses the train as a central image, metaphor, and topic many have observed in the rise of modern fiction in world literature.[10]

Sandalwood Death is set against the background of the anti-Christian movement of the Boxer Rebellion, but it does not spend much space on the topic of Christianity. However, in *All Sounds Are Still*, Christianity is an important component in the image of "the global." For example, missionaries in Luokou may help and educate the locals and thereby bring some positive changes to the town (Chapters 3 and 5). Chang Fang also designs the character of missionary in her work titled *The Fifth War Zone*, a story about the experiences of people in a village during the Second Sino-Japanese War. Her interest in this type of character resonates with the observation made by Hou Xu and Wang Heng: that many contemporary novels created since the 1990s use the missionary as an important character to reflect on modern Chinese history (Hou and Wang 101). *All Sounds Are Still* also explores the theme of Christianity through the Nan family's experiences during the Taiping Rebellion, which was inspired by Christianity and received great interest from the foreigners from Christian states. For example, David records that the Nan family's maternal grandfather, a magistrate in Shandong, was decapitated by the Taiping rebels. As a result, his daughter, the Nan family's matriarch, holds great hostility towards Christianity. Nevertheless, as a mother, she is saddened to hear the story about Jesus's sufferings and sacrifice in the Bible (Chapter 7). Later in the novel, her son, Nan Huaizhu, also perishes for his political ideal. Therefore, the author implicitly draws an analogy between Jesus and the matriarch's revolutionary son. Taken together, Christian elements play an important role in connecting "the global" and "the local" in *All Sounds Are Still*. Foreigners with Christian roots send

9. This plot design brings to mind the iconic scene in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, in which the mentally unstable female protagonist throws herself in front of a freight train. The author also makes a connection between death and the train in the last chapter, which I will discuss shortly.

10. For example, the significance of the train in British novels is discussed in Jen Cadwallader, "Death by Train: Spectral Technology and Dickens's *Mugby Junction*." *Transport in British Fiction: Technologies of Movement, 1840–1940,* edited by Gavin, Adrienne E., and Andrew F. Humphries, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

stories about Luokou to their homelands; Christianity inspires the Taiping Rebellion that precedes the Republican Revolution, which is also influenced by Western beliefs; last but not the least, Christianity provides reconciliatory opportunities that transcend political, cultural, and religious boundaries.

Joseph Zhou, a coachman and Christian who received his name from a missionary, is an important intermediary character who embodies convergences and conflicts of the modern and the traditional. Joseph's moral values straddle both Chinese and Western worlds: he adheres to traditional virtues such as loyalty and industriousness, but seeks solace and redemption in Christianity. Joseph delivers not only goods but also news, and during the process he serves as a witness of many important events in the town.[11] In Chapter 1, Joseph Zhou observes the train as a witness of modernity and collects folk medicine formulas as an inheritor of the old. Later in the novel, Joseph plays a politically and morally ambivalent role: a loyal worker of the Nan family, he witnesses the death of the revolutionary Nan Haizhu; threatened by Gu Youzhi, the sheriff who suppresses the local revolution, Joseph disposes Nan Haizhu's body in the tank where he soaks the ingredients of folk formulas. Symbolically, Joseph Zhou erases traces of the revolution with methods from the past. His death at the end of the novel is mysterious. The sheriff, who is the only witness of Joseph's death (he may also be the murderer), describes that death as an incident caused by startled mules driving his carriage on the railway bridge. This arrangement may suggest that when conservative forces take charge of the town, little space remains for an in-between character like Joseph Zhou.

The relationship between Ed Feng and Gu Youzhi is worth noting. Ed Feng, who traveled around the world as a sailor, may be understood as a floating "contact zone." This character forms a complementary relationship with Gu Youzhi since they were both adopted by missionary Grand and his wife in Luokou. Therefore, these two characters form a bond resembling "fraternal twins."[12] When the missionary family went back to America, they took Ed Feng and left Gu Youzhi behind. Though Gu Youzhi is initially curious about Ed Feng's rich global experiences, his murder of Ed at the end of the novel is to certain extent suicidal because he "kills" a part of his identity that is cosmopolitan and modern. As a result, Gu Youzhi becomes the embodiment of conservative political forces.

Like Christianity, the revolution is also an imported idea from the West. In *All Sounds Are Still*, the title of the first chapter, "The Folk Formula," and that

11. In the workshop about *All Sounds Are Still* held in Shanghai University, Shao Bu from Shandong University analyzed how Joseph Zhou "decentralizes" the family narrative. He pointed out that "Joseph Zhou's carriage shows us a unique geographical space"allowing the coexistence of perspectives of Jinan people, Luokou locals, and foreigners. See "*Chang Fang Changpian xinzuo* He tu."
12. Chang Fang talks about these characters in her interview, "*Chang Fang xinzuo* He tu."

of the last, "China," imply a narrative arc about curing a sickened China. This theme brings to mind C. T. Hsia's observation that modern Chinese writings, obsessed with China's humiliations and sufferings in the past, exhibit a trait of "provincial patriotism" (Hsia 533–554). At the end of the novel, *All Sounds Are Still* makes the implication that the Western recipe of revolution would replace "the folk formula" in saving China. However, the author does not idealize the revolution as a harmless and perfect remedy, shown in the violent histories Charlie and David share about the Russian Revolution and the French Revolution.[13] As a result, *All Sounds Are Still* puts the Republican Revolution into a global perspective and shows a reflective attitude towards revolution as a political ideal and historical practice.

In comparison with *Sandalwood Death*, which fashions itself with vernacular expressions and strong anti-colonial sentiments, *All Sounds Are Still* reveals a more ambivalent attitude towards Western languages, ideals, peoples, and cultures. Throughout the novel, the train is represented as a symbol of modernity, and incidents revolving around the train demonstrate conflicts between the modern and the traditional. Caught between Chinese and Western practices and beliefs, the intermediary character Joseph Zhou can hardly survive the political turmoil. Ultimately, the author situates the Republican Revolution in a global context with foreigners' voices that reflect on the political contingencies and violent consequences of revolutions in Western history.

Ecologizing the Local: Sounds of Water

All Sounds Are Still creates a fictional hydro-environment in which water is a topic, metaphor, and symbol. Through a layered sentence structure, the author creates a ripple effect resembling water waves on a linguistic level. In addition, a lyrical quality facilitates the novel's fantastic representations about water from multiple cultural perspectives. Descriptions of acoustic effects associated with water in the local environment resist the impact of imperial and colonial order represented by modern technologies. With its portrayal of many kinds of water, *All Sounds Are Still* intervenes upon the "global" discourse with local knowledge and experience.

Both *Sandalwood Death* and *All Sounds Are Still* use sound as a key element, and both use a distinct language style to create an imaginative acoustic environment. In *Sandalwood Death*, Mo Yan seeks to stimulate readers' awareness of sound in literary writing through rhymes of words and rhythm of sentences (Mo and Zhang 75). In comparison, *All Sounds Are Still* gives reader the impression that "all sounds" in nature and human society are interconnected and mutually influence each other. For example, Chapter 2 describes boat trackers' songs

13. Based on the way it conceptualizes revolution, Li Haipeng from Nanjing University thinks that the novel shows disillusionment about the myth of modernity. See "*Chang Fang Changpian xinzuo* He tu."

in the following, "[A]long the Yellow River that runs by Luokou, the boat trackers' songs travel down from afar with northern wind intermittently, as if they [the songs] were woken up by a slander whip while falling asleep; after a short while, they fell asleep quietly again." In this example, the writer vividly represents the weakened or interrupted acoustic effect not only by anthromorphizing the sound of songs but also by a series of short sentences strung together. This example is representative of how the author deftly forms a web of people, things, and natural phenomena with the mediation of language throughout the novel. In highlighting sounds in local environment, Chang Fang "turns down the volume in the celebration of modern sound technologies" and thereby challenges Western imperial narrative, structure, and knowledge (Ronald Radano and Tejumola Olaniyan 4).

Water in *All Sounds Are Still* should be understood in association with Luokou as a geographically significant place. As Tetsuro Watsuji (1889–1960) points out, there is an essential relationship between the natural environment of a place and its local culture (Watsuji 4). Once called "Little Jinan," Luokou is an administrative district of Jinan today. Historically, Luokou was located by the Ji River until the Yellow River changed its course to take the estuary of the Ji River in 1855. Connecting various regions through waterways on both land and ocean, Luokou has been a major port in northern China since the Han dynasty (202 BC –9 AD, 25–220 AD). It became a vital port for salt transportation during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). At the end of the Qing (1644–1911), the strategically important role of Luokou was further heightened by the Jiaoji railways built by the Germans.

Luokou's connection with the Yellow River and the many waterways was historical and primary, but this connection was changed by modern railways. A rumor about the Yellow River and the railway in *All Sounds Are Still* epitomizes the clash between traditional beliefs and modern technology. The rumor goes that the railway bridge hanging over the Yellow River is a sword that cuts the dragon of the Yellow River into halves and consequently destroys the *fengshui* of China. As a result, "[I]n the long run, the Chinese nation and people will be rendered extinct. In the near future, Luokou will become a dead city; with all its shops and houses burnt overnight by a Heavenly fire; the town would sink into the bottom of the river" (Chapter 2). At several other places in the novel, the Yellow River is a site for local people's disastrous deaths (Chapters 1 and 40). Thus, as an imaginative burial ground for Luokou and its people, the Yellow River holds existential significance for both, and this kind of connection is heightened by the introduction of modern technology.

The Yellow River does not only provide Luokou with a distinct natural environment but also forms the deepest structure of local people's psyche as

shown in magical and supernatural expressions.[14] However, to the foreigners, the Yellow River is a part of the global hydrographic system and a useful natural resource. For example, Luokou people believe that "the nearby Yellow River is connected to the Milky Way (literally, "the Silver River") in the sky. 'Water of the Yellow River comes from Heaven; water in Heaven is in the Milky Way" (Chapter 40). A skilled local carpenter can "put" the sound of the Yellow River in a wooden stick with carved patterns of waves and spindrifts. The sheriff, though suspicious at first, "truly hears the muffled sound of deep currents formed only in the Yellow River" (Chapter 25). The sheriff locks up this stick in the Italian chest he purchases from Davis, an act symbolic of his attempt to seal the life force of the Yellow River—and by extension, that of the local people—with borrowed foreign and colonial forces. Nevertheless, his instant impotency at the thought of floods shows the power the Yellow River holds in his subconsciousness.

In comparison with local people whose knowledge of the Yellow River is associated with supernatural power and subconsciousness, the Westerners look at the Yellow River from an empirical perspective. For example, the drifting bottle made by the missionary who saves Joseph Zhou's life may travel through the water networks worldwide and deliver the message to his family in America. In another example, David teaches the school children that the patterns they observe of the Yellow River may reflect precipitations in previous and future years. Put together, the epistemological systems of China and the West are respectively revealed through the different meanings held by the Yellow River for the locals and the foreigners.

In addition to the Yellow River, Luokou connects many other kinds of water, ranging from rain to springs and ocean. For example, Chapter 4 describes an everyday scene where Joseph Zhou's mules drink from the spring water between stone slabs in the street:

> Spring water flows on the pavement of this street all year round (…) The two animals (mules) can drink cool and clean spring water as long as they bend their noble heads. When there is plentiful rain in the summer, water in all springs rises. There is not only spring water between the cracks of slabs, but also flocks of little fish swinging tails and swimming in the streams.

This lyrical description shows a harmonious relationship between natural environment, livestock, and aquatic animals that forms an ordinary scene in Luokou in the past. However, this ecological balance may be disrupted by modern technology, as shown by the deaths of Joseph's mules caused by the

14. Xiao Shui at Shanghai University points out that the Yellow River is simultaneously a metaphor that provides a "psychological space" and a symbol of "fracture" of many opposite concepts such as modernity and backwardness (*Chang Fang Changpian xinzuo* He tu).

train at the end of the novel. Spring waters are ubiquitous in the streets, but the ocean is felt in the form of ocean salt transported through the Yellow River. This is best illustrated in the story about the Nan family's grandmother, in which pervasive senses about the salt is described in great details (Chapter 7).

All Sounds Are Still represents ocean water from a female perspective. For example, the maternal grandmother of the Nan family suffers from insomnia and could not stop wandering in the house after her husband is killed by the Taiping rebels. Worried about her pregnancy, the family take advice from a shaman to cover everything in her room with white salt. The room is described in the following, "the salty smell that floats over the ocean fills up the entire room, as if they (the family) have moved her room on to the ocean and made it a sailboat that rocks up and down on the waves" (Chapter 7). The maternal grandmother characterized by abnormal behaviors brings to mind Rebeca in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, who comes from afar to the Buendía's family with her parents' remains and has the habit of eating earth. Both characters experience profound family loss, and both exhibit eccentric behaviors. However, the maternal grandmother's story is also synthetic of gender, family trauma, and political history in late nineteenth-century China.

The fluidity of water makes it a medium that transcends the boundaries of forms and senses, and thereby a convenient means for hallucinatory realistic depictions. This is best illustrated by the images a young servant sees of Nan Huaizhu's hat when he was caught by the sheriff and policemen:

> Around the hat, there are many trembling leaves as slender as feathers (…) Those slender tree leaves are like fish swimming and lashing their tails freely in water. Ripples of water keep expanding and bouncing against the Gate of Pu'an (…) It turns out that those fish tails that swing casually are lashing out blooddrops. It is precisely those fallen blooddrops that make the sky ripple like a water surface (…)

In this paragraph, movements are carried from plant to animal through the mediation of flowing elements of wind, water, and blood. As a result, a sense of fluidity across forms of lives (i.e., tree, fish, and human) and materials (i.e., water and blood) creates a "hallucinatory" effect that foreshadows Nan Huaizhu's impending revolutionary sacrifice.

Aquatic animals with supernatural power are also symbolically significant in *All Sounds Are Still*. The two reptiles, a soft-shelled turtle and a crocodile, respectively symbolize traditional conservative power and foreign revolutionary influences. Associated with the opportunist sheriff, the turtle allegedly prophesies to him the short-lived nature of Luokou's revolution. However, in the fisherman Huang Sanguan's dream, the turtle takes revenge against him to collect karmic debts for all the fish he previously killed.

In comparison, the crocodile, the other reptile who speaks in the novel, is associated with outsiders. Brought to Luokou by a visiting circus, the crocodile's appearance and disappearance is a part of a magic performance. Among all locals, the crocodile has only spoken to Nan Huaizhu, who was still a boy at the time. In Chapter 11, Nan Huaizhu's elder brother believes that his ideas about revolution and democracy are as illusionary as the crocodile, which explicitly establishes a connection between this imaginary animal and the concept of revolution. Nevertheless, though the turtle and the crocodile are respectively associated with conservative and progressive forces, they are both cold-blooded reptiles symbolic of the inconstancy and cruelty of politics.

A fisherman of supernatural talents, Huang Sanguan is an intermediary character between the aquatic environment and human society. He is capable of catching any fish in the river, so the locals believe that he could communicate with the God of the Yellow River to wash away the bridge and the railways (Chapter 4). It is also believed that Nan Huaizhu has asked Huang Sanguan to support his revolutionary cause by transforming schools of fish into soldiers. In her other novel, titled *History of Romance* (*Aiqing shi* 2013), Chang Fang designs a similar character, a bird-catcher who can imitate birds' singing perfectly and is known by people as the Birdman (*Niaoren*). *History of Romance* reflects on disturbing changes brought by urbanization to a small town. In both novels, these characters' supernatural connections with nature diminish when political or economic tensions escalate as a result of modernity's encroachments on the close human-nature relationship established in the past.

An essential topic and metaphor in *All Sounds Are Still*, water is foregrounded as intrinsic to the identity of Luokou and its people. On the textual level, the author uses syntax and sentence structure to simulate rippling waves. The novel's descriptions of many forms and sounds of water, especially those of the Yellow River, form an indigenous expression that refuses to be subsumed under imperial knowledge structure. In *All Sounds Are Still*, water is simultaneously nourishing and disastrous, mystic and mundane, fluid and gendered. Through the animals and human beings that have supernatural power and are associated with water, the author registers conflicts between the conservative and progressive, and between human and nature in modern times.

Conclusion

Born in the 1970s, Chang Fang explores topics such as local identity, cultural roots, and history that also concern the generation of writers that came before her, among them Mo Yan. However, Chang Fang differs from them by embracing world literature in terms of language, tropes, and character design. Experimenting with a language style inspired by Western sentence structure, she gives the

impression of a continuous flow of things, people, and events, to the effect of a river. In comparison with Mo Yan's *Sandalwood Death*, *All Sounds Are Still* shows a less hostile and more ambivalent attitude towards the West as shown by its representation of the foreigners, the train, Christianity, and the revolution, thus giving the impression of "globalness." Water plays a key role in representing indigenousness in *All Sounds Are Still*. From the Yellow River to the ocean and aquatic creatures, the various kinds of water constitute Luokou people's unique experiences, memories, and identities. Taken together, *All Sounds Are Still* adopts tropes and character designs typically associated with modernity and the West to convey a sense of "globalness," but uses water as a medium, metaphor, and symbol to establish unique expressions about the local.

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Sirong Zou
Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

Ai Wei's *In the Mirror*: The Guilty System and the Inner Universe of Chinese People

Abstract Ai Wei thematically explores a Chinese sense of guilt and redemption in *In the Mirror* through the lens of China's Three Teachings—Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism—as a key to unlocking the inner universe of Chinese people. Rooted in these teachings, the novel offers frameworks for defining, absolving, and transcending guilt. Ai Wei aligns with Liu Zaifu and other critics regarding the fundamental flaw of Chinese literature: its lack of discourse on the soul. Ai Wei, however, also draws upon the tradition of confessional literature—long associated with Western religion—to carve out a distinct Chinese path, tracing the Chinese origins of and answers to confessional literature.

Keywords Ai Wei, *In the Mirror*, confessional literature

Introduction

At the turn of the 21st century, Liu Zaifu (1941–) and Lin Gang (1957–) put forward that there is a fundamental flaw in Chinese literature: the lack of discourse on the human soul (ix–x). The absence of confessional consciousness in Chinese culture has led to a significant gap in quantity and quality between Chinese confessional literature and Western literature with a religious background. Confessional literature is characterized by narratives that focus on the theme of guilt. The characters in these works experience a realization and understanding of their wrongdoing, forming a profound sense of self-denial that leads to acts of confession and other responsive actions. Through this process, they endeavor to transcend their former identities, aspiring to achieve a renewal of the self on a spiritual level. However, this phenomenon has greatly changed in the first two decades of the 21st century, when a group of novelists represented by Yan Lianke (1958–) intentionally delved into the soul dimension.

Among these novelists, Ai Wei (1966–) stands out for his emphasis on the concept of the soul. He argues that traditional Chinese secular novels, exemplified by *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (*Jin ping mei*), are deficient in this

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critical dimension (Ai, "*Zhongguo jinyan ji qi jingshenxing*" 5). This criticism is in line with Liu Zaifu and Lin Gang's argument that Chinese literature lacks a dimension of soul debate, whereas Ai Wei consciously engages with the dimension of the soul across his works, including *The Guilty Lover* (*Airen you zui*), *The South* (*Nanfang*), and *In the Mirror* (*Jingzhong*).

In an interview, Ai Wei speaks about the responsibility of a novelist:

> Since we are engaged in this profession, I think we all have the responsibility to explore the fundamental problem, namely, what is the pillar of our lives as Chinese people today, what is the code of the Chinese spiritual world, how can we effectively and convincingly open the Chinese spiritual world and explore the Chinese "soul"? I believe it is still worthwhile for writers to explore ("*Zhongguo jingyan*" 5).[1]

Ai Wei's sense of mission is reflected in the two key actions of opening and exploring, the corresponding objects of which are the Chinese spiritual world and the Chinese soul. It is through these ontological notions of soul and spiritual world that the term "Chinese" becomes one of the most prominent labels in Ai Wei's confessional literature. In contrast to Western literature, which is often regarded as the origin and mainstream of confessional narratives, Ai Wei distinguishes himself from other novelists by refraining from seeking answers in Western paradigms. Instead, he returns to the roots of Chinese cultural traditions in seeking out spiritual foundations for Chinese ontological existence. Consequently, Ai Wei's works exhibit two distinct characteristics: they are distinctly Chinese as well as millennial.

This raises a related inquiry as to whether a Chinese writer can uncover the ultimate truths of confession and redemption within the framework of traditional Chinese culture. Can a culture that has seemingly lacked the resources for interrogating the soul offer contemporary Chinese individuals the spiritual support they require?

This article explores the significance of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism in Chinese confessional literature, using Ai Wei's *In the Mirror* as its focus case. It delves into how Chinese traditional culture defines, explains, and helps to overcome sin. Additionally, this paper discusses appropriate approaches to opening the inner universe of Chinese people.

Firstly, I assert that the principles of loyalty and consideration (*zhongshu zhi dao*) in Confucianism serve as foundational values, establishing a framework for moral judgments in the novel. In this system, Confucianism often raises questions of guilt and blame. Additionally, Wang Yangming's (1472–1529) School of Mind (*Xinxue*) offers a means of redemption for characters.

1. The English translations related to Ai Wei are my own.

Secondly, I incorporate Buddhist concepts, symbols, and path choices in the work. The narrative explores the Buddhist worldview of "dependent origination and emptiness of nature" (*yuanqi xing kong*), which helps to explain the concept of sin. By examining the causes and effects of actions, retribution, impersonality (*wu wo*), and impermanence (*wu chang*), the novel highlights Buddhist understandings of the human world. Moreover, the idea of "who is not suffering in the world" replaces the notion of "everyone is a sinner," thereby paving a way for the protagonist's ultimate redemption.

Regarding Daoism, this section discusses spirit and its relevance to life in the text. The key concepts of Yin and Yang in Daoist philosophy serve as means by which to overcome sin. According to Daoist belief, every person has both positive and negative traits, whereas accepting this duality helps individuals better understand themselves and others, leading to forgiveness and reconciliation. Additionally, Daoism serves as a guide for individuals in leading a poetic and aesthetically pleasing life.

Additionally, this article examines how Ai Wei explores the inner universe of Chinese people by incorporating the Three Teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. As such, these three philosophies are not only complementary but also integrated, symbolized by the concepts of "mirror" and "light." I evaluate the innovative potential and possibility of Ai Wei's efforts to seek the answer of confessional literature within the framework of traditional Chinese culture.

Confucian Ethics: Loyalty and Consideration as well as the Unity of Knowledge and Action

According to Ai Wei, it is a novelist's duty to explore the inner language of Chinese people ("*Zhongguo jingyan*" 6). In his work *In the Mirror,* Ai Wei grapples with how to face the pain inflicted by fate, upon oneself and upon the world at large. To find answers, Ai Wei turns to Confucian culture as a reliable frame of reference, particularly in his quest to resolve these issues within the context of his motherland and its history. Thus, *In the Mirror* can be seen as an Chinese ethical story of infidelity and forgiveness.

The negative actions of characters in the story are contrasted with the principle of loyalty and consideration, which advocates treating others as you would like to be treated. Meanwhile, a sense of guilt is rooted in the human capacity for a feeling of commiseration *(ceyin*). Ai Wei draws on the philosophy of Wang Yangming which emphasizes the unity of knowledge and action (*zhixing heyi*) as a means of achieving sagehood.

The primary storyline of the novel is a sequence of infidelity and betrayal between two men and two women. Initially, the character Yi Rong engages in an affair with her husband Zhuang Runsheng's close friend, Gan Shiping. Concurrently, Zhuang also has an affair with another woman Zishan, triggering a series of tragic events. If we condense the two aspects that Ai Wei intended to express and refer to with specific keywords, the most appropriate expression would be "a story about infidelity and forgiveness," evoking Chinese Confucian culture upon which the novel touches deeply.

Zhong ("loyalty") and *shu* ("consideration") are the two main themes of *In the Mirror*, while also serving as core concepts of Confucianism.[2] Another Confucian core concept includes "all-pervading unity" (*yi yi guanzhi)* in *The Analects*. *In the Mirror* is a novel that combines both themes of ethics and confessions. The sense of guilt in traditional confessional novels stems often from law, religion, or other absolute forces. However, in *In the Mirror*, guilt is based on the principle of loyalty and consideration, emphasizing a fundamental obligation to others.

Confucius articulated the principle by explaining that "what you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others (*ji suo bu yu, wu shi yu ren*)" (Legge, *Confucian Analects* 301). This maxim serves as a foundational ethical guideline designed to elicit feelings of guilt. This negative imperative underscores the notion that the act of imposing suffering upon others can ultimately lead to self-inflicted pain. How is it that this principle causes feelings of guilt? The term *shi* means "to impose" or "to apply," explaining how the suffering of others in turn implicates the self. Human unwillingness can stem from two primary sources, be they human or non-human. While humans cannot control non-human factors such as earthquakes, the principle aims to prevent one's words and actions from causing suffering in others. This is demonstrated in the plot of *In the Mirror*.

The novel starts with a tragic car accident that results in the demise of Zhuang and Yi's two children, while Yi is left disfigured. The husband, Zhuang, who bears no direct responsible for the accident, still feels guilty. For Zhuang, the sense of guilt is constantly changing. Initially, he blames himself for not answering his wife's call for help while he was with his lover, unable therefore to arrive at the accident scene in time to potentially save their children.

Here, I should stress that Zhuang first only feels guilty for not answering Yi Rong's call, which he perceives as the best chance he had to save their children. He does not feel guilty for cheating on his wife, as he initially believes the affair unconnected with the car accident. However, after Zhuang stumbles upon the fact that Yi had taken their kids to follow him on the day of their car

2. Based on Feng Haofei's observation, the word *zhong* appears in *The Analects* 18 times, while *shu* appears only twice. Feng Haofei, "*Guanyu Kongzi zhongshu sixiang de jieshuo wenti* [On the Definition of Confucian Ideas of Loyalty and Forgiveness]," *Kongzi yanjiu* [*Confucius Studies*], no. 4 (2003): 63.

accident, Zhuang Runsheng comes to a realization that his wife's emotional distress over his infidelity had caused the accident. Such revelation triggers a profound emotional breakdown for Zhuang, as he confronts the reality that his actions were the cause of the catastrophic accident. This realization brings about a qualitative change in the situation. In other words, what one "imposes" on others brings undesirable consequences, arising from one's own words and actions that serve as cause of others' misfortune.

When discussing why the pain of others can bring pain to oneself, there is a critical transformation mechanism rooted in the core of the Confucian philosophy. This is the feeling of commiseration:

> All men have a mind which cannot bear to see the sufferings of others. (…) Even nowadays, if men suddenly see a child about to fall into a well, they will without exception experience a feeling of alarm and distress. (…) From this case, we may perceive that the feeling of commiseration is essential to man, (…) The feeling of commiseration is the principle of benevolence. (…) Men have these four principles just as they have their four limbs (Legge, *The Work of Mencius* 201–203).

This passage has profoundly influenced Chinese thought for millennia, where Mencius not only regards the feeling of commiseration as inherent in every person but also treats it as the most significant difference between humans and animals.

The novel *In the Mirror* vividly illustrates this theme of empathy among its characters. For instance, Zhuang Runsheng worries about the Burmese boy and the female volunteer teacher, while Zishan and Yi Rong also show empathy by trying to prevent Zhuang from experiencing a mental breakdown. Furthermore, at the narrative's conclusion, Gan Shiping saves Zhuang Runsheng from fire, a demonstration of the Confucian value of "feeling commiseration."

The feeling of commiseration serves as a primary value in Confucian morality. Mou Zongsan (1909–1995) raises an intriguing question about how Confucius discusses benevolence, positing that Confucius believes that feeling at ease is a critical component of benevolence (62). Feeling uneasy can lead to a sense of conscience and guilt if one's actions bring unwanted consequences to others.

The story of Gan Shiping exemplifies this idea, as he feels guilty for his infidelity with his friend's wife. Consequently, when Yi Rong gives birth to a second child and becomes less available, Gan feels relieved because he does not want to cause any harm to their family. Ai Wei suggests that the four protagonists are "mirror images of each other to some extent (*Ai, Changpian xiaoshuo* Jingzhong *fenxianghui*)," wherein everyone feels guilty, confesses, and is later redeemed. In *In the Mirror*, main characters commit actions that cause

pain for others, leading to feelings of guilt. Hence, in his epilogue, Ai Wei summarizes this novel as one that teaches us "how to settle our hearts in a broken life" (*In the Mirror* 327).

