

THE ECOLOGICAL TURN: POSITIONING THE NATURAL WORLD IN POST-MAO
FICTION AND FILM

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This dissertation bridges ecocritical perspectives of literature (often understood within the context of European and American literary traditions) with discourses of post-Mao Chinese modernity. Topographical and spatial transformations within Mainland China, accompanying an ideological shift from Maoism to a mode of global neo-liberal capitalism, have challenged individual writers and filmmakers in their narration of identity (cultural, national, or regional), memory (personal and cultural), and history. The term “ecological turn” derives from the work of notable ecocritics such as Lawrence Buell and Greg Garrard and it is assigned within this research to describe a heightening interest among Mainland Chinese intellectuals to study the interactions of humans, places, and the natural world. The individual works of Dai Sijie, Jia Zhangke, Han Shaogong, and Wang Anyi demonstrate in many ways the extent to which the role of the natural world has been explored and positioned within post-Mao fiction and film, echoing the systemic violence inherent to legacies of authoritarianism and colonial conditions.

By formulating a relationship between ecologically informed readings with polyvalent discourses of Chinese modernity, this dissertation broadens avenues for further ecocritical interpretive critique of post-Mao fiction. Taken in context of the vast history of Chinese literature, an ecological understanding takes on an even more pressing position. Historically nature has been used to represent human emotion, define society, serve as a metaphor of dynastic change and cyclicity, and formulate spiritual realms. From this perspective, an implicit danger begins to emerge. The rapid industrialization of Mainland China of the past decades not only puts its ecosystem in danger, more perniciously, it also endangers literature, and the primary works read for this study speak in many voices against that danger.

Acknowledgements

Towards the end of my oral final examination, a tricky question came my way, and I admit that I fumbled around a bit to try and answer it adequately. The question went somewhat like this— “what do you think you might discover as you write your dissertation that you perhaps do not currently anticipate finding?” My response was a generic rundown of some theoretical issues I had already been facing. What my answer to this provocative question did not explain would be what I would ultimately discover about the dissertation writing process itself— specifically that the project would prove to be more of a product of collaboration rather than a personal, lonely time of reflection.

Like many scholars that describe themselves as comparativists, I fully embrace the fact that I am interested in too many things. Because of this, it is difficult to trace the exact point at which I became infatuated by Chinese language and literature from a comparative perspective. In fact, it seems like I have always been excited by travel, languages and literatures, and teaching. My love of travel began when I was an undergraduate at the University of Memphis as I spent my junior year abroad studying in France. My desire to explore as many places as possible would extend beyond the European continent soon afterwards when, on a whim, I decided to delay graduation to live in China to teach. Teaching and travelling would become my main occupation over the following few years until finally I decided to allow those experiences to crystallize into a graduate degree.

I worked on my Master’s in East Asian Languages and Cultures at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign from 2001 to 2003. During this time I would meet many wonderful scholars and colleagues who not only inspired me but also directed my interests towards the

study of literature. Rania Huntington, who would be my first of many advisors, has taught me everything I know about traditional Chinese novels and works of drama. She showed amazing patience with me as a Master's student as I trudged my way through numerous and voluminous works. Her passion for Chinese literature easily transfers to her students, and I was deeply impressed by the enthusiasm she could instill in the classroom. During this time I met Gary Xu who would become a close friend and mentor over the years. He would inspire me to study modern Chinese literature and film. After my Master's degree and a brief hiatus from graduate school, Gary would be instrumental in securing the continuation of my studies towards a PhD, though now through Comparative Literature. Upon returning to UIUC to finish my doctorate degree, Gary would also be active in molding my research interests. He helped me research the field of Chinese studies and encouraged me to pursue my interest in the intersection of ecology and literature. As the director of my thesis research, Gary allowed me the freedom to meander through the writing process while continually remaining as a solid support person when my personal strengths met their inevitable limitations or I began to lack confidence in myself. It was ultimately his patience that nourished my persistence.

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As they say, last but definitely not least, this dissertation would not have been possible without the loving support of my best friend and wife Anissa. She was more secure about my abilities to write and finish the dissertation than I was. Her profound belief in me was what really allowed me to get up in the mornings with a firm sense of purpose and direction. She was also my copy editor, and without the hours she spent reading and rereading my different drafts, this project would never have ended with the resolute approval of my committee that it eventually received. For that I am deeply grateful. Towards the end of my writing, our daughter Léonie came into this world and changed ours. I never knew that a one year old could teach you about life, but her laugh and sense of humor has imparted more wisdom than any book ever could.

The beginning is always written last. As I reflect upon this product of years of thinking and writing, I see now that it was those who supported me that actually made this dissertation possible. To all of you, I dedicate this work. I truly enjoyed pondering the theoretical issues broached in this project, and finishing this dissertation has given me an enormous sense of accomplishment. I have appreciated having the opportunity and privilege of writing, and these were only possible because of those who have shown great love for me. For that, I will never be able to adequately express my gratitude.

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Introduction

Ecological Points of Departure

When the other villagers heard about the fisherman's arrival, they all came out to pay him a visit. They told him that their ancestors had fled the disorders of Ch'in times, and having taken refuge here with wives and children and neighbors, had never ventured out again; consequently they had lost all contact with the outside world. They asked what the present ruling dynasty was, for they had never heard of the Han, let alone the Wei and Chin. They sighed unhappily as the fisherman enumerated the dynasties one by one and recounted the vicissitudes of each.

T'ao Ch'ien, "The Peach Blossom Spring"

As in many narratives which reside among the traditions of world literature and which could be described as utopian, T'ao Ch'ien's (372-427) introduction to the poem "The Peach Blossom Spring" casts a non-existent place in contrast to a contemporary malaise. Like many utopian scenarios as well, the visitor to the newly discovered place, once taking leave, will never rediscover it nor possess the opportunity to venture back to the location. The fisherman in T'ao Ch'ien's introduction will leave the hidden village, and though he marks his route, he will be unable to ever re-discover the trail that led him to the cave through which he witnessed the Peach Blossom Spring. The village that the fisherman happens upon also allows him particular political insight in that he is able to interact with a group of people who have remained unaffected by dynastic progressions. The insight that the fisherman obtains demonstrates one of the inherent aspects to such narrative—a political imaginary intrinsic to the textual formation.

However, the aspect of “The Peach Blossom Spring” that interests this current discussion is neither the concept of a utopia nor the inherent politics of utopian narrative. Rather, the striking similarity that exists among many stories of this kind is the manner in which natural realities craft the very possibility and foundation of the setting itself. Thus the political agenda the text purports depends upon its specific ecological particularities. The fisherman in the introduction ventures upstream and finds the village through the portal of a cave that is hidden deep behind a grove. The poem describes the naturalistic setting, formulating the possibility of this hidden location:

For several hundred paces on both banks of the stream, there was no other kind of tree. The wildflowers growing under them were fresh and lovely, and fallen petals covered the ground—it made a great impression on the fisherman. He went on for a way with the idea of finding out how far the grove extended. . . The fisherman left his boat and entered the cave, which at first was extremely narrow, barely admitting his body; after a few dozen steps, it suddenly opened out onto a broad and level plain where well-built houses were surrounded by rich fields and pretty ponds. (578)

The description also conjures imagery related to Daoism of hidden caves and clandestine places of respite and seclusion, echoing a common internal struggle of many scholars of Confucian obligations pitted against Daoist spiritualism. From a biographical perspective, T’ao Ch’ien was known as a hermit and poet who sought out a bucolic existence rather than vie for official positions for meaning and tranquility. Through “The Peach Blossom Spring” T’ao Ch’ien designs a realm free of the dynastic and political obligations of his contemporary life.

Many similarities among world literary traditions can be evoked to demonstrate ecological parallels to the crafting of a utopia, i.e. ways in which natural phenomena foreground the existence of the thematically charged location represented by the text. Examples from world literature could include Voltaire’s Eldorado in *Candide*, or the original semantic example More’s

Utopia, from which the place and literary genre takes its name.¹ The purpose for conjuring these previous examples, and they are by no means exhaustive, stems from a concerted effort in this current study to explicate ecological aspects inherent to various texts in order to comprehend ideological, political, and global shifts which are explored through different kinds of narrative. Two seminal questions manifest themselves and inaugurate this research project: “for what purposes do different narratives represent ecology?” More precisely, in relation to the literary and historic period of this study, “what will an ecologically minded study of post-Mao fiction and film uncover in relation to contemporary positioning of the ‘natural world’ among narratives?”

To begin with, the term *ecology* as used in this dissertation can be defined broadly as the study of interaction among humans, places, and the natural world.² This interaction evinces latent thematic elements which contribute to readings of fiction and expands the possibilities of interpretive inquiry. The three actors of the ecological interaction—humans, places, and the natural world—remain three scientific realities that exist outside of the text. Yet, these three entities are also represented, thus constructed by the text. Greg Garrard refers to this conundrum, in his description of the role of an ecocritic as “keep[ing] an eye on the ways in which ‘nature’ is always in some ways culturally constructed, and the other on the fact that nature really exists, both the object and, albeit distantly, the origin of our discourse” (10).³ Being aware how writers and filmmakers construct natural phenomena within their texts inevitably leads to the question as

¹ In *Archeologies of the Future*, Jameson will point towards a future oriented utopian impulse which he will situate and discuss in regards to the science fiction genre (4).

² In his work *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, Lawrence Buell gives the following definition of ecology: “Ecology is the study of the interactions between organisms and the environment. During the past century, the field has evolved into a congeries of theoretical and applied foci, including such disciplines as population biology, ecosystem ecology, conversation biology, landscape ecology, and restoration ecology” (139). The definition as used in this dissertation draws on Buell’s definition and expands it to focus on human interaction and also emphasizes location and place which are important thematic elements of the works that are studied.

³ Garrard will also refer to Buell’s assessment of this conundrum as a “myth of mutual constructionism” (Buell 6).

to why they choose to represent ecological interactions in a certain way. Taken in context of the historic time period in which certain works are composed opens avenues through which to invest critical weight in order to illuminate underlying thematic elements that camouflage themselves within narratives. To assert ecology as a manner in which to broach texts implies interrelatedness among the actors in the ecological exchange and anticipates their interaction as being able to yield specific insight into the textual project. Therefore, the hypothesis can be established that ecological aspects of the texts read in this dissertation will provide keen insight into this study's specific historic period of interest.

The timeframe of this dissertation focuses on literature and film produced after China's Open Door Policy of the late 1970s to the first decade of the 21st century. This specific period of time designates a series of profound ideological and social shifts that accompanied the move away from Maoism to the opening of Chinese markets to increased global neo-liberal capitalist policies. A period of great topographical change, from industrialization to large state projects, notably the Three Gorges Dam, also corresponds to this timeframe and remains directly related to the vast ideological, cultural, and economic changes. These changes challenge the individual writer or filmmaker on several fronts regarding, but not limited to, identity (cultural, national, or regional), memory (personal and cultural), the concept of progress, history, and the notion of modernity. The interpretive goal of this project is to assess how individual intellectuals narrate the struggle with the aforementioned categories among the continually morphing power structures of a global society through which ecology will be shown to be a leading thematic thread. This project will demonstrate how narrative relies upon the presence of natural phenomena, the primacy of places as indicative of identity, the metamorphosis of topography to

uncover psychological effects, and references to nature and its cyclicity in relation to ideological changes.

Chinese Modernity and Ecocriticism

This project situates itself as the intersectional bridge between two larger areas of inquiry. First, the concept of Chinese modernity has been a heavily contested notion, and its debate has carried with it reactions to several legacies including colonial encroachment, occupation, and dynastic rule. From the perspective of this project, the accelerated environmental impact accompanying industrialization in the post-Mao era has altered landscapes and cityscapes, and this reality has complicated the modernization debate. Related to this complication, globalization furthers the problems of conceptualizing Chinese modernity by problematizing notions of nationality and cultural identity.⁴ Moreover, there exist competing discourses of modernity in relation to ecology. The position of many artists, writers, and filmmakers fly in direct opposition to how the state perceives its duty as a world power to encourage development, even at the cost of environmental degradation while paying lip service to the need for world ecological harmony.

Secondly, from a theoretical perspective, this project uses a loose set of approaches, which have been termed ecocriticism, as a framework and expands this literary approach to cover contemporary Chinese writers and filmmakers. The vast majority of the theoretical work done in ecocriticism has focused on texts from the European and North American traditions. In order to apply ecocriticism to texts of the Chinese literary and film tradition, then, it will be necessary to understand relationships between ecocriticism and post-colonial theories which

⁴ Jane Sayers begins the article “Remembering the Mother River: The Impact of Environmental Injustice on National Identity in Contemporary China”, by tracing many historical relations between the Yellow River and identity. The article explains the rich history of identity that begins with mythology which continues to complicate notions of national and cultural identity today.

assume the premise that ecological change in post-Mao China, though caused directly through industrialization projects and development, is a systemic violence resulting from the historical remnants of colonialism, imperialism, and authoritarianism. Though a portion of ecocriticism is polemical or calls for intervention, this research project seeks to elucidate the historical logic of ecological violence existing on the ground in conjunction with interpreting the ways in which the interaction of people and the natural world contributes to a work's textual project. An overview of the issues within the debates will create a constellation of points of entry into the discussion, provides the basis from which this project will proceed, and maps the relationships among multidirectional conversations.

Modernity—literary and political

The idea of the modern or *modernity* has remained a debatable concept among European and American philosophical and literary histories. As many scholars have shown, the modern is also subject to historicization through which permutations have fallen into recognizable nomenclatures. For example, Matei Calinescu categorizes modernity into distinct yet overlapping “faces” all of which contribute to a larger historical charting of its variations.⁵ Within each permutation of the modern, there further exist contradictory and competing ideas. Calinescu sees, for example, two hostile conceptualizations of modernity, one which adheres to science and technology and purports progress while linked to capitalism and the latter which exists in dramatic tension—an aesthetic modernity which challenges and contrasts the former “bourgeois modernity” (42). Though the term modernity is contentious and conflicting, debates over “what constitutes the modern?” or even better “what is the meaning of post-modernity?” pale in

⁵ The five categories of modernity that Calinescu examines are, in order, Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, and Postmodernism.

comparison to the complexities of comprehending the concept and implications of *modernity* understood in the context of Chinese history from the late Qing to the early 21st century.

Leo Ou-Fan Lee acknowledges that there has been a recent revitalization of interest in the concept of the modern at the turn of the 21st century. He asserts that this renaissance of interest extends deep beyond any passing scholarly fancy and has become an indication of a “new mode of historical consciousness developed since the turn of the century” (110). Understanding the concept of the modern in relation to Chinese “modern” history offers a historical understanding to the literary reflection of historical reality because of the intense intertwining of Chinese literature and history. This premise offers a ground from which the examination of literature provides a mirroring of social conditions upon the backdrop of national and historic events. From this perspective, the ecological provides a method of entry into the examination of the historical period of the post-Mao era to the beginning of the 21st century, a time in which the concept of the modern, which sparked much debate at the beginning of the 20th century, was recast in exploratory and controversial ways.

Modernity within the Chinese context inserts several complications to long-established, hegemonic binaries regarding the manner in which it is and has been disseminated—i.e. a Western to non-West directionality. In her introduction to the work *The Lure of the Modern*, Shih Shu-mei meticulously details the complicated discursive negotiation involved in the contextualization of Chinese modernity from a historical perspective. It must be first asserted that the conditions of modernity within Europe were based on economic factors that were brought about by the agenda of imperialism (7). According to Edward Said, the advent of an awareness of alterity, which either consciously or unconsciously challenged the perceived hegemony of European nation-states, was appropriated by European intellectuals and artists.

These challenges to empire from a psychological perspective manifested themselves aesthetically in the forms of alienation, self-contemplation, and passivity—all aesthetic components of what would comprise modernist forms of representation (88).

A further self-protective narrative occurred with the advent of the modern that perceived modernity as a solely “western” concept completely derived from internal dynamics, and this appropriation cast the interpretive trap that inevitably interpreted non-European modernisms as backward and European modernisms as superior. Chinese intellectuals fell under the spell of this general narrative of modernity in terms of its directionality as well as its hegemony. By acceding aesthetically and thematically to modernism as valorized form, Chinese intellectuals failed in some ways (by Shih’s assessment) to self-reflexively engage and challenge the ideology and content of modernism itself (14). Furthermore, because of the proximity and influence of Japan, Chinese discourses of modernity fall into a tripartite paradigm challenging the concept of a Chinese modernity as a one dimensional non-West-West travel narrative. Throughout the 19th and 20th century, Japan acted as conduit of modernity through Westernized modes of representation, science, and technology. The tripartite discourse of modernity which situated itself within China (since the negotiations between Chinese modernity and Japanese and European modernity were located solely within Chinese intellectual circles and not *vice versa*) produced the grounds upon which one of the deepest and most concentrated attempts to search for modernity has ever occurred. As Shih comments in terms of her work which examines the presence of modernity within the context of semicolonialism:

Due to its proximity in time to that of Western and Japanese modernism (in the language of teleological history), Chinese modernism perhaps embodies the most intense search for cultural modernity, and thereby becomes the site where manifestations of cultural politics in the pursuit of modernity are most revealing. (45).

The search for modernity represents a search on several fronts from several participants including the state as well as artists and often accumulates in official representation of China on a world stage (see the conclusion as a literal example).

Within the narrative of Chinese literature, the advent of modernity and its various permutations have met with a similar self-protective and hegemonic narrative regarding its historic and thematic inception. The dominant narrative of the May Fourth movement is that it was the seminal moment of modernity within Chinese literature. Thus the beginning of 20th Chinese century literature is understood as commencing with the inauguration of the specific date—May 4th 1919. As Rudolf Wagner points out, however, the canonization of the May Fourth movement was a complex negotiation that was established by competing processes including its very conceptualization as even a movement. As a consequence of being considered a movement, the May Fourth program became vanguardist and was established as leader and teacher of the people. This phenomenon left behind an entrenched tradition against which subsequent writers and artists were measured (67). Similarly, the numerical appropriation of the historic date occurred through a concerted attempt to define a set temporal marker that would be appropriated among a number of historic events and anniversaries from which to found the movement (102). In Stephen Owen's assessment, the appropriation of a date-specific point constructed a divide through which the modern/traditional frontier could be passed, inducting Chinese culture into modernity (169). Thus the date May 4th 1919 became a facile point of reference that was quickly incorporated into the narrative of Chinese modernity.

Working against this reigning historic paradigm of literature, David Wang has complicated the relationship between Chinese literary modernity and the May Fourth movement. In his work *Fin de Siècle Splendor* Wang asserts that the seeds of modernist representation were

already present within late Qing fiction. He clearly defines his project as a historicization of the polemic of modernity—exposing it as a twisted process rather than safe terminus of social progress. Wang claims that there has been a repression of late Qing modernity on the part of scholars and critics who prefer to “mythify” modernity, unfortunately falling back upon the European vs. Chinese modernist debate that inevitably fixes the latter into the catch-up to history game (7). Ironically, the dominant modern literary narrative constructs a tradition from which the “modern” has a hard time breaking away and refuting. The repressed modernist aspects of late Qing fiction work against the prevailing narrative and in turn comprise another aspect of Modern Chinese literature (21). Furthermore, David Wang explores the works of notable May Fourth writers such as Mao Dun, Lao She, and Shen Congwen, to expose their particular textual lyricism as another aspect of Chinese modernist literary representation apart from a strict realism in relation to the style of Lu Xun. Rather Lu Xun’s realism should be contextualized as a starting point, not a definitive point, which offers venues upon which other writers have found alternative methods of fictional realism (*Fictional Realism* 23).

Bringing the conversation about the modern of Chinese literature to the Post-Mao era, certain social and political trends have complicated the debate. The Maoist form of Socialist Realism of the previous decades was immediately debunked by writers in the 1980s upon the advent of what Jing Wang would term “High Culture Fever”—a period punctuated by many debates regarding modernism and culture (48). Most of the debates comprised a concerted effort to reestablish the role of the intellectual during the 1980s in the wake of the Cultural Revolution. Jing Wang finds the beginning of the period of the 80s to be defined by a sort of utopian optimism that looked to the future; however, such optimism would turn dystopian toward the end of the 80s particularly as a result of the Tiananmen incident of 1989. But with the advent of

increased consumer culture of the 1990s there would be the demise of the cultural fervor which raged during the previous decade. These drastic changes in Chinese cultural production as a result of increased neo-liberal market practices at the end of the 20th century would venture into the realm of a newfound period that many scholars would freely term post-modern. In the conclusion to the collected volume of essays titled *Postmodernism and China*, Zhang Xudong makes the following observation about literature during this period.

While high modernism had become an intellectual and formal institution in the Chinese metropolis before the Tiananmen incident, it has been thoroughly dismantled in the 1990s by the joint force of the market and the ideological apparatus of the state, as well as by a rising cultural populism and nationalism closely associated with the nascent urban middle class, its economic interest, and its increasing cultural and political assertiveness. (406)

Regardless of one's position on whether the vast changes in cultural production over the past twenty years warrants the mobilization of the notion of post-modern, the fact remains that drastic permutations in consumer culture have affected the production of literature and film in relation to inter/intra national dissemination and consumption. Furthermore, the cosmopolitanisms and transnationalisms of many intellectuals challenge the conceptualization of a national modern identity. Diasporic Chinese literatures, which constitute a vast body of works spanning many languages and cultures across the globe, often incorporate the construction of a memory-imbued narrative that portrays "China" from a multitude of angles (Lee, A. 15).