While exploring the root cause of inner unease serves as a mere introduction to Ai Wei's writing, his fuller intention is to tell a story about how to find inner peace. Although the text does not seem to provide a direct answer, clues can be found in Ai Wei's essay "The Mind is the Universe (*Renxin ji yuzhou*)," published in 2019, a year before he conceived and wrote *In the Mirror*. In this essay, Ai Wei engages with the philosophy of Wang Yangming and evaluates him as "a person full of curiosity about all things in the world" ("*Renxin*" 264). This devotion to Wang's work is essential to understanding *In the Mirror*:

> In Wang Yangming's view, Dao is *li*. Wang Yangming believes that the human heart can compare to the heavenly way of the universe, that is, "the mind is *li*." He suggests that our hearts are shining mirrors that can illuminate all things in the world as "conscience." Nevertheless, due to our desires, the mirror is inevitably stained with rust, so we need to wipe it constantly, and this process is called the "extension of intuitive knowledge (*zhi liangzhi*)." Only by wiping the mirror can we become saints (Ai, "*Renxin*" 264).

Ai Wei came up with the title for his novel, *In the Mirror*, before he even began writing it.[3] The scholarship has long noticed that Ai Wei frequently employs mirrors in his works to demonstrate character relationships and plot structure. While many have noted the significance of the mirror as a symbol and medium, Ai's use of it as a metaphor both in title and narrative has particularly impressed readers. It is worth noting, however, that Ai's inspiration for the mirror may not solely come from Jorge Luis Borges's poem "Mirror," as many critics have pointed out (Zhang 63–64). Instead, Ai's use of mirror as a metaphor may be traced back to the ideas of Wang Yangming.

Wang Yangming is considered the representative of the Neo-Confucian School of Mind, whose proposal of the unity of knowledge and action has influenced generations in China. One of Wang Yangming's essential teachings is the importance of "conscience," which has become his theory's essential symbol and connotation. Wang asserts that conscience is an intuitive and innate perception that every person possesses.

In his essay "The Mind is the Universe," Ai Wei openly expresses his admiration for Wang Yangming, suggesting he is a person who aspires to sainthood, dedicating his life to the practice of his philosophy. In this essay, Ai Wei inadvertently expresses his motivation and aspiration to attain sagehood. While he may not fulfill this wish, he still longs to reach a pinnacle of spiritual

3. Ai Wei writes: "The title *In the Mirror* was at the top of the document from the beginning, and there was still a blank below, just like the mirror itself. Will it illuminate the long writing journey in the future?" (*In the Mirror,* 414).

enlightenment through the protagonists in his writing. Ai Wei stresses the importance of the word "light" in Wang Yangming, saying "Before he died, he said, 'My heart is bright, and there is no need to say more.' This statement hides numerous adventures, hardships, and life insight" (Ai, *"Renxin"* 266). Coincidentally, brightness/light is a recurring motif in *In the Mirror*, indicating the profound influence of Wang Yangming's philosophy on Ai Wei's writing.[4]

The characters in the novel aim to rid their sense of guilt by aligning with Wang Yangming's theory of the unity of knowledge and action, where taking action is a prominent way for them to find inner peace. For example, at the end of the first part of *In the Mirror*, Zhuang experiences a profound sense of guilt when he finds out about the hotel surveillance. However, by the beginning of the second part, he has already taken action by undertaking the role of teacher in a primary school he donated in Yunnan.

The human mind can be compared to a mirror, inevitably tarnished by desire. In this regard, *In the Mirror* is a novel that records the process of cleansing the heart's mirror, which is also known as the process of "extension of intuitive knowledge." Although commiseration and loyalty are important moral obligations, they alone are not enough to drive individuals towards higher moral endeavors like self-sacrifice.

Two characters, Gan Shiping and Yi Rong, exemplify the theme of sacrifice in their commitment to helping others. Gan, hesitating at first, ends up selflessly rescuing Runsheng from the scourge of his own conscience. Similarly, Yi Rong commits suicide not because of her physical appearance but rather because her unsettled soul can not bear so much struggle, being mainly concerned with helping her husband overcome his guilt. This act of exchanging one life for another aligns with the Confucian theory of sacrificing one's life for righteousness (*she sheng qu yi*).

The novel's four protagonists each find ways to regain their conscience, some going so far as to sacrifice themselves to pursue the refinement of their consciousness in keeping with Wang Yangming's teachings on the unity of knowledge and action. The depiction of guilt in *In the Mirror* distinguishes itself within the realm of world confessional literature by utilizing the Confucian ethical theory of conscience, to establish a spiritual system of self-consistency leading from confession to redemption. The protagonist's journey towards self-forgiveness is not dependent on power from a transcendent realm or on an absolute authority, but rather upon a daily ethical world guided by simple moral principles engaging in a dialogue with the human soul. This unique intersection of Confucianism with world confessional literature is a valuable contribution to the genre.

Ai Wei's focus centers on the complex and rich inner world of Chinese people,

4. This can be proved in that the Chinese character "*guang*" appears 433 times alone in *In the Mirror*.

seeking to discover their "soul." In this regard, his ambitious goal is supported by the Confucian School represented by Wang Yangming, who stresses mind exploration. The human soul is not only a subject of interest to philosophers but also a source of curiosity to artists. In a sense, Ai Wei's novel, especially *In the Mirror*, can be regarded as a study of the mind.

Buddhist Wisdom: Impermanence, Impersonality, and Dependent Origination as well as the Emptiness of Nature

As Ai Wei sought out Chinese origins of confessional literature, Buddhism serves as another intellectual and spiritual reservoir for the author. Ai's protagonists have experienced the impermanence of life and the consequences of their actions, striking to break free from suffering and becoming more compassionate through the acceptance of impermanence and impersonality. In this context, *In the Mirror* is a novel version of the *Diamond Sutra*, reflecting the Buddhist teaching of dependent origination and emptiness. It not only tells a story of loyalty and forgiveness from a Confucian perspective, but also a Buddhist story of reincarnation.

Buddhism plays a significant role in *In the Mirror*, as evidenced by Buddhist-related characters and settings, such as the abbot Shi Huize and the famous temple Shwedagon Pagoda. Zhuang Runsheng's architectural design is heavily influenced by Buddhism, particularly in the design of a monastery for his Japanese client, Yoko Yamaguchi. This plays an essential role throughout the story, with the appendix including an interview with Zhuang, discussing how Buddhism impacted his architectural style. Another notable feature includes the use of four verses from the *Diamond Sutra* in the novel's epigraph: "All conditioned dharmas/ Are like dreams, illusions bubbles, shadows/ Like dew drops and a lightning flash/ Contemplate them thus. (*Yi qie you wei fa. Ru meng huan pao ying. Ru lu yi ru dian. Ying zuo ru shi guan*)" (Hsuan Hua 253). These lines resonate with thematic emphasis in *In the Mirror* upon impermanence.

If the epigraph of a novel may not necessarily be a quote with the greatest authorial intention, it is at least something the author uses to reveal the theme of their work. In the case of *In the Mirror*, Ai Wei's quotation from a Buddhist scripture highlights the importance of Buddhism in his thinking. Although both the protagonist and Ai Wei do not consider themselves religious adherents, Buddhism has influenced their perspective and thinking about the world.

The heaviest imprint of Buddhism on Ai Wei may be "impermanence." In the epilogue to his novel, Ai reflects on a friend's family tragedy, referring to just this notion. Impermanence is a driving force for Ai, whose friend's experience brings him to contemplate how to face the cruel pain of life and navigate the world in the face of such uncertainty. The word "impermanence"

is mentioned 12 times in *In the Mirror*, with the novel also portraying a strong sense of impermanence throughout its storyline. From the opening car accident to the tragic suicide of Yi Rong, as well as in the various accidents at the Myanmar border, with earthquakes and fires in Japan, Ai Wei emphasizes the impermanent nature of life, where one can be deprived at any time of beauty, reputation, status, and even life.

Impermanence may be the most widely used term in Buddhism next to Amitabha. Furthermore, impermanence is a critical concept in Buddhism that emphasizes constant change and instability, leading to feelings of powerlessness (*wu li*) and suffering, as everything is constantly in flux. The impermanence is the cause of suffering, while suffering is the effect of impermanence. Hence, impermanence has become a negating force in Chinese confessional literature, as it dismisses all human greed and attachment.

The question remains: why does impermanence imbue guilt upon individuals? While originally victims of impermanence, they have now become sinners. This can be explained through the concepts of dependent origination and emptiness in Mahayana Buddhism. According to these teachings, all phenomena arise from conditional causation and are not, as such, dependent on individuals. In other words, no one can control or prevent the occurrence of events or keep things from changing. There is no "creator," therefore, in the teachings of Buddhism. This understanding can engender guilt or regret when individuals realize their inability to control their lives, forcing radical acceptance of impermanence.

In *In the Mirror*, we witness a miniature version of the dependent origination universe, where all four protagonists in the novel experience human suffering. All these sudden life changes are unpredictable and beyond their control. However, behind all the seemingly bizarre occurrences, there exists the chain of cause and effect. The theory of dependent origination gives rise to the theory of impermanence, whereas behind the latter lies the law of causality. The characters in the story often encounter unexpected events from the perspective of time. Upon closer examination, however, each character's destiny has its timeline, where random occurrences throughout time have causes and effects, and the seeds of time are constantly in motion.

Zhao Puchu (1907–2000) compares the cause and effect to flowing water, which is interrelated and without interruption (23). In other words, good actions lead to positive outcomes, while evil doings cause retribution. In simple terms, the connections between characters and events in *In the Mirror* are complex but well-planned. If we take a closer look, whether at a natural disaster in Japan or the encounter with a boy at the border, a powerful causality network constrains everything Zhuang encounters. All things in the universe, including life, are born from causal relationships. Pain, misfortune, and retribution are all caused by one's own karma, where the suffering one endures is the consequence of

one's actions.

People usually feel powerless and suffer from the impermanence of life. In this regard, compassion and pity (*cibei*) are the answers of Buddhism to get over the sea of suffering (*kuhai*). Buddhism inspires people to deeply sympathize with the immeasurable suffering of humans. Cessation of suffering depends upon the perfection of wisdom through compassion and pity. In the novel, the protagonists go through great hardship, but are finally able to find relief from their suffering through compassion. Yi Rong remains calm amid great adversity because of her compassionate nature. Her last wish is to help her husband overcome his hardship. Similarly, Gan Shiping's compassion and empathy drive him to act against primal instinct to save his friend.

If the above actions have not yet proved compassionate, then Ai Wei makes it explicit by using the words "compassion and pity" to describe Zhuang Runsheng's final liberation at the end of the novel:

> His heart is peaceful and moved at this moment as if he had been reborn. (…) Heaven makes him experience the sorrows of the world and learn compassion and pity. He realizes that neither he himself, nor Shiping, as well as all ordinary people—who could escape suffering in this mortal world? (*In the Mirror* 381).

It is noteworthy that Ai Wei uses a unique verb to depict compassion and pity, namely, "learn." It suggests that compassion and pity are not inherent or automatic responses to suffering, but must be learned and cultivated over time. Compassion arises from learning since it comes from a pearl of wisdom, as exemplified by Zhuang Runsheng's statement that "all suffer in the world," which is precisely the essence of dependent origination and the emptiness of nature in Buddhism. In accordance with Buddhist teaching, true liberation from pain can only be achieved by letting go of everything and experiencing a new sense of happiness.

As Buddhism teaches Zhuang Runsheng to learn compassion, it is unsurprising that Ai Wei underscores, in the epilogue, that this is a story "about compassion and pity" (*In the Mirror* 414).

The Spirit of Daoism: The Philosophy of Yin–Yang and Self-reconciliation

In the context of interpreting *In the Mirror*, Daoism is not an external label but rather a spiritual framework within the characters' inner universe. It is unlikely that Daoism triggers any sense of guilt, as it advocates for "ultimate joy" (*zhile*) and "heavenly joy" *(tianle*). Daoism more likely serves as a source of strength in

eliminating feelings of guilt.

The dialectical thinking of Yin–Yang philosophy inspires people to appreciate the duality of human nature, wherein people have both light and dark sides. This school of philosophy encourages a deeper understanding of the complexity of human existence, recognizing individual similarities, and learning to forgive others. The Daoist principle of following nature (*shun qi ziran*) guides people to embrace imperfection in both human nature and daily life. As an aesthetic, Zhuangzi's philosophy enables the protagonists to poeticize and aestheticize the tragedy of life, objectifying human aesthetic personality through artistic practice, expressing understanding and reconciliation of human nature, as well as leading to spiritual liberation and freedom.

Compared to Confucianism and Buddhism, the influence of Daoism on *In the Mirror* may be less apparent. However, an essential Daoism serves as the true spiritual core of this novel. We must look at more subtle use of language to find Daoism, such as in the use of Zhuang for the protagonist's name. Zhang Qinghua (1963–) suggests this as a significant nod to Daoism, saying, "The protagonist Zhuang Runsheng also implies an overlap between Zhuangzi and Daoism. 'Zhuangzi woke in the dawn dream, confused whether he had been a butterfly (*Zhuang sheng xiao meng mi hudie*.).' This ancient example of existential confusion supports philosophical thinking in the novel" (61).

Nonetheless, critics may overlook the significance of another character's name, namely, Zhuang Runsheng's wife, Yi Rong, whose last name is readily associated with *Yijing* or *The Book of Changes*. Although the *Yijing* is also a foundational Confucian text, Daoism exerts the most profound influence among the three major schools represented in this work. It is reasonable to presume that the surname of Yi Rong is semiotically linked to the *Yijing*, resonating inter-textually with the principles of Yin–Yang philosophy.

An essential text in the novel is the appendix, titled "It Has to Be" (*Fei ruci buke*), which is an interview appearing unrelated to the main plot. However, Ai Wei intentionally arranges such a fictional interview to elaborate on the implicit meaning of the work. During this interview, the magazine editor mentions that he observes a sense of religiosity in Zhuang Runsheng's designs, recollecting the Chinese Yin–Yang philosophy. In response, Zhuang articulates the fundamental idea of modern architecture as "beauty in simplicity," which in Chinese philosophy is "One produced two; two produced three; three produced all things" (412). This ontological formula reveals the architectural philosophy of Zhuang Runsheng as deeply rooted in Yin–Yang philosophy and Laozi's *Daodejing*.

More particularly, Ai Wei notes that architecture transcends physical

structure, also representing a nation's culture and spirit. He argues that people build homes and places of worship based on their imagination of the universe and the transcendent realm (Shu "*Tansuo xinling de youwei zhi chu*"). Therefore, the philosophy contained in architecture is the inner philosophy of a national culture. Similarly, we can also consider the spirit of Yin and Yang and the thought of Laozi not only as architectural thought in Zhuang Runsheng, but also as the core and background of Zhuang's spiritual world.

For the protagonist, Yin–Yang philosophy's most significant idea is the notion of dialectics. Xu Yong (1977–) recognizes this and describes the work as "an excellent text of psychoanalysis and a masterpiece of dialectics." What distinguishes the novel is Ai Wei's exploration of a profound dialectical principle that "truth or beauty exists as both a contrast and a state of criticality" (131, 133).

Daoism is one of the most dialectical schools of thought in ancient Chinese philosophy. Many sentences in the *Daodejing* illustrate dialectical principles. For example, "weal comes after woe; woe lies under weal. (*Huo xi, fu zhi suo yi. Fu xi, huo zhi suo fu*.) (Laozi 65)." It reminds people that absolute perspectives fail. All things have two sides—Yin and Yang. Daoism treats everything as complex rather than unilaterally, allowing tension between two sides to achieve mutual transformation. This way of thinking applies to human nature, as well, which has both light and dark sides, and cannot be simply labeled as good or evil.

The recognition of human complexity runs through *In the Mirror*, which can be seen as en effort to update our understanding of such complexity. Similar to an unfolding fan, the dark side behind each character is revealed in sequence. At the beginning of the novel, human nature is concealed. As the plot progresses, however, the fan is opened, revealing wrinkles of human nature that lie in the detailed spread.

The couple, Zhuang and Yi, both cheat on each other. Gan Shiping has an affair with his friend's wife, Yi Rong, resulting in the birth of two children. The abbot of Feilai Temple, Shi Huize, however, serves as another typical example. Initially, Shi Huize was regarded as the redeemer of Zhuang Runsheng. However, Zhuang later catches him drinking wine alone in his pajamas and listening to classical music late at night.

In this regard, the novel turns characters from idealized saints into flawed and guilty mortals, highlighting the complexity of human nature. As the story progresses, Runsheng comes to the realization that everyone experiences suffering and has imperfections, leading him to conclude that there is no completely pure human nature. In the novel, Ai Wei writes, "Perhaps only death can forgive one's sin. Now, Runsheng feels like everything is related to him. He is one of them, one among countless people across thousands of years.There is

nothing special. His emotions are uncomplicated and ordinary. Whatever he can feel, other people will feel it as well" (Ai, *In the Mirror* 389).

Therefore, there is no excuse not to forgive others, nor is it reasonable to excoriate oneself since human nature is inherent. Embracing a Daoist perspective facilitates a deeper understanding of the complexity of human nature, which ultimately leads to reconciliation. In a word, familiarity leads to understanding, and, understanding, in turn, leads to reconciliation. This dynamic is perfectly depicted by Yi Rong, who forgives and reconciles with not only her husband, but also with the woman who ruined her marriage. Zhuang Runsheng also chooses to forgo revenge on Gan Shiping, in favor or achieving self-reconciliation, aligning with principles of Daoist philosophy. In addition to a dialectical understanding of the complexities of human nature, another inspiration Daoism has given Runsheng is the notion of "going with the flow," accepting life's inherent complexities, as well as the ups and downs of life.

After enduring multiple life changes, Runsheng's understanding of life has changed significantly from when he carried a sense of guilt. We observe this change when Gan Shiping uses his life to save Runsheng. Upon returning to Hope School and encountering the teacher, Runsheng realizes: "there are no legends in this world and that all fantasies are destined to be shattered" (Ai, *In the Mirror* 394)." Although he feels helpless in that teacher's situation, he does not take the initiative to help her, deciding instead to let her approach him.

The most significant contribution of Daoism to characters in the novel is, indeed, the cultivation of poetic life and aesthetic personality. Liu Zaifu has identified the two main branches of Chinese culture: Confucianism, which emphasizes "order, edification, and ethics," and the other is represented by Laozi and Zhuangzi, who value "individuality, freedom, and nature" (Liu, "Hongloumeng *de zhexue yaodian*"13). Xu Fuguan (1903–1982) further claims that Zhuangzi reaches the realm of "artistic spirit," achieving spiritual freedom and liberation (103), illuminating the potential of embracing Daoist ideals in the pursuit of a more meaningful existence.

Based on this approach, it is possible to assume that Ai Wei intentionally designs the fate of the four main characters. Intriguingly, neither of the deceased characters, Yi Rong nor Gan Shiping, are engaged in artistic pursuits. In contrast, the two survivors, Zhuang Runsheng and Zishan, both have professions related to the arts: Zhuang is an architect, while Zishan studied animation art in New York. As previously discussed, the deaths of Yi and Gan somehow relate to a Confucian "sacrificing life for righteousness." Zhuang and Zishan, however, complete their reconciliation while also putting a dent in the suffering of life through their artistic works.

During a period of depression, Zhuang once sent a manuscript to Zishan

with the hope that she would adapt it as an animation. The draft features ants to symbolize Zhuang and three birds to represent his deceased wife and children. They reside between heaven and hell, and in the end the ant representing Zhuang is stabbed to death. Zishan, however, reinterprets the presence of heaven as a four-headed Buddha in her short film. This Buddha features a face that is half Yi Rong's and half Zishan's, while the back face, originally blurred, changes to half Runsheng's and half an unclear figure after an ant crawls into a hole in the Buddha. Inspired by it, Runsheng decides to put a similar Buddha statue in the Nagasaki monastery he designs, with each head composed of two faces and two expressions.

Yin–Yang philosophy has a decisive impact on the final works of Zhuang and Zishan. Notably, the Buddha statue representing ultimate strength and value is no longer presented with one face, but instead with four faces and eight facial expressions. This symbolizes the fusion of Buddha-nature and human-nature, with each face half-divine and half-human. The Buddha statue also vaguely shows Zhuang's face, indicating that he may have attainted sagehood in spirit at this time.

Runsheng takes darkness as its point of departure, identifying it as one of the themes of his architecture; the animation draft he sent to Zishan is also dark and bloody. However, the darkness shows they are suffering, while the light represents hope. Zhuang Runsheng's profound fascination with light stems from his belief in its role in creating the world. In his design philosophy, light is not only the object of faith but also a power for redeeming reality itself. Zhuang attempts repeatedly to to kill Gan Shiping. During one swimming session, Zhuang even plans to end both their lives. However, a beam of light falling into the sea, piercing through water, prompts in Zhuang a moment of hesitation and letting go, which he later regards as a revelation. Light inspires him to design the monastery as a design incorporating painful growth through various stages of life in darkness and in light. In this context, human nature and Buddha nature are no longer simple binaries of black and white, but rendered in the full complexity of color.

The script includes a line from Runsheng that resonates with Daoist philosophy: "Only death can be reborn. Maybe one day I will meet you again" (Ai, *In the Mirror* 230). Such a statement parallels Zhuangzi, who sees life as fleeting, with everything eventually returning to dust, as he sees the life of humans as "brief as the passage of a horse through a crevice in the wall" (372). Zhuangzi suggests that death should not be mourned, as it is merely a return to the natural state. About death, Zhuangzi says, "who understands heavenly joy follows nature when he is alive, changes with everything in the world when he is dead" (202).

In the final version, Runsheng changes the title of animation from *The*

Suicide Note to the World to *Love Letter to the Human World*, suggesting a rebirth or nirvana through art. For Runsheng, art is the only eternal and valuable thing. Both he and Zishan find redemption through their artistic expression, achieving freedom of the soul and moving toward a poetic life.

The spiritual internalization of Daoism has significantly influenced *In the Mirror*. If we conceive reality as a rope tied in multiple knots of life, then the spirit of Daoism seeks to unravel these knots. The dialectical nature of Yin–Yang philosophy inspires individuals to understand and comprehend human nature, finally reconciling with oneself in order to achieve rebirth. This process of familiarization, understanding, reconciliation, and seeking resolution is not only a natural one but also a poetic and aesthetic journey. Despite its seemingly passive and reclusive nature, Daoism has served for thousands of years as a spiritual pillar of Chinese intellectuals' pursuit of inner freedom and independence. Although Daoist principles are not explicitly externalized in the novel, they serve as a fundamental spiritual force in *In the Mirror*.

The Chinese Sense of Guilt and the Integration of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism

The global landscape of confessional literature can be traced primarily to the West, and more specifically to Christianity. Liu Zaifu and Lin Gang note that the genre of *Confessions* was first established by the Christian priest Saint Augustine (354–430 CE) (47). Afterwards, literary figures such as Rousseau, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky exemplified the profound influence of Christianity as the pinnacle of confessional literature. The development of this genre has always attempted to transcend the boundaries of Christianity, introducing the exploration of the soul world into broader and deeper fields. Nevertheless, the influence of Christianity on confessional literature is self-evident.

Liu Zaifu and Lin Gang have also pointed out an important factor in their critique of deficiencies in the tradition of confessional literature and its spiritual depth within Chinese literature. This is identified as the lack of religious tradition in Chinese culture (Liu and Lin ix–x). Nowadays, some Chinese writers consciously seek to introduce or appropriate the concept or spirit of religion, actively engaging in dialogue with the world in the development of Chinese confessional literature.

However, Ai Wei's *In the Mirror* does not seek to identify problems or derive solutions from the Western origins of global confessional literature. Instead, it explores the themes of guilt and redemption within a Chinese context. In this work, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism supplant Christianity as the foundational backdrop of confessional literature. It therefore raises questions

regarding the roles that Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism play in Ai Wei's narratives, the system they collectively form, and how this system differs from the mainstream Christian symbolic framework of confessional literature. In the following discussion, I will examine Ai Wei's contributions within the broader context of global confessional literature.

Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism are not only the three main streams of Chinese thought but also serve as the origin of Ai Wei's exploration of the sense of guilt among Chinese people. These Three Teachings provide insight into the human mind, world, and nature. Together, they serve to identify, explain, and eliminate guilt. Ai Wei uses symbols, such as mirrors and light, to interpret the unique inner world of the Chinese people.

Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism offer distinct perspectives on the Chinese spiritual world in respect to guilt. The first step in opening up this spiritual world is through the process of cognition. Each of the three paths emphasize different cognitive objects. Confucianism focuses on understanding in the human mind, while Buddhism is concerned with the exploration of our human world, as Daoism emphasizes the exploration of human nature. These different cognitive patterns complement each other and play unique roles in the development of confessional literature.

The most notable contribution of Confucianism in *In the Mirror* is its understanding of the human mind. Through the principles of loyalty and consideration, Confucianism creates a value judgment system that sets moral standards for Chinese society. Individuals who violate it are deemed guilty, a primary function of condemnation based on conscience. In essence, Confucianism's ethical rules define what is considered right or wrong, and characters in the story are labeled guilty when they violate its principles.

Confucianism offers a unique ethical rule system in confessional literature in *In the Mirror*. This contrasts with other works in this genre, where the absolute power can be either the spiritual power that produces religious guilt; or moral power, representing the highest moral pursuit within oneself. *In the Mirror*, however, explores guilt within the context of conflicting ethical systems, while Ai Wei intentionally avoids discussing political and social ethics. Instead, he emphasizes the importance of family ethics in Chinese culture, as it places great importance on integrating family and country (*jia guo yiti*).

Tragedies in the novel depict conflicts of family ethics and betrayal among characters. Ai Wei sharply criticizes traditional Chinese novels for their failure at depicting daily life, lacking exploration of the human spiritual world ("*Zhongguo jingyan*" 5-6). However, *In the Mirror* successfully combines both aspects through its focus on family ethics and guilt, not only discussing the hustle and bustle of life, but also dialogues between souls. In this context, Liu

Weidong (1971–) remarks that a sense of guilt in the work comes not from religious systems, but from the family (118). Family-centered confessional literature serves as a unique contribution Ai Wei makes to world of confessional literature, a benefit deriving from Confucian cultural traditions.

Secondly, the main contribution of Buddhism is that it offers a way to understand the human world while providing an explanatory framework for a sense of guilt through concepts such as impermanence, dependent origination, and the emptiness of nature. These ideas help us analyze root causes of negative actions rather than simply condemning them. Refraining from defining sin, per se, Buddhism posits that sin arises from complex causes and conditions.

Such explanatory framework leads to the conclusion that everyone is guilty. This is expressed from the perspective of the victim rather than the perpetrator, as in Runsheng's case. Instead of looking for the guilty person, Buddhism shifts the focus to a recognition that all sentient beings experience suffering, and are guilty as such. In this context, the Western concept of "sin" is replaced by the more passive and reflective Chinese concept of "suffering". In Western confessional literature influenced by Christianity, everyone is a sinner, while in the Buddhist-influenced *In the Mirror*, everyone is recognized as a sufferer. This contrast stems from Buddhism's emphasis on explaining and absolving guilt rather than condemning it, where *In the Mirror* effectively uses Buddhism to explain the source and cause of sin. However, it falls short of providing the power of redemption, which raises doubts about Ai Wei's perception of Buddhism. For instance, despite Zhuang Runsheng's visits to several Buddhist temples, he still craves revenge. This suggests that Ai Wei is hesitant about fully embracing the idea of ultimate redemption in Buddhism. Perhaps Buddhism's all-encompassing explanations detract from the sense of personal transformation and growth that he seeks to convey. Therefore, Ai Wei leaves the final stage of letting go and redemption to be explored through another source of Eastern wisdom, which he hopes to address in his works.

Daoism teaches that human nature has positive and negative aspects, reflected in simple dialectics such as Yin–Yang philosophy. Additionally, Daoism believes in the natural course of events (*tiandao*), guiding people to go with the flow. Unlike other philosophical schools, Daoism refrains from criticizing or explaining the causes of guilt. Instead, it enlightens people about the complexity of human nature, leading to forgiveness and reconciliation.

While Daoism neither judges nor explains sin, it helps to transcend a sense of guilt, encouraging people to accept the flaws of human nature and the imperfections of life. Daoism suggests that by embracing the imperfections of life, people can create a more poetic existence while developing their unique charm and personality. Through artistic and other practice, individuals can

better understand themselves, and thereby ultimately achieve spiritual freedom.

Ai Wei notes that it is necessary to utilize three frames of reference to address spiritual conflicts of Chinese individuals, asserting that no single philosophical system can claim authority in this domain. Therefore, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism must collaborate as a trinity of supreme influence to provide structured spiritual assistance for guilt and forgiveness. In his novel, Ai Wei integrates the three in a complementary way. Specifically, Confucianism serves as an external framework, the Buddhism as the underpinning ground, while Daoism embodies the spiritual core.

The complementary relationship among these Three Teachings wasn't invented by Ai Wei. Rather, this trinity comprises a tradition passed down for thousands of years within Chinese discourse. In Liu Zaifu and Lin Gang's view, *Dream of the Red Chamber* represents the historical peak of Chinese confessional literature (67), presenting a combination of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, as demonstrated by the presence of "a Buddhist monk and a Daoist priest" (*yi seng yi dao*). Wang Yangming's School of Mind, which Ai Wei endorses, is also influenced by Buddhism. As Ai Wei suggests, although the School of Mind is "rooted in the framework of Confucianism, it contains traces of the intersection, fusion, and re-integration of cultural genes (*"Renxin ji yuzhou"* 264)."