This current project does not take a stance towards a strict definition of modernity within the Chinese literary context but comprehends all conversations about its philosophical impact as a concerted effort by various scholars to come to terms with the different ways the hegemonic notion plays as an actor within Chinese national and literary history. Therefore, "modernity" can be viewed as a platform of debate upon which artists, filmmaker, and writers, compete and have competed among varying forces including the state, colonial pressure (which has been replaced

by global economic pressures), neo-liberalism, and globalization. Therefore, this study is less interested in comprehending the notion of Chinese modernity and more invested in interpreting how competing discourses have reflected the reality on the ground. The notion of the modern as imposed historically by the state (Great Leap Forward, Cultural Revolution, and Four Modernizations, for example) often contrast with artistic representation of the modern (Chapter 2 of this dissertation will deal with this issue). It also plays a role in identity formation; in other words the vast changes which have “ruptured” with the past have forced individuals to comprehend and re-narrate origins and location as rapid industrialization alters the traditional Chinese landscape (as can be seen with Chapters 3 and 4 of this project). Therefore, the ways in which the notion of the modern has been forged or contested will be utilized as a tool within this current research project to read ways in which various competing and often contradictory discourses form a web of relations which refract the historical reality of massive industrial, economic, and cultural change of China of the past few decades. Among these polyvalent discussions, the representation of the environment through the “ecological” becomes a thematic thread which will lead the discussion and offer one particular view of comprehending how modernity plays such an important role in cultural production. Most importantly, the ecological will be shown to be a method in which ideological shifts during the post-Mao period have been narrated (this will be seen in Chapter 1). The examination of film and literature through the “ecological” forms the manner which can lead to further discussion, and the following section describes how the ecological has become an important component to understand literature and how it can be mobilized within the context of Post-Mao literature and film.

Ecocriticism

The theoretical area that has been named “ecocriticism” is a loose heterogeneous set of approaches to literary texts that involve environmental issues or incorporate an environmental reading in some way. The term itself was coined in 1978 with the title of William Rueckert’s seminal essay calling for an ecological critical mode of reading literature, and in particular poetry. From a historical perspective, the essay reacts to the energy crisis of the 1970s, influencing Rueckert’s view that the power of poetry resides like repositories of stored energy (108). These cells of energy have pedagogical implications in that through teaching, the stored power can emanate from the individual piece of literature and transform into civic duty or community involvement:

To charge the classroom with ecological purpose one has only to begin to think of it in symbiotic terms as cooperative arrangement which makes it possible to release the stream of energy which flows out of the poet and into the poem, out of the poem and into the readers, out of the readers and into the classroom, and then back into the readers and out of the classroom with them, and finally back into the other larger community in a never ending circuit of life. (121)

Towards the turn of the century, the interest in ecocriticism gained steady momentum with the publication of several foundational texts employing the term to refer to its theoretical approach.⁶ As the terms stands now, “ecocriticism” has remained the generally accepted term for ecological critical practice, though it has also been referred to as “environmental criticism” or in the British academy as “green studies” (Buell 138).

One of the biggest problems in describing the theoretical trend of ecocriticism, other than its relatively recent inception, stems from the lack of a holistic approach that possesses a set

⁶ There are several critically engaged collections of essays such as *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996); *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature* (1998); and more recently *Coming into Contact: Explorations in Ecocritical Theory and Practice* (2007). Furthermore, work has been done looking at historical texts to point out the ecocritical implications such as David Mazel’s collection of 19th and early 20th century essays in *A Century of Early Ecocriticism* (2001).

methodology. Any attempt to define ecocriticism, then, will be guilty of gross generalization, though some ecocritics find that this ambiguity allows the field to address a broad range of topics (Mazel 2). Two separate full volume works attempt to understand ecocriticism as a literary practice: Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism* (2004) and Lawrence Buell's *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005). Though the two works share the same goal of describing and defining a field of inquiry, their approaches are completely different. Garrard arranges his work around particular natural themes that have engaged ecocritically minded scholars such as pollution, wilderness, or the Earth. He also clarifies the particular positions of different distinct eco-philosophies. Buell traces the history of ecocriticism and describes various theoretical implications in the areas of globalization studies, ethics, and feminism. He ends with an assessment of where he sees future challenges and possibilities. For Buell, at least for the time being, there is little expectation for a major theoretical paradigmatic shift that defines the terms of the field such as Edward Said's watershed concept of Orientalism (11). However, regardless of the problems associated with locating the perfect definition or theoretical terms of the ecocritical endeavor, both Buell and Garrard refer to Cheryll Glotfelty's widely accepted description of the basic premise of ecological criticism from her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*:

Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman. (xix)

The relationship between land and literature as well as the human and nonhuman originally appears incompatible with theoretical practice, particularly due to critical theory's perceived anthropocentrism. Much of this misperception perhaps has to do with post-structuralism's insistence on the role of the text and its meaning to humans without regard of how the text could

contain signification for the world outside of humanity (Campbell 133). But Glotfelty's definition also allows space for the insertion of the ecological into the generalized understanding of critical practice. She continues to assess ecocriticism's pertinence as differing from other critical theories in that it expands "the world" as one of the pillars of interpretive inquiry

Literary theory, in general, examines the relations between writers, texts, and the world. In most literary theory "the world" is synonymous with society—the social sphere. Ecocriticism expands the notion of "the world" to include the entire ecosphere. (xix)

Accordingly, ecocriticism engages critical inquiry by developing the notion of "world" as a dynamic interconnectedness among humans, places, nature, and society, rather than an antiseptic space of exclusively human dwelling. The conceptualization of the human as separate from nature or wilderness, however, is not new to the history of literature and is found in many ancient texts such as Genesis and *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. As many scholars have begun to point out, the history of ecocriticism within the philosophical tradition is profound, and many even attribute particular philosophers such as Montaigne and Heidegger as foundational to ecocriticism (Garrard 30, 125; Phillips 217; Rigby 427-438). The conceptualization of the frontier of nature, as well, is a construct stemming from the European Enlightenment tradition. It has been pointed out, for example, that Jean-Jacques Rousseau sought to define the realm of nature as separate from human civilization, and though he sought refuge in the realm of nature, the philosophical bifurcation of realms remained in place as a product of his legacy (Garrard 125).

The contemporary interest in ecocriticism as a possible critical practice dominantly stems from the American tradition—finding inspiration among scholars in their study of Transcendentalism. Texts such as Thoreau's *Walden* have proven inspirational in the literary interest of nature writing as exemplified by Buell's work *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995). Particular texts are

also held as canonical in the formation of an ecocritical stance: Edward Abbey *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* (1968), Rachel Carson *Silent Spring* (1962), Aldo Leopold *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), Leo Marx *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964), and Raymond Williams *The Country and the City* (1973). Since the advent of an ecocritical stance towards literature, certain postmodern works and their relationship with globalization, such as Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1986), have also been the subject of critical scrutiny (Garrard 171). The emphasis on nature, however, is also deeply rooted in the British literary tradition. As Jonathan Bate speculates in his book on ecocriticism and ecopoetics, *Song of the Earth* (2000), 19th century works (particularly those of Jane Austen and Thomas Hardy) begin to apply the "environment" to social contexts to offset industrialized society and the alienation of city-dwelling (13).

Ecocritic Rob Nixon has raised questions regarding the dominance of environmental studies as an apparent offshoot of American studies. He points to a particular incommensurability between ecocriticism and post-colonial theory formed out of the former's emphasis on an ethics of place and the latter's preoccupation with displacement, migration, and transnationalism (236). The question in relation to this research project remains as to how ecocriticism, which has predominately remained within the American and British traditions—thus Eurocentric and predominantly Anglophone—can broach the texts of Chinese literature. Lawrence Buell, in an interview with Wei Qingqi, feels that Chinese literature, with its fortuitous position within both the development of a global modern China and its roots of antiquity, can open the larger doors to ecocritical understandings:

I also want to say that China's unique experience in modernization will allow China's ecocritics to make outstanding contributions to the field. In recent years, the pace and scale of China's modernization has been unheard of worldwide. People can use 19th century England, Germany, and United States, and later

Russia and Japan as standards of comparison, but China's situation is unique. China's singularity also lies in its advancement towards modernization as that civilization in world history whose high culture has the most ancients in place. (90)

Chinese literary history is replete with pastoral works that describe the relations among humans and the natural environment. Similarly philosophical traditions, particularly Daoism with the writings of Chuang Zi, advocate a harmonious manner of interaction with others and nature. Because of the vast Chinese literary tradition, it does appear that there are broad openings for a development of a Chinese ecocriticism.

The general problem of hastily and uncritically pursuing ecocriticism within the Chinese literary context is the potential for an imperialist position towards the text without consideration of the many legacies which have contributed to the environmental problems of Mainland China. Graham Huggan refers to the dangers of an "ecological imperialism" which assumes a cultural arrogance though masked as philanthropy (702). In *The Empire Writes Back*, the authors call for post-colonial analyses of global problems due to a similar ethical hypocrisy. While developing nations feel the need to ascribe to modernization for its civilizing effects, they fall victim to the criticism of industrialized nations for the fact that their efforts have been destructive to their home environments, thus further perpetuating the influence of an imposed moral imperialism (213). Work from non-European and non-American scholars and activists have pointed to environmental issues in the developing world that have occurred through well-intentioned programs and their connection to global politics. Vandana Shiva calls attention to the disastrous effects, particularly to women and children, of programs such as the Green Revolution. She points to the relationship between the need for surplus beyond sustainability which steals from nature and the negative effects of policies to feed that surplus which takes from women and children, thus leading to starvation and malnutrition (Mies and Shiva 81). Through essays and

her works of activism, Arundhati Roy, whose recognition came from her first novel *The God of Small Things* (1998), has led the cause against dams in India whose construction stem from deep-rooted nationalistic need to showcase progress and advancement through large scale projects (Huggan 705). Such scholarly activism is present in Mainland China as well—particularly among the scholars of the Nanshan Seminar.⁷

How does one represent a developing society without re-colonizing; similarly, how does one represent the voiceless non-human without dominating? This parallel question hints towards representation as the primary concern of an ecocritical interpretation. This project is invested in understanding how contemporary Chinese intellectuals represent the relations of natural phenomena, places, and humans in their narrative. Interpreting how the narrative imaginary functions in relation to ecology may offer possibilities of resistance towards historically and culturally formulated attitudes that have unintentionally neglected the importance of the dependence of humans on the natural world. Rerouting critical weight towards broadening the conceptualization of the world as a dynamic entity paints a landscape from which we can comprehend how ecology has become a latent thematic undercurrent of great significance.

Richard Kerridge's introduction to his edited collection of essays *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature* (2007) designates representation as the fundamental missing link between an environmental crisis and the discourses of environmentalism which now permeate a multiplicity of texts coming out of the global culture industry—not just environmentally minded works or pieces of nature writing:

The real, material ecological crisis, then, is also a cultural crisis, a crisis of representation. The inability of political cultures to address environmentalism is in part a failure of narrative. Yet these concerns will not be kept out of narrative. Environmental preoccupations are registering, now, across a wide range of texts

⁷ The work of the participants of the Nanshan Seminar will be discussed in the second chapter of the dissertation that reads the works of Han Shaogong—one of the scholars.

and discourses, some of them not obviously concerned with ecology or ‘nature’.
(4)

Differing slightly from Kerridge’s interpretation of the relationship between narrative and representation, this project comes from the perspective that narrative, in and of itself, has not failed. Rather, it has been a lack of an attempt to uncover and interpret the ecological aspects of texts that have formed basic theoretical problems. The issues of ecology and narrative are intimately related, and through their interconnectedness, ecocriticism forms a stance from which to address them. It is precisely this problematic relationship, between ecology and narrative, that renders the guiding questions and subsequent metaphor of this dissertation.