The mutual integration of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism is a well-established fact, and there is no need to explain how or why the three can be integrated. What is worth discussing is how Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism are integrated within *In the Mirror*, where the use of "mirror" and "light" symbols are most prominent in showcasing the fusion of three philosophical frameworks.

The three schools all have a particular fondness for mirrors, which have become an essential symbol for expressing and conveying ideas. The "mirror" symbolizes reflection and self-examination. Zhuangzi relates the human mind to the mirror: "The perfect man has a mind like a mirror, which neither welcomes nor sends, which reflects things but does not retain things. Therefore, he can act successfully without wearing out his mind" (123). Moreover, he links mirror, mind, and saint together: "The peaceful mind of the sage is a mirror that reflects the heaven and the earth, a mirror that reflects everything in the world" (201).

The use of mirrors in Daoism is evidenced in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, also known as *Precious Mirror of Love* (*Feng yue bao jian*). According to the lame Daoist priest who presents it, the mirror comes from the Hall of the Illusory Spirit in the Land of Great Void, and it was made by the Goddess of Disenchantment, whose function is to "cure illnesses resulting from lust and has the power to preserve men's lives" (325).

Regarding Confucianism, the two Cheng Masters (*er Cheng*) also use bright mirrors to compare the saint and the human mind. Mirrors, sages, and mind are three keywords that are closely related, aligning with Confucian ideals of moral standard and self-cultivation. The metaphor proposed by Wang Yangming that sages must frequently wipe the mirror of their inner selves also resonates with Ai Wei's essay "The Mind is the Universe." Mirrors are also important in Buddhism and are often used as metaphors. The wisdom of Buddha is referred to as mirror-like wisdom (*jingzhi*) and the Dharma is compared to a mirror that reflects everything.

The use of mirrors as a metaphor to convey ideas is a shared characteristic among Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. It is also evident in Ai Wei's *In the Mirror*, where the mirror symbol is prevalent throughout the title, epigraph, and epilogue. Furthermore, the four main characters in the novel are also described in relationship with the mirror, thereby underscoring its importance as an symbolic element.

In addition to the mirror, "light" is another typical symbol of the integration Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism in Ai Wei's *In the Mirror*. For instance, the Confucian concept of "illustrious virtue" (*mingde*), which refers to the original nature of the human mind, uses "light" to describe the admirable qualities that a person should possess. Wang Yangming's declaration before his death, "My heart is bright, and what else can I say?" deeply resonates with Ai Wei. He further underscores the importance of light, stating that light is always a revelation to life (Ai, "*Renxin ji yuzhou*" 266)

In Buddhism, Maitreya Buddha is the Buddha of the future, indicating the great brightness of life. Many of the names given to Amitābha Buddha also contain the word "light," representing their wisdom and compassion. "The glare is softened, all look like dust. Apparent, it seems to exist." Dao in *Daodejing* is likened to light and dust (*he qi quang, tong qi chen*) (Laozi 10). Zhuangzi uses the term "inner light" (*baoguang*) to refer to the sage's wisdom (31).

Through these associations, Ai Wei effectively illustrates how the symbol of light not only conveys the ethical and spiritual aspirations inherent in Confucianism and Buddhism, but also serves as a bridge to the Daoist emphasis on harmony and illumination. In the novel, "light" serves as an artistic medium that objectifies the essential power of the protagonist Zhuang Runsheng. The architecture he designs is replete with light, which he imbues with meaning. For him, light and shadow have the capacity to "form any pattern in the world and establish the appearance of architecture" (Ai, *In the Mirror* 24). He further articulates the significant role of light, asserting, "without light, the world is nothing. (...) From another perspective, it is light that creates this world" (Ai, *In the Mirror* 412).

Light emerges as a quasi-religion that Zhuang Runsheng integrates and even uses to transcend the boundaries of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, by stating that "Sometimes I almost want to define everything as light. Inspiration is light, emotion is light, and love is also light. I have no faith; if I must say I have one, architecture is my faith, and architecture is that ray of light to me (Ai, *In the Mirror* 412)." In this regard, Ai Wei not only highlights the protagonist's artistic vision but also illustrates the thematic significance of light as the essence of his spiritual and philosophical explorations.

Taken in isolation, Ai Wei draws inspiration from Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist stories and combines them into a cohesive narrative exploring the human mind, creating a distinct and universal inner universe for Chinese people. Indeed, the combination of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism in China shapes and interprets the inner universe for Chinese people, influencing crucial concepts such as guilt, confession, and redemption. Although Christianity and Judaism represent Western culture and, as such, appear occasionally in the novel, they only serve as foil for Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. In the genealogy of world confessional literature, Ai Wei finds the source of explaining people's minds and the foundation of life in the millennial tradition of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism.

To fully appreciate the significance of Ai Wei's *In the Mirror*, it is essential to situate it within the broader framework of world confessional literature, which allows us to recognize the importance of his introduction of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism into this literary genre. Confessional literature emerges from the exploration of sin, wherein each narrative operates within an explicit or implicit framework of guilt that can be divided into three subsystems: conviction, interpretation, and exoneration. Certain works may concentrate exclusively on one of these subsystems, while others may combine together all three. Regardless of the focus, it all requires a supreme, absolute authority. As mentioned earlier, Western confessional literature, serving as both the foundational and dominant form of this genre, is unavoidably linked to the background of Christianity. Confessional literature can be said to have emerged under the impetus of Christian consciousness with its theme of redemption in the Bible (Liu and Lin 47). Within Christian thought, the supreme absolute exists in the other world, from which the initial condemnation originates, given the existence of God as the creator. Humans have thus been endowed with original sin. Whether individuals are guilty or not is not something that they can decide for themselves, but the reality of original sin is dictated by the divine authority of a transcendent God.

Since the development of confessional literature, especially with the process of secularization and disenchantment, Western confessional literature is no

longer limited to religious themes. However, as a foundational element of Western culture, Christianity still influences the development and expression of Western confessional literature, both implicitly and explicitly, wherein the tangible and intangible are intertwined and yet separate. The sins on this world are bestowed by the other realm, where they are defined and ultimately subject to redemption.

In contrast, Ai Wei's guilt system in *In the Mirror* is constructed by the complementary interplay of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. A defining feature of this suffering is its origin in this world, from which conviction also derives. The manifestations of guilt within the narrative are rooted in the ethical frameworks of everyday life, generated and defined by this world. Such a guilt system is entirely independent of the other world.

Although Ai Wei references Buddhist concepts within the framework of forgiveness, Buddhism here is not a religious concept. Neither the author Ai Wei nor the protagonist Zhuang Runsheng sees himself as a Buddhist. Rather than promoting the teachings of Buddhism, the work more likely draws upon the wisdom of Buddhism. Throughout the novel, the protagonist is guided to let go of guilt through the assertion that "all who are in the world suffer" still points to the material realm.

The reason why people are guilty is explained by a causal relationship inherent in this world, while the ultimate framework for absolution draws upon Daoist principles rather than upon religious teaching. Of the four characters in the work, two achieve self-redemption through the Confucian doctrine of sacrificing their lives for righteousness, whereas the other two characters achieve self-redemption through the aesthetic practice of Daoism.

In Ai Wei's work, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism are not simply complementary, but form a complete system of guilt, fundamentally rooted in and directed toward the material world. In this context, it becomes evident that Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism cannot independently fulfill the role of a comprehensive guilt system. Rather, the three must work together to establish a relatively self-contained structure for the guilt system, thereby generating a profound richness and multiplicity within the Chinese conceptualization of guilt. Most importantly, Ai Wei's entire guilt system is situated within the material world. The significance of Ai Wei and his works may not primarily lie in the exceptional quality of his work in confessional literature, but rather in its exploration of how the material world serves as a means to generate, interpret, and seek redemption from sin within the framework of confessional literature rooted in and predominantly influenced by the transcendent realm.

This not only provides a Chinese perspective and response to the world of confessional literature, but also proves the potential for diversity of confessional

literature depicting daily life. In *In the Mirror*, guilt transitions from the religious sphere into the ethical domain, while the concept of confession travels from the transcendent realm to the material world, where Ai Wei's endeavors reveal new opportunities and transformations within this genre. Research on Ai Wei indicates that China offers a new and illuminating perspective for this genre.

However, it is also essential to acknowledge that there remains a considerable gap between Ai Wei's *In the Mirror* and the canon of works in confessional literature. This disparity should not be attributed to a deficiency of themes related to guilt in religious contexts, but rather because Ai Wei's exploration of the material world may not be sufficiently expansive or profound. Such limitation can be mainly due to two factors. The first factor consists in the role of family, which serves as a critical entry point for understanding Chinese society and culture. When one moves beyond the familial context, the understanding of Chinese society and culture may appear superficial. Although the depiction of family in Ai Wei's novel serves as a focal point, it is evident that the portrayal of family is relatively simple, lacking depth when compared with the pinnacle of Chinese confessional literature, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, which functions not only as a narrative about guilt, but also as a profound exploration of familial relationships. Hence, such limitation constitutes a significant shortcoming that hinders Ai Wei's works from attaining a higher level of literary value. The second critical aspect is collectivism, which serves as a persistent background in Chinese culture, traditionally considered as a significant barrier to considerations of individual guilt. However, given that collectivism stands in opposition to the notion of the individual, it can precisely become the source of guilt and a new form of expression for guilt. Regrettably, Ai Wei's *In the Mirror* does not pay much attention to the existence of Chinese collectivism, which also weakens the tension and depth of the work.

In summary, Ai Wei's contributions and limitations call for and expect the necessity for Chinese confessional literature to broaden its scope to consider the realm of daily ethical life. Chinese confessional literature aspires to produce great works with family serving as their main narrative axis and collectivism as their contextual backdrop. Such an expansion would not only offer new dimensions to global discourse on confessional literature, but also reach new heights within the genre.

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Alan Huang
Stanford University

Ecological, Mental, and Social Alienation in Gu Tao's Evenki Trilogy

Abstract The Evenki are a nomadic reindeer-herding people in northeastern China whose lives have been significantly transformed by China's rapid development in the form of relocations, hunting restrictions, and poaching. This forms the background of Gu Tao's Evenki documentary trilogy: *Aoluguya*, *Aoluguya*; *Yuguo and His Mother*, and *The Last Moose of Aoluguya*, centering around an alcoholic hunter named Weijia who witnesses the ebbing of his nomadic livelihood by Chinese industrialization. By employing a close reading of the films, I raise the following questions: Is there any inner connection between the prevailing alcoholism and the disappearance of the Evenki cultural identity? Is mental and ecological degradation the result of ignoring the intrinsic interdependence of the human and nonhuman? Will the Evenki's animism, which imbues the nonhuman world with personification and dignity, become the main source of salvation for the Evenki people who are entrapped by modernity's ravages? The conditions faced by the Evenki signify how the rapid development of China has exerted a dire impact on indigenous communities, cultures, and their psychic conditions. By focusing on the destruction of fulfilling human and nonhuman relationships, Gu Tao casts doubt on the direction of Chinese modernity.

Keywords Evenki, animism, anthropocentrism, ethnic minorities, modernity

The Evenki are a nomadic reindeer-herding people in the greater Khingan Mountain Range of northeastern China. Their lives have been significantly transformed by China's rapid development. They have faced changes such as multiple relocations, hunting restrictions, poaching and cultural erosion. Under the aegis of the Chinese government's anthropocentrism, a belief that sees humans as superior to nonhumans, the Evenki's identity is fracturing. In this paper, I will explore Gu Tao's Evenki documentary trilogy—*Aoluguya, Aoluguya*, *Yuguo and His Mother*, and *The Last Moose of Aoluguya*—which center around a depressed and alcoholic hunter named Weijia and his sister, Liuxia. By

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employing a close reading of the films, I aim to explore the tensions between a fading nomadic lifestyle and a modern sedentary one. The questions I raise are the following: Is there any inner connection between the prevalence of alcoholism and the disappearance of the Evenki cultural identity? Is mental and ecological degradation the result of ignoring the intrinsic interdependence of the human and nonhuman? Will the Evenki's animism, which imbues the nonhuman world with personification and dignity, become the main source of salvation for the Evenki people who are entrapped in the process of modernization? The conditions faced by the Evenki in this trilogy signify how the rapid development of China has exerted a dire impact on indigenous communities, cultures, and their psychic conditions. Disrupting such intricate ties in favor of endless extraction is shown to be folly in Gu Tao's trilogy.

Weijia's plight is one of many common themes in the documentaries of Gu Tao, a Chinese indie documentary filmmaker who focuses on the gradual loss of cultural identity among the ethnic minorities of northeastern China. Besides the Evenki trilogy, he has made documentaries about the nomadic Oroqen people called *The Opaqued God* and *Lost Mountain*, who also face declining traditions amid the advance of modernity. Compared to the Chinese novelist Chi Zijian, who has also depicted the Evenki, Gu Tao's documentary format lends a more realistic and grounded perspective that delineates the inner pain of the Evenki's cultural erosion. Since Chi Zijian's *The Last Quarter of the Moon* is more aesthetic and lyrical about Evenki traditions, she does not touch as deeply upon the detrimental effects of modernity as Gu Tao. Although the novel features an Evenki painter, Irina, who leaves her nomadic habits to learn painting in a modern city and commits suicide due to returning, Chi's aesthetic writing style greatly downplays this tragedy. Using the documentary format, Gu Tao has a more frank depiction of the Evenki's lived realities with little chance of an aesthetic embellishment of the Evenki's precariousness.

Facing a brutal reality

Gu Tao's trilogy takes a personal perspective by using Weijia and Liuxia to follow the sentiments of disorientation and loneliness in a disappearing culture. *Aoluguya, Aoluguya* is a broader survey of the Evenki way of life between the Aoluguya township and hunting camps in the mountains. The documentary shows Weijia and Liuxia travelling to the Aoluguya Township to interact with other hunters in a camp within the Khingan Mountains. *Yuguo and His Mother* focuses on the titular character and his mother, Liuxia, as the boy reconnects with his Evenki heritage. Yuguo is a boy brought up in a distant boarding school who occasionally visits his mother and uncle in the Aoluguya Township. When he visits, he slowly learns more about Evenki mythology and nomadism,

re-evaluating his identity. *The Last Moose of Aoluguya* centers on Weijia, who laments the disappearance of the Evenki hunting customs and cultural identity. The hunting ban imposed by the Chinese government has pushed many Evenki into despair, which is underscored by the difficulty of finding wild reindeer. Compounding his despair, Weijia is unable to overcome his crippling alcoholism, which strains his relationships. The trilogy's focus on Weijia and his relatives evokes how detrimental modernity has been for the Evenki.

The degradation confronting the Evenki consists of three stages: disenchantment, enclosure, and despair. Disenchantment is the reduction of spiritual beliefs and magical aura in favor of rational processes that render the natural world inert. Max Weber argued that disenchantment occurred when Western nations saw a decrease of both spiritual beliefs and human freedoms in conjunction with the advent of rationalized practices such as bookkeeping, intricate bureaucracies and timekeeping since the late 18th century (Weber 312–313). This disenchantment aligns with the dualistic ideas of René Descartes which view nature "as non-agentic, as passive, non-creative and inert, with action being imposed from without by an external force" (Plumwood 110). In this paradigm, spiritually endowed nonhumans are reduced to nonspiritual, lifeless, and even non-thinking entities, inferior to humans and ripe for exploitation. In the Evenki context, the impact of disenchantment are felt in the loss of the shaman as a vital figure in Evenki life. The shaman was typically revered as a medium between the divine and human worlds. Their knowledge allowed them to treat illnesses and intimately comprehend their natural surroundings (Heyne 378).

Disenchantment allows the implementation of enclosure, in which the state and other property owners impose exclusionary and extractive policies upon the humans and nonhumans in an area. According to Jason Hickel, enclosure is a process instrumental to the rise of capitalism in which elites eliminated "self-sufficient economies," and created both "a mass of workers but also a mass of consumers—people wholly dependent on capital for food, clothes and other essential goods" (Hickel chap. 1). For the Evenki, enclosure is manifest in the forms of hunting bans and poaching intrusions which eliminate their traditional livelihoods, forcing them into a sedentary life dependent on the Chinese state. Despair results from enclosure in which the recipients lose meaning in their lives, spiralling into alcoholism, violence, and suicide. The anthropocentric belief that humans can exist apart from nature is shown to be folly when profound personal meaning and communal bonds are shattered in the name of development. The process of degradation severs the Evenki from nature, assimilating them deeper into the wider Han-dominated culture of the People's Republic of China.

A counterpoint to the degradation I mention is catharsis, which is characterized by rekindling Evenki nomadic traditions and restoring environmental connections. While Gu Tao's trilogy mourns a precarious and vanishing culture, it urges a reconsideration of human-nature kinships. Graham Harvey defines animism as the view "that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others" (Harvey 137). This worldview emphasizes reciprocity between humans and nonhumans instead of an extractive dualism. Animism complements the grouping of social ecology, mental ecology, and environmental ecology from *Three Ecologies* by Félix Guattari (Guattari 41). He describes social ecosophy as "reconstructing the modalities of 'group-being'," reconsidering interpersonal relations, family, and communal bonds (Guattari 34). Mental ecosophy requires rethinking "the relation of the subject to the body, to phantasm, to the passage of time, to the 'mysteries' of life and death" developing alternatives from capitalist mass media (Guattari 35). The degradation of these ecologies under the extractive and expanding nature of capitalism has instilled a "certain incomprehension and fatalistic passivity" in both individuals and the government (Guattari 41).

When situated in the context of the trilogy, Weijia and many Evenki people are left adrift because the encroachment of the state and its industries has ruptured their three ecologies. Despite their wayward pathway, the Evenki depicted find meaning when they engage with the natural world, demonstrating a powerful bond. It is in that light that animism deserves attention for contextualizing how humans are inevitably connected to the nonhuman world. It implies that a separation from nature is at the root of much social disorientation in China.

Evenki History and Disenchantment

Disenchantment is key to the denigration of animistic spirituality and the imposition of anthropocentric beliefs. It rests upon a mechanistic view of the universe that regards humans as innately rational and full of feeling compared to nonhumans. When placed into the context of the trilogy, animism is regarded as a retrograde obstacle to progress by the Han-dominated Chinese state. According to Judith Shapiro, Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party held a militantly anthropocentric view of the world, failing to see humans "as part of nature, seeing nature rather as something to be harnessed or overcome" (Shapiro 3). They espoused the spirit of the "Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains" to radically reshape the natural world (Shapiro 3). It was in line with the notion of "continuous revolution" in Mao's socialism which militarized society in constant social upheavals (Shapiro 6). This worldview identifies nature as a force to be subjugated, reducing ecosystems and animals to raw material. Even after Mao's death, such echoes can be seen in the rapid

pace of Chinese industrialization. When applied against the Evenki, they are categorized as atavistic individuals who must be integrated into the national development project. But in the eyes of Weijia, the state's approach renders the Evenki's lands unrecognizable because it severs the nomads' relationship to their land.

The Evenki people of China are a Tungusic people who have traditionally lived between Lake Baikal and the Amur River on Chinese–Russian borderlands. Arriving in the 17th century, they are a reindeer-herding people in China and often traded many goods, accessing abundant materials in Siberia such as as tigers, bears, sable and deer (Dumont 518). Due to this livelihood, hunting is central to Evenki identity for sustenance, trade, and culture. They are divided into clans with relatively egalitarian social structures and follow customs referred to as *aojiao'er*, "customs or rules passed down by ancestors" (Xie 64). Community and ecology are interlinked among the Evenki with their reindeer serving functions such as transportation and clothing. Evenki customs revolve around the reindeer life cycle, moving locations to prevent the animals from overgrazing on lichen (Xie 63). Furthermore, the animals are important to religious ceremonies because they are believed to transport the souls of the dead into another world (Siqinfu 27). The intimate attention paid to the relationship of organisms is shown when an Evenki chief, Maria Suo, recollects observing the movement of squirrels in order to effectively find food (Gu 192). It resembles Xie Yuanyuan's observation that older Evenki could "serve as a 'living map' of the Khingan Range,'" and could guide manifold people such as geological research teams, surveyors, forest research groups, land and irrigation survey organizations (Xie 61). The Evenki's nomadic lifestyles displays a deep familiarity with ecological patterns, reflecting the importance of harmonious ecosophy.

However, such ecological kinships were shattered by tremendous changes in the 20th century. When the Japanese took over their homelands in the 1930s, the Evenki suffered a severe population decrease (Xie 71). After the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, the Evenki faced disruption in the form of geopolitical pressures and development projects. They were frequently relocated to places such as the Aoluguya Ethnic Township in response to events such as the 1964 Jimide Surrender-to-Revisionism-Treason Incident (Xie 75). Furthermore, large-scale development of Daxing-anling caused many Evenki, Oroqen and Daur to leave the forest to work as farmers or live in the city (Siqinfu 21). Due to difficulties in hunting, the Evenki started to shift from hunting to reindeer herding in 1961, becoming more reliant on reindeer for antler production (Ge 47–48). However, they had to contend with the increasing arrivals of outside migrant workers since 1979 whose presence "incurred disruption and damage to natural ecosystems and the concomitant

decrease in the number of wild animals" (Xie 80). The early 1980s saw a new wave of development under the Reform and Opening Up policy, causing railways, highways, and logging roads to encroach into the forests (Siqinfu 23). One particularly disruptive event in the eyes of Weijia was the 2003 relocation which transformed the Evenki from hunters into producers of reindeer antlers. Another crucial step in the relocation was the confiscation of all Evenki hunting guns by the public security bureau of Genhe county and the local police of the Aoluguya ethnic township (Ge 49). Nevertheless, the Evenki still frequented the forests and continued practices such as foraging, herding reindeer, living in tents, and clan structures (Ge 51). This alternating environment explains why Weijia divides his time between the hunting camp and the Aoluguya township, preferring the former.

The policies of the People's Republic of China towards the nomadic Evenki are assimilationist, pressing them to adapt to a settled life since the 1960s (Ge 49–50). This resulted in the fading traditions and corrosive alcoholism that comprise the backdrop of *Aoluguya, Aoluguya* and *The Last Moose of Aoluguya*. In *Aoluguya, Aoluguya*, Weijia mentions that "it was a good decision not to move down to the settlement," as he feels a greater sense of freedom in the camp than the Township which he finds restricting and bewildering. Furthermore, the camp enables Weijia to feel a closer connection to his ancestors which is reflected in a song he chants. In Geiger's analysis of *Nanook of the North*, he argues that a documentary filmmaker makes art by "passing from the realm of the purely descriptive use of 'natural material' into the realm of 'arrangements, rearrangements, and creative shapings of it" (Geiger 126). Gu Tao does not merely represent reality but enhances it with his choice of certain scenes and soundtracks. Here, he emphasized scenes where Weijia utters words such as "to lead the children of the forest home," "father's forest" and "mother's river." It reflects Xie's observation that many Evenki hunters are deeply familiar with natural details such as peaks, hills, and creeks to the point that every "location had a name brimming with vivid meaning that fully described the site and its characteristics" (Xie 64). But under the increasing enclosure of the Evenki lands, such practices appear doomed to fade into history, provoking frequent nostalgia in Weijia.

The Enclosure of land and tradition

Enclosure is the process of implementing restrictions on a territory for extraction. In the Evenki context, it takes the forms of a hunting ban, increased development and the marginalization of the Evenki language in favor of Mandarin. There was a hunting restriction passed in 1996 to ostensibly protect wildlife in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, confiscating private

guns (Ge 58). However, this ban has proved devastating to the Evenki by severing traditions while contributing to poaching intrusions into the Khingan Mountains. In addition, the Chinese education system threatens the Evenki language due to the emphasis on Mandarin, obstructing an intergenerational transfer of knowledge. This process of land encroachment, hunting bans and linguistic decline reduces the autonomy of the Evenki by endangering their cultural knowledge.

Enclosure is symbolized by Weijia's description in the start of *The Last Moose of Aoluguya* when he likens the police to Big Brother due to their ability to exercise arbitrary power over him. He feels helpless against the police because he was fined 1500 yuan and jailed for fifteen days for firing a gun at the sky. To that end, the hunter reminisces about older times when Evenki walked down the street proudly displaying their guns without any fear of police harassment. In effect, the hunting ban brutally damages Weijia's self-esteem and self-respect, stripping him of dignity and identity. Later, when he sits with other hunters around a campfire, Weijia recalls an incident where hunters were arrested and found guilty in a trial. He feels that hunters are deeply disrespected in Chinese society. The denigration of hunters is connected to the degradation of Evenki cultural identity as shown in an interview with Maria Suo where she describes the ubiquity of hunting practices in her youth (Gu 189). This differs from the contempt experienced by Evenki hunters after the 2003 relocation in which they are seen as rowdy, dependent, and insatiable by local residents in Genhe County (Xie 141). In addition, Evenki hunters believed that reporters who interviewed them never addressed their actual concerns and instead treated them as "savages" and "weirdos" (Xie 142–143). Hunting restrictions diminish the Evenki's autonomy, making it difficult to practice core aspects of tradition.

Another form of enclosure is the decline of the reindeer population. One instance was a massive plunge of the reindeer population during the 2003 relocation with over three hundred reindeer transported to the Aoluguya township only for ninety to go missing or die (Xie 138). The government's failure to provide lichen and sufficient willow leaves for the reindeer to eat also contributed to the mortality rate (Ge 58). This food supply proved unsuitable for the reindeer, causing many deaths and forcing a beggarly dependence of the Evenki on the Chinese state. A 2004 letter to the Hulun Buir City party committee secretary exclaimed that "We are almost left to live on chaff!' Now at Genhe we live on subsidy and assistance" (Xie 144). These deaths are referenced by Weijia in *The Last Moose of Aoluguya* when he recounts the manifold deaths of reindeer brought down to the settlement, forcing the animals to be moved back to Hunters Camp. It is due to the presence of the reindeer and their inextricability from the Khingan Mountains that the Evenki can continue

their nomadic livelihood rather than completely surrendering to a sedentary modernity. Nevertheless, one hunter in Aoluguya remarks that "I feel like we are just hanging here and no one will take care of reindeer." The statement captures a loss of purpose from the hunting ban since the hunters find little reason to stay on the mountain. What worsens the issue is that the Evenki's livelihood of selling antlers yields meager profits. In this light, the Evenki resemble ethnic groups in Siberia such as the Siberian Evenks and Chukchi who have dealt with cultural threats from both climate change and state constrictions such as residential schools (Jagani). Due to the paramount importance of reindeer in Evenki culture, a decline in the population adversely affects their identity and customs.

In *The Last Moose of Aoluguya*, a key threat to the Evenki is the decreasing numbers of wild reindeer. The population has either been killed by illegal poachers or migrated elsewhere due to deforestation. Maria Suo mentions that deforestation and the increased presence of poachers made nomadism more difficult, hard even to find firewood (Gu 194). Due to restrictions on hunting, the Evenki have to succumb to market forces whereby reindeer become a source of income rather than just a hunting tool (Xie 152). Likewise, Maria Suo mentions eating reindeer only as a recent phenomenon among the Evenki (Gu 190–191). Such trends date from the 1990s, which saw an increase in illegal poaching and logging that decreased wildlife. It is necessary to contrast the Evenki's traditional hunting with poaching because the former respects ecological rhythms whereas the latter is based on market logic. The former practice acknowledges reciprocity, enabling a wildlife population to regenerate from killings. In contrast, poaching catalyses a drastic decline of wildlife because animals are commodified as raw material to generate profits. This distinction is exemplified in a conversation at the camp in which an Evenki from the city spoke about the purpose of hunting as thinning the herd of the weak and never targeting females to ensure reproduction. That logic is also depicted in a later scene with Weijia when he recollects approaching six bears with the intent to kill until he was dissuaded by his companion, Mao Xie on the basis that they were mating. This story is juxtaposed by Weijia with his knowledge of Han Chinese poachers who shoot everything, signifying the consequences of ignoring reciprocity.