The ecological turn, then, represents a deepening critical emphasis on the interaction of people, places, and the natural world as a manner of assessing how the positioning of the natural world services the thematic construction of a text—whether this be to assert a particular brand of Chinese modernity or to serve other ideological purposes. The ecological turn also points to an emphasis of writers and filmmakers in using ecology, broadly defined, within their works in the post-Mao period. This emphasis may be latent within a text’s construction or overt to warn of particular environmental dangers. Rather than focus solely on the literary works of politically active environmentalists, this study examines four artists from across periods and genres to show how the ecological turn has become increasingly important to understand the direction of post-Mao works as a whole. The ecological aspects of these writers and filmmakers remains their only related thematic thread; nonetheless, the positioning of the natural world will revitalize an understanding of their works and clarify the importance of ecology as interpretive key to research globalization and its manner of complicating the notions of Chinese modernity. The following section gives an overview of how the project will proceed and introduces the works that will be used for this study.

The first chapter of this dissertation takes an ecocritical approach to Wang Anyi's series of novellas known as *The Love Trilogy*. These works, which appeared in the 1980s, were controversial because they examine sexual relations between men and women—and more controversially extra-marital affairs. As a result, critical attention has been weighted towards the understanding of these novels and the roles of the female protagonists through sex. Wang, however, crafts a conflicting connection between the sexuality of her characters against a linear political time, and she declares that the sexuality of her characters reflect the site of tension between humans and nature. A close reading of each of the three novellas will explicate how their temporalities are narrated through references to natural phenomena (which will be referred to as “seasonality”) which in turn complicate the relationship between humans and nature as polar entities. Furthermore, this reading of Wang's *Love Trilogy* advances an understanding of how her early works offer a critique of Chinese society during a time of vast social and cultural change and how they remain insightful to the manner in which the human subject must continually endure among competing temporalities.

The second chapter looks at the 1980s “root seeking” literature of Han Shaogong, whose use of rural Hunan Province as the setting for his works crafts an alternative space to re-imagine modernity apart from industrial development. The chapter begins by reading Han Shaogong's career through the lens of his literary manifesto titled “Roots of Literature” and then turns to a close reading of his well-known root-seeking period novella *Pa Pa Pa*. This reading will show how Han's work purposefully resists interpretation that seeks to define the work as invested in portraying national allegory. The second half of this chapter looks at Han Shaogong's first full length novel *A Dictionary of Maqiao*. In this work, Han excavates linguistic peculiarities of his

fictionalized province to assert the heterogeneity of the modern condition which acts to subvert totalizing state discourses. Reading this novel in conjunction with post-colonial theorist Dipesh Chakrabarty's dual notion of history elucidates Han's project as a resistance to global state historicity.

Chapter three reads the films of director Jia Zhangke, whose works are heavily invested in exploring the emotional impact of changes in China from the 1970s to the present. Jia began his career with three full-length works known collectively as *The Hometown Trilogy* which document social and topographical changes to his native Shanxi province. Closely examining this trilogy explicates his themes via his filming technique, and with his fourth full length film *The World*, Jia turns his camera toward capturing changes on a global scale. His various emphases on location and the global in relation to topography will come together in his 2006 film *Still Life* which explores the conversely deteriorating/resolving relationship between two couples from different social milieus. *Still Life* will be read through the concept of linguistic heterogeneity (a concept discussed by several prominent scholars who look at the notion of "sinophone") to show how language exposes societal problems caused by the flooding of the Yangtze: human trafficking, migrant labor, and local violence as a result of economic disparity. Similarly, Jia will re-narrate nostalgia as a heightened reaction to a loss of signification caused by the disappearance of space and time. This chapter will also demonstrate how *Still Life* promotes a de-centered approach to the conceptualization of home and homelessness in 21st century China. Finally, taking Jia's concurrent documentary *Dong* into account in the reading of *Still Life*, it will be shown how Jia ultimately searches to represent the *non-representability* of the magnitude of environmental change brought about by the Three Gorges Dam.

The last core chapter of this dissertation turns to the novels and films of Chinese-francophone writer Dai Sijie. As his work demonstrates, when places are altered due to development, the anchoring of memory and identity for the diasporic subject is challenged. Dai's first film *China My Sorrow* reveals his preoccupation with places as enriched sites of memory and trauma. He continues this theme in his first two novels *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* and *Mr. Muo's Travelling Couch*. A close reading of both works demonstrates the author's self-conscious distance from his homeland via a parodying of "occidental" fascination through literature and psychoanalytic theory. An important addition to the film version of *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* will also reveal that the diasporic condition is further problematized as the physical site of trauma is eradicated as the Yangtze River floods due to the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. The conclusion to this chapter will use Arjun Appadurai's re-imagining of global cultural flows to present a reading of Dai's corpus as a disjuncture of competing global forces—of which ecological effects remain primary.

The conclusion begins with a brief overview of the negotiation process between artists and the state to craft the opening ceremony of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing titled "The Beautiful Olympics". The state controlled narrative of "China" as presented to the world, surgically obverts contentious historical realities while promoting an optimistic, easily comprehended projection of harmony among people and the environment. This representation, ironically, contrasted the real battle to fight pollution in order to hold the games to begin with. The largest question remaining about "The Beautiful Olympics" is why the state narrative of a modern and global China would necessitate representations ecological harmony, when the state itself remains adamantly uncooperative in international environmental movements. The conclusion, intended to encourage further discussion on this issue, asserts that the ecological is

part and parcel of one's personal, cultural, and national identity—whether this assertion of ecological harmony exists in one's personal practices or exists as an imagined relationship. Taken in context of the vast history of Chinese literature, an ecological understanding takes on an even more pressing position. From poetry of the Tang Dynasty to the large traditional novel, nature has been used to represent human emotion, define society, serve as a metaphor of dynastic change and cyclicity, and formulate spiritual realms. From here there is an implicit danger that begins to emerge. The rapid industrialization of Mainland China of the past decades not only puts its ecosystem in danger, as has been demonstrated by scientists and environmentalists, but also, and perhaps more perniciously, it also endangers literature.

Chapter 1

The Seasonality of Wang Anyi's *Love Trilogy*— an Ecocritical Reading

In each novella of Wang Anyi's *Love Trilogy*, the female protagonist, known simply as *she*, proves resilient in enduring hardship or triumphant against the banality of quotidian life. Wang Anyi casts the endurance of her protagonists through sexual relationships, all of which are culturally inappropriate and involve either clandestine love or extramarital affairs with a similarly unnamed *he*. The novellas explore the significance of intimacy during a historical time in which social morals experience a reevaluation in conjunction with China's development after the Cultural Revolution as it socially awakens from state-enforced puritanism of previous decades. However, one peculiar thematic thread runs across all three novellas of Wang's trilogy. A close reading of her work reveals that the intimacy she depicts between men and women relies upon their interactions in tandem with the natural world which then in turn positions the protagonists in dramatic tension to society and the realm of the political. Seasons, as well as the bucolic and the naturalistic, form a backdrop for the physical relations among the characters, setting in motion the repercussions of sexuality that Wang Anyi describes as the struggle between humans and nature (Wang, Zheng "Three Interviews" 114).

Though Wang Anyi has a vibrant literary career with many influential and provocative works, this chapter focuses mostly on the loose set of novellas known as *Love Trilogy* (*sanlian*). Much scholarship has been done on the feminist aspects of these texts, showing how her female protagonists often prove stronger than their male counterparts, provoking an array of interpretive

critiques concerning the cultural malaise of the post-Cultural Revolution period.⁸ What has not been addressed in the scholarship of the *Love Trilogy* is the manner in which the plot of each work hinges upon multidimensional tensions which arise from the natural world and their interaction with humanity from which sexual relations become thematically prioritized. The obviousness of seasonal and naturalistic depictions inherent to each of the three works masks its very program—a descriptive Purloin Letter of sorts. This chapter will therefore read all three novellas in order of publication, *Love on a Barren Mountain* (1986), *Love in a Small Town* (1986), and *Brocade Valley* (1987) in order to elucidate the emphasis on seasonality inherent to each of these works.

The term *seasonality* is employed in this chapter to refer to the intersection of two domains. On one hand, seasonality refers to the seasonal aspects that dominate each of the works—references to changing seasons, cyclicity, temperatures, and other natural phenomena—which remain independent of the lives of the protagonists and the political climate being described, though these phenomena are also mobilized to describe psychological states or social conditions. On the other hand, seasonality refers to a specific temporal “seasonal change” marked by the historical shift (with all of the associated social and political implications) that accompany Mainland China’s ideological move from the period of the Cultural Revolution to the 1980s. An ecocritical stance towards Wang Anyi’s texts elucidates how her narrative produces a critical dynamism—the interconnectedness of human society with natural phenomena—that forms an interpretive maneuver to circumvent an understanding of her novellas as solely invested in the exploration of sexuality. Rather, by approaching each of the novellas from the perspective

⁸ In an interview with Wang Zheng, Wang Anyi rejects the label *feminist* to describe herself from her understanding that the term refers to a premise that denies the distinction between men and women, whereas Wang Anyi attempts to assert difference. This is due to what she feels was a purposeful silence about sexual difference that occurred after the Liberation that caused many social problems (106).

of the natural elements within (the setting, the seasonal changes, as well as human sexuality in conflict with society and political climates) the works can be reread as organic critiques of the effects of ideological shifting following the Cultural Revolution.

Love Trilogy – Seasonality, Cyclicity, and Sexuality

Wang Anyi was born in Nanjing in 1954 and grew up in Shanghai—which will have a particular nostalgic hold on her writing later in her literary career. Wang is often introduced in conjunction with her mother, Ru Zhijuan, whose writings in the first two decades of the People’s Republic of China typified orthodox intellectualism in support of the Communist government (McDougall, Introduction v). Her father, Wang Xiaoping, was also a writer as well as a stage director. At the age of sixteen, Wang Anyi answered Chairman Mao’s call to learn from the peasants in the countryside and was sent to Wuhe County in Anhui Province. Wang is associated with many other writers who were formerly sent-down as educated youths during the Cultural Revolution.⁹ During this time, Wang began keeping a diary which documented her first relationship with literature. In 1972 she was admitted to the Xuzhou Art Workers’ Troupe as a cellist and accordionist, at which time she began writing short stories and essays. Once Wang returned to Shanghai in 1978, she worked as an editor and joined the Beijing Writers’ Association in 1980.

One of Wang Anyi’s first pieces of fiction that established her reputation as a writer was her story “Rustling Rain” (*Yu, shashasha*), a text that explores the lives of young women as they search for love and fulfillment. In 1985 Wang published her novella *Bao Town* (*Xiaobao zhuang*), considered one of the best representative pieces of the “root-seeking” movement (Xiao

⁹ Han Shaogong and Dai Sijie in the later chapters are also considered part of this generation of writers. In particular, the chapter on Han Shaogong goes into detail about many of the thematic preoccupations of the writings of returning Educated Youth.

514).¹⁰ Writers of the 1980s began expressing their views with an openness not possible in the previous decades, and Wang Anyi chose to explore women's sexual relationships within a puritanical cultural climate, including socially unacceptable relations such as extra-marital affairs. In 1982, Wang spent several months at the University of Iowa attending the International Writer's Workshop, and her travels abroad would influence her literary outlook. In particular, Wang would be affected by certain writers, such as D.H. Lawrence, influencing her to explore sexuality as a natural instinct that potentially contributes to the redemption of a character's subjectivity and gender consciousness (Chen 95).

The three novellas collectively known as the *Love Trilogy* (*sanlian*) garnered much attention and brought her much public recognition as well as notoriety. These works explore sexuality as an expression of love, demonstrate the resilience of the female protagonist, detail the potential societal dangers associated with sex, and show how promiscuity can form a potential means to find personal fulfillment and individuality. The first two novellas, *Love on a Barren Mountain* and *Love in a Small Town*, occur during the ending years of the Cultural Revolution, and the characters are involved with cultural performance troupes. In the third novella, *Brocade Valley*, the protagonist, who works as a copy editor in Shanghai, attends a literary convention in a scenic tourist location, a typical office business-tourist trip which became popular in the 1980s.

In an interview with Wang Zheng, Wang Anyi comments on her emphasis on sexuality in her writing and about the presence of sex in literature in general:

I think it's inevitable. Sex is important when writing about human beings. I wrote something about sex last year and people criticized me. In my story, "Xiaocheng zhi lian" [Love in a small town] I tried to show that guilt and repression are Chinese attitudes toward sex but that sex is an irresistible force. Sex is the struggle between humans and Nature. The two tiny creatures having sex are already social and cultural beings. Writing about sexuality I tried to expose the

¹⁰ Chapter 2 outlines many of the preoccupations of that movement, particularly in conjunction with Han Shaogong's seminal essay titled "Roots of Literature".

process, how the social and cultural beings struggled with this natural drive. The consequence of their struggle was that both suffered. (114-115)

Wang Anyi's description of her novella's tensions, the "humans vs. nature" paradigm, establishes a point of departure for an ecocritical reading of her works. Challenging the human/nature dichotomy reveals that it is not a one-dimensional framework of tension. Rather it is a complex set of relations that de-centers traditionally accepted polarities. The realm of the human includes the social and the political in tension with the sexuality of Wang's characters which is cast as a "natural" actor to the plot. Cultural artifacts, such as specific Revolutionary ballets and songs, place the narrative within a strict timeframe punctuated by national events and establish a linear chronology of political and social changes of Mainland China. The biographies of Wang's protagonists play out simultaneously with the cyclicity of nature, and as seasons change into one another, the libidinal urges of the protagonists are placed in conflict with social and political dictates. The realm of the natural—seasonality, cyclicity, and sexuality—often slips into the human realm, thus complicating a strict understanding of humans and nature as separate entities. Each novella focuses on a different particular period and a different kind of sexual dynamic. The three distinct novellas, taken together, provide a more nuanced and psychologically rich description of social and political events. A close reading of each work, in chronological order of publication, explicates the evolution of Wang Anyi's exploration of sexuality and how these texts function to complicate the "humans vs. nature" paradigm.

The Barren Mountain as Literal and Literary Escape

Wang Anyi's first novella of the trilogy, *Love on a Barren Mountain*, details two characters' lives from their youth, to their first encounter, and to their tragic end. The work follows the male and female protagonist as they experience the hardships of the Great Leap

Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Accompanying this historic narrative, the love lives of the characters unfold. Both marry, have children, but through happenstance they encounter each other and experience an unprecedented desire that forces them into an illicit affair against their own interests. Unlike the other two novellas, the love between the two protagonists develops late in the work as the narrative accelerates to its tragic conclusion. The lengthy development of the two characters gives insight into the psychological temperaments of each, allowing an empathetic view of their affair, and the text does not hide its statement that the love between the two is in fact “true love.” Though their affair brings much adversity—*he* demoted at work due to the illegality of extramarital affairs, and *she* taking the wrath of her husband’s anger—they continue until the misery caused by their love is no longer possible to bear. One day, after *he* is beaten by the husband and a gang of his friends, the two characters run off to a “barren mountain” where they ingest poison and die in each others’ arms. The rapid succession of events that culminate in the tragic conclusion draws the characters to the barren mountain. This is the location where they had gone before to actualize their affair away from society, and it is the place where they decide to die. Though the resolution to the plot seems to swiftly draw to its termination with the suicide, the role of the mountain itself is hardly a convenient location to the plot. The inability of the protagonists to reconcile love and social obligation forces the novel’s termination to situate itself in a place of “wilderness” that carries contradictory signification: barren yet bearing fruit. Bringing the ecocritical concept of wilderness into the discussion lays the framework for understanding how the location offers conflicting representations of human realms with their relationship with nature. Closely reading where the mountain comes into play in the strand of events and in conjunction with its historical and literary significance reveals that

the “barren mountain,” from which the novella takes its name, serves as the only site in which the incommensurability between human passion and familial and social duty can unfold.

Love on a Barren Mountain describes the two main characters as opposites in terms of temperament. *She* is a well know beauty who flirts with all men as a game; *he* is a weak-willed and socially awkward musician who finds solace by playing the cello and concertina. Neither initially thinks of the other as one who could provoke such strong desire until they are caught in the tangled complexities of their affair. The novella begins by separating each chapter into small numbered segments which alternating in the descriptions of the lives of the two main characters. It follows them as children, teenagers, and details the way in which both encountered and fell in love with their respective spouses. These chapter segments are generally short and concentrate on only one character at a time, fluctuating in sequence between their lives. Once the protagonists find themselves employed at the cultural palace in chapter three, the alternating segments which follow the two protagonists separately collapse into a unified chapter.

The arrival of both characters to the cultural palace occurs for completely different reasons. The male protagonist is employed in a song and dance troupe after having been transferred a few months earlier. As the Cultural Revolution comes to its political end, his employment as a cellist ends and he is sent elsewhere. As for the female protagonist, she is transferred to the culture palace by her husband so that she would not have to work her former job as a fruit seller. The husband decides to remove her from this position, because she attracted too many male customers. Ironically, by sending her to work at the culture palace, *she* encounters the male protagonist, leading to the affair.

As the novella details, *she* takes great delight in purposefully flirting with a variety of men to make them nervous or lead them on only to reject them in the end. In fact, her

relationship with her husband begins in the exact same manner. However, because her husband is able to feign disinterest in her for an extended period of time, he wins her love by employing her own devices. Once she arrives at the culture palace and discovers the bumbling, introverted musician, her desire to play flirtatious games is ignited again, but this time with very real consequences. In one of the initial encounters, she decides to bring him flavored ice. She sits in his office and provocatively sucks at her dessert, taunting him. The reaction on his part is immediate self-hatred at his inability to act:

He knew that she was toying with him, but there was nothing he could do about it, and for this he hated her, and hated himself. He hated her for making fun of him, and he hated himself for being a coward. He dared not stay in his office alone, and so he got up and went to chat with his colleagues next door. He felt that his colleagues all eyed him with a peculiar look, as if they were testing him or making fun of him, and this made him extremely ill at ease. He was by nature a loner, and whenever he was in other people's company he felt nervous, so it would have been better for him to be alone. Yet however uneasy he felt he refused to go back to his own office. (107)

The detailed exposition of the novella reveals that *she* learned the art of flirting from her mother, and because it is something that she has always done naturally, it is merely a game. However, her playfulness quickly turns serious with the male protagonist. Though this interaction causes uneasiness for him, and simultaneously joy for her, their encounter has profound effects on their future relationship. Beginning with this episode, he begins thinking about her, even when he is with his wife. Similarly, her resolve is steeled by her easy victory over him in the flirtatious game, and she decides to have even more encounters with him. Unknown to them both, their entry into the game causes them to spiral into the affair that catches them both by complete surprise. One day, as they are alone in one of the office rooms, the two can no longer control their desires:

She was standing right in front of him; he could not take it anymore, he really couldn't, and he stretched out his hands to her, asking for help. She had just

stretched out her hands. They had to embrace, if they had not they would both have collapsed. When they embraced they felt a sudden sense of relief, as if a burden had been lifted. He held her burning body close to him, and she held his cold body close to her; they did not say a word. Outside the window the sky was blue and a few white clouds drifted slowly by. . . . He felt he was wrapped in flames; he was almost suffocated. It was the suffocation of joy. Oh they were so very very happy. Oh god, they were so very very guilty. (120-121)

The two are then caught between the “suffocation of joy” which causes them happiness and the guiltiness, which in the end causes misery and sorrow. As the culture palace officials realize that an affair is occurring, he is demoted—forced to take tickets for performances and sweep the floors of the theater afterwards. He is able to hide this demotion from his wife, until one day when she sees him collecting tickets and realizes the affair that she had been suspecting is indeed a reality. The inability of the protagonists to negotiate the conflict between the joy of their desires and their shame in face of the larger community and their families, forces the two to the brink of supportability; “He felt guilty, he had sinned, he was ashamed, but all this was not as painful as the prospect of not seeing her again” (128). Though they try to contain their desires for one another, and encounter a brief series of on-again, off-again relations, their passions win in the end, forcing them to act impetuously, eventually getting caught by the husband. After this incident, they both realize that the affair cannot continue. She says to him, “‘If we can’t live together we will die together,’ . . . They came to the foot of the barren mountain and began to climb. . . .” (138).

The mountain is introduced early in the text, and it is also the last object described by the novella. A close reading of the role of the barren mountain reveals that it mirrors the affair of the protagonists; it is barren and desolate yet abundant and fruitful in relation to literature, history, and the tragedy of love which will take place at the novella’s conclusion. As it is initially introduced, the mountain is a geographical point of reference:

Three hundred *li* west of the real-life Mountain of Fruit and Flowers there was a small, brand new city, so small that it could only be rated a town, but still, it had county status, and it was a new county. (5)

The mountain begins as a cartographic spot from which various snapshots of life extend into the regional geography. In this manner, the mountain is introduced as a geographic coordinate, and it will remain as if it were a surviving character to the plot after the novella's tragic ending.

Bringing forth the concept of wilderness into the discussion and associating it with the mountain allows for its role within the novella to be conceptualized as a space beyond the reaches of humanity and existing outside of the moralistic clutches of civilization. According to Greg Garrard's analysis in his work *Ecocriticism*, the idea of wilderness, in the ecocritical sense and among world literary histories, signifies a state of nature that remains uncontaminated by civilization. As opposed to the pastoral which designates a cohabitation of humans with the nature—the domestication of a natural setting, for example—wilderness is an entity which goes beyond human influence (59). Because wilderness represents a separation from human society, it holds ambivalent positions in relation to civilization, as can be evidenced from the various philosophical attempts to comprehend it as well as a range of literary utilizations of it.