There is a reverence for animals in a story recounted by Weijia because Evenki hunters observe strict limits motivated by sustenance, taking no more than they need. The activities of Han poachers have caused a population decline because they are driven by greed and profits and do not practice reciprocity. The consequences are demonstrated by a long scene in *The Last Moose of Aoluguya* where Weijia and another hunter, Mao Xie, set off to find more reindeer in

response to a dearth in the population. It is at this point that before the duo set out, there is a sense of both futility and uncertainty that the duo will not succeed at their task. When the two embark, a somber didgeridoo music plays, implying that their search will be a failure. As he walks through the forest, Weijia finds a desolate loneliness and a grim atmosphere. Instead of finding live reindeer, the hunter only comes across rusting traps and the bones of a female reindeer. Leading their reindeer, Weijia and Mao Xie first walk through brownish pathways and trees before crossing several streams. Walking up the mountain, they find a gateway frequented by reindeer which is left in disarray. To the hunters and the audience, it displays signs of tampering, indicating that poachers were there. As the duo walk, the camera pans around the landscape, revealing a generally gray and dull color palette. Most of the grass appears desiccated, the trees lack leaves and those that have leaves seem gray and colorless. Furthermore, the area appears devoid of animal life, conveying an aura of abandonment and decay. Walking further, Weijia shouts in disbelief at the sight of some traps, exclaiming "These idiots leave their traps to rust?" When the camera zooms to his perspective, it shows a poacher's trap on the ground, now a set of broken metallic parts. Then the camera cuts to show a circular chain dangling from a tree. These two objects serve as a source of danger and destruction for the Evenki. In light of this setback, Weijia reflects that "It's been years since any moose have come here" then turns around only to find a lack of tracks. Not giving up hope, the hunters climb up the hill to come across scattered reindeer bones. Among the hunters, Mao Xie notices the lack of skulls and antlers while Weijia suspects that the bones belonged to a female reindeer. Disappointed, the hunters leave the area and as they leave, the camera points down to focus on the bones. The search has been a failure because the hunters have only discovered rusting traps and the bones of a female reindeer rather than teeming herds of wild reindeer.

During the foraging, sombre music plays to signify the hopeless tone of the scene. The presence of the bones is associated with death, hinting at a potential extinction of the species and the extirpation of the Evenki culture. Furthermore, the living reindeer accompanying Weijia and Maoxie sniff at and examine the bones for themselves. This juxtaposition of the living reindeer with the scattered bones highlights the possibility that the virile animals standing before their dead brethren could suffer a similar fate one day. As the two hunters leave the area with a sense of defeat, the film displays text reading, "Weijia and Mao Xie were in the forest for five days and four nights. All they discovered were some poachers' traps and some moose bones." The text tells the audience how long the hunters searched, and the length of time emphasizes their crestfallen attitudes. The scene is presented as one of dashed hopes, as if to confirm that

decline and extinction are inevitable. The documentary format is used to present the concrete realities confronting the Evenki while the use of music conveys an aesthetic sense of mourning to complement the subject matter.

Returning from his unsuccessful search to the hunters' campfire, Weijia mentions only seeing three traces of moose, first at Nalaqi, second at Xogeliqi, and the third at Jianchang. He can only reflect on the drastic changes, noting that previously, near Nalaqi there were moose everywhere. Weijia discusses that the present day is "a different era" in which poachers will ravenously claim an abundance of wild reindeer. Compounding the problem is the fact that many reindeer have also died in snares set by Forest Bureau employees (Siqinfu 25). As mental, social, and environmental ecologies are interconnected, a threat to the Evenki's environment posed by the poachers disrupts their livelihood like the hunting ban.

An important way the Evenki relate to their natural environment is in their use of language and unique terminology, distinguishing them from other ethnic groups. It is underscored by an elderly Evenki in *Last Moose of Aolugya* who states that it is vital to learn the Evenki language, otherwise they will become Chinese. This sentiment is echoed by Richard Fraser's argument that once "you lose a language you don't just lose vocabulary, you literally lose an entire way of seeing and expressing the world" (Gibson). These dangers are exemplified by how Weijia and other Evenki mostly speak in Mandarin rather than the Evenki language. This linguistic usage represents an ecological rupture due to the disappearance of a unique vocabulary tied to the Khingan area. The reason more Mandarin is spoken instead of Evenki is that the Chinese education system prioritizes the learning of Mandarin while estranging younger Evenki from traditions (Xie 159). Furthermore, the Chinese education system considers hunting and herding lifestyles to be primitive and tries to educate such beliefs out of students (Xie 159). What exacerbates the situation is how the Evenki language is not written down, as compared to Mandarin, and therefore more vulnerable to disappearing (Xie 64). This phenomenon is part of a larger global trend of decreasing linguistic diversity where more than 40% of an estimated 7,100+ languages are in danger of extinction by the end of the 21st century (Glasberg). This pattern is interconnected with environmental degradation, development, and the destruction of Indigenous communities (Glasberg). The loss is devasting because of the potential insights gleaned from the Evenki's perception of their natural environment, posing greater obstacles to repairing ecological destruction.

Enclosure is best represented by how the Chinese state's all-encompassing notion of development homogenizes ethnic minority cultures like the Evenki while ignoring ecological reciprocity. Policies imposed by the Chinese government such as the hunting ban and increased development have ruptured

traditional hunting practices and imperilled Evenki cultural identity. The hunting ban has coincided with increasing poaching and deforestation, effectively replacing sustainable practices with destructive ones. The increasing homogenization is demonstrated by the Sinicization of the Evenki where the majority live a more sedentary life in townships with less access to traditional hunting grounds. This is underscored by a decrease of the native Evenki language in favor of Mandarin, raising the risk that the Evenki will be indistinguishable from the Han ethnic majority. Since enclosure enforces a loss of meaning for the Evenki, nostalgia is a common sentiment in the trilogy with Weijia and his sister constantly reminiscing halcyon times. Due to this damage to cultural identity, many Evenki have fallen into despair, coping with alcoholism, which exacerbates the process of cultural disappearance.

Despair and alcoholism

When cultural beliefs are ravaged by disenchantment and hunting ways constricted by enclosure, the Evenki fall into despair because they cannot express connections to the natural world. In such absence, alcohol is left as the only alternative to numb the grief and anguish felt by the Evenki. It is represented by how Weijia and Liuxia struggle with alcoholism throughout the trilogy, awkwardly lumbering in completing certain tasks. The hunter's alcoholism is so entrenched that he shows tremendous difficulty overcoming the problem even in faraway places such as Hainan. While used to cope with the loss of their cultural identity, alcohol engenders a variety of other problems such as interpersonal violence, hindering a continuation of traditions. The Evenki's despair is compounded by the alienating quality of modern society where townships do not fully accommodate their needs and technologies such as television do not provide a sense of fulfilment. Such a damaged mental and social ecosophy questions whether humans can truly live apart from reciprocity with the nonhuman.

The loss of cultural meaning and consequent despair are central to a celebration of an Evenki festival where the dancers wear traditional dress in front of a fire in *The Last Moose of Aoluguya*. The dance and use of alcohol are attempts to restore the animistic imagination and traditions, trying to capture the mystique their ancestors and shamans once led. However, the audience feels the dance is more like a performance, serving only to entertain than to express bonds with nature. The practice feels disconnected from the daily life of the Evenki township in which most of the inhabitants have increasingly more in common with the Han ethnic group. This event resembles an event on August 10, 2003 where a county art troupe was invited by the government to perform at the Aoluguya Evenki Township relocation. As the Evenki hunters were driven out of area, the troupe was tasked to pose as them, offending the hunters

who saw the performance as a mockery (Xie 135). These reactions signify a hollowing out of identity in which Evenki culture is rendered more akin to a museum relic rather than a living culture. They encapsulate Weijia's observation in an interview with Gu Tao, where "to lose your culture is to lose everything" (Gu 199).

Weijia mentioned that initially during the relocation, many Evenki did not turn to alcoholism until the hunting ban, because the forest can be a desolate place "where all you can hear is the sound of deer bells and the wind blowing through the leaves" (Fornieles). When the Evenki still retained their hunting guns, they were unbothered by loneliness because they could continue meaningful practices. But with the hunting ban, they were left with a "deafening silence exacerbating their loneliness and emptiness" (Fornieles).

Alcoholism is a destructive way of confronting anguish because it leads to both lethargy and violence, trapping many Evenki in addictive cycles and pushing many to their deaths. This is demonstrated with Weijia, reliant on alcohol to the point that he remarks that he can't speak his mind if he does not drink. When a woman tells him his inability to speak arises from the drinking, the hunter retorts that he can write when he is not drinking. For the Evenki drinkers, alcoholism is an attempt to re-enchant the world by altering their state of consciousness. According to Lesley, many pre-contact Native Americans associated "mind-altered states" with a "quest for enlightenment" and ways of contacting the spiritual world (Lesley 92–93). As such, when hunting is banned, alcohol becomes appealing to the Evenki because it appears to replicate shamanic experiences despite its degrading qualities. As part of his coping mechanisms, Weijia has a habit of creating extensive paintings depicting landscapes and Evenki life, which he then burns. In *Aoluguya, Aoluguya*, when asked about this absurd behavior, he proudly proclaims it to be his cool style. During his forays across the mountains in *The Last Moose of Aoluguya*, Weijia complains about the inaccessibility of alcohol, showing little concern about alcohol poisoning. The potency of alcohol is shown in one scene in which Weijia expends effort to climb a tree just to reach the liquor attached. Weijia's struggles signify the pervasiveness of alcohol addiction among the Evenki in which about eighty three Evenki died of alcohol abuse, alcohol-related accidents and suicide between 1957 and 1998 (Siqinfu 35). Siqinfu observes that 85 percent of men of marriageable age are unable to marry due to alcoholism, mental health and physiological issues, hindering the transfer of cultural traditions and parent-child relations (Siqinfu 35). This is heavily apparent with Weijia who often talks about committing suicide if his rifles were seized. According to Gu Tao, Weijia made many attempts at suicide before, describing an instance where he ran into the woods with his rifle and tried to jump into a ditch (Fornieles). Besides

Weijia, the behavior of his sister Liuxia highlights why alcoholism is particularly destructive to Evenki society.

Like her brother, Liuxia has been reduced to a deplorable state by alcohol. Liuxia lost her husband in an accident where he fell down a ravine and her grief plunged her deep into alcoholism (Fornieles). In an interview, she mentions that she has only two teeth left—many of her teeth have rotted and fallen out from alcohol abuse (Gu 205). Due to her instability, her son Yuguo was sent to a boarding school between the ages of six and seven in Wuxi, under the Communist Youth League's Project Hope initiative (Fornieles). Alcohol often pushes Liuxia into violent situations with her brother and other Evenki. Once, when she stole another person's alcohol, she got beaten to the point of requiring two steel plates (Fornieles). In addition, Liuxia and her brother often hit each other casually as shown in *Aoluguya* when Weijia and Liuxia have a dispute, causing her to bash her brother over the head with a chair. Furthermore, in Yuguo's first reunion with his mother in *Yuguo and His Mother*, she quickly stumbles from wooziness, worrying him. It is due to alcoholism and its associated violence that when Yuguo first visits the Aoluguya Township, he expresses a reluctance to get closer to his mother and uncle. The rift created by the siblings' alcoholism could potentially push Yuguo further into Han society and away from his heritage. Due to this malignance of alcoholism, the mother of Liuxia and Weijia tried drastic interventions to halt their bad habits.

The failure of Weijia to change despite intervention demonstrates the pervasiveness of alcoholism in the Evenki. Once, his mother tried to confiscate alcohol from both him and his sister, but to no avail. In *The Last Moose*, she sends Weijia to Hainan out of desperation, both to undergo treatment for his alcoholism and to find a wife. Weijia befriends a woman named Xia in Hainan, and he shows signs of improvement. During his stay, Weijia discusses a variety of topics with Xia, continues his artistic painting habits, and even visits amusement parks with her. Nevertheless, Weijia proves unable to give up his bad habits; his relationship with Xia does not endure. This is shown when Xia asks Weijia about keeping his promise not to drink, only for the two to argue about what alochol to buy: beer or liquor. During this exchange, Xia worries that the Evenki man will embarrass guests as he displays habits that discomfort her, such as wearing a tropical shirt in an unsuitable setting. Moreover, Xia is a teacher of English and attempts to convince Weijia to learn the language, even allowing him to sit in the back of her class. But when Xia's students are learning the alphabet, Weijia takes a nap, frustrating the teacher. Eventually, Xia gives up on Weijia, causing him to return to Aoluguya township. Weijia's interactions with Xia demonstrate not only how difficult he is to work with, and the intractable nature of alcoholism.

When analyzing the nature of the Evenki's alcoholism, it is important to note that this kind of alcoholism is a problem confronting many other indigenous minority groups. Another nomadic group from China, the Oroqen, face a similar predicament as the Evenki, forced to give up hunting for an agricultural livelihood. This process of transformation was very destructive, causing widespread alcoholism and suicide and significantly eroding traditional culture (Gibson). After the transformation, the majority of Oroqen were urbanized and Sinicized, with few speaking their native tongue (Gibson). Another parallel can be found with Raphael Lemkin's description of Native Americans and Tasmanians in which exposure to alcohol caused the intoxicated drinkers to murder friends, kin, wife, and offspring in a frenzy (Lesley 88). Lemkin's analysis indicated that alcohol is directly connected with social destruction, proving uniquely dangerous to indigenous societies compared to industrialized ones. These situations echo Weijia's sentiments in a poem where he describes industrialization as "turning the world into a miserable place" (Fornieles). In such a hopeless milieu, he exclaims that he would shout "Go ahead, shoot" if he crossed paths with the police (Fornieles). When examining all these situations, a loss of meaning is a central consequence of rupturing mental and social ecosophy.

In addition to alcoholism, television and other media heighten the feelings of alienation and despair felt by the Evenki. Throughout the trilogy, there are scenes of people watching television with a hollow reaction. Towards the end of *Yuguo and His Mother*, Yuguo is brought to listen to karaoke, yet he feels bored. This ennui continues when Yuguo watches television news about US–China relations and the War on Terror, causing the boy to cover his face with a pillow. This disinterest contrasts the enthusiasm the boy felt earlier when he listened to the explanations of Evenki myths. Yuguo's listlessness matches Guattari's critiques of "mass-media serialism (the same ideal standards of living, the same fashions and types of rock music, etc.)" (Guattari 30). He mentions that "our television screens are populated, saturated, by 'degenerate' images and statements" (Guattari 43). It is easy for enormous amounts of disturbing imagery and information to spread through information technologies, inducing a numbing effect. As such, the narratives and entertainment provided by media prove unable to satisfy the hollowness of meaning that faces the Evenki in their encounter with Chinese modernity. The alcoholism and Weijia and Liuxia in conjunction with Yuguo's listlessness towards television media signify a need to re-evaluate Evenki traditions.

The disruption of traditional ties between the Evenki and their environmental, mental, and social, ecologies induce a tremendous despair. To resolve that despair, many Evenki turn towards alcoholism, but it worsens their problems

by intensifying violence and social disintegration. Within the trilogy, Weijia and Liuxia are shown to be lethargic or violent, dragging them into dangerous situations and straining their relationship with relatives. Alcoholism combined with new media underscore a meaninglessness caused by modernity because their ecosophy is shrivelled. But despite this aimlessness, there are signs that their ecosophy can be repaired by paying attention to a reciprocity with nature. As such, there is a question of how to strengthen the Evenki's bonds to nature despite disenchantment and enclosure.

The Catharsis of Animism

In spite of disenchantment, enclosure and despair, animism still holds tremendous importance in Evenki culture for enchanting the world. Weijia, Liuxia, and even Yuguo are shown to find meaning in their interactions with their natural surroundings. This is evident in the myths they impart, which personify nature, and in Liuxia's adoration of the sun, moon, and stars. This kinship with nature is linked with sustainability because it recognizes the reciprocity of humans with nonhumans and emphasizes relating to the other over prioritizing the individual self. These connections are most embodied in *Yuguo and His Mother* where the boy reconnects to his culture, both learning about Evenki mythology and discovering how to relate with the nonhuman world. Through Yuguo's familiarization of Evenki culture, Gu Tao implies a rejuvenating force from animism even for people with little prior exposure to it.

In the *Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, Nurit Bird-Davis extends A. Irving Hallowell's insights that "indigenous life is organized around the existence of persons, human and otherwise, rather than around materiality, functionality and abstraction" (Harvey 39). Bird-Davis describes indigenous thinking as "I relate, therefore I am" contrasting the Cartesian maxim of "I think, therefore I am," which is a cognition and self that is "bounded at the skin and isolated from others" (Harvey 39). Within the animist paradigm, projective activities such as "dream encounters, greetings, praise songs, give-aways" are valuable because they cement relationality (Harvey 40). In contrast, Cartesianism refuses to acknowledge aspects of life that cannot be quantified and subject to a "mathematical, empirical and replicable test" (Harvey 51). Where a Cartesian paradigm emphasizes an individual and a cause, animistic thinking emphasizes "who is dividually, and therefore collectively, acting, rather than what causes" (Harvey 49). As these ideas prioritize relationality over the self, animism emphasizes collective power and agency.

The power of animism's relationality is demonstrated in the transformation of Yuguo after arriving in Evenki lands because he gradually adopts nomadic habits. The boy is initially unfamiliar with the Evenki nomadic traditions and

finds the practices bizarre. Due to Yuguo's upbringing in a boarding school, Weijia is pessimistic about the boy's prospects of survival in the mountains. The hunter believes that the boy will be unable to adapt, only to find that the boy gradually acclimates to the native way of life. This is expressed in actions where Yuguo comes to prefer sleeping on the floor rather than a sleeper and even considers eating raw meat (Fornieles). These attitudes are complemented by his proximity to his mother, who shows him around the reindeer while constantly comparing him with the sun and stars. When Yuguo was at boarding school, Liuxia longed for her lost son and in his absence, directed her affection towards the sun. After her drinking, she has been found lying down in her tent to let the summer sun shine on her face, personifying the sun as her son (Fornieles). In doing so, Liuxia not only symbolically reunites with her son, she expresses an animist relationality in which she professes gratitude to the sun for gifting warmth. Sometimes, Liuxia turns her affection to the stars as a substitute for her son, describing the stars as her children. The power of relationality is further demonstrated in her positive comparison of her son to baby reindeer. She is often shown singing to reindeer and caressing them, treating them like her own children. In turn, the reindeer express affection as shown when they voraciously surround Liuxia and her son during a feeding session and lick them. When bonding with the animals, Yuguo is able to access a deeper spiritual reservoir, reminiscent of creation myths.

Creation myths are important for explaining the natural world to a people and strengthening communal bonds. The Evenki have a moon creation myth in which the Khingan Mountains were once a great ocean and there was no moon, only sun and stars. But when the sea began to drift, the Khingan mountains arose and the birds debated which trees to plant. The cuckoo arrived in the midst of this, viewed as the first shaman who determined the area's plants. As birds emerged from the lake, the cuckoo decided that the moon would appear every 15 days. As the myth is narrated in the documentary, the narration is paired with a montage of the Khingan Mountains at night and sunrise. The myth and its juxtaposition with a time-lapse of forests elucidates the importance of relationality, particularly birds who are venerated as crucial shapers of the environment. "The Storyteller" by Walter Benjamin defines oral storytellers as vital to a community by imparting narratives face-to-face, preserving collective identity (Benjamin 171). As the narrators of these myths impart the stories to younger people like Yuguo, they ensure the myths will shape future generations. Quoting Walter Benjamin, Guattari mentions storytelling as being analogous to a potter making a clay vessel, adding distinct touches to the object instead of expressing "the pure essence of a thing, like information or a report" (Guattari 67). In spite of his alcoholism, Weijia demonstrates a powerful artistic spirit, singing verses such as "listening to the silence of the spring, the bright skies

carry a familiar sound." This encouragement of a keenness for nature reflects Guattari's observation that "Individuals must become both more united and increasingly different" in response to global capitalism (Guattari 69). Due to Yuguo's different background from Weijia, coming of age in the city, the boy will appreciate the creation myth differently.

Animism's importance in Evenki life is demonstrated by the awareness of reciprocity. This is shown in *The Last Moose of Aoluguya* when the hunters venerate fire as a deity for gifting beloved light and heat to humanity; in turn, they must show gratitude. Describing such beliefs, Richard Fraser mentions that when a fire is lit, "a person will first offer a portion of liquor into it as a gift" (Fraser 135). Fire is given personhood and is even seen to communicate via crackles and hisses (Fraser 135). The reverence of the fire deity reflects Georg Heyne's observation that "All events in nature, any success or failure in human activities, illness, death" are caused by spirits (Heyne 378). A prominent embodiment of human and nonhuman kinships in Evenki culture is the role of the shaman, who is believed to be personally chosen by spirits (Heyne 393). This role is elaborated in *Last Moose of Aoluguya* when Weijia mentions his grandmother was a shaman who once slapped him for upturning an ant nest because he was ruining their home. Despite the fact that Weijia harmed ants, his grandmother scolds him as if he hurt other human beings. In this memory, the shaman makes little distinction between the human and the nonhuman, refusing to recognize a hierarchy. Within these beliefs, the Evenki do not see human beings as entitled to exploit nature when they are deeply indebted to its gifts.

Despite their alcoholism and despair, Weijia and Liuxia derive profound insight from their people's animistic practices. It is because animism emphasizes relationality, giving a picture of a world where the Evenki have renewed environmental, social, and mental ecologies. The effects of animism are evident in how Weijia continues his ways of hunting, Liuxia expresses adulation of the natural world, and Yuguo becomes acquainted with his heritage. What is crucial in animistic beliefs is the importance of nonhumans in shaping the world, calling for humans to respect nonhuman beings as varied as fire and birds. This attention to reciprocity exposes pitfalls of an anthropocentric worldview which emphasizes the individual self over the relationality of beings. With this perspective, Gu Tao expresses questions toward the viability of Chinese modernization.

Conclusion

Throughout the trilogy, Weijia, Liuxia and the larger Evenki people are shown to be in a state of disarray caused by an anthropocentric trifecta of disenchantment, enclosure, and despair under a rapidly industrializing People's

Republic of China. Disenchantment is the creation of anthropocentric ideas that bifurcate the human and the nonhuman, justifying the former to exploit the latter. To enable this exploitation, the lands of the Evenki are subject to enclosure, hindering their hunting traditions and subsequently pushing them into a meaningless despair. Despair is manifested when the Evenki descend into alcoholism, violence, and fraying communal bonds. In such a state, they are likely to be heavily Sinicized. Despite anthropocentrism threatening the viability of propagating hunting customs and tending reindeer herds, the Evenki's animistic beliefs offer catharsis. Catharsis is the regeneration of environmental, mental and social ecologies in which humans find different ways of relating to the nonhuman world. This perspective casts doubt on how Chinese modernity is an imposed homogeneity and whether it is truly fulfilling. While showcasing modernity's pitfalls, Gu Tao illuminates how rethinking human and nonhuman bonds can answer this question.

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Pei-yin Lin
University of Hong Kong

Affective Cold War in Hong Kong and Taiwan: Vernacular Sentimentalism in *Star, Moon, Sun* and *The Blue and the Black*

Abstract This paper expands on research regarding early postwar U.S.-supported literary institutions in Hong Kong and Taiwan, as well as emotions or sentimentalism in pre-1949 Chinese literature and contemporary Chinese cinema. Focusing on the dynamic between Hong Kong and Taiwan, particularly the popular literature of the 1950s and 1960s, this study addresses a gap in scholarship using a comparative and affect-centric approach, concentrating on the relatively overlooked mid-20th century period. Viewing sentimentalism as excessive emotionality in literature and synonymous with *wenyi* films, the paper examines the melodramatic narratives in Xu Su's *Star, Moon, Sun* (1953) and Wang Lan's *The Blue and the Black* (1958) along with their film adaptations. It explores how the shared melodramatic imagination in these novels provides insight into the early postwar social imaginaries of Hong Kong and Taiwan and the cultural exchanges between the two regions. It begins by setting the context of the Hong Kong–Taiwan collaboration, then proceeds to analyze three ways in which sentimentalism is manifested in the two novels. It posits that romance-driven sentimentalism serves as a critical lens through which to explore themes, narratives, and social implications in these works. The sentimental male protagonists, symbolizing alternative masculinity, represent a non-communist cultural subjectivity of "free China." The emphasis on moral values and spirituality, primarily portrayed through female characters, indicates a common moral imperative among the writers, aligning these postwar romances from "free China" with leftist Chinese literature and films from preceding decades.

Keywords sentimentalism, Hong Kong, Taiwan, *The Blue and the Black*; *Sun, Moon, Star*

In the context of global Cold War backgrounds, studies on early postwar literature from Hong Kong and Taiwan have been influenced by U.S.-supported literary institutions.[1] Critics harbor varying views on U.S.-backed culture, with some welcoming its byproducts, such as modernist literature

1. For a general study of Taiwan's U.S.-aid culture, see Wang Meixiang. *"Meiyuan wenyi tizhi xia de Taigang wenxue* (1950–1962)" ("Unattributed Power: Taiwan and Hong Kong Literature under the U.S. Aid Literary Institution"). PhD thesis, Graduate School of Sociology, Tsinghua University, 2015.

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and new criticism, while others critique American cultural imperialism. In addition to examining the U.S.-influenced literary establishment, research on love and emotions is gaining traction. Jianmei Liu explores the evolution of the enduring "revolution plus love" formula in modern Chinese literature; Haiyan Lee historicizes love as a moral discourse in New Literature and revolutionary literature; and Rey Chow analyzes sentimentality in contemporary Chinese cinema amidst globalization.[2] Both Liu and Lee touch upon revolutionary literature, prompting reflection on the connection between love and revolution. Lee employs the concept of "supplementary logic" to explain the role of romance in revolutionary literature, while Wang Ban (1997) posits that love is sublimed for the cause of revolution. In Chow's film studies, she redefines the sentimental, translating it as "*wenqing zhuyi*" ("warm sentiment-ism"), typically known for its "apparent emotional excess," as "an inclination or a disposition toward making compromises and toward making-do and even—and especially—that which is oppressive and unbearable" (17, 15, 18). Such unbearable realities include poverty, exile, and familial conflicts. Instead of critiquing or demystifying sentimentalism, Chow is concerned with how sentimentalism, though fabulated, has become a delicate identity negotiation process (within Chinese cinema) in a globalized age for cross-cultural recognition. Different from Chow's comprehensive perspective, Miao defines the sentimental as *qinqing*, equivalent to kinship relations, in her analysis of contemporary Chinese films, whereas Liu characterizes it as "poetics" (*shixue*) in her investigation of the aesthetic progression of modern Chinese literature from sentimentality to tragedy.[3]

From the existing studies, two main tendencies emerge. One focuses on pre-1949 Chinese literature or contemporary Chinese cinema, while the other concentrates on one specific literary or filmic production locale. This paper broadly defines sentimentalism as excessive emotionality. In literature, it manifests as authors crafting melodramatic narratives revolving around romance, moral dilemmas, patriotism, or characters immersed in emotional experiences. In cinema, the *wenyi* genre is a key channel for expressing sentimentality, as well as prioritizing emotions and feelings,[4] although other genres may also incorporate sentimental elements. As the cases analyzed in this paper are adaptations from fiction, aligning with the original notion of *wenyi* films as screen adaptations of foreign literature (Yeh 447), sentimentalism can be considered synonymous with *wenyi* films in this study.

2. See Jianmei Liu, *Revolution Plus Love: Literary History, Women's Bodies, and Thematic Repetition in Twentieth-century Chinese Fiction* (Honolulu: Hawai'i UP, 2003); Haiyan Lee, *Evolution of the Heart: A Genealogy of Love in China*, 1900–1950 (Redwood City: Stanford UP, 2006); Rey Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films: Attachment in the Age of Global Visibility* (New York: Columbia UP, 2007).

3. See Hui Miao, *The Sentimental in Chinese Cinema* (Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2022); Liu Liping, *Xiandai zhongguo wenxue de "ganshang" shixue yanjiu* [*Enlightenment and sentimentalism: A study of Chinese modern sentimentalism*] (Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2020).

4. This resonates with the definition used in Tsai Kuo-jung's *Zhongguo jindai wenyi dianying yanjiu* [*Studies on Contemporary Chinese wenyi Cinema*] (Taipei: Film Library Press, 1985).

This paper expands the temporal scope of current research by focusing on the overlooked 1950s and 1960s period, exploring sentimental manifestations concurrently in two distinct settings—early postwar Hong Kong and Taiwan—by analyzing affect-centered literature within the context of anti-communism. The study also delves into the common habitus shared by writers and filmmakers in these regions. While building upon previous discussions regarding the intersection of aesthetics and politics, this paper introduces a slight twist by shifting the focus from the "love plus revolution" motif to a "love plus war/anti-Communism" theme in the U.S.-influenced Hong Kong and Taiwan.[5] The primary case studies selected for this research are Xu Su's *Star, Moon, Sun* (*Xingxing yueliang taiyang*, 1953) and Wang Lan's *The Blue and the Black* (*Lan yu hei*, 1958) due to their wide readership and canonical status.[6] *Star, Moon, Sun* is renowned as Hong Kong's top-selling *wenyi* (romance or literary) novel (Huang Nanxiang 2), whereas *The Blue and the Black*, serialized in *Zhongguo funü* (*Chinese Women Monthly*) for three years starting from 1954, is recognized as a significant anti-Communist novel that has been adapted across different media. Despite their popularity, critics have dismissed these works as "shallow" and "sentimental" *wenyi* pieces, attributing their appeal to the perceived emotional void experienced by young urbanites in a society constrained by societal taboos and doctrines (Hang 29). Rather than harboring a derogatory stance toward sentimentalism, I view the two novels as a starting point for reappraising the early postwar historical experience. My objective is to explore how the shared melodramatic imagination in these popular novels can offer insights into the early postwar social imaginaries of Hong Kong and Taiwan, as well as the cultural exchanges between the two regions. I term this perspective "vernacular sentimentalism," inspired by Hansen (1999), to explore the collective sentimental imagination that emerged in 1950s and 1960s Hong Kong and Taiwan. By examining the collaboration in *wenyi* filmmaking between these two regions, I aim to establish a "dual-city" approach to the sentimental discourse of "love plus war/anti-Communism," with the goal of capturing the development of a shared sentimental ethos. Furthermore, I will analyze the characteristics of the sentimental expressions in the case studies and discuss their wider implications.