As Garrard describes by tracing the concept to the earliest periods of literature, wilderness represents manifold and contradictory ideas. For example in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, one of the earliest pieces of literature, wilderness represents a threat. Within the Judeo-Christian tradition, wilderness represents contradictory connotations of danger, trials, freedom, and purity. After the scientific revolution, wilderness was comprehended as subordinate to the reason of humankind, thus knowable and subject to mastery. Conversely, within the Romantic period, experience with wilderness contributes to the philosophical concept of the sublime (60-66). Garrard's historic analysis of wilderness through different literary texts highlights the term's continually negotiated

signification in relation to civilization. Though contradictions exist from the concept's utilization, the most important aspect of comprehending the term within ecocritical paradigms derives from how its conceptualization attempts to designate, define, and narrate the boundaries of civilization. For *Love on a Barren Mountain*, the association of the mountain with wilderness can be used to acknowledge that love between the protagonists exists beyond the moralistic view of the society in which they live. In turn, the mountain assumes a contradiction, it is a barren place, yet it becomes alive in relation to love as represented by nature. Once the lead characters kill themselves on the mountain, the mountain springs back to life, in terms of natural rejuvenation and the literary imagination. Thus Wang terminates her work with a brief description of the barren mountain after the events of the novella have occurred: "The next year the grass on the western side of the mountain was lush green" (142).

The mountain is also of interest within Wang Anyi's text because of the literary and historical importance attributed to it within the context of the novella. The locals know it as the Mountain of Fruits and Flowers where the Monkey King established his home past the water curtain. Related to the story of the Monkey King, the mountain is also known as the place where a lonely scholar retreated after failing the imperial examinations out of shame. After living in solitude for some time, he began to let his mind wander, penning the classic novel about the pilgrimage of the Monkey King— *Journey to the West*:

The story was written on paper and has therefore travelled far and wide with the wind, but the mountain has its roots in the ground and could not budge an inch. That was why most people thought that the Mountain of Fruits and Flowers and the Cave of the Water Curtain were all writer's [sic] inventions. No one knew that there was indeed such a mountain left untouched in a little dent in the Yellow Sea coastline, where only tiny boats could enter. (4-5)

The incongruity between the illustrious Mountain of Fruits and Flowers and its association with "barrenness" produces a discrepancy painted by Wang's novella that reverberates with the

tormented love between the protagonists. Though their love is described as true, their relationship abrades their individual family lives and is censored and disdained by the townsfolk who are aware of the affair. Similarly the mountain conjures two conflicting significations. It is a place of great literary and spiritual importance by being the location that Monkey would lead the band of monkeys and then assume leadership over them. However it is also a place that is described by Wang as nothing more than a barren mountain. Importantly, the mountain exists outside of the society that condemns the two main characters. This society ostracizes the two because of their illicit affair which had come to light, and this affair causes great harm to the families of the two, to their careers, and intimately to their physical safety. Consequently, the protagonists are forced to discover a space beyond civilization.

The two lovers in *Love on a Barren Mountain* search locations to actualize their desires because they run in conflict with the morality of civilization. They eventually discover the barren mountain because it hides them away from their familial and professional obligations and rests apart from the condemnation of the townsfolk:

They went further and further from the city and met at more and more deserted places; fixing a rendezvous demanded all their imagination. And then one afternoon they went to the Mountain of Fruit and Flowers where there was actually no fruit and no flowers; it was just a barren mountain. (131)

Conjuring the concept of wilderness and its contradictory signification among literary and philosophical traditions demonstrates how understanding the “barren mountain” as a wilderness allows the protagonists to experience simultaneously disjointed emotions when their love depends upon an oscillation between civilization and wilderness. The gap between the relationship of the barren mountain and the fruit and flowers projects an image of discrepancy through which the protagonists find a lived experience through a deserted locale. Being a “wilderness” it houses the instinctive passions of the two lovers, both *eros* and *thanatos*. Thus

the mountain is barren yet becomes fruitful upon being imbued with the passions of the main characters. In fleeing to a “wilderness” the characters are moving to a location that does not involve the interaction of humans and nature.

As with the other two novellas in the trilogy, *Love on a Barren Mountain* juxtaposes the protagonists’ lives against the backdrop of political events. The extended exposition of the two main characters develops their youth in relation to these historical occurrences of Mainland China. For example, the famine that followed The Great Leap Forward (1958-1960) is represented early in the novella and details the male protagonist’s experiences with hunger. Furthermore the meeting of the two characters occurs because of a specific political change: the decline of the Cultural Revolution:

The age of the Gang of Four was over, and then the age of the song and dance troupe was over too. Six months after his transfer the troupe disbanded. From start to finish it had only lasted eight years, not even as long as the Gang of Four who lasted a decade. The members of the troupe were scattered around, those who had the right connections found their own jobs, and those who did not had to go wherever they were sent. He had no connections, but had become a well-known cellist and the culture palace took him on. (92)

Political events move the characters through their lives and eventually bring them together at the cultural palace which is a place that offered employment for musicians and other artists after the end of the era of the performance troupe. The historical progression of political events parallels the characters lives whose tragic end occurs as a result of an inability to negotiate personal desires with social mores of the society in which they live. They find that their love cannot exist within their society, so they naturally find a space in which to actualize their romance. It permits them to hide away from the disdain of the townsfolk; however, they are not immune from the moralistic clutches of their town.

Here the dramatic tension points to the conundrum of conceptualizing the realm of the human as unified entity. On one hand there is the human realm of civilization, society, and the duties to work and family. On the other hand is human passion that once brought outside of the grasp of society finds potential for its actualization. However, as demonstrated by the tragic end of the two protagonists in *Love on a Barren Mountain*, the two sides of this human realm are incompatible and inevitably self-destruct. The “barren mountain” then is the affair, a stale reality that becomes imbued with lived experience.

Biopolitics and Ideology in a Small Town

The second of Wang Anyi’s trilogy, *Love in a Small Town*, exemplifies the intricate struggles between humans and nature spread upon a cyclical seasonal topography which intersects with political chronology. The struggle further manifests itself upon the protagonists’ corporeality, physically demonstrating the intersections of state-sponsored propaganda art, bodily harm, and sexuality. The novella follows the lives of two dancers who are placed in a cultural dance troupe at a very young age. They practice daily together for several years, and because they are not formally trained, they utilize bad technique and destroy their physique. As the years pass, they find themselves in such intimate physical contact that it inevitably leads to numerous sexual encounters though it goes against the cultural and political norms of the time. The two dancers develop a deep sense of guilt and shame about their romantic affairs; they do not necessarily know what is happening to them from lack of sexual knowledge. After several years of wavering animosity towards each other, often followed by intense physical desire, *she* becomes pregnant. Both of them are censored by the troupe. *He* is banished from the small town and married off to a woman who does not love him. *She* is given a menial job as a gatekeeper

and raises her children, a boy and girl set of twins, by herself. *She* is disdained by the villagers, and though people try to marry her off, no one will take her. In the last scene, she sits with her children and, “feels enveloped in a sense of sacred solemnity” (104).

As in all of Wang Anyi’s works, location, in this instance the small town, assumes a persona within the narrative. After the initial exposition which reveals the main characters, their predicament, and the political-chronological frame through which they are interacting, Wang introduces the town in a lengthy passage. Great detail is given to the physical space of the small town, its surroundings, and the natural elements which make it unique. The very beginning of the passage sets the tone:

This is a small town bounded by three or four rivers, with a very narrow road leading to the railway. The best thing about it is its trees—elms, willows, poplars, cedars, peach, plum, apricot, date and persimmon—all fresh and green. If you travel on a ferry coming downriver, you’ll see this green delta with its luxuriant vegetation a long way off; as you come closer, you will see the houses of grey and red bricks; and coming still closer, you will hear the water-men singing their work songs in a quite unaffected manner. (4)

The town is described as a series of layers. The green delta and vegetation form the outer reaches of the town, and the passage crafts human activity as the deeper layer. The hypothetical visitor who travels down the river only realizes that there are inhabitants after having passed the outer organic layers. Finally, only after the visitor has travelled through the natural sceneries, do humans appear on the scene—workers on the river.

The passage then continues to describe how the townsfolk interact with the location. The inhabitants drink river water. There is a lengthy portion about the roads and its traffic. Towards the end of this introduction, when it turns to the psychology of the inhabitants, sex is introduced—but as a hidden reality, inaudible, and only visible through its resultant effects: biological life:

At night when all the pedlars are gone and all the shops are shut, the street is pitch black; only the stones shine in the crystal-clear moonlight. Doors are shut, then windows are shut, and then even the lights are extinguished. Children begin to dream about the days when they will be grown-ups; old timers sit thinking, or relive the memories of their younger days. Those who are neither old nor young have another kind of pleasure, moving in the dark, planting the seeds of life. This time next year, the town will hear the wailing of new inhabitants. (6)

Sex exists in the deepest darkest part of the evening. A hypothetical visitor¹¹ sees the vegetal aspects of the area upon entering the village. The movements that plant the seeds of life linger in the dark, extrapolated from the natural vegetation that greets those who enter in the town. The two protagonists, like hypothetical visitors who arrive in the town, also pass through the outside layers of the location. This passage foreshadows their maturation process. As the novella begins they are like the children. As the story progresses, they will become like the ones who are “neither old nor young.”

The maturation of the main characters falls upon the backdrop of seasonal changes which are used to describe the small town, the surrounding countryside, and the school where they practice their dance. The town is also continually described through the changing of the seasons throughout the entirety of the novella. In many parts of the text the changing of the seasons are painted in great detail; in other parts, entire years pass in the matter of a few paragraphs. Almost every incident involving the protagonists, such as their first sexual encounter, their various fights, and the birth of the twins, involves a seasonal change and its effects. The seasonality of the novella, utilized to punctuate important events in the plot, also carries a strong thematic influence—particularly when reading the novella in terms of its historical and political background. Seasonality naturally creates cyclicity throughout the novella and works to counter a linear timeframe that adheres to political events. Wang’s work incorporates two

¹¹ Eva Hung’s translation utilizes the second -person pronoun “you” in her translation, but an assigned pronoun is assumed in the original text.

distinct temporalities: cyclical and linear. The former is descriptive and involves natural events—such as rain, drought, darkness, snow etc. The latter is embedded in the novella’s plot which follows linear progression; however, the work’s linear frame also assumes a political dimension that sets the work on a specific timetable and charts social and cultural changes that occurred in the 1970s. *Love in a Small Town* pits cyclical time, cast as natural, organic, and recurrent against linear time which charts historical and political changes in China:

Just as the summer was extraordinarily hot, so this winter is uncommonly cold. . .
 A sense of uneasiness drifts through the streets like a wandering spirit, as if
 something extraordinary is going to happen.
 And sure enough, just after Chinese New Year the news comes that Premier Zhou
 Enlai has passed away. . .
 And then General Zhu De, Commander-in-Chief of the People’s Liberation Army,
 also passes away;
 And then comes the earthquake in Tangshan;
 And then the country’s leader Chairman Mao passes away;
 And then,
 Comes the fall of the Gang of Four. (44)

This list of political and natural events coincides with the turning of the seasons. Within this list, two conceptualizations can be detected: the cyclicity of seasonal changes, and the linear timeframe of political events. The struggle between humans and nature as Wang Anyi describes, is also a friction between “natural” cyclical time and “political” linear time. The temporal tensions between cyclicity and linearity occurs through the “natural” sexual maturation process of the protagonists paralleling the linear “political” climate that leaves knowledge of sex and sexuality up to their own exploratory devices. Though the “natural” as described in the novella adheres to a cyclicity, the “naturalness” of the protagonists’ libidinal maturation conforms to a linearity that leaves the protagonists in a dangerous position. The fact that the boy and girl are dancers forces them in close physical proximity. The naturalness of libidinal exploration remains as an inevitability, and the gap between the ideological and their responsibilities as performers

will transform into a lengthy and painful tension that will force them against the social and moralistic mainstream.