The HK–Taiwan Link (and Beyond): Wenyi Film Collaboration and Vernacular Sentimentalism

The emergence of "middle-brow" sentimental literature and film production and consumption in Hong Kong and Taiwan during the mid-twentieth

5. Examples include *The Asia Pictorial* which attracted several writers from Taiwan to participate in its writing competitions, and Hong Kong critic Lin Yiliang's (Song Qi), involved in the editorial work of the modernist journal *Wenxue zazhi* [*Literary Magazine*].

6. Both were chosen to be in the "100 Chinese-language Novels of the 20th Century" in a survey published by *Asia Weekly* in 1999.

century was influenced by several factors. One was the HK–Taiwan film collaboration, which involved shooting on location in Taiwan or the migration of intellectuals and artists between the two regions, particularly after 1949. Certain scenes in MP&GI's *Star, Moon, Sun* (1961) and Shaw Brothers Studio's *The Blue and the Black* (1966) were filmed in Taiwan,[7] and the Nationalist government's (*Kuomintang*, hereafter the KMT) army took part in creating realistic war scenes in both films (Su 205; Huang R 44). Around the mid-1950s, the KMT government introduced policies to facilitate the Taiwan/Hong Kong connections. Despite the restrictions on importing foreign films, HK-made films were deemed "local" by the KMT government, allowing them to benefit from governmental subsidies. The establishment of Hong Kong and Kowloon Cinema and Theatrical Enterprise Free General Association, commonly known as the "Free General Association," enabled Taiwan to foster a strong alliance with right-leaning filmmakers, actors, and actresses from Hong Kong.[8] While the film workers from Hong Kong may not have had explicit political affiliations, the lucrative market in Taiwan provided an incentive for them to maintain friendly relations with the KMT government. In addition to the external policies and context, the movement of artists between the two regions, such as director Yi Wen (also known as Evan Yang) of *Star, Moon, Sun* and director Doe Ching (Tao Qin) of *The Blue and the Black*, played a noticeable role in facilitating the dynamic connections between Hong Kong and Taiwan during the early postwar years.

Utilizing Bourdieu's notion of habitus, the cultural and social inclinations of the artists involved are instrumental in molding the *wenyi* attributes of the films. Yi Wen, Doe Ching, Xu Su, and Wang Lan, all hailing from scholarly backgrounds, contribute significantly to the cultural and social dispositions reflected in their works. Yi was a skilled scriptwriter, lyricist, and director. The film was released by MP&GI after they won the copyright battle against Shaw Brothers. Similarly, Ching studied Diplomacy at Shanghai's St. John's University and gained recognition as a translator before graduating. He started directing at Changcheng Studio, then moved to Shaw Brothers and MP&GI. While at MP&GI in the late 1950s, he honed his unique style, showcased in his renowned film *The Blue and the Black*, released by Shaw Brothers before his death. Both he and Yi were St. John's University alumni with parallel career paths,[9]

7. Other HK films, such as He Menghua's *Journey to the West* (*Xiyouji*), and Luo Zhen's *Too Late for Love* (*Fenghuo wanliqing*), were also partially shot in Taiwan. Those directors based in Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore, and Malaysia planned to come to Taiwan to make films, too. See Huang Jianye, ed., *Kuashiji Taiwan dianying shilu* 1898–2000 [*The Chronicle of Taiwan Cinema 1898–2000*] (Taipei: Wenjianhui, 2005), 480.

8. Hong Kong's film workers in the early post-war years had to be members of the Free General Association to be able to work and screen films in Taiwan. See Zuo Guifang's "*Taigang dianying de hudong (yi)* [The Taiwan–Hong Kong Film Interactions (One)]," in Huang Jianye, ed., *Kuashiji Taiwan dianying shilu 1898-2000 [The Chronicle of Taiwan Cinema 1898-2000*] (Taipei: Wenjianhui, 2005), 22.

9. Yi Wen's father Yang Tianji was a cultured high-ranking KMT official. Yi grew up in an intellectual environment, befriending the Shanghai-based new-perceptionist writers. He left Shanghai for Hong Kong via Taiwan. Doe Ching came from a highly professional background; his father was a successful accountant in Shanghai.

evolving from scriptwriters to acclaimed directors, notably in *wenyi* films.

Xu Su and Wang Lan also share a common literary and artistic background. Upon arriving in Hong Kong in 1950, Xu worked as an editor at Freedom Publisher and later established Highland Press in 1951, which published *Star, Moon, Sun* in 1954. He also contributed to journals like *Renren wenxue* (*Everyman Literature*) and *Hailan* (*Waves*). The Freedom Publisher, primarily comprising Youth Party members, held significant influence in Hong Kong's literary scene during the 1950s. Eventually, the Youth Party absorbed members from the Great League of Democratic China, including Xu Bin (Xu Su's original name). After this transition, Xu founded Highland Press. While Freedom Publisher focused on anti-Communist works, Highland Press offered a diverse selection, including literature for young readers and melodramatic novels. Wang, on the other hand, founded Red and Blue Publisher and engaged actively in various literary organizations upon moving to Taipei.

The network of literary and film personnel was crucial in expanding the popularity of both novels and ensuring the critical acclaim of their film adaptations.[10] The involvement of talents based in Hong Kong was advantageous to Taiwan's film industry, and the evident popularity of Hong Kong films in Taiwan during that period can be illustrated by looking at the year 1962 as an example. Li Han-hsiang's *Yang Guifei* was the top of the list of 1962 Taiwan's highest-grossing Chinese-language film, whereas Yi Wen's *Star, Moon, Sun* came in second place. Among the top ten box office hits, only two were produced in Taiwan and eight were Hong Kong films (Huang 419). *The Blue and the Black* was equally warmly received in 1966. It ranked as the fourth highest-grossing film in Taipei and emerged as the top-grossing Chinese-language film of the year.[11] In Hong Kong, it was the number one box office hit among all twenty Shaw Brothers films shown in 1966 (*United Daily News*, 8). Thanks to transcultural collaboration and the Shaw Brothers' theater network in Southeast Asia, the influence of these films extended beyond book sales. The popularity of *Star, Moon, Sun* reached beyond Hong Kong and Taiwan, with strong sales in Southeast Asia (Liu Shuyong 410; Qiu). Yanan's Singaporean background could have been a tactic to attract the Southeast Asian audience. The literary bond between Hong Kong and Southeast Asia is further demonstrated by Xu Su's Highland Press, which published works related to

10. *Star, Moon, Sun* won the best feature film, the best actress (Lucilla You), the best script, and the best color cinematography in the first Golden Horse Award in 1962. *The Blue and The Black* won the best film in the 1966 Asia Pacific Film Festival as well as one of the three best feature films—runner up in the fifth Golden Horse Award in 1967.

11. The top three are the British James Bond film *Thunderball* and the American films *The Sound of Music* and *Battle of the Bulge*, respectively. Other popular Chinese-language films (ranking fifth and sixth) were Taiwan-made ones—*Many Enchanting Nights* [*Jidu xiyang hong*] adapted from Qiong Yao's eponymous novel, and *Fire Balls* [*Huanwo heshan*] in the "healthy realist" style. Huang Jianye, ed., *Kuashiji Taiwan dianying shilu 1898-2000* [*The Chronicle of Taiwan Cinema 1898-2000*], fn. 7, p. 523.

Southeast Asia by authors like Huang Sicheng and Huang Ya. In the 1960s, Xu launched the monthly journal *Dangdai wenyi* (*Current Literature*) which made an impact in Southeast Asia.[12] Chinese-speaking communities in the region likely embraced these novels and *wenyi* films because of a common pan-Chinese sensibility shared with readers in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Interestingly, the box office result of *Star, Moon, Sun* was better than Wong Ho's film *14000 Witnesses*, based on the 1954 true story about 14,000 anti-Communist Korean War criminals' arrival in Taiwan. *Star, Moon, Sun* ranked nineth on the list of ten highest-grossing films in Taiwan in 1962 (Su 201). If the war context served as an audience-appealing element, then the greater success of *Star, Moon, Sun* suggests that audience were drawn to its love theme. Compared to the novel, in which A-Lan's fiancé, Li Zhizhong, dies in the war, the film allows Li to re-encounter A-Lan, helping her to dissuade Jianbai from pursuing his love for her, as requested by A-Lan. While Li may be seen as a "clear current amid the overflow of love" (Pan 8), he is almost denied romantic love. His helping A-Lan implies that the national is again prioritized before the personal because, in doing so, Jianbai is expected to devote himself fully to the nation. Moreover, his feelings for A-Lan remain subtle and unrequited. In comparison, Jianbai is largely emotion-driven and only occasionally patriotic. Although his indecision about love causes the plotline to be "mutually off-setting" or "ridiculous" (Leung 168), Jianbai remains the last character in the novel and film that sticks to his feelings. He even claims that for true love, even life can be sacrificed.

The sentiments evoked through these two novels and their film adaptations open the possibility to reconsider early Cold War experience. Compared to modernism and the publication competition between the left- and right-wing forces, the melodramatic works by Xu Su, popular among readers at that time, remain nearly unexplored. Xu's *Spark* (*Xingxing zhi huo*) was the first novel published by the author after arriving in Hong Kong; it has a similar love-plus-war plotline to *Star, Moon, Sun*. *Spark* was advertised as "a realist novel mixed with blood and tears in a free literary field."[13] This indicates that the niche of Xu's creative works lies in providing melodramatic tales set outside Communist China. Critics have expressed reservations about the film's aesthetic quality. For example, Sam Ho claimed that Yi was at his best when shooting small films (*xiaopin*) and was not well-suited for large-scale and big-setting films (Suzi). Du Yunzhi echoed Ho's view, considering that Yi was a master of man/woman love, rather than that of heroic or epic films. The 2009 exhibition "The

12. For an analysis on this journal's network, see Ngai Ling Tun's *Dangdai wenyi yanjiu: Yi Xianggang, Maxin, Nanyue de wenxue chuangzuo wei zhongxin de kaocha* [*A Study on Current Literature: An Investigation Focusing on the Literary Creation of Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, and South Vietnam*] (Hong Kong: Tiandi tushu, 2019).

13. See the inserted page at the end of *Star, Moon, Sun* that advertises the second edition of *Spark*.

Lasting Affection" (*Ernü qingchang*), organized by the Hong Kong Film Archive, further highlighted Yi's unique portrayal of human emotions. However, this characteristic of Yi should not be considered a "flaw," as the love-heavy narrative often effectively reflects the tension between the audience's desire for comfort and the ideological backdrop in which these films were created.

Compared to the "soft" evaluations surrounding the novel *Star, Moon, Sun* and Yi's directorship, The *Blue and the Black* was praised as a representative work within the "anti-Communist and nostalgic" (*fangong huaixiang*) or "diasporic" framework. This suggests that the novel's sentimentalism is deemed less significant than its contextual portrayal. If the sentimentality of *Star, Moon, Sun* is downplayed, then the case for *The Blue and the Black* is unconditionally "elevated" to justify its standing as a classical wartime novel. As for Ching's adaptation, the evaluation seemed more neutral. Wang Jicong praises the film for being "faithful to the original novel" (*Central Daily News,* 9) while Chung Po Yin (*Hong Kong Memory*) and Huang Ren (44) commend it as a notable achievement of the Shaw Brothers' *wenyi* films. This acclaim likely stems from Ching's concluding the film with a humanitarian touch, reuniting Tang Qi and Xingya instead of depicting Tang Qi's involvement with the guerrillas as a frontier nurse. While Wang Lan's novel explores the dual themes of "love" and "anti-Japanese war," the film accentuates the former, resulting in a narrative that is less politically charged.

Nevertheless, the dominant love theme, based primarily on the male protagonists' superfluous amorous passions and love, is subject to sociopolitical constraints. In other words, love may not be sufficient to make a change. In *Star, Moon, Sun*, it is either deemed impossible (as in the case of A-Lan), compensated (such as Qiuming's religious pursuit), or subdued (such as through Yanan's devotion to the "greater" national cause). In *The Blue and the Black*, Tang Qi's pursuit of love is both compensated and subdued, whereas her antithesis Meizhuang's pragmatism and self-centric manner in love illustrate the fickle and expedient nature of love. To elaborate further, I will provide close reading of both novels below, focusing on the three shared characteristics of sentimentalism: emphasis on pure love, sentimental male characterization, and hyperbolic rhetorics.

Extolling Pure and Altruistic Love

The sentimentality of *Star, Moon, Sun* is predominantly showcased through its male protagonist Xu Jianbai's complex love entanglements with three females. Xu Su, in his preface, already specified that the novel did not aim to make a profit by pleasing the targeted readers with sensational plotlines. Rather, it hoped to bring some "love, heat, and light" to the readers (1954, unpaginated). Unsurprisingly, it emphasizes positive qualities of life rather than a desire-

driven romance, like the "sublimation" process coined by Wang Ban (1997). The title refers to the three female protagonists—A-Lan (the "star"), Qiuming (the "moon"), and Yanan (the "sun").[14] The sentimental tone is established from the beginning with narrator Jianbai reminiscing about his childhood memories of listening to grandmother's stories while gazing at the stars. A-Lan, Jianbai's childhood sweetheart, is introduced, setting the stage for a pure and innocent relationship that is deemed scandalous due to A-Lan's arranged marriage. On the verge of getting married with his cousin Qiuming, Jianbai feels his responsibility for A-Lan, urging her to elope with him. In high school, Jianbai becomes attracted to the strong-willed editor from Southeast Asia, Su Yanan, while A-Lan writes to him and asks him to love Qiuming.

Each heroine represents a distinct archetype. A-Lan represents the frail and sickly country girl with few alternatives in her life. Qiuming resembles the May Fourth "enlightened" woman. As an educated woman from a respectable family, she doubts that marriage will always bring happiness to women, even though she yearns for a marriage based on "a spiritual unification of two people" (79). Yanan epitomizes a man-like heroine who prioritizes national welfare over her personal emotions. Considering Jianbai's feelings for A-Lan and Yanan, Qiuming does not insist on her betrothal with Jianbai. A-Lan abandons the idea of elopement out of moral considerations, not wanting to hurt Qiuming.

Unable to resolve his love triangle, Jianbai flees and coincidentally encounters Yanan. When he discovers A-Lan has submitted her creative works to the publication under Yanan's charge, the three women become intertwined. Yanan then realizes her feelings for Jianbai. She values spiritual congeniality and believes it is "a union of [two individuals'] spirit and soul" (202). This proclamation resembles Qiuming's extensive discussion with Jianbai on the nature of love. In both instances, pure love is seen as a paramount quality in a relationship. The narrative emphasizes not only pure love, but also selfless love, as all three women sacrifice their happiness for Jianbai's sake.

The novel's love-centric sentimentalism halts temporarily with the outbreak of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, enhancing Yanan's devotion to national survival. During the journey southward, she remains calm and determined, contrasting other protagonists who are either physically sickened or emotionally shattered by the wartime casualty. Yanan's brevity in public affairs can be seen as a camouflage of her emotional vulnerability, considering that she grew up in a broken family, needing to be self-reliant at an early age. In the film, she rejects a soldier's declaration of love to her, stating that she has chosen her nation over love.

The celebration of altruistic love is revealed through the choices made by

14. Yao Xueyin's 1944 novel *Chunnuan huakai de shihou* (The Flower-blossoming Springtime) also uses the metaphor of the star, moon, and sun to refer to the female characters. Xu Su faced allegations of plagiarism, but he denied them.

the three heroines, guided by the Chinese concept of "sacrificing for someone's sake" (*chengquan*) as a female virtue. Chen Xianmao incorporates Confucian principles such as "forgiveness" (*shu*) and "courtesy" (*rang*) to elucidate the self-sacrifice of these female characters, claiming that they merit inclusion in the monument of chastity (310). A-Lan lets Jianbai go twice, understanding Qiuming's affection for him and Jianbai's love for Yanan. She lives a life dedicated to others—initially for Qiuming and later for her patients. Yanan declines Jianbai's proposal, encouraging him to be with Qiuming, while Qiuming steps back from pursuing Jianbai's love and ultimately chooses to become a nun in Hong Kong. All three women opt to distance themselves from Jianbai out of deep affection for him.

The concept of *chengquan* is particularly evident in both A-Lan's and Yanan's farewell letters to Jianbai, as well as in their diaries. In Yanan's diary, she details how she financially supports Jianbai by paying him generously for his articles out of her own pocket. A-Lan's diary reveals her selfless nature as she shows concern for Jianbai, worries about Qiuming, and suppresses her feelings for Jianbai to protect Yanan. Jianbai only understands A-Lan's departure after his friend Ziyun clarifies that she wants Jianbai and Yanan to be together. This self-sacrificing mindset unites the three women and is foundational for the female bonding depicted in the film. In contrast to the novel, where A-Lan and Yanan never cross paths, A-Lan encounters Yanan and conveys Jianbai's affection to her in the film. Yanan fulfils her promise to visit A-Lan after the war, and both Qiuming and Yanan are present when A-Lan passes away. A scene symbolizing their deep friendship in the film shows A-Lan attempting to knit sweaters for Qiuming and Yanan using red thread. Qiuming holds onto the wool while, after A-Lan's passing, the ball of wool rolls to Yanan's feet. The absence of Jianbai in this scene could invite a feminist interpretation, but that can be problematic as these heroines consistently consider Jianbai and prioritize the feelings of others. Their thoughtful and rational demeanor stand in stark contrast to Jianbai's emotional outpouring and sentimentality.

In *The Blue and the Black*, romance serves as the core to convey its anti-Communist message. The interplay between the political and personal love narratives, however, invites deeper analysis. Set between 1937 and 1950, the novel explores Xingya's tangled relationships with the strong-willed orphan Tang Qi, and later with the indulged warlord's daughter Zheng Meizhuang. The symbolic title portrays "blue" as synonymous with "freedom and benevolence," representing KMT rule, while "black" embodies "degeneration and downfall," encompassing the Japanese, pro-Japanese, and Communist influences. It can also be understood contextually as an implication of the U.S. (blue)/U.S.S.R. (black) confrontation. Wang Lan once called for readers' maximum effort and

greatest sacrifice to reach the result of blue's victory over 'black' ("*Lan yu hei houji*", 20). Given this novel's intimate connection between personal love and external wartime context, the "blue" can be interpreted as Tang Qi's self-reliant struggle, while the "black" represents Meizhuang's hedonism.

The intertwining between the collective and personal in the novel can be interpreted as a reflection of Xingya's rational and emotional facets respectively, as the story is told primarily from his perspective. The narrative opens with Xingya feeling melancholic after encountering Tang Qi, only to be reminded by his friend He Li of his duty to combat Japan. This sets the stage for the central theme of love versus war in the novel. While Xingya values the anti-Japanese war, he also cherishes his pursuit of love. His distress mounts when he learns Tang Qi's family's plans to wed her to a prominent pro-Japanese man. He believes a man's ability to protect a woman reflects his capability to defend his country. Xingya aspires to dedicate himself to both the greater good and his personal desires but is frequently reminded that prioritizing the collective is essential. His inner turmoil intensifies when his friend He Meng urges him to enlist in the anti-Japanese forces. Different from Xingya's hesitation, Tang Qi is portrayed as a proactive and self-reliant career woman whose progressive behavior challenges conventional feminine norms. The sexual assault on Tang Qi by her employer—a doctor with strong ties to the Japanese—highlights the gendered nationalist perspective that implies only men, or at least not "fallen" women like Tang Qi, are deemed capable of safeguarding the nation's survival. The incident further reinforces the love and (anti-Japanese) war connection. Tang Qi's series of hardships function in the novel as a journey of moral purification, culminating in her refusal of Xingya's love as she embraces Christianity and yearns to join the frontlines. The fusion of religious devotion and anti-communist beliefs in her character delivers a distinct political message as the novel concludes.

Compared to the original novel, Doe Ching's adaptation places a stronger emphasis on the theme of love. The war theme and anti-Communist message are notably less pronounced or even absent in his interpretation. In the novel, the He brothers are the main prompters of Xingya's patriotism. However, a scene in the film shows Xingya's inclination toward discussing love with He Meng when he delivers He Li's letter. Doe Ching also strengthens Tang Qi's image as a character devoted not only to the common good but also to Xingya; exemplified by his composition of the lyrics for the interlude titled "Waiting Foolishly" (*Chichi di deng*) to emphasize the latter. Furthermore, the film concludes on a positive note as Tang Qi arrives in Taiwan and is reunited with Xingya. In parallel with the film's focus on love, its anti-Communist theme present in the original novel becomes weakened. A striking deviation occurs in the film where Xingya is seen as being shot by the Japanese instead of the

Eighth Route Army as depicted in the novel. In the novel, the anti-Communist standpoint plays a crucial role in establishing the foundation for the romantic relationship between Xingya and Meizhuang. By downplaying this element, the film becomes less politically charged and more entertaining, likely driven by the Shaw Brothers' intent to market the film primarily on its romantic theme.

Sentimental Males and Accompanying Gender Politics

Both novels showcase a sentimental male protagonist from a relatively affluent background. Nevertheless, the female characters span a spectrum, creating intricate gender dynamics within the characterization. In *Star, Moon, Sun*, Jianbai's indecisive and emotionally driven personality contributes greatly to the novel's sentimentality. He joins the army with the objective of finding Yanan. He gains courage to fight against the Japanese only when thinking of Yanan. He often reproaches himself for his inability to commit to one woman. While recovering in Kunming, he is tormented by nightmares in which all three women hold him accountable for not returning their affection. Although he initially chooses to marry Yanan upon their post-war reunion, Jianbai's subsequent pursuit of Qiuming after Yanan's departure for Southeast Asia highlights his emotional indecision, contrasting with the unwavering loyalty demonstrated by the women toward him.

The emotionally fragile Jianbai is antithetical to the resolute heroines. A-Lan, despite her humble beginnings, pursues her literary interest and contributes to the war effort by serving on the frontline medical team. Qiuming participates in a troupe entertaining army units, while Yanan is portrayed as a capable student leader and courageous soldier. Jianbai's sentimentality allows him the freedom to explore love more openly, driven by personal motivations rather than national concerns. The females, mostly characterized by their moralistic and altruistic virtues in both national and personal realms, demonstrate faithfulness to Jianbai but find themselves restricted from fully expressing their true emotions. Qiuming even quotes from Confucianism, Daoism, and Christianity to explain the importance of being self-disciplined emotionally and behaviorally. Consequently, their lives are all tragic. Xu confesses that he is influenced by Western philosophy and the Eastern notion of "destiny" (*yuanfen*), considering tragedy can move people more easily. He further adds that *Star, Moon, Sun* is set to be a tragic story. While critics contend that the novel's wartime backdrop adds credibility to its tragedy (Du 296), it is worth noting that the true essence of tragedy stems from the heroines' quest for the purity of love, imbuing the narrative with a poignant sentimentality.

The novel's female-centric moral message is conveyed through the repeated emphasis on Platonic love, verified typically through Jianbai's interactions with

his three lovers. Qiuming maintains a non-sexual relationship with Jianbai and eventually sublimates her feelings for Jianbai through her religious belief. Yanan and A-Lan both control their physical contact with Jianbai. While rowing a boat under the moonlight, Yanan could not help but throw herself into Jianbai's arms, asking him to declare his love for her. While Jianbai's desire is ignited by trying to "hold a physical body mixed with all of the three [A-Lan, Qiuming, and Yanan]" (Xu 202), Yanan swiftly sits up and instructs Jianbai that love occurs when two people's souls are in harmony. Later, Yanan suppresses her affections for Jianbai by pushing him away. Likewise, when A-Lan leans against Jianbai and caresses his face, hair, and chest, she feels embarrassed and concerned about potential gossip. The novel discourages the expression of affection through physical contact, allowing it to focus on the female protagonists' prioritization of either collective welfare or selfless devotion to Jianbai.

Jianbai's emotional irresolution results in his exclusion from being appropriated into the novel's moral discourse. Several instances depict Jianbai's uncertainty in choosing between the women in his life, whom he symbolically refers to as the star, moon, and sun, lending a poetic essence to the narrative. For instance, Jianbai experiences emotional turmoil upon receiving a letter from A-Lan. In the letter, A-Lan quotes the German writer Clemens Brentano's poem to express her feelings for Jianbai, causing her letter to be "extra-flowery." This chapter ends with Jianbai dramatically professing his love for A-Lan, telling her he has never forgotten her, much like he has never overlooked the shimmering stars when the moon graces the sky. This declaration hints at Jianbai's inclination toward loving multiple women, foreshadowing him as a self-fashioned Don Juan figure who operates with minimal moral constraints. His solitude at the end could be seen as a symbolic punishment, yet he sacrifices the least and receives the most love. His "freedom" entails a sentimental and relatively "effeminate" (male) subjectivity as a symbol of postwar Hong Kong.

In *The Blue and the Black*, Xingya is depicted as timid, sentimental, and lacking in worldly experience, often seen as a younger brother figure. To serve his country, Xingya excels physically as a champion athlete at the university. His ultimate amputation alludes to Communist oppression, while also underscoring his vulnerability when compared to the robust and able-bodied He Li. The two female protagonists are also depicted in opposition to each other. Meizhuang's childlike personality resembles Xingya's, yet he perceives her as pampered, carefree, and innocent, providing a refreshing contrast amidst tumultuous times. On the other hand, Tang Qi is characterized as strong-minded, patriotic, and thoughtful, despite the sacrifices she makes for her autonomy.

The tangled relationship between the male and female characters creates a dual narrative of personal/love vs. national/Nationalist. For Wang Lan, personal and national destiny are tightly bound and inseparable (Chang 43).

But for Xingya, the two appear incompatible. Throughout the novel, Xingya continues to oscillate between rationality and sentimentality, as well between patriotism and personal love. His pessimism over his relationship with Tang Qi pushes him to focus on wartime politics. His missing Tang Qi distracts him while serving the army, although occasionally Tang Qi becomes a source of strength for Xingya during fierce battles. Later, also because of his unsmooth relationship with Meizhuang, Xingya becomes devoted to politics. Overall, the national aspect appears quite dominant, and is often associated with positive connotations such as freedom and peace. Tang Qi is praised more because of her patriotic devotion than her self-reliance as a woman, which again exhibits Wang Lan's emphasis on the national.

The novel's characterization reflects a gendered value system, with Xingya torn between the "blue" represented by Tang Qi (her love for Xingya and contribution as a wartime nurse) and the "black" symbolized by Meizhuang (her lavish lifestyle and father's Communist leanings). Xingya grapples with a decision between two women who represent contrasting perspectives on love and life. Tang Qi prioritizes national peace over personal happiness, adding a moralistic undertone to the novel, while Meizhuang focuses on fulfilling her own desires and distancing herself from political upheaval, seeming self-serving. Meizhuang's penchant for luxury is often criticized as a moral flaw, setting her in contrast to the humble Tang Qi. However, Meizhuang's pursuit of material wealth encapsulates the essence of personal fulfillment. Unwilling to settle for a modest existence, she seeks partners who can provide her with opulence. Meanwhile, Tang Qi eventually decides to join the fight against Russia on the western Yunnan battlefield. Despite seeming to sacrifice personal love for the nation, she believes that taking an anti-Communist stance will lead to a bright future where she can be reunited with Xingya. In this regard, the collective and the personal are viewed as compatible, yet their realization is seen as a sequential process.

Meizhuang views Taiwan as a temporary sanctuary, contrasting with Tang Qi's vision of it as a utopian, anti-Communist bastion. This distinguishes Meizhuang from nationalist rhetoric, granting her the autonomy to evade assimilation into the grand narrative. However, the novel ultimately casts her as a "fallen" woman and reinforces its conservative moral stance by implying that Xingya will choose the "virtuous" woman and reunite with Tang Qi. The sentimental tone persists as Xingya feels a sense of melancholy and seeks guidance, but this introspective moment is quickly eclipsed by a more "masculine" narrative centered on the nation. In the climax, three male characters (He Li, Huiya's husband, and Xingya's best university friend) all implore Xingya to rally for the nation's cause. For example, Huiya's husband suggests that the only way for Xingya to meet Tang Qi again is for all of them

to devote themselves to the anti-Communist struggle to recover the nation, like Tang Qi's perception discussed above. Tang Qi's self-sacrifice thus can be seen as fitting into this "masculine" narrative, while Xingya's apprehension and Meizhuang's self-centeredness embody a more "feminine" and individualistic viewpoint. While Meizhuang is marginalized in the narrative due to her moral ambiguity, Xingya's life trajectory is realigned.