The opening passage of the novella immediately places the maturity of the protagonists within a specific time that straddles the Cultural Revolution to its waning and the fall of the Gang of Four. The opening introduces the common revolutionary pieces that the two dancers had performed such as the “Dance of the Little Soldiers,” and “Dance of the Children’s Brigade.” The two are young, he is sixteen and she is twelve. Immediately the text jumps two years; “Two years have passed. The excitement over ‘The Red Detachment of Women’ has subsided, and the troupe is rehearsing ‘On the Yimeng Mountains’” (2). A dance teacher from the Provincial Performing Arts School arrives and immediately discovers that the two dancers have been practicing incorrectly and have destroyed their physique:

The teacher even pulls her to the middle of the studio and, turning her around, points out to everyone her typically deformed legs, hips and shoulders. And the problems are indeed serious; she has thick legs, thick arms, a thick waist and very broad hips. Her breasts are twice the normal size, protruding like small hills, hardly like a fourteen-year-old’s.

As for the young boy,

At this time she is half a head taller than him. Something must have gone wrong with his body; he has just stopped growing, and though he is eighteen, he still looks very much a child. He can only perform children’s roles, and yet when he is in costume as a child, his face is obviously that of a grown-up. (2)

From a historical perspective, the passage sets up a temporal and cultural shift in which political effects are evidenced through the body. The descriptions of the corporal deformities foreshadow a larger tension in relation to physicality.¹² The boy and girl are ideological products of the Cultural Revolution, and their physicality mirrors an ideological shift inherent to the 1970s. The

¹² Bonnie McDougall in her article “Self-Narrative as Group Discourse” notes that Wang Anyi worked in a Dance troupe during the Cultural Revolution and was able to observe first-hand the physical deformities of youths forced to perform without proper training.

distortions are remnants of the Gang of Four, yet it is the teacher, the representative of the new order, that then criticizes and humiliates the dancers' bodies (McDougall 9). The irony between the forced physical exertions which result in deformities and the mockery of the new regime parallels what the characters will encounter throughout the rest of the work in terms of their sexuality because it will follow a similar ironic trajectory. As adolescents they must undergo sexual maturity in a period of cultural puritanism, in which sexuality was eradicated from the social sphere through the auspices of the political (Chen, Helen 91). Throughout the rest of the novella, their sexual desires, which neither fully comprehend, will meet with derision that is social, political, as well as self-imposed. The demise of the two characters results directly from the tension between the body and the political.

Through depictions of sex and sexuality, *Love in a Small Town* narrates an internal contradiction of Cultural Revolution politics and its biopolitical means of surveillance. The discourse of sexuality operated in service to the state for matters of reproduction rather than bourgeois pleasure. During the 1950s the original intent of the Party's puritanism was meant to create a virtuous society; however, the resultant political maneuverings of the following decades exacerbated sexual repression to "inhumane proportions" (Chen, Helen 91). Yet the protagonists of the novella are forced to dance together in close proximity for several years concurrently with their "natural" maturation. The result is a double bind in which their service to the ideological state apparatus (the propaganda dance troupe) forces the boy and girl into physical contortions, which, coupled with the denial of any sexual knowledge, leads the two into a newly discovered libidinal realm. Per the ideology of the Party, sexuality outside of marriage was bourgeois, contrary to the ideology of the state, and therefore punishable. However, as Wang takes great

pains to describe, the reality of physical bodies overpowers the protagonists' duties as dancers for the dance troupe:

As he climbs on her back once again he smells the heavy odour of sweat; he feels the firmness of her back on his chest, exposed by the low-cut leotard, naked, warm and wet. His equally warm, wet chest rubs against her back, making a noise, and the friction hurts a little. He can feel the strong movements of her waist with his knees and her rounded muscular shoulders and thick neck with his hands. . . . Dancing has become for him just mechanical movements, unworthy of the slightest attention. He is carried on the back of a burning body; a burning body is moving energetically under him. Even the tiniest breath is communicated to his most sensitive nerve, igniting his hope with is erupting like lightning and fire. (33)

The olfactory senses, heat and sweat, and close physical proximity culminate into a dangerous concoction with which the characters come to experience their own biology. The irony is that in service to the politics of the state, the characters physically surpass the mandated barriers set by political surveillance and experience the libidinal, though knowledge of it had been withheld from their educational formation. As the characters mature, they find themselves in an awkward relationship to their own biology—forcing them to discover for themselves the dangers of the naturalness of sex in relation to culturally and politically mandated taboos. These natural discoveries prove bothersome:

The burden for him is his maturity. At heart he seems a fully grown man, filled with shameless desire so mean and base that it frightens him. At first he did not know which part of his body was the seat of such desire; if he did, he would surely be determined to destroy that part of himself. And then one night he wakes up at an inappropriate time, and it suddenly dawns on him where his sin originates; to him it is all sin. But by this time he has realized how impossible it is to destroy that part of himself, and what's more, because it is such an important part he begins to treasure his desires as well. He does not understand why this is so. (29)

The relationship between the historical political ideology, depicted in *Love in a Small Town*, and its biopolitical agenda generates the confrontation between humans as natural beings and humans as political entities, and the effects become manifest through the physicality of the novella's protagonists. Their bodies succumb to the harsh treatments in relation to strict training without

methodology or approved technique; their deformity attests to political power and knowledge over the biological.

The fact that the protagonists fall victims to the imposed restriction of sexuality attests to an internal contradiction in the state's biopolitical agenda from which the tragedy of the novella proceeds. In other words, the employment of the dancers' bodies for the purposes of propaganda performances is the same force that compels the protagonists to experience illicit sexual relations which contradicts state imposed restrictions on sex. The tension of the characters' with their own biologies in relation to their service to the propaganda troupe highlights an interesting relationship between the ideological functioning of the troupe and its relationship to biopolitics. The propaganda dance troupe, which was a historic staple of the Cultural Revolution period,¹³ can be understood by conjuring Althusser's paradigmatic notion of the ideological state apparatus which operates from ideology over repression—as opposed to the state apparatus that is involved in repression. Although Althusser refers mainly to educational institutions as a prime example of a mechanism that functions within capitalist society as a means to reproduce the means of production, the importance of the ideological state apparatus in relation to the discussion of this story is the external and material emphasis he places upon the existence of ideology (125). Althusser's emphasis on materiality pushes a utilization of the Marxist methodology of historical materialism through which he views ideas as not occupying a spiritual realm but rather manifesting themselves physically. Accordingly, an individual wishing to demonstrate religious beliefs, as an example, will kneel, pray, go to church, and participate in the physical activities inherent to that ideological state apparatus. Though Althusser's analysis goes into much greater involvement in extending the notion of ideology as it pertains to Marxist

¹³ A section of Chapter 3 reads filmmaker Jia Zhangke's work *Platform* which similarly follows a performance troupe during the abatement of the Cultural Revolution and during the social changes of the early 1980s.

theory (introducing the process of interpolation, for example) his emphasis on materiality remains central to the present discussion and for an analysis of *Love in a Small Town* because it locates the site of tension and contestation within the material. Per this reading, the ideological mechanism, in which the protagonists play a role as propaganda dancers, focuses attention on the human body and its activities. Their very service to the apparatus utilizes their physiques as medium of communication, scars their bodies with improper training, and ultimately introduces them to sexual-physical behavior, though through the latter they are ironically and unwittingly behaving in opposition to ideologically imposed restrictions.

At this juncture, an eclectic marriage between ideology and the biopolitical can be forwarded to explicate the dramatic tension unfolding within Wang Anyi's novella. Foucault refers to a specific transformation that occurred within modern society when humans begin to face an unprecedented subordination to politics and political strategies in which their own biological existence finds itself in question. Processes of history and the existence of life interfere with one another, yet a particular power (which he will term "bio-power") took the notion of life and all its mechanisms and brought it into the realm of knowledge. Once the existence of a biological existence becomes subject of study and knowledge production, it finds itself integrated in power dynamics which control, regulate, and survey it. Foucault explains in *The History of Sexuality*,

For the first time in history, no doubt, biological existence was reflected in political existence; the fact of living was no longer an inaccessible substrate that only emerged from time to time, amid the randomness of death and its fatality; part of it passed into knowledge's field of control and power's sphere of intervention. Power would no longer be dealing simply with legal subjects over whom the ultimate dominion was death, but with living beings, and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied at the level of life itself; it was the taking charge of life, more than the threat of death, that gave power its access even to the body. (143)

Understanding the material existence of the body as the site of control for power dynamics explains why the scarification of the protagonists' corporeality occurs in the first place and elucidates how the concerted ideological control over their bodies, through the auspices of the ideological state apparatus, reaches to the depths of their own libidinal development. Power and control over the body infers control over its sexuality. In service to the propaganda dance troupe, the male and female protagonists submit their physical and biological existence to the power of the apparatus, which regulates their knowledge of their own sexuality. Simultaneously, it forces them in intimate proximity over a period of time corresponding to their adolescent maturity, after which the inevitable occurs. As such the two main characters are tragic figures, caught between their duties as dancers in service to propaganda and their surveillance as biological beings that remain subordinate to the power dynamics at play within their lives.

The tension between humans and nature that Wang describes as the project of her text proves to be a complex web of relations that involve seasonality, temporality, ideology, and the biopolitical. Each dancer's body becomes a charged site upon which the aforementioned forces scar in service to the larger power structures. The two characters are tragic in that by being actors in the state apparatus and denied knowledge about sexuality, they find themselves in a bind of circumstances that challenges their understanding of themselves. They are also thrust into contradiction with the power of the state and the political events of the ending years of the Cultural Revolution. Formed through the seasons and ending with the tragic demise of the two protagonists, *Love in a Small Town* broadens the playground of tensions between humans and nature and historicizes it against the backdrop of linear time and politics whose material focal point becomes the human body.