Overall, Xingya's sentimentality and wimpish personality as well as Meizhuang's hedonism and self-centrism considerably sabotage the novel's masculine political messages. Only toward the end do the two become compatible, although the open ending does not guarantee Xingya's reunification with Tang Qi. If considering this novel a bildungsroman of Xingya, then his love for Tang Qi, associated with national salvation, is crucial to his growth. However, this nationalist narrative is repeatedly diluted by Xingya's self-reflection about love. Moreover, it is "framed" within Xingya's perspective. Commencing with the claim that falling in love twice is a stroke of misfortune,[15] and culminating in Xingya's reaffirmation of his love for Tang Qi, the novel's romantic theme remains prominent and continues to blend with Wang Lan's war-driven and anti-Communist perspective, reconfirming his view that the national and personal realms are interconnected.

Hyperbolic Rhetorics and Genre Reflections

Both *Star, Moon, Sun* and *The Blue and the Black* are enriched with abundant plot twists, typical in love fiction to enhance its readability. However, in terms of literary techniques, the former is distinct in its rich cross-cultural literary references, while the latter stands out in its adroit employment of narrative suspense. In *Star, Moon, Sun*, besides quoting Brentano, the novel has other intertextual devices employed at the beginning of the story, enhancing its female characterization. For instance, Jianbai recites a poem by the Roman poet and astrologer Marcus Manilius when thinking of A-Lan. The poem uses metaphor to describe the beauty of a woman such as her star-like bright eyes and "walking on the stars with her snow-white bare feet" (Xu 18). Two chapters later, Qiuming sings the "Moonlight Song" from the German Romantic poet Novalis' mythical work Heinrich von Ofterdingen (1802) when she visits Jianbai during his illness. The quoted lines depict the dreamy night scenes under the moonlight, which matches well with Qiuming's charm. Yanan quotes the German theologian Schleiermacher and the British poet Shelley to demythify the holiness of first love and to suggest that promising to love someone forever is unreasonable. When Jianbai goes to find Yanan in her place, Yanan is translating a play by Shakespeare. Jianbai finds Tolstoy's *The Sisters* on Yanan's bookshelf,

15. The first page of the novel contains only two lines: "If a person only falls in love once in his life, then he is lucky. Sadly, I did twice."

feeling that A-Lan and Qiuming are like sisters, whereas Yanan is like Scarlett in *Gone with the Wind*.

To enhance the female characters' personalities, Xu Su incorporates quotes of loving or romantic lines, infusing a lyrical and sentimental layer into the novel. The several coincidences within the plotline intensifies the novel's sentimentalism, as well. Examples include Jianbai's encounter with Yanan when running away from home, his bumping into A-Lan's fiancé when searching for Yanan, his reunion with A-Lan at the hospital, A-Lan's getting to know Yanan, and Jianbai's two chance meetings with Qiuming (at a wartime concert and at a Christmas mass in Hong Kong). These coincidences enhance the novel's dramatic effect, turning Jianbai's tangled love into a hyperbolic melodrama in which "the tragic elements become diluted" (Wong 194).

Several other features of the novel help strengthen its melodramatic quality and are conducive to evoking sentimental emotions. One prominent aspect is the absence of any villainous character throughout the entire narrative. Instead, altruism is consistently emphasized. Yanan's complicated background and dramatic "fingertip touch" with Jianbai on the battlefield are two compelling examples. When Yanan was young, she was abducted and sold to a wealthy businessman in Singapore, who, interestingly, turns out to be her biological father who previously abandoned her and her mother. As her fate improves, Yanan runs away to escape a forced marriage arranged by her father. By a stroke of luck, she coincidentally boards the fishing boat of Brother Jin, a childhood companion whom Yanan had shepherded in the past. With Brother Jin's assistance, Yanan returns to China and secures a position as an editor to sustain herself.

When Jianbai enlists in the military and catches sight of Yanan amidst the chaos of battle, he instinctively abandons his weapon and rushes toward her. Yanan also moves closer to Jianbai, who touches Yanan's fingertip before losing consciousness. This sentimental and somewhat clichéd scene is further embellished in the film adaptation by depicting the two characters embracing and rolling down a hill, thereby prompting feelings of tenderness.

In *The Blue and the Black*, Wang Lan skillfully maintains suspense regarding Tang Qi's whereabouts, leaving Xingya curious about her life in Tianjin during his absence. As the novel progresses, Xingya's cousin reveals Tang Qi's involvement in "heroic" acts, including working as a hostess to save money for an air ticket to Chongqing to reunite with Xingya, bribing individuals to rescue He Li from prison, and supporting He's underground anti-Japanese activities. While Xingya's family changes their opinion of Tang Qi and admires her deeds, Xingya struggles with conflicting emotions, feeling unable to sustain his love for her due to what he perceives as her past "betrayal" in declining to accompany him to the South. Seeking equilibrium, Xingya resolves to move

forward, prioritizing his obligations as Meizhuang's fiancé, and dedication to work, over Tang Qi's altruism.

The novel then refocuses on Xingya and Meizhuang in Tianjin. After discovering Xingya's past with Tang Qi, Meizhuang leaves for the Southwest. The novel returns to political narrative, including the Communist infiltration of the central government. Amidst Xingya's victory in the local senator election, anti-Communist sentiments are conveyed. As the political situation worsens, Xingya and Tang Qi reappear. A plot twist occurs when He Li confesses to discouraging Tang Qi from going South several years ago. However, the climax is prolonged with dramatic twists devised by Wang Lan. First, He Li passes on Tang Qi's message begging Xingya to leave Tianjin for safety. Second, Tang Qi writes to Xingya twice, emphasizing the same plea. Lastly, He Li reveals to Xingya that he had asked Tang Qi to stay behind. The confrontation between He Li and Xingya is intense, almost escalating into a physical altercation. However, Xingya quickly regains composure and apologizes for his impulsiveness. Amid their reconciliation, Tang Qi contacts Xingya, reigniting their love. The novel then shifts to Xingya's journey to Shanghai and Chongqing, set against the backdrop of the Communist takeover of Nanjing, Taiyuan, and Guangzhou. Xingya and Meizhuang eventually flee to Taiwan separately, leaving Xingya alone as Meizhuang settles abroad with another man and Tang Qi sets off to become a frontline nurse.

In considering the fictional rhetoric employed within a specific genre, it becomes appropriate to reassess the applicability of existing labels such as romance, war fiction, or anti-Communist fiction. While the first two descriptors can be aptly applied to both novels under discussion, *The Blue and the Black* is also interpreted as a work with anti-Communist undertones. Chen Fangming has summarized three tips for producing anti-Communist literature: a contrast between brightness and darkness, evil never prevailing over good, and the employment of healthy realism (157). Wang Dewei further elaborates that the bright endings of most anti-Communist novels not only cater to the need for political propaganda but also reveal the exilic authors' desire to rationalize history (146–7; 154). Chen Chien-chung redefines anti-Communist writing as historical fiction and exile literature, regarding *The Blue and the Black* as an example of history witnessed from an exilic perspective (9–44). These revised views suggest that the monolithic "anti-Communist literature" is inadequate to explain the core of *The Blue and the Black*: Xingya's sentimentality. It is perhaps more productive to consider anti-Communism as a theme instead of a genre. Although the novel's love-related quality is becoming more widely recognized, most existing scholarship remains concerned with its context, or how the personal is appropriated into the national. In fact, the novel's treatment of China's civil war and the anti-Japanese war remains significant

in the valorization. Ye Shitao, for instance, considered *The Blue and the Black* as lacking a "concrete and profound social background" (99).

However, neither Xingya nor Jianbai is an overtly anti-Japanese hero. Xingya's patriotism is often prompted by or intertwined with his love for Tang Qi, while Jianbai joins the army for personal interest. The sentimentalism in both novels is intricately woven into emotional ambivalence of their male protagonists. Contrasts emerge when compared to other characters, such as He Li's unwavering dedication to the nation, He Meng's reserved affection for Xingya's cousin Huiya, and Tang Qi's selfless sacrifice. Similarly, the three female characters in *Star, Moon, Sun* persist in their love for Jianbai, even though they may pursue other paths. While the depiction of love in these works does not directly challenge the national theme, it adds nuances and offers a reflective affect-centric lens on the past.

Conclusion

This paper argues that the primary theme of *Star, Moon, Sun* and *The Blue and the Black* is love rather than war or anti-Communism. By exploring the cultural connections between Hong Kong and Taiwan during the 1950s and 1960s, particularly in terms of collaborative filmmaking and the network of writers and directors, this paper traces the general audience's interest in love-centric narratives in these two non-communist locales. Departing from prior scholarship that undervalues the significance of romance fiction and *wenyi* films in Hong Kong and Taiwan's literary and filmic history in favor of politically-engaged and ideologically-correct works, this paper reevaluates the cultural and artistic impact of these regions using romance-driven sentimentalism as a critical prism through which to explore the themes, storylines, and social implications embedded within these two early postwar creations. It identifies three key characteristics discernible in both works. Although the film adaptations maintain the core plotline, they exhibit notable differences, such as emphasizing female bonding and reducing politically-charged details. Their popularity demonstrates the niche and demand for Chinese-language *wenyi* productions.

Both novels' enduring impact lies in their shared vernacular sentimentalism that celebrates love within the confines of national cause or conventional values. In *Star, Moon, Sun*, there is even lengthier discussion about the discourse on love. The male protagonists' emotional experiences related to love in both novels are the main repositories of sentimentalism, while the female characters, except Meizhuang in *The Blue and the Black*, are typically constrained by societal expectations and traditional ethics. Feminist critics may critique this gender imbalance, where only men enjoy the privilege of experiencing complex love relationships without significant compromises. A Cold War-

informed perspective may view these emotionally expressive male characters as emblematic of the subjective position of "free China" during the 1950s and 1960s. Both Jianbai and Xingya provide an alternative portrayal of masculinity, while their female counterparts signal a departure from the predominantly male-centric nationalist narrative. The emphasis on moral values and spirituality over materialism, especially in the portrayal of female characters, suggests a shared moral imperative among the writers, which makes these early postwar romances from "free China" not entirely at odds with leftist Chinese literature and films from preceding decades. The narrative exaggerations in these works invite a reevaluation of existing literary valorizations and genre classifications. Sentimentalism, therefore, should not be devalued; instead, it provides a viable lens through which to explore a history marred by wars and shaped by diverse ideologies.

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Wei Yan
University of Hong Kong

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 Brook'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."

This paper draws on Tzvetan Todorov's analysis of dual narrative structures

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).

in detective fiction, his definition of suspense form, and Peter Brook'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 "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).

With a strong sense of righteousness, Li once stepped in to help a tea egg

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.

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."

In the story "Moses on the Plain," the second structure of the investigation

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).

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 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 father by killing one of the culprits. However, the veracity of Mi

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.

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 constrast, 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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Yijiao Guo
King's College London

Confronting Nature and Identity Crisis:
Eco-gender Narrative in Pema Tseden's Films

Abstract By understanding ecofeminism as a theoretical possibility to engage with multi-dimensional interrelations between gender and nature, this paper discusses eco-gender narrative and ethical (self-)representation in Pema Tseden's *The Search* (*Xunzhao zhimei gengdeng*), *Tharlo* (*Taluo*), and *Balloon* (*Qiqiu*). The parallel between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women unveils male dominance and its waning influence in Amdo Tibet. Unlike visual ethnography or exoticism-hunting, the natural environment in Pema Tseden's depiction has been rendered as a secular space imbued with complexity, and it remains tangible while invariably dislocated. In addition to portraying the conflicts arising from modernization and intercultural confrontation, Pema Tseden also metaphorically remodels lingering Tibetan identity, flux of life, and various modernist shocks in three archetypes of female characters: caring mothers (Tara), modern-to-be women (Nora), and femme fatales (Laverna). This refashioning has forged a problematic yet multifaceted representation of identity through correlation and interconnection between gender and nature. Furthermore, these three recurrent archetypes illustrate distinctive reasoning behind sociocultural challenges and shocks Tibetan people experience amidst modernization and socioeconomic development.

Keywords Pema Tseden, ecofeminism, gender discourse, Tibetan cinema, new materialism

Rethinking Natural Ecology and Gender

Unlike Judith Butler's emphasis on how gender and its performativity are shaped by discourse (*Gender Trouble* 37–44; *Bodies That Matter* 3–9), Jane Bennett states, "humanity and nonhumanity have always performed an intricate dance with each other" (31). By underscoring the "thing-power" of nonhuman actors, Bennett situates humans and nonhumans within interconnected networks, proposing that all entities coexist within interconnected networks, with nonhuman bodies impacting human societies (2–4). Human beings, thus, have

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always been "in composition with nonhumanity" within these interconnected networks whilst non-human bodies also affect human bodies, shape human society, and transcend boundaries and hierarchical divisions between humans and non-humans (365). In contrast to historical materialism, which defines materiality through human action, Bennett's perspective posits that all non-human matter possesses a form of vitality. This vital agency dynamically interacts with other entities, actively participating in gender performance (14–16). Hence, materializations of gendered bodies have something to do with history, society, tradition, culture, and, most importantly, with bodies themselves.

Critiques have been directed at Jane Bennett's anthropocentric approach to describing materiality despite a proposal to study vitality in vibrating matter (Sedlmeier 273–74). Particularly, specific historical contexts and socioeconomic constraints seem ambiguous, if somewhat lacking, in theorizations of interactions and entanglements between humans and non-humans (Rekret 240; Schleusener 530–31). Although advancing the debates surrounding performativity is meaningful, it is equally significant to consider how humans perform their gender identities in accordance with non-human beings, such as natural ecology, sociocultural norms, and moving-image artworks. More precisely, what role have non-humans played in socio-gender performativity by humans? How are these performed actions or their processes represented and mediated through film—another non-human entity shaped by and shaping humans?

These inquiries do not necessarily seek to reiterate various agencies, institutions, and disciplinary forces that construct Tibetan social matrices, with women, non-humans, and natural environments being systematically and continuously oppressed. Nor does this paper examine micro-material faculties and properties of those shaping powers, such as the structure of a Tibetan family, the departmentalization of the religious system, or the numerous images of gender biases. Instead, the preliminary objective of this paper is to explicate how natural ecology and Tibetan women confront and interrelate with one another in Pema Tseden's (*Wan ma cai dan*, 1969–2023) films, wherein non-human entities shape and are shaped by humans.

The natural ecology of Amdo Tibet (*Anduo Zangqu*) is actively independent from humankind, while ceaselessly interacting and interrelating with its denizens. The performativity of Tibetan women, in this sense, is not merely a matter of gender but simultaneously a matter of gendered "platformativity" closely related to society and nature through the medium and technology of cinema (Lamarre 287; 301–02). Namely, cinema operates as a platform that actively performs and shapes social gender relations, cultural forms of femininity, and

subject positions of Tibetan females. The eco-gender narrative in Pema Tseden's films showcase nature and gender as mutually constitutive forces in a manner extending current theorization of ecology and ecofeminism. Furthermore, nature captured in these films goes beyond local natural environment to involve the Tibetan people who must earn a living through environmental hardship and hostility. Natural ecology, as filmed, is neither an abstract object with threatening yet exploitable material contents/substances inside, nor a given object externalized and alienated as an unfriendly and troublesome non-human being.

Setting aside potential misunderstandings, the argument that 'natural ecology is a *thing*' does not suggest that nature can be fully known or exhaustively represent perspectives on nature, media, and humanity in cinema (cf. Heidegger 8-10). As Object-Oriented-Ontology theorist Graham Harman holds, things are perpetually withdrawn from human access and cannot be known (37). In a more contextualized sense, this argument does not suggest that those outside Tibet, Han Chinese in particular, may acquire knowledge through films. The conjecture about unified, immobile, and immanent objects or "aggregates of traits" (Appadurai 7) does not exist for Tibetan culture, Tibetan people, and Tibetan ecology (cf. Maitra and Chow 17).

Similarly, this paper refrains from understanding natural ecology in Pema Tseden's films as "conatus" or "univocity of being," which stop short in falsely cheering for a single substance encompassing all of nature, humanity, non-humans, gods and divinities, as well as all other beings (Spinoza 283-84; Deleuze 67). It is not a simplistic formula of nature residing within humanity or vice versa. Rather, nature and human beings are independent beings in themselves and should not be conflated. Nature is neither a human-made concept nor a space produced by and through human actions. Nevertheless, it would be equally mistaken to disregard evident connections, interactions, and interrelations between nature and humankind. Human beings inhabit a land beyond human will and control, while nature is neither an other to humans nor are humans an other to nature. Hence, the analytical approach seeks not to separate humans from nature or nature from humans, but rather to explore subtle correlations, interconnections, and interactions between ecology and people inhabiting ecologies.

The Search (*Xunzhao zhimei gengdeng*, 2009) offers a useful case to examine how these correlations, interconnections, and interactions have been represented and reshaped in and through cinema. The state-built asphalt roads overshadow other natural scenery, as seen by four men—the casting crew for the film adaptation of *Drime Kunde*, a traditional Tibetan opera. The crew travels in a Jeep across desolate mountainous terrain. At one point, the road takes on presence as a

token of space that intertwines performance and life. Because contemporary Tibetan men can no longer embody the role of Prince Drime Kunden–an idealized icon of masculinity, the crew is unable to find a suitable actor for the film adaptation, thereby (re-)defining "male identity and masculinity" (cf. Barnet 143-50) even by the end of the film. In other words, contemporary Tibetan men have lost conventional masculinities needed to play a male role in film and reality. The absence of this man-already-lost in the present exerts a desire to anchor something masculine in a past that can no longer become an anchorage. This is thus the search for the "thing" of nothing, a thing lost and therefore nonexistent, an anchorage without anchor. Consequently, Tibetans perform new sets of characters and roles, variants on the historical male figure of a manly persona.

In a less symbolic interpretation, natural ecology is viewed through the male gaze for the crew members to come and take, upon which practical and worldly concerns predominate and predetermine nature as a merely an objective view. It is the road constructed in a natural environment, rather than nature itself, that holds greater significance for these men. Their *raison d'être* is to be on the road into nature, extracting and reclaiming masculinity. As Thomas Lamarre says, nature is reduced to "environments and static contexts that serve as repositories of fixed values" (289). As such, natural ecologies are rendered pragmatic and merely visual tableaux. Moreover, a male-digital gaze is formed after the crew members videotape nature as "the image seen" to constitute egoic fascinations (Mulvey 363–64). Looking through the DV camera lens behind the windshield of a moving car, the four men embark on a quest not only for lost masculinity and Tibetan tradition, but also for a landscape that can be recaptured, remastered, and tamed by means of the automobile and modern technologies in infrastructure (cf. Berry 97–98).

The female character (Lumo Tso, *Limao cuo*) in the car sees nature differently. She is chosen to play the princess in the film, traveling with the crew in search of her ex-lover. In a medium close-up shot, the girl leans against the rear door, and a lake surrounded by mountains reflected on her veiled face behind the window glass. It is noteworthy that in Tibetan culture and belief, lakes are considered sacred places of purity for divinity to reside in and rest. Lakes also symbolize fertility, life, and growth. This praise for female virtue and femininity dictates what it means to be a woman and prescribes how femininity should be expressed and performed. However, juxtapositions between nature and femininity are subtle, as when the girl suddenly sits up straight and gazes outside. The camera cuts to the girl's point of view, and the audience sees a large lake in the subsequent shot. This is the only female point-of-view shot, as well as the only shot of the natural environment without driveways and villages. In this

extremely long shot, a wide sapphire-like lake appears as if fallen from heaven onto this arid land. Blue water and dazzling sunlight truly emblazon thinness in the heady plateau air of Amdo.

As the car moves forward, the camera cuts back to the girl's veiled face; the girl and the lake merge into one image (Fig. 1).



Figure 1 The girl and the reflection of the natural environment merge into one in a medium close-up.

This overlapping image becomes an eco-feminist image, where nature and femininity transcend the metonymic relationships between fertility and birth-giving in traditional Tibetan mythology. The lake and girl retain their nature, while mutually interconnecting and interacting with one another. The girl does not act upon the water and distant mountains outside. Rather, she co-creates an image of nature reflecting upon her face and body. The lake remains a part of nature, captured by and through the purely optical situation the girl finds herself in. In return, the lake/nature engages with the girl's memories of bygone love—a recollection provoked by the eco-feminist image. Interestingly, the casting crew ignores the lake and drives quickly away from it, leaving nature to continue as nature.

It is easy to conclude that men and women see and understand nature differently. Nonetheless, I am more interested in how cinematically-mediated connections, interrelations, and interactions between nature and gender, femininity in particular, have forged a distinctive eco-gender narrative. Therefore, in line with the paradigm of eco-feminism (Vakoch 3–12; Carr ix–x; Yang 3–5), I will continue to outline the dual exploitations of nature

and women in Pema Tseden's films. Analyses will be given on the connection between women and the natural environment amid the sociocultural crises accompanying the ecological transformation of Amdo Tibet from a nomadic land into an economic market.

What follows will first illustrate the stylistic pattern of female characterization in *Tharlo* (*Taluo*, 2016) and *Balloon* (*Qiqiu*, 2019). Then, I will discuss how ecology and femininity have reshaped but never confirmed the identities of both Tibetan women and men today. Finally, I will address how struggles to reconceptualize gender and nature correlate with ongoing sociocultural predicaments, especially impeded re-identification as Tibetan.

It is problematic to categorize Pema Tseden as formalist. Nonetheless, there is a recurring formal style in which women are commonly characterized into three female archetypes and/or three imagined femininities: Tara, Laverna, and Nora. Tibetan women in Pema Tseden's films are represented as either bodhisattva-like savior, threatening and dangerous femme fatale, or modern woman who chooses to leave their family with no clear idea of their future. In so saying, I do not mean that the analysis of his characterisation is enough. In actual fact, Pema Tseden became increasingly subtle and complex in addressing gender issues, requiring various analytical methods and theoretical frameworks for interpretation. These three archetypes provide a cogent approach to describing and elucidating the director's stylistic pattern of female characterization. Nor do I mean that his films only feature three types of female roles. Scholars Zhao Min and Yuan Zhizhong identify four types of female characters in these films: the working woman, rakshasi (a human-devouring demon or *luocha nü*), new woman, or empty symbol (41-43).

Although close affinities may be found between Hinduist/Buddhist mythology and the religion and culture of Amdo, the collocations of fierceness and death differentiate the archetype of rakshasi from femme fatale in both symbolic meaning and narrative function. Furthermore, it is problematic to consider the female character in *The Search* as a signifier of "emptiness" (43), especially when she and nature are interrelated and interconnected.

Tara, Laverna, and Nora

In specific terms, Tara, also known as Dolma (literally meaning "she who saves") and Sgrol-ma (literally meaning the mother/goddess of liberation), is a female bodhisattva (meaning Buddha-to-be) of liberation and compassion in Tibetan Buddhism (Purna; Beyer vii; Kaur 213). This ever-caring female divinity blesses success in one's work and protects people in the world. Tara has twenty-one emanational forms, amongst which the most famous two are Green Tara (Sgrol-ljang or *Lü dumu*), who will protect one from fears and obstructions, and

White Tara (Dolma Karpo or *Bai dumu*), who personifies long life, compassion, healing, and serenity (Kaur 214).

The Tara-like female characters point to a reflection of Mother Nature, who endures all difficulties with infinite energy. Many female depictions develop from this archetype, especially housewives, mothers, and nuns. The wife and mother Drolkar (this name is the short form of *Dolma Karpo*/White Tara) in *Balloon*, the male protagonist's lover in *Jinpa* (*Zhuangsi le yizhi yang*, 2018), and the relatively insignificant role of the housewife in *Snow Leopard* (*Xue bao,* 2023), to name a few, shoulder all household chores to help their spouses through daily hardship. All these female characters have weathered difficulties of their own, alongside those of families and male spouses/partners. They are also expected to be compassionate, goddess-like, such as the nun Drolma (Yangchuk Tso, *Yangxiu cuo*), whose name means Tara, in *Balloon*. Drolma devotes herself fully to Tibetan Buddhism and chooses not to pursue revenge after her boyfriend betrays and abandons her. Male characters, in contrast, bear the financial responsibility, and in this role the man is oppressor. Coincidentally, actor Jinpa (*Jin ba*) plays the male lead in all three films.

Laverna is a goddess of thieves, cheats, and the underworld (Chisholm 293), encompassing femme fatale characters who are usually portrayed as threatening and dangerous to male characters. As arguably the most representative figure, Yangtso (also Yangchuk Tso) in *Tharlo* represents this sensuous hazard that will jeopardize a Tibetan man's socioeconomic power and male privilege. The protagonist Tharlo (Shide Nyima, *Xide nima*) in this film encounters an existential crisis after losing a fortune of 160,000 yuan (roughly USD $25,000 in 2015) along with his ponytail. These huge losses jolt him out of his once stable and coherent Tibetan manhood. Facing a crisis of self-identity and the symbolic castration of cutting off the ponytail, Tharlo finds his only solution is to self-harm or even commit suicide, prostrate before physical and spiritual mountains.

Nora is the female protagonist in Henrik Ibsen's (1828–1906) 1879 play *A Doll's House*, and comes to function in China as a symbol of modern women who depart from patriarchal kinship structures and articulate new forms of female independence and subjectivity. Drolkar's situation and action in the final scene of *Balloon* exemplify this. After she struggles to have an abortion (the result of which is left open-ended), she finally decides to leave her husband and two sons, not necessarily for good, but for the moment, to recover from both physical and psychological traumas in the monastery where her younger sister Drolma practices. The future of Drolkar, akin to Nora's fate in the play, remains opaque. Nevertheless, both protagonists initiate their autonomy in a practice of (re-)becoming a woman (de Beauvoir xiii-iv). More detailed discussions on each archetype will be given in the following section.

Rethinking Gender and Ecology in Tibet and Tibetan Cinema

Before moving further, it should be noted that Pema Tseden's eco-gender narrative does not achieve or epitomize something ideal. On the contrary, many gender and environmental issues in his films must be problematized and critically reviewed. Case in point, the adoption of certain female archetypes per se stems from a rather delimited scope. Nonetheless, instead of giving unequivocal conclusions and answers, the necessity at this point is to contextualize these problems first before questioning how one can understand the shared attention on, if not anxiety over, the ethical-gender identities and the deteriorating natural-social ecologies in Tibetan cinema, or the Tibetan New Wave (*Zangdi dianying xin langchao*) over the past two decades.

In this regard, scholars (M. Li 117; Berry 91–93; Frangville 108–09; Xiang 84–88; Yau 121–22; Shen 32) have thrown light on the differentiation and correlation between Pema Tseden's visual representation and ethnographical depictions of exotic adventure in the wilderness commonly found in categories of ethnic minority films (*shaoshu minzu dianying*). Depicting Tibet and Tibetan people atypically, Pema Tseden disenchants his homeland and makes it clear that the self-identity of Tibetans must be continuously contested and redefined. In addition to ongoing struggles over ethnicity, religion, and culture, the space of Amdo Tibet also exerts contestations between tradition and modernity, as well as center and periphery, putting the notions of homeland and nature-human relations in need of questioning (Lo 162–63; Gong 9; Huang 112; Xu 151–53). Anup Grewal's article elaborates on how the filmmaker has contested the landscape of Tibet as a heterogeneous realm through cinematic aesthetics and techniques (138–40). Myriad studies have also investigated problematic gender narratives and androcentric views about femininity and women's social roles (Robin; Han 162; Y. Li 480). In short, the gender hierarchy is based on economic inequality in one's family as well as in Tibet, where men have access to economic and social capital, thereby exclusively able to participate in production.

Previous scholarship, though much needed, has paid insufficient attention to intersections between cultural-ethnic identity, gender, and nature. Even so, depictions of women on screen have been inextricably intertwined with depictions of natural Tibetan ecology, serving as a reflection on identity crises amid the unavoidable confrontation with modernity and modernization in Tibet (particularly from the 1980s onward). Male oppression extends from the domestic to the natural sphere, with both women and nature seized as hostages to be exploited and degraded (Mellor 1). As Donna Haraway has it, women

are made spectacles of exploitation in a nature that can only be endured when it becomes lucrative (265). Put another way, by integrating Tara, Laverna, and Nora into nature, Pema Tseden also initiates a cinematic strategy to re-represent Tibet, Tibetan people, and their day-to-day lived experiences. Such re-representation negates homogenizing and foreignizing gazes upon Tibet and Tibetan identity, underlining vernacular life and complex individual psyches amidst rapid sociocultural and socioeconomic changes. This highlights the subtle, and sometimes awkward, transformations of femininity in Amdo Tibet.

The awkwardness and imperfection in these re-representations manifest a distinctive situation within Pema Tseden's cinematic world, challenging Eurocentric theoretical frameworks of ecofeminism and ecology that view nature as significantly impacted and altered by humankind (Crutzen and Stoermer 17–18). In Pema's films, nature cannot be entirely reshaped or inhabited. The failed quest within nature frustrate males engaged in seeking lost masculine identity. At the same time, femininity can frustrate and threaten Tibetan men even more. This typically occurs when female characters voluntarily or involuntarily destabilize the patriarchal matrix, symbolically or physically returning to nature.

Tharlo demonstrates how a woman impairs a Tibetan man's masculinity and identity, wherein suspension of Tibetan masculinity and identity is attributed to a female thief. The protagonist, Tharlo, falls in love with the hairdresser Yangtso at first sight. However, Tharlo's life is desperately hampered after Yangtso steals Tharlo's money and runs away. In the end, Tharlo mutilates himself by exploding a firecracker in his left hand. The shock of transitioning between conventional and newly-imported life ethics thrust Tharlo into mirroring hazardous and traumatizing representations of the ongoing socioeconomic changes in Amdo Tibet.

Interestingly, Pema Tseden captures Tharlo and Yangtso's courtship inside a karaoke bar in a static medium long shot. Positioned on the left of the frame, Tharlo is singing a *laye* (*layi*),[1] the traditional Amdo Tibetan love song, in front of Yangtso to show his affection. This *laye* portrays the beautiful scenes of two loving larks in the forest and how strangers in a village come to know each other. While Tharlo wants to use this love song to bring Yangtso closer, the strikingly contrasting context of the *laye* lyrics and the noisy, dim, neon-flashing room suggests no possibility of reconciliation between traditional and modern life. The dream of love in an idyllic environment conflicts with utilitarian objectives in contemporary society, with unspoken conflicts over mismatched intentions. Tharlo's desire for Yangtso has nothing to do with Yangtso's eagerness to

1. In oral Amdo Tibetan, "*laye*" is the homophone of the literary term "*la gzhas*." The latter is the commonly used term in written Tibetan, which literally means mountain pass songs (Skal bzang nor bu 1).

find a better life in a big city like Beijing, Shanghai, or Hong Kong. Yangtso's final decision to steal the money and leave Tharlo puts this man's expectations and desires out of joint. In other words, Tharlo wants Yangtso to become his imagined traditional Tibetan wife—a Tara, in his dull, monotonous life. However, Yangtso plans to escape from this small town, thus transforming into Laverna.

The disjointed and unmatched soundtracks between Tharlo's singing and the background music create another stark contrast in the room. While Tharlo sings, the monitor screen to the right of the frame plays a music video of pop song "Beauty in the Past (*Cengjing de meili*)." This song was written in 2009 and performed by Tibetan singer Chongshol Dolma (*Qiongxue zhuoma*) in Mandarin Chinese. The lyric reads:

> That sweet happiness,
> like a girl herding her sheep. She is chasing the time in the morning glow,
> You said love is the heart's destination,
> but I put on a scarlet kasaya for my love (Chongshol Dolma).[2]

This video fabricates a *mise en abyme* in which contestation of affection and caution in the melodramatic, hyper-sentimental lyrics parallels Tharlo's ballad. Meanwhile, the audience may find another parallel in Tharlo's elusive projection of affection on the mispositioned desire object of Yangtso and sentiment in the song lyrics on the monitor. In addition to lamenting over time and youth, what the herding girl chases in "Beauty in the Past" is a lack that can never be fulfilled. Her desire to keep peace with the passage of time and her bygone love, like Tharlo's craving for Yangtso, cannot be satisfied. Since Laverna is not Tara, Tharlo's desire is an illusion concerning an imagined female figure—one that does not exist. Therefore, Tharlo can never actualize a desire that is already not real, already in a state of deficiency. Covering the heart with a scarlet *kasaya* symbolizes caution in Buddhist teachings, a trick that camouflages this Laverna-like woman's true intentions. The refashioning of a religious symbol in a commercial space also makes a prophecy of Tharlo's inevitable frustrations tied to unfulfillable desires. The rest of the film is more about unravelling such a foretold message.

Noticeably, Yangtso is never found in a natural environment, but in commercial spaces of the country's central district, like a barber shop, karaoke bar, or concert venue. In contrast, Tharlo travels from the county to grazing lands and rolling hills. He creates more notable and direct interactions with natural ecology. One exception, if not a peculiarity, arises after Tharlo shaves his ponytail. He then attends a concert with Yangtso at a venue called the Great

2. All English translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

Norbulingka World of Singing and Dancing (*Luobulinka gewu da shijie*), where the realms of the worldly sphere, religion, and nature intermingle.

Situated in Lhasa, Norbulingka served as the summer residence of successive Dalai Lamas until 1959, after which it was transformed into a public park and tourist attraction. The once-sacred palace is now repurposed for entertainment, demonstrated as the camera captures the lively, hand-clapping vibe of singer Dekyi Tsering's (*Deji cairang*) rap performance in a static wide shot. The long-focus lens blurs the foreground, directing the audience's gaze solely towards the singer in the background. Then, the focus is pulled from the background to Tharlo and Yangtso seated in the front right. Tharlo shows no interest in either the performance or the venue, as he only cares to return to the karaoke bar and sing three new *laye* to Yangtso. Nevertheless, they remain to watch the show at Yangtso's insistence. The Potala Palace (*Budala gong*) is depicted as background for the stage set, silently awaiting Tharlo's imminent confrontation with another man. Two life-size posters of the singer, positioned on either side of the stage, compete with a painting of the Potala Palace, the former winter palace of the Dalai Lamas, to claim as much space and visual attention as possible within the shallow depth of field.

Residences of religious leaders bespeak historical rendering of nature through architecture. These two palaces were, nonetheless, transformed from sacred to decorative spaces in this sequence. These spaces then serve as the backdrop to a popular music concert, informing us as to how the films capture the profound changes and struggles of contemporary life. Pema Tseden brings the cinema to a process of "worlding" and creates "an ongoing source of the meaning and content of entities" (Heidegger 43–61; Wrathall 822; cf. Spivak 252–54), regenerating our understanding of nature, lived experiences, and social gender roles in a place known as Amdo. As a result, nature becomes familiar and palpable through filmic self-representations and the very re-representing medium of Tibetan cinema. Since the pastoral ecology is subject to capitalism and marketization, previous heteronormative structures and the male-dominated economic order face destabilization. They are being compelled to change or, in some views, undergo modernization. Nothing in Tibet today—neither tradition, religion, nor fundamental emotions of human love—escape constant fluctuations that frustrate Tibetan women and men.

In *Balloon*, the correlation between gender, religion, and traditional Tibetan culture strengthen. In a static medium long shot, Dargye and Drolkar sit on a bed and become involved in a fierce quarrel about whether Drolkar should have an abortion. Drolkar feels it is financially impossible to have a fourth child in this family, whereas Dargye insists on keeping the baby, because the lama says this child is the reincarnation of his recently deceased father. After hearing

his wife's unwillingness to keep the baby, Dargye bursts into fury and scolds Drolkar for having no conscience, acting like a demon, being ungrateful, and showing disrespect for the lama by doubting him and the reincarnation belief. Dargye soon loses his temper and slaps Drolkar while Drolkar is trying to explain that her decision is for the family, which can barely support their eldest son to go through middle school. One of the multiple underlying rationales behind Dargye's violent termination of this conversation is that, in Dargye's eyes, Drolkar's doubts over his ability to support the family and her disregard of the lama's prediction unleash a de facto blasphemous attack upon the authority of religion and the esteem of the patriarchy as a religious authority. It is not only the lama whom Drolkar disrespects, but also her husband, late father-in-law, unborn son, and the reincarnation belief institutionalized and dominated by Tibetan males.

Stylistically, the height and the position of the camera in this low-angle wide long take accentuate tension between Drolkar and patriarchal religion. The camera is positioned in the distance, slightly tilted above the edge of the bed, which roughly equals the height of a child. This spectating viewpoint, therefore, is also the subjective point of view of an infant, looking at the ongoing fight between Dargye and Drolkar, as if the unborn fetus's or dead grandpa's soul are crouching at the bedside, watching the couple quarrel over their fates. This ghostly perspective simultaneously accommodates a third perspective of divine or supreme power, as if a transcendental being is also watching this contestation over the fate of Buddhist belief in a world that no longer devoutly believes in religious values.

Pema Tseden repeatedly uses a static medium-wide long shot to film conversations and interactions, either face-to-face or spatially separated by a frame, between the couples in *Tharlo* and *Balloon*. His choice of shot size and camera (un-)movement have instantiated the director's cinematographic style, which nods to Abbas Kiarostami's (1940–2016) and Hou Hsiao-Hsien's (1947–) cinematic aesthetics (Rayns). In my opinion, the fixed camera forges an observatory perspective of seeing all ongoing gender disputes. The process of (re-)identifying gendered contestation with an immobile camera invite the spectator to participate with and into the storytelling through the unmoving movement of stillness that is conceivable in cinema. In other words, the stationary camera in each of the two scenes allows the full presence and functioning of a duration of time, *durée* for Deleuze (2). The full presence and duration of these two films crystallize, materialize, and substantiate ongoing contestations between men and women over their irreconcilable subjectivities and contentious definitions of socio-gender roles in contemporary Amdo Tibet.

Considering that the national policy of birth control has done good for

Tibetan women and female subjectivity, the newly-introduced freedoms for Tibetan women, a kind of cloning of female subjectivity, appear eerie and sinful to the grandpa figure, who was the most conservative and traditional patriarch in the film. Tharlo's comment about Yangtso when she smokes is that a modernized Tibetan woman does not look Tibetan or feminine, as if such a role or type of "Tibetan femininity" truly existed. Despite whatever archetype she becomes, a so-called "modern woman" disallows male protagonist/subjects' complete enjoyment of their fulfilled desires and endeavors, causing an avalanche of unsustainable change.

This leads the male protagonist/subjects to fantasizing pleasure and fulfillment. Yangtso, Drolkar, and Drolma, along with other females with or without names in Pema Tseden's films, are not so much characters as symptoms continuously repressed and fantasized (Breuer and Freud 71; Lacan 243–87; Žižek 155–56). To illustrate this, we recall the traumatic losses of Tharlo and Dargye when the two films end (another coincidence in the storytelling.) Hurt psychologically or physically—or both—by their female counterparts, Tharlo and Dargye both fail to (re-)anchor their male identities (to become a husband for Tharlo and to become a father for Dargye) and fulfill their desires to (re-)master not only their female spouses but also the dominating power of patriarchy. Encounter and interaction with Tibetan women causes nothing but new trauma for these two male protagonists who are trying in vain to hold onto control. By implication, contemporary femininity has brought about great changes in socio-cultural milieu, leading to masculine identity crises.

Later in *Balloon*, Drolkar decides to recover her health in a monastery. In a hand-held long take, Drolkar gets on a tractor with her sister Drolma and figuratively moves into nature, leaving her sons and husband staring blankly into the distance. After the dawning light gently embraces the two sisters in the open air of grassland and mountains afar, this extreme long shot then zooms in to a close-up shot while panning right to Dargye's agonized, perplexed, and frustrated face. Drolkar's decision to leave transforms her from a Tara to a Nora who leaves the domestic sphere with the hope of finding as well as redefining who she truly wants to be, even what it means to be a woman, mother, and wife in and through nature. It is at this point that Drolkar's leaving differs from her sister Drolma's detachment from the worldly life and Yangtso's absconding, for Drolkar does not choose capital or religion, but returns to nature and femininity. Drolkar may not be fully conscious about her decision or her future. After all, she never answers her son's question about whether she will become a nun. Nevertheless, she who leaves home and returns to the vast earth is also on the way (back) to her independent and autonomous self.

Conclusion

Pema Tseden seems to show little interest in drawing a clear conclusion. He invariably employs ambiguous open endings, never answering the question once posed by Lu Xun (1881–1936): What will happen after Nora leaves? Nor does he indicate what will happen to Nora's husband, children, and boyfriend once she embarks on a new journey in life. Instead, Pema Tseden introspects tradition, culture, religion, self-identity, ethnicity, gender, and nature by visualizing subtle complexities in today's Amdo Tibet. The ambivalent psyche of Tibetan people is in a continuing process of sociocultural confrontation. The lives of men and women in his films, as in reality, go we know not where and toward we know not what. Although these things remain unresolved and undetermined, this state of unresolvedness and impossibility of determination represents a pervasive quotidian situation people live through today, in a land full of ambiguity but also hope, the name of which is Tibet.

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Ma Xiaolu
Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

Supplementing Socialist Realism:
The Ups and Downs of Revolutionary Romanticism in Twentieth-Century China

Abstract This article follows the ups and downs of revolutionary romanticism in twentieth-century China, as well as the entanglements of romanticism with Soviet literary guidelines. Despite being consistently overshadowed by realism, revolutionary romanticism presented an answer to the newly established Chinese communist regime's search for an independent discourse in the Eastern bloc. The movement also reflected Chinese writers' ambition to maintain literary creativity amidst the mandated ascendancy of verisimilitude demanded by realism. Although revolutionary romanticism was ultimately highjacked by the economic and social campaigns of the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962), its ideological utility continues to offer an important theoretical foundation for the cultural products that promote Chinese patriotism in the twenty-first century.

Keywords revolutionary romanticism, the combination, socialist realism, the Great Leap Forward

Introduction

Throughout the twentieth century, movements devoted to Chinese literary reform have prompted Chinese writers to absorb diverse elements from Western literary schools into their literary creations. This absorption has often been ahistorical, and has sometimes involved infusing indigested and even paradoxical elements into original Chinese works. One amalgamation that became characteristic of Chinese literature after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) was the "combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism" (henceforth: the "combination".) While realism unsurprisingly dominated the mainstream, romanticism became an indispensable supplementary feature, stressed by the Chinese as differentiating their creation from the pure Soviet discourse of socialist realism.

Geopolitical needs motivated the Chinese to search for a literary discourse that would not break socialist bonds with the Soviet Union but would nonetheless

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declare cultural independence. At the same time, however, the accentuation of romanticism also responded to the aesthetic demands of Chinese writers who were not satisfied with the principle of faithful representation. As Ban Wang argues, "[in] this early reception of realism in China, a moral thrust and aspiration for a romantically imagined world were interwoven with realistic portrayals" (238). For writers, the promotion of romanticism allowed greater freedom in their literary creation; for politicians, the romantic conceptualization of realism generated realistic depictions that could still accommodate utopian visions for the purposes of propaganda.

To a certain extent, the versatile nature of romanticism made possible such a combination, with its diverse artistic and political functions. After all, even at the height of revolutionary romanticism in China, its definition was vague and elusive. Although most scholars have identified Romanticism with the Romantic movement in European arts and literature from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, its impact has continued beyond that period. Its tenacious vitality has invited a range of interpretations. I agree with Paul Dave that "romanticism only exists in the disconnected plural—romanticisms—not the grand singular" (3). After all, even canonical Romantic writers such as William Wordsworth (1770–1850), George Gordon Byron (1788– 1824), Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822), and John Keats (1795– 1821) might not be particularly flattered to be grouped together under the title of Romanticism (Perry 4–5). Their successors gave further play to the idea's versatility by layering their own interpretations on top of the prior romantic traditions.

Another approach to defining romanticism is to describe it in terms of what it is not. Rather than designate significant features purportedly shared by the works of Romantic writers—an approach that can lead to arbitrary conclusions—it can be compelling instead to construe romanticism by setting it opposite its supposed antitheses, including Classicism, Realism, Enlightenment, or Capitalism. However, the boundaries between these movements are not always clear-cut. Consequently, after examining the various and sometimes contradictory definitions of Romanticism in recent scholarship, Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre have drawn the conclusion that "Romanticism is fundamentally antimetaphysical" (4). The only reasonable approach to a definition is to accept its arbitrary nature and tumultuous multiplicity. Thus, these scholars propose to treat Romanticism as a Weltanschauung or worldview, a collective mental structure (14).

Discussion of Romanticism is typically confined to the realm of European culture. When considering the leftist literature guided by Marxism, the example of Soviet literature leads to the natural conclusion that realism enjoyed absolute dominance. One might therefore also expect that the Eastern bloc—

which advocated Socialist Realism or critical realism as the prime manifestation of historical materialism—would reject Romanticism. Yet Romanticism was not always the "cultural avatar of counterrevolution" that Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre assert (12). To the contrary, the concept of revolution—used as an adjective to modify romanticism—gave Chinese writers a way to mingle realism with romanticism, thus creating a distinctive literary discourse in the twentieth century.

The historical entanglement of romanticism and realism

Realism is often regarded as the product of artistic rebellion against the romantic tradition. Yet arguably the fundamental difference between Western romanticism and the later revolutionary romanticism that travelled from the Soviet Union to China lies in the latter's distinctive and complex relationship with realism. Revolutionary realism enjoyed officially sanctioned dominance in Chinese literature for more than half of the twentieth century, and Chinese revolutionary romanticism has necessarily been conceptualized in terms of its intimate entanglement with that realist tradition.

Leo Ou-fan Lee suggests treating certain social and political movements, including the Cultural Revolution, as a "resurgence of a kind of collective romantic spirit against the routinization of an established order" (296). If we accept this idea, we can in turn assume that the romantic impulse consistently managed to find its way into mainstream Chinese literature throughout the twentieth century, even amid the predominance of realism. As Lee vividly demonstrates, the seemingly paradoxical combination of realism and romanticism established itself in China as early as the 1910s and 1920s, in the groundbreaking practice of the writers of the May Fourth Movement.

When Chinese literature took a leftist turn in the 1930s, the romantic and utopic visions crafted in literature were further explored by Communist theorists such as Qu Qiubai (1899–1935) and Zhou Yang (1907–1989), who promoted the idea of merging romanticism with realism (Anderson 56).1 In particular, in 1933 Zhou Yang published an article restating an argument from Soviet critic Valerii Kirpotin's (1898–1997) speech at the first meeting of the organizing committee of the Union of Soviet Writers (Soiuz pisatelei SSSR) in 1932. In his speech, Kirpotin presented revolutionary romanticism as an essential component of socialist realism, and indeed heretically divergent from classic capitalist or bourgeois romanticism (Zhou 30–31).

1. Qu Qiubai suggested extracting positive qualities from both realism and romanticism, to produce a superior literary mode. Zhou Yang, meanwhile, proposed the more ambitious idea of integrating romanticism with realism.

Mao Zedong (1893–1976) implied a similar amalgam of realism and romanticism in his 1942 "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" (*Zai Yan'an wenyi zuotanhui shang de jianghua*, or "Talks") when he suggested that realism might be "elevated to a higher, more intense emotional pitch and endowed with a forward-moving momentum: revolutionary realism driven by popular energy and romantic visions of a new world" (Wang 238). According to Mao, the life reflected in literary and artistic works should be more intense, more concentrated, and more idealistic than reality; only in this way can literature and art be universal and revolutionary, capable of helping the masses to promote historical progress (Mao 861). Mao's Talks recall Zhou Yang's insights into Chinese socialist realism inspired by the Soviet tradition, published almost a decade earlier:

> Only by focusing on non-superficial details, holding to an essential and representative pursuit, and depicting objective reality—on the one hand delineating diverse negative and positive elements, and on the other hand revealing the victorious nature of socialist revolution, indoctrinating readers with the spirit of the struggle for a better future—can we find paths towards socialist realism (Zhou 29).

Yet where Zhou Yang's 1933 article—directly inspired by Kirpotin's speech to the Union of Soviet Writers—is more theoretically oriented, Mao's talks instead take the socialist realist doctrine and repackages it in a colloquial style more accessible to the everyday Chinese reader. Mao's talks never highlight romanticism as a historical artistic tradition. Nonetheless, both Zhou and Mao articulate similarly romanticized reconceptualizations of realism, intended to develop a literature better suited to arouse certain emotions and serve as a guide for class struggle and daily life.

The Chinese promotion of revolutionary romanticism had its basis in Marxism, especially its Soviet manifestation entailing romantic inclinations merged with realism. The entanglement of romanticism with Marxist aesthetics can be traced to the Marxist–Leninist ideology that drew on the romantic spirit of nineteenth-century European revolutionary thought, incorporating romantic philosophy invested in ideal social conditions (Löwy 17).[2] In the Soviet context, though, romanticism was more closely connected with practical political goals. One of the earliest conceptualizations of socialist realism is as an amalgam of proletarian realism and revolutionary romanticism put forward by Aleksei Tolstoi (1883–1945), Anatolii Lunacharskii (1875–1933), and Maxim Gorky (1868–1936) (Clark 33–34). It gained political traction through Stalin's mouthpiece Andrei Zhdanov (1896–1948), who gave a keynote address at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, which declared socialist

2. Michael Löwy, for example, perceives a romantic dimension in Marxism.

realism the fundamental method of Soviet literature. Zhdanov declared that such literature should not only represent reality, but also prioritize the task of ideological transformation and mass education (Pervyi vsesoiuznyi s"ezd 716). As Hilary Chung observes, in Zhdanov's speech, "the 'historically concrete representation of reality' is enhanced by the dynamic of its 'revolutionary development' by means of a revolutionary romanticism infused by the writer's commitment to Socialism"; nevertheless, Zhdanov's proposal still emphasized realist conventions such as "an authoritative narrative voice and coherent plot structure" (Chung 15). Although socialist realism became the literary norm of Soviet society, the principle of verisimilitude on many occasions in fact gave way to revolutionary romanticism, which urged Soviet writers to heroize, monumentalize, and exaggerate. In the end, by turning realism (or romanticism) into merely a rhetorical device, socialist realism incorporated what had hitherto seemed uncombinable: "verisimilitude and mythicization" (Clark 35).

Such a fusion must still be governed by the earnest belief in the communist future as depicted in socialist realism. Readers must feel assured that the ideal communist future depicted in such texts is reliable and attainable. Two cultural shifts occurred to eliminate potentially problematic connotations of unrealistic utopianism implied by the term romanticism. First, realism underwent a process of remodelling to incorporate myth, as described above; second, romanticism itself was gradually redefined as reactionary and bourgeois, and thereby antithetical to socialist principles.[3] By obscuring the boundary between realism and romanticism, and incorporating the romantic spirit into an extended vision of realism, romanticism became ubiquitous. Even as romanticism ostensibly declined in favor, it persisted in hidden ways, never fully withdrawing from realism in Soviet literature.

At the same time, the decreasing discussion of romanticism in Soviet Russia left the Chinese extra space to create their own discourse of revolutionary romanticism—unsurprisingly, a concept that came to have an intimate relationship with Chinese revolutionary realism. It is worth noting that in the late 1950s and the 1960s, during the post-Stalin years, romanticism returned to Soviet literary scholarship as a concept worth studying (Leighton). In addition, Marxist philosophers in the Western world also advocated their own vision of revolutionary romanticism in the same period.[4] However, by then the Chinese had become fixated on the search for their unique revolutionary voice, and

3. The popular assumption in Russia that romanticism should assume a position subordinate to realism also facilitated the recasting of romanticism and realism. For scholarship on Russian romanticism and its development, see Lauren G. Leighton, *Russian Romanticism: Two Essays* (The Hague: Mouton, 1975); Robert Reid, *Problems of Russian romanticism* (Aldershot: Gower, 1986).

4. For example, Henri Lefebvre published "Romantisme Révolutionnaire" in *Nouvelle Revue Française* in 1957, where he argues for a new revolutionary romanticism as an aesthetic that might be embraced by Western anti-capitalist movements outside Soviet realism. Cf: Henri Lefebvre and Gavin Grindon, "Revolutionary Romanticism," *Art in Translation* 4, no. 3 (2012): 287-299.

therefore barely resorted to the latest Soviet or Western sources in seeking inspiration for their own discussions of revolutionary romanticism.

The "Combination"

The discourse of Chinese revolutionary romanticism was solidified as an officially recognized mode in 1958, when Mao established the slogan of the "combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism." Mao highlighted this "combination" in a March meeting at Chengdu, where he commented on the development of Chinese poetry. In May, at the second session of the Eighth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, Mao reemphasized the "combination," alongside his promulgation of the Great Leap Forward (Cui 269–270).

Initially the principle was designed to encourage Chinese poets to learn from Chinese folk songs. However, the idea was soon expanded. The famous Chinese poet Guo Moruo (1892–1978), who rejoined the Communist Party in 1958, used the "combination" in an April essay to explain Mao's lyric poem "Butterfly Lingering Over Flowers: Reply to Li Shuyi" (*Die lian hua: Da Li Shuyi*) (Wang 342–343). Then, in June, Guo elaborated the idea of the "combination" further, acclaiming Mao as both the greatest realist and the greatest romanticist. He also proclaimed Mao's poetry to be the prototype of the "combination" and the greatest extant paragon (Guo 7–9). Guo called on all writers and artists to learn from Mao, not only in terms of writing poetry, but also in other forms of literary composition. Zhou Yang in his discussion of the "combination" also moved beyond Chinese poetry and claimed the "combination" to be "the scientific summing-up of the experience of all literary history". He therefore declared it the goal to which all Chinese writers and artists should aspire (Zhou 5).

Still later in 1958, Zhou Yang published an article based on his speech at Peking University of earlier that year, in which he elaborated in detail the idea of the "combination," providing an extended theoretical framework based on his interpretation of Mao's thought and his reading of Russian literature. In particular, Zhou cited Russian literary criticism by Vissarion Belinsky (1811–1848) and Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1828–1889) in his discussion of realism. He also traced the merging of revolutionary romanticism and socialist realism back to Gorky's remarks at the Soviet Writers' Union's First All-Union Congress in 1934, when Gorky had promoted the idea of combining positive romanticism (as distinguished from negative romanticism) with socialist realism.[5] In the same 1958 article, Zhou also pointed out that Soviet writers had gradually

5. According to Gorky, positive romanticism presents a reflection of reality, whereas negative romanticism distorts and falsifies reality

shifted their attention away from romanticism, and that it was Mao who had brought it back to the people's attention. Zhou explained romanticism as a kind of idealism—a motivation embedded in great foreign writers, especially Russians such as Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881). According to Zhou, the conflict between the ideal and the real—the conflict underlying the traditional opposition between romanticism and realism—can be solved by proletarian literature, because the people's ideal life is realizable through mass labour and struggle. Therefore, for Zhou the "combination" best reflects "our time and the spirit of the people" (63).

Zhou Yang and Guo Moruo were the leading figures in discussions around the "combination," which ultimately aroused the enthusiasm of writers, editors, artists, and film producers all over China. Already in 1958, workshops were being organized by local literary and artistic offices in major Chinese cities including Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenyang. News agencies, periodicals, and party journals all solicited essays on the "combination." Famous writers including Lao She (1899–1966), Mao Dun (1896–1981), and Tian Han (1898–1968) participated actively in the discussion. In 1960, at the Third Congress of the All-China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, the "combination" was confirmed as the guiding principle of Chinese literary and artistic creation. As the cultural manifestation of the spirit of the Great Leap Forward—filled with fervor and fantasy—the "combination" became a political form of romanticism that drew both writers and readers to identify with the party's vision and strive for its realization. The literature produced in this period concentrated on the narration of three types of history: the history of factories, the history of the people's communes, and the history of the army, alongside revolutionary memoirs of the establishment of the People's Republic of China. The main theme was "to recollect the revolutionary history, and to glorify the Great Leap Forward" (Wang 356).

Significantly, promotion of the "combination" initially aligned with the Anti-Rightist Campaign which commenced in 1957 and resulted in the purge of many Chinese intellectuals. An unspoken terror was embedded in the romantic discourse, even as that discourse illuminated a grandiose communist future in the spirit of the sublime. Consequently, the launch of the "combination" demanded a precise elucidation of Mao's thought. In a speech at the Third Congress of the All-China Federation of Literary and Art Circles in 1960, the Minister of Culture Mao Dun addressed the "combination" in a section that opens with a paragraph repeating Mao and his mouthpiece Zhou Yang's assertions. The following paragraph likewise restates the importance of Mao's poetry as the sublime model of the "combination," as it reflects the worldview of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, along with the rich experience of struggle, the

persistent revolutionary spirit, the lofty ideals, and the noble qualities of a strong proletarian solder (Mao Dun 46–47).

Mao Dun's romantic description of the impact of Mao Zedong's "combination" continues:

> The flame of the combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism in literary works may have arisen before [Mao's] proposal of the ["combination"] slogan as a result of writers' unconscious or subconscious. Now, after the proposal, writers have lived and worked through two years of the legendary Great Leap Forward that made the earth tremble, the mountains sway, the wind and cloud change colour, and miracles take place in succession. They do not only understand the writing principle of the "combination" rationally, but gain sensorial understanding of it from the majestic and splendid reality. The unprecedented harvest in the field of literature and art in the two years of the Great Leap Forward has proven the potential of the profound enlightenment and formidable inspiration embedded in this slogan (48).

A similar rhetorical style with its emphasis on sublimity appears in Chinese publications throughout the Great Leap Forward, describing miraculous advances achieved by the people. Mao Dun not only adopts such rhetoric in his description of the social transformation of the previous two years (60), he also utilizes it in his description of the new look of the field of literature and art. After all, the principle of revolutionary romanticism is to "mobilize people's subjective attitudes, to depict the grand prospect of communism with tremendous courage and foresight, to extol the heroes of our generation from amidst the masses that create history and transform nature" (64). Romanticism takes center stage as a way of motivating citizens to vigorously promote—rather than simply reflect on—communist life. To a certain extent, Mao Dun's speech is in itself a performance in keeping with the goal of reconstructing social life—including public speeches—into a collective, communal art form, itself part of Mao's aestheticized politics intended to appeal to an ideologically conditioned audience.

Interestingly, however, it is not clear that Mao Dun himself in 1960 is certain where the future lies. It is difficult for him even to name model literary and artistic works that anticipate the future in the spirit of the "combination." In contrast to the grandiloquence of his general overview, Mao Dun is stingy with concrete examples that might illustrate the spirit of the "combination." The few works that he names include Liang Bin's (1914–1996) novel *Red Flag Flying* (*Hongqi pu*), Liu Baiyu's (1916–2005) short stories, the poems of Ruan Zhangjing (1914–2000) and He Jingzhi (b. 1924), the new opera *The Red Guards of Lake Honghu* (*Honghushui chiweidui*), and the dramas *To Subdue the*

Dragon and Tame the Tiger (*Xiang long fu hu*) and *A Single Spark Can Start a Prairie Fire* (*Xing huo liao yuan*). Mao Dun does not seem to have the appetite to analyze any of these works in depth, despite the fact that he includes lengthy analysis of classical Chinese literature and foreign works in his 92-page speech. The section on the "combination" ends abruptly with Mao Dun's hasty projection of a bright future for Chinese literature.

Mao Dun does not mention that the Great Leap Forward embedded a cultural plan, launched in the second half of 1958. This cultural plan required all Chinese writers and artists to "write about, sing about, perform about, and draw about the center [Maoism]". The masses meanwhile were encouraged to produce their own work. The hope was to create an upsurge of literary and artistic creation (Li Yuntuan 98). These practices—rather than the few works Mao Dun mentions in his speech—were the true embodiment of the "combination" that made the seeming "cultural leap" possible.

The "combination" may reasonably be treated as an offshoot of Soviet literary theory. After all, the Chinese drew persistently on Soviet and Russian theories as the starting point for their discussions of the "combination." In their essays, many Chinese writers and literary critics of the time also remarked on the close connection between the "combination" and Soviet socialist realism, or argued that the "combination" enriched socialist realism through a greater emphasis on romanticism (Fokkema 273–274). However, it is equally important to highlight Mao's determination to find a uniquely Chinese path in cultural development. The period's emphasis on Chinese folk culture and the call for Chinese poets to learn from folk songs, alongside the endorsement of elements in Chinese classical literature as proper examples of the "combination," all reveal the fact that this "new formula stressed the continuity in the development of Chinese literary history" (197).

It is also important to note that the political relationship between the PRC and the Soviet Union had deteriorated in the second half of the 1950s. The resulting Sino-Soviet split led to the removal of Soviet specialists from China during the Great Leap Forward. The Chinese recognized the need for independence both in scientific and cultural development. Zhou Yang's speech in August 1958, for example, criticized any dogmatism that would copy the Soviet experience mechanically without considering Chinese reality. Instead, Zhou emphasized the necessity to revaluate the Chinese cultural legacy and draw lessons from the Chinese revolutionary experience since the May Fourth Movement, in order to prepare the Chinese working classes to become the true masters of science, culture, and art (Zhou 38). Where learning from foreign culture, even Soviet culture, might invite the charge of being reactionary, the Chinese literary tradition and folk culture offered relatively safe ground. In

addition, the promotion of revolutionary romanticism fell in line with Mao's own poetic temperament, which sparked a sense of recognition from poets such as Guo Moruo, who entered into the ideas from the start.

Despite the enthusiasm with which Chinese writers and literary critics embraced Mao's proposal of the "combination" as the basis for a new school of literature to answer the call of the Great Leap Forward, the literary response was not straightforward. A perusal of the discussion around the "combination" in the late 1950s reveals an imbalance between literary criticism and literary creation. While a heated theoretical discussion followed Mao's proposal, the accompanying literary creations were not comparable in either quantity or quality. Moreover, the influence of the "combination" was interrupted in the 1960s, beginning with the political shift that occurred from the middle of 1960 to 1962.[6] Although this shift did not last long—and was soon replaced by the radical zeal that led directly to the tumultuous Cultural Revolution—the "combination" lost its influence as a pivotal slogan. A new formula—Three Prominences (*san tuchu*)—emerged during the Cultural Revolution, emphasizing a tiered approach: at the base, writers should give attention to characters viewed as positive; amongst these, the most prominent should be heroic main characters; and foremost amongst these should be the central hero. This slogan triumphed over all prior ones, becoming the clarion call of a new era.

Notwithstanding the great variety of dominant slogans, however, the spirit of revolutionary romanticism held on through the Cultural Revolution. The situation resembled the Soviet Union's, where romanticism had been outwardly rejected, even as its useful elements were absorbed into socialist realism. The most prominent shared emotional commitment during the Cultural Revolution was to none other than the appropriated figure of the sublime. Specifically, the culturally accepted sublime took the form of representation that helped construct an image of grandeur and transcendence in accordance with Mao's political vision.

Overall, revolutionary romanticism served specific political functions during Mao's era. As Laikwan Pang argues, "[if] modern European arts resort to the poetic and the artistic to reach beyond the world of order, Maoist arts were given the opposite mission of constructing an order. They were tasked to provide affective aesthetic anchorages in a highly disorienting political reality, and to construct a more coherent sphere of existence in contrast to the political chaos" (Pang 37). To a certain extent, the art produced in the spirit of revolutionary romanticism constructed a utopia meant to transcend material

6. These years saw an attempt to moderate far-leftist elements within the party through various means, including by reinstituting the 1956 Hundred Flowers Campaign that had allowed for greater freedom of thought and speech, and by downplaying the role of the "combination," perceived as encouraging exaggeration and empty talk.

reality. Through the constant repetition of a limited selection of artworks circulated across China, revolutionary romanticism stimulated a collective emotional consensus among the Chinese in a decade of political and social turmoil. It also offered a channel for readers to move beyond their mundane life and engage with the extraordinary.

The Return of Revolutionary Romanticism

In a work report submitted to the First Session of the Fifth National People's Congress (NPC) on February 26, 1978, the Premier of the State Council Hua Guofeng (1921–2008) discusses the sabotage by the "Gang of Four" (*Siren bang*). Hua holds the "Gang of Four" were responsible for the relative dearth of literary and artistic creation during the Cultural Revolution and urges the revival of principles from the 1950s, especially the formula of the "combination." In his report, he writes:

> The topics of literary and artistic creation must be diversified. The focus should be on modern revolution, especially the three revolutionary movements during socialist times, but we should also pay attention to historical subjects and other topics. We must uphold the artistic method of the combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism (Hua).

Hua's report generated a new round of discussion about the "combination" among literary critics of the late 1970s and early 1980s. In 1978 in his inscription for *People's Literature* (*Renmin wenxue*), the official journal of the China Writers Association, Hua reemphasizes the importance of the spirit of the Hundred Flowers Campaign, which had encouraged free speech and criticism of Chinese society. Hua's inscription helped prompt the resurgence of revolutionary romanticism. In the same journal's next issue, the editorial staff asserted that an in-depth discussion of the "combination" was essential to the success of socialist literary and artistic creations, and upheld the "combination" as a crucial starting point for restoring order after the Cultural Revolution (He and Tian 108–112).

Familiar voices from the 1950s also chimed in. Zhou Yang, the theorist who had enthusiastically advocated for the "combination" in the 1950s, took the opportunity to restate its importance in a December 1978 speech, which was published in the party's official newspaper *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao*) the following year:

> To follow the principle of revolutionary realism means that we need to base work on actual life, to observe and study reality. We need to be loyal to that reality, but we should not be limited to fragmented and trivial phenomena; instead, we should stand up high and see far beyond: we need to combine our revolutionary ideals with realist description. Chairman Mao's

> revolutionary romanticism means revolutionary idealism. The combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism is the combination of the principle of seeking truth from facts, with the revolutionary spirit (Zhou Yang 84).

Zhou's statement did not greatly diverge from what he had proposed twenty years earlier. However, in terms of his concrete approach, Zhou now not only supported the positive depiction of revolutionary heroes, but also considered it necessary to reveal social problems. He maintained that self-criticism is just as important as the denunciation of enemies: "socialist literature should not only criticize capitalism, feudalism and all kinds of hostile ideologies of the exploiting classes, but also reprimand the negative phenomena, malpractices and dark elements of socialist society" (86). This deviation from the earlier interpretation of the "combination," which had only allowed for optimistic renderings of socialist society—gave rise to new potential for literary creation starting in the late 1970s. In particular, it meant that the pursuit for sublimity was no longer a necessity.

In many ways critics in the late 1970s and early 1980s relied on similar theoretical and literary sources to those used in the 1950s. These included the Russian and Chinese literary canons, Marxism and Leninism, Mao's statements—including his Yan'an talks and his poetry—and Soviet critical discussions of writers such as Gorky. Occasionally the Western tradition of realism and romanticism was raised for comparison. However, where critics in the 1950s had been expected to unanimously glorify the "combination," the loosened political environment after the Cultural Revolution gave critics more freedom to interpret it according to their own understanding. Some critics argued that the "combination" does not stipulate a single formula by which writers and artists must abide, but allows for a wider variety of approaches to reality (Ma 125). This approach opened up possibilities for using the "combination" to represent frustrations and even setbacks. Writers also debated the specific relationship between realism and romanticism, and argued for an organic synthesis that would allow flexibility and variety of composition (Li Peihua 124–125). Conceived in terms of material dialectics, realism and romanticism need not be mutually exclusive, but instead, the two can be synthesized while each retains its distinctive essence.

Throughout this renewed discussion, there was even room for dissent: while most critics welcomed the revival of the "combination," others cautioned against the dangers of the sort of superficial and grandiloquent romanticism that had reached its peak during the Cultural Revolution (117–122). Despite this lively revival within the field of literary criticism, though, few actual literary works represented the spirit of the "combination." Critics were able to

agree in condemning what was seen as the false detour taken by revolutionary romanticism during the Cultural Revolution—and particularly the sort of literary and artistic works represented by the eight revolutionary operas produced during that time. Yet it remained challenging for critics to name successful examples that truly reflected the "combination." Critics ended up repeatedly mentioning a few works produced before the Cultural Revolution, especially *Red Flag Flying*, *Tracks in the Snowy Forest* (*Lin hai xue yuan*), and *Red Rock* (*Hong yan*).

Coda

Revolutionary Romanticism has been summarized by Chinese scholar Ding Fan as a school that exerted a great impact on Chinese literature in the first thirty years of PRC before it was "ruthlessly abandoned." This description reflects the fate of revolutionary romanticism in more recent decades. By the 1990s, the Great Leap Forward had been recognized as a failure by the Chinese communist party; its strong connection with the "combination" caused that proposal to lose favor as well. Today, Chinese writers and scholars are still primarily interested in realism—though without the constraints of the modifier "revolutionary." Yet revolutionary romanticism has been replaced by modernist schools such as symbolism and decadence—schools once suppressed by the overpowering discourse of realism—as inspirations for literary creation.

The decline in the fortunes of revolutionary romanticism has corresponded with Chinese intellectuals' fading excitement about revolution, as seen in works such as Li Zehou (1930–2021) and Liu Zaifu's (1941–) 1995 book *Farewell to Revolution: Looking Back at China of the Twentieth Century*. Despite accusations that this book expressed a kind of cultural conservatism or historical nihilism, it reflected Chinese intellectuals' disillusionment with the transformations promised by revolutionary violence. Consequently, romanticism qualified by revolution also lost its appeal.

The 1990s and beyond reveal a clear reduction in the number of scholarly articles on the "combination," especially when compared with the end of the 1950s or the early 1980s. Recent articles addressing the "combination" tend to treat it as a historical event, not a proposal quintessential to Chinese contemporary literature.[7] This does not mean the end of revolutionary romanticism, though. In primary schools, where Chinese language textbooks still incorporate heroic stories of the Red Army, the sacrifices made by Red Army heroes are still interpreted as fulfilling the spirit of revolutionary romanticism. Moreover, the popularity of Chinese "main-melody" (*zhuxuanlü*) blockbusters, some of which are direct adaptations of works such as "Tracks in the Snowy

7. See Zhiyuan Cui, "*Guanyu "liangjiehe" chuangzuo fangfa de lishi kaocha yu fansi*."

Forest," has revived the term revolutionary romanticism, which has been used to describe these films—twenty-first century works of propaganda that pay tribute to the PRC and the Chinese Communist Party. Thus, in the "post-revolutionary" era, the evocation of revolutionary romanticism has remained a powerful way to accommodate the sublimity of revolutionary heroism.

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Reviews

Min Qiao
Soochow University

Book Review of Xuelei Huang's *Scents of China: A Modern History of Smell*

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Introduction

Academic interest in sensory experiences is surging.[1] Studies that focus on seeing, hearing or tasting take Chinese readers on sensory and emotional journeys through late imperial and modern Chinese history. Among them, Xuelei Huang's thought-provoking work, *Scents of China: A Modern History of Smell* (hereafter *Scents of China*), is pioneering in bringing the olfactory sense of China to light, exploring an uncharted realm closely linked to everyday social life. This review seeks to present the endeavor of this groundbreaking work to enrich the critical understanding of modern sensibilities beyond the remarkable priority of visuality (Heidegger 170) and to "theorize the sensorial–social connectivity" (Huang 8).

Scents of China explores the environmental, literary, cultural, historical, and sociopolitical dimensions of the sense of smell in China since the eighteenth century. Huang revisits Chinese history through a careful examination of changes in China's smellscapes within a globalizing regime of olfactory modernity. The question of the sense of smell, in other words, is intertwined with social and technological developments, literary and political revolutions, cultural transformations, public knowledge of hygiene, collective memory, and private understandings of sexual sensitivity. In Huang's own words, odors help to "conceptualize physical and social space, store memories, evoke desires, and engage with history" (Huang 72).

The first chapter of the book explores the scents in the masterpiece *Dream of the Red Chamber* within the framework of material culture. Based on the delicate writing of material details in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Huang analyzes how

1. Xiayun Yu's article also highlights and analyzes this growing academic interest. (Yu 118–125).

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the use of scent creates a temporal and spatial distinction between the novel's worlds. The exquisite scent of pre-modern China contrasts sharply with the foul odor of, and even foreshadows, the end of the story. To be more specific, Huang points out that main female characters in the fictional world of the red chambers are depicted in relation to different scents. In the context of the global mobility of goods during the High Qing period (roughly 1683-1799), perfume had become a fashionable commodity among the Chinese aristocracy. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Jia Baoyu has a vast of knowledge of perfume and its sources. Fragrant objects, in this literary text, have multiple functions, including their use as gifts, purifiers, messengers, and symbols. They can be used to create a religious space for rituals, a personal space of reverence, a private space of intimacy, and an allegorical space for illusion. In other words, smell, with its "transcorporeality" (59), plays a mediating role.

The second chapter ostensibly illustrates a conflict between Western olfactory modernity and Oriental olfactory primitiveness in nineteenth-century travel writing. In fact, the social power behind this contrast is revealed through the language of smell. For the privileged noses of Western travelers, the unpleasant odor of China includes atmospheric foulness, the bad smell of people's bodies, the garlicky scent recognized as Chinese, the 'foul-smelling' opium, and so on. The discourse of "China stinks," as Xuelei Huang suggests, conjures up the concept of the uneasy "stranger." To travelers from the West, smell in China is neither Self nor Other, but stranger. Huang extracts from missionary travelogues what is referred to as Orientalism in the "unfolding process of physical and psychical encounters with the Orient" (65). What is most intriguing and impressive here is that Huang argues against the existence of a pre-defined orientalist structure of feeling. The author's discussion of China's response to this smelly accusation seems somewhat abbreviated. How strong Chinese emotions, such as feelings of humiliation and defeat, underpinned the rise of nationalism and the formation of modern Chinese subjectivity remains to be explored.

The second part of the book, "Smellscapes in Flux," comprises the next two chapters. The third chapter examines the process of environmental deodorization in modern China, which has been driven by the need to address the issue that "China stinks." Meanwhile, it investigates power relationships behind the Chinese war against water contamination and its pursuit of "hygienic modernity." Water played a crucial role in sanitary campaigns from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. It is worth noting that all three projects mentioned by the author took place in Shanghai over the course of the century. Unpleasant odors, especially stagnant water, came to be seen as the enemy of modernity and associated with unhealthiness with the renewal of hygiene knowledge in European countries. In colonial Shanghai,

the need for sewage treatment also arose under these circumstances. However, capitalist economic expansion in Shanghai was in many cases at odds with public health needs. Colonial deodorization demonstrates its tension. The elites and authorities of imperial Shanghai implemented several measures to address the issue of the troublesome water and to deodorize the city. During the subsequent wartime and socialist periods, the olfactory revolution continued.

In Chapter Four, Huang explains how China is implementing the re-perfuming program. The chapter starts with a soap advertisement that caught Mao Zedong's (1893-1976) attention. After the Opium War, more beauty products were imported into China than during the High Qing period, which contributed to the development of a new olfactory sensibility in China. The concept of "stranger" plays an essential role. Artificial fragrances, particularly those industrially manufactured, had been used to replace natural scents. This had contributed to the advancement of knowledge on smell, individual bodies, and national commodity.

The last two chapters form the third part, "A Whiff of Alterity," focusing on the allegorical, moral, and political aspects of smell. The author's meticulous reading of texts by May Fourth writers, from the point of view of scent, is one of the chapters in which the skill of close reading is most evident. In Yu Dafu's (1896-1945) short story "Sinking," the protagonist is stirred by a provocative perfume and the unique scent of a Japanese woman's flesh. At this moment, the personal olfactory language is linked with sensual desire and the expression of individuality and national identity. Particularly creative is Huang's reading of Lu Xun's (1881-1936) "Soap," which adopts an analytical strategy. She envisions the story "as a concerto comprising three movements, with the two olfactory motifs running throughout" (202). As she points out, Lu Xun's phrase, 'a scent she couldn't quite put her finger on—that might or might not have been olive' suggests that women who are "sexually attractive" (203) are subjects beyond being wives and mothers. Additionally, the sexually-charged phrase *gezhi gezhi* (a good scrubbing) suggests that women cannot be physically and morally fragrant.

From Huang's insight, some literary rhetoric associates olfactory revolution with Chinese political revolution. Huang argues in the final chapter that, in Communist China, the description of the malodorous *fentu* (muck) in Chairman Mao's poem can be interpreted as a symbol of new moral standards and a transformed society. This verb form of muck, as Huang suggests, is "a form of empowerment given to stench to instigate a revolution in the soul and the nervous system" (234). By carefully examining the political messages encoded in odors, this chapter deals with moral-political sniffing. What remains to be explained in detail is how the private olfactory experience is more intertwined

with public emotion than with the intimate.

Xuelei Huang offers a thorough and fascinating account of the history of the senses in China. Looking beyond familiar literature, and drawing on a wide range of historical records and visual materials, the heteroglossia of Chinese modernity is presented through solid historical research and close readings of literary and visual texts. The study presents the modern history of China through urban history, local history, environmental history, revolutionary history and emotional history. Moreover, for Huang, new olfactory experiences and representations not only interact with Chinese "multiple modernities" and sensibility, but also reflect China's adaptation to Western influence. It is worth noting, however, that there are more smells described in contemporary Chinese novels than are discussed. The olfactory trail runs through the landscape of contemporary Chinese literature across the borderland. In this light, Huang's study, which explores the relationship between olfactory modernity and various socio-cultural issues in modern China, is thus an inspiration for further studies of contemporary Chinese cultural history and literature.

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Abel Han Song
Cornell University

Postsocialist Symptoms, Recursive Readings:

A Review Essay of Xiao Liu's *Information Fantasies: Precarious Meditation in Postsocialist China*

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Introduction

Xiao Liu's *Information Fantasies* provides a timely answer to the question: what can media theory learn from modern China? Unearthing a history of China's role in the global production and circulation of information, Liu's work to some extent inaugurates current research interests in modern Chinese humanities that attend to materiality, infrastructure, and bodily affects. Consisting of five chapters, the study's first part explores the histories of extrasensory powers, *qigong* (Chapter 1), and Artificial Intelligence-driven systems (Chapter 2). The second part examines the cultural imagination of information and systems in new cinema (Chapters 3 and 5) and literature (Chapter 4 and the epilogue). Engaged in media theories, each chapter illustrates how key concepts, "the digital, the interface, the system, noises, and the liminality of cinema" (35), interact with postsocialist practices.

Whereas "information fantasy" denotes the dream of "all-inclusive mediation that integrates human beings into seamless, real-time information circuits" (22), Liu focuses on the "cybernetic body" that sustains or disrupts these circuits. From mass media to AI-driven systems, when technologies incorporate human bodies into ceaseless flows, Liu urges us to recognize the frictions and perils of such information fantasies. "Anticipating the discussions on information surveillance, data collection, and precarious labor conditions in the economy today," Liu envisions, "this project thus provides an *ur*-history of the digital" (35).

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Chapter 1 begins with the craze over magical waves through extrasensory powers and *qigong*—a traditional medical practice combining breathing techniques and meditation for bodily balance. These waves acquired a universal convertibility beyond the confines of the body and environment, incorporating the body into instant information transmission. For scientists such as Qian Xuesen, a "somatic science" was thus worthy of serious study, treating the body as information. Instead of viewing the digital as binary coding, this underexplored cultural history of magical waves envisions new corporeal relations between bodies and environments.

Chapter 2 rethinks the interface through an AI-driven expert system that emerged in China in the late 1970s. Comprising specialized "expert" knowledge with an inference engine, the expert system aimed to provide professional consultation—particularly for traditional Chinese medicine—even in the absence of a human expert. The system presumes "neutral," professionalized knowledge, converging with the "politics of depoliticization" in postsocialist China (108). However, such a system continues the (Western) philosophical binary that separates intelligence and reason from the human body. Whereas scientists call for a more inclusive "metasynthetic engineering" to incorporate bodily affects or a "user-friendly interface," Liu sees the interface as symptomatic of a fragmented society that requires communicative labor to bridge its segregated layers.

Chapter 3 on the "ultrastable system" may be the most ambitious case study. Reading new cinema (Chen Kaige and Huang Jianxin) alongside intellectual history (Jin Guantao and Liu Qingfeng), Liu situates emerging modernist aesthetics within a Needham-style question asked by scholars such as Jin and Liu in the 1980s: Why did feudalism persist in China, and what was missing in Chinese culture that prevented its modernization, unlike the West? Liu specifically focuses on Chen's *Yellow Earth* (1984) and Huang Jianxin's *Black Cannon Incident* (1985). Whereas former scholarship focuses on how new-wave cinematic aesthetics were influenced by global modernism or Chinese tradition, Liu illustrates that, in this intellectual environment, they actively participated in a "scientific" system theory-based discussion: is China an "ultrastable" system? And if so, what can Chinese culture do in the face of global modernization?

In two strikingly different circumstances—the former in a rural loess plateau and the latter in an urban industrial area—the directors contemplate people's agency within and beyond systems. Their distinctive film language, such as Chen's immobile camera as well as long shots, and Huang's low-angle shots and "strange loop" patterns, also depicts landscapes of eternal stagnation and people's deep-seated anxiety in the recursive loops of bureaucratization and modernization. In this light, while the protagonists in these films are observers

of the system—a Party representative seeking folk songs and inspiring a peasant girl, and a factory expert mistakenly accused of espionage—they are nonetheless trapped within the systems they observe. The dilemma, as Liu asks, is this: "Is this man involved in the circuit an operator/observer of the system, or is he himself a black box functioning no differently from an input/output device?" (140).

Chapter 4 rereads the experimental writing of Wang Meng alongside the rise of the market economy and the return of advertising. In the face of "information bombing"—enabled by wireless radio and television broadcasts—what is information, and what is noise? Liu contextualizes emerging modernism alongside the cacophony of multimedia advertising, arguing that experimental literary styles—"metonymy, unconventional association, and defamiliarization"—were also valued skills in advertising and information aesthetics (183).

Chapter 5 continues the discussion of new cinema and situates its transformation in fierce competition with television and videotapes. Starting with film theorization such as "idea-image" (*yixiang*)—ideas that move beyond realism and value simulacra and affective power—Liu contends that a tension emerged in discourses on postsocialist film: whereas critics regard film viewing as an intellectual inquiry, the production and marketization "carried film spectatorship toward sensorial stimuli and simulacra with no origins" (244). This divergence is particularly striking in what Liu calls "haunted media": films that depict the coexistence of different epistemologies and realities. *The Lonely Spirit in a Dark Building* (1989) is a prime example. By placing the process of filmmaking within the film, this horror movie explores the limits of communication and the ethics of mediation.

The book concludes with an analysis of an online sci-fi story about the opposition between humans and machines, "Youth, Chinese-style" (2006). Highly influenced by multimedia popular culture, such stories depart from postsocialist histories and politics, where even themes of "resistance" and "revolution" appear deflated and dehistoricized, "symptomatically [underlining] the postsocialist politics of depoliticization in the understanding and imagination of information technology." (261)

Xiao Liu renews our understanding of the vibrant moment of post-socialist "culture fever" in the 1980s and 90s. Engaging in dialogue with pioneering works such as Rey Chow (1995), Wang Jing (1996), Zhang Xudong (1996 and 2008), and more recent scholarship like Erin Huang (2020), Liu's analysis is informed by theories and histories of information, systems, and cybernetics. By contextualizing aesthetics and politics within concrete technological backgrounds, Liu demonstrates that (post-)modernist aesthetics in new

literature and cinema are not merely transposable or translatable techniques; rather, they are deeply embedded in and contributory to circulating discourses on information.

For instance, whereas Rey Chow—whose primary example is also Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth*—astutely observes that reform-era intellectuals had a "primitive passion" to reconstruct a lost origin, Liu anchors this psychoanalysis-oriented discussion within cultural history and system theory. *Yellow Earth* ends ambiguously: a child runs toward the Party representative, an embodiment of the Party's idealism, but is ultimately consumed by the frantic masses. Chow, illustrating the distance between intellectuals and the masses, comments that the film "leaves us with a cognitive repetition and roughening of the oppression whose true origins remain ambiguous with historical weight" (103). Liu, however, offers a different reading: when the outsider-representative disappears into the landscape of the people, "the observer no longer occupies a view of command but becomes indistinguishable from the system he observes" (140). In a self-reflexive manner, the intellectual's dissolution into the masses recursively embodies artists' unsettling circumstances within the "strange loops of knowledge" (Liu 157). Liu's work itself participates in this loop, composing a recursive historiography of China that unravels changes both from within and outside the system.

Yet, how can STS histories and texts traverse so many domains? Here, "symptom" emerges as a crucial keyword in Liu's work, where information fantasies are consistently framed as symptoms of postsocialism. This symptomatic reading presupposes latent meanings and systemic oppressions waiting to be unveiled. As Eve Sedgwick insightfully comments on paranoid reading, such a "hermeneutics of suspicion" can have unintended consequences: "they may have made it less rather than more possible to unpack the local, contingent relations between any given pieces of knowledge and its narrative/epistemological entailments for the seeker, knower, or teller" (124). The multifaceted relations that shaped the cultural productions are always quickly tamed as sociohistorical forces, particularly the "politics of depoliticization." While this framework has explanatory power, it is less effectual in describing Chinese culture today and, in some cases, within Liu's book itself. For example, many of the films discussed still operate under the shadow of the Cultural Revolution. Ironically, many literary experiments were made possible by subsidies from the socialist cultural system. How might history appear differently if we applied alternative reading practices beyond symptomatic reading?

Reading Liu's work is like looking into a kaleidoscope of postsocialist China, where bewildering texts, news, and films make us question: from whose perspective are we witnessing these meditations? Mediation is always precarious,

Liu reminds us—not only because media is prone to dysfunction and failure, but also because China's postsocialist transformation is full of uncertainties. What, then, is the value—whether negative or positive—of precarious meditations when mediations either overflow or undermine the circuits of global capitalism? In the wake of post-2008 structural crises in finance and globalization, does precarity hold alternative potential, or will it be redirected to construct an even more all-encompassing system? Liu's work invites further research into the radical potentials that emerge at the intersection of human bodies and information circuits, urging scholars to scrutinize the shifting dynamics of mediation in postsocialist China and beyond.

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