The Heterotopic Nature of the Valley

Brocade Valley is the most complex of each of the three novellas in terms of the narrative style.¹⁴ The narrator is the protagonist, but for the majority of the work she positions herself as an omniscient observer privy to the thoughts of the protagonist. At other times she appears as a third-person voyeur. The narrative also follows a stream-of-consciousness style that describes the psychological state of the main character as she falls deeper into a reverie about an affair with a prominent writer. The protagonist is a copy editor whose married life has gone stale, and the opening sequences details the mundane aspects of daily office life. One day she is given the opportunity to attend a literary convention in Lushan—a famous scenic mountain in Jiangxi Province. The novella follows the main character’s thoughts as she strings together brief conversations with the writer, glances between the two of them from across the room, and walks in the mysterious, foggy, and wild Brocade Valley. The valley in the Lushan resort absorbs the protagonist and her paramour in an illusory “mist and clouds” that prove insubstantial in actuality, but relevant in providing a location to project her desires in a safe and distant location.¹⁵ A sexual affair never physically takes place, and it is revealed in the end that the amorous encounter exists in a conscious realm of possibilities that the main character construes as an escape from her mundane life. Ultimately, it gives her regular life meaning.

Brocade Valley differs greatly from the first two novellas of the *Love Trilogy* in several ways. First, this work takes place during the 1980s, as opposed to the other two which end at some point during the decline of the Cultural Revolution. Also, as opposed to the former works

¹⁴ Just like the previous two novellas, this work could be translated literally as *Love in Brocade Valley*, retaining the “love” part which has contributed to three novellas to be known as “love trilogy.” However, the translators (Bonnie McDougall and Chen Maiping) decided to translate the work as simply *Brocade Valley*. All references to the novella will refer to this translation.

¹⁵ As McDougall notes in her reading of the novella, “mist and clouds” is a common euphemism in traditional Chinese literature for sexual intercourse (12).

that chart the upbringing or maturation process of the protagonists, *Brocade Valley* describes the adventures of the main female character who has already matured and married, but lacks something in her life. In this novella, no actual affair takes place between the protagonist and her love interest, and in this work he is known as a writer as opposed to simply *he*. Because this novella does not chart the evolution of the main character over a several year span, there are fewer references to the cyclicity of the seasons throughout many years that play such a prominent role in *Love on a Barren Mountain* and *Love in a Small Town*. However, just as in the previous two novellas, there are continual references to seasonality through constant references to natural seasonal phenomena. In fact at the termination of the work, the protagonist-narrator will admit that nothing has actually happened, except that a tree near her apartment has lost its leaves. The entire work will occur during a brief seasonal change.

The opening of the novella begins with an idiosyncratic admission of the intentions of the narrator. *She* embodies a triad of personas: narrator, author, and protagonist whose perspective positions shift throughout the exposition and conclusion of the novella. What appears as idiosyncratic in the following excerpt is the way in which the narrator's voice rests buried in the leaves and rain of the story's seasonality. In the opening paragraphs, the narrator states her intention to tell the story of a woman, but it is the opening's strategic, temporal placement that camouflages the text's intentionality, settling it in conjunction with the seasons and echoing the narrator's psychological state:

The last typhoon of the year had come and gone, and the first leaves of autumn fell down sibilantly on the balcony. Night had sealed the glass-panelled door with darkness, but I could imagine a deep golden quilt out there. Later, it began to rain, large drops striking the fallen leaves with heavy plops. I didn't notice the rain ending, but after a while I no longer heard it. When I got up this morning, sunshine sparkled in every corner, but the fallen leaves were sodden and pasted, yellow-brown, over the balcony floor.

I want to tell a story, a story about a woman. The early autumn wind is fresh, the sunlight is clear and my mind is calm, and I can think about the story calmly. It occurs to me that this story also began after an autumn rain. (1)

Creating narrative seasonality or establishing the plot in conjunction with natural phenomena is, of course, not specific to Wang's work, nor is it particularly innovative to literature. However, the appeal to a season change continues Wang's project of situating the private lives of her characters within the competing temporalities of natural time and its abrasion against linear historicity. In *Brocade Valley* the complexity of the narration recasts this abrasion in terms of psychological reverie, through which the female protagonist experiences a liberating fantasy from her married life.

The setting of *Brocade Valley*, as a location which will also become a psychological state, allows the protagonist to flee her mundane existence as an editor working in an office. Her life is surrounded by trivial things, such as the habitualness of her daily pedestrian commute, from which she attempts to find excitement:

The street was tranquil, tree-lined avenue of a kind rarely found in this city, and featured its most handsome buildings in traditional Chinese and Western styles. . . Even if it had been very long she would have walked the whole way, never taking a bus. Unfortunately, it was very short. As soon as she turned out of it, losing the protection of the green shade, she became a little depressed and felt tired. (5)

The opportunity arises for her to be able to take an extended trip away from Shanghai, and she is instantly excited about the prospect of being the representative from her office to attend. However, *she* suddenly becomes stuck between this opportunity to travel away from her tedious office and her duties at home. Leading up to the departure, she and her husband hold only brief conversations with each other, each trying to prevent their terse dialogue from slipping into a fight. In fact the husband's words to her about not starting a fight will reverberate in her head throughout the entire novella and return in the end in the form of an epiphany:

For a long time afterwards, she often, often remembered that evening—how at their last meal together before she left, he deliberately, in order to beat a retreat, made this statement:

All right, all right

You're about to leave.

I don't want to start a fight. (22)

Finally, when the day arrives for her departure and the train begins to leave, *she* remembers that she needs to remind her husband to take the pork out of the freezer. However, she is unable to communicate as their conversation is interrupted by the train whistle. The husband speedily walks with the train to hear what she has to say as though her words were of vital importance, and ironically the departure resembles a stereotypical cinematic train scene of two lovers departing. She, on the other hand, is disgusted by the efforts the two are taking to communicate such an unimportant detail, and she sits back and cries.

Even before the conference begins, however, she begins experiencing unexpected changes in her attitude and psychological state. She is introduced to a prominent writer who will be attending the conference, and she feels an intense fascination with him. She immediately finds a sense of tranquility. In the car from an airport where they met the writer for the first time, she sits next to him:

After only one evening, everything had abruptly changed shape—not only in her life, but also in herself. What had happened to her former anxiety, tension, and disgust? All had disappeared like smoke, as if they had never existed. Her mind was clear as a tranquil pool. (31)

This tranquility will expand once the characters arrive at the lodge. As the number of incidents in which she and the writer can interact increases, she becomes increasingly aware of changes in her life. She begins to analyze particular elements of interactions and starts to piece them together. Most importantly, she and the writer have brief encounters with each other and

eventually begin taking walks along paths in the surrounding scenery, the “wild” and “mysterious” Brocade Valley:

The sun’s burning rays transformed the valley into a place of dazzling beauty. White clouds drifted past like living creatures, clean, white, and soft. Clouds formed a permanent cover over the deep valley, concealing its true nature and screening its bottomless depths so beautifully and innocently that no one realized that only one slip of the foot spelled certain death. Occasionally, unintentionally, a cloud uncovered one corner, laying bare a profound truth, but it was only for a moment. Before people had time to notice, the cloud covered it over again, spreading its white petal-like fringes, unfolding a joyous camouflage; all that remained behind was a faint doubt. (44)

Through their walks, they are able to experience the naturalness of the location. The valley surrounds them, bringing them closer together and further away from her past life. The labyrinthine valley encapsulates the two characters as they are able to share moments together:

Not knowing when or how they began, they were walking again, circling Brocade Valley. They had started to walk without being conscious of it. Brocade Valley was like a trap: no matter how they went, they could not get out. How long this path was! The sun had dried the dew, and the path was very dry, very soft. The cloud in the valley floated back like a stream. They walked through some dry grass, which rustled under their feet. (47)

The story begins reveling in the ruminations of the protagonist as each contact with the writer, no matter how seemingly inconsequential, transforms into an intimate interaction. On one outing, the two become separated from the group and spend time together. On one evening, as the two are on a path that is surrounded by mist, they kiss.

In escaping her work and urban life for the scenic valley, the protagonist mentally allows herself to feel the emotional effects of an illicit affair, but as she returns to her urban life, the experiences in Brocade Valley fade into her memory. In fact, as the novella progresses, the writer becomes an enigmatic figure, and at the end of the work, he remains as mysterious as when he is first introduced. There is no character development, and no information is given about him than he is famous writer and that he is a chain smoker (McDougall 13). What the

mental ruminations upon the possibility of an affair with such an obscure figure eventually accomplish is a reinstatement of a lost virginity. This reinstatement is formed through an experience with the mysteriousness of the opposite sex which reasserts sexual difference:

She was a married woman, and because she was married, she was so accustomed to the male that she'd stopped being conscious of sexual difference and the nature of opposites. She'd spent her life with a member of the male sex; cooped up in one room, they'd soon lost their inhibitions, concealing nothing from each other, keeping nothing secret. They'd lost their sense of sexual difference, and in consequence had also lost the mystical tremor it bestowed. She'd so far forgotten this tremor that it has become a stranger to her, and when it now recurred, it felt like first love: he seemed to be her first man. (74)

Though the writer is the least developed male protagonist in all three of the novellas, his enigmatic nature serves a specific purpose for the female protagonist of the story. His mysteriousness is like the mysteriousness of sexual difference, which allows her to experience a naive view again towards the opposite sex. The secrecy and inhibitions involved in the relationship between her and men resurface. The child-like innocence that she had had as a girl comes back to her in the final scene of the novella. The narrator watches her as if looking from a window looking down at her as she walks along the street. The narrator remarks that she takes a childlike pleasure in stepping on the crunchy leaves on the sidewalk—a final scene that explains a certain psychology that had been lost, but regained through her imaginations in Brocade Valley. The last episode of the novella plays out against the divided selves of the protagonist. She projects herself as an observer, surreptitiously spying on her, as if watching from a window, and the self-being-watched remains seemingly unaware of the interest in her life:

I watch her mischievously pursuing the golden, curled-up leaves with her toe and playfully trample them to make them crackle. It reminds me of what she was like as a child: if something she loved was just a little imperfect, she would destroy it; the more she loved it, the more determined she was. Apart from this, I can't remember anything else. I have to release her, and let her walk away without a story. (123)

The story without a story is a psychological period of time, framed through the only physical difference that can be detected are the leaves of a Chinese parasol tree had fallen. Outside of the brief seasonal change, nothing occurred. Rather than intend to subvert an unhappy marriage through a physical affair with the famous writer, the female protagonist “wills the affair to re-create her selfhood . . . to readjust a psychological balance of her married life, and eventually to succumb to the marriage institution against which she has rebelled” (Chen, Helen 106).

The ending of the novella explains a change in temperament, and this change is precisely dependant on the space of Brocade Valley as natural physical space as well as psychological location. The valley acts as an alternate space from the protagonist’s monotonous life, and through it she can reevaluate herself and come to terms with her marriage as well as find a new view of life. Brocade Valley is a precisely situated place that exists yet does not exist. It becomes a place that invents a set of relations that inverts the protagonist’s regular life with the possibility of an extramarital affair, and through these very set of possibilities inherent to this particular space, her married life finds its very fulfillment. In an article titled “Of Other Spaces” Foucault designates the concept of space as the source of our greatest anxiety of the current era. Though he acknowledges time as another source of anxiety, particularly the notion of history, it remains, to his analysis, only one of many operations of distribution which allow relations to extend themselves out in space. His purpose for mentioning space is to assert its heterogeneous nature which proves that human subjects do not inhabit a void. Rather, the spaces which they fill are replete with relations that make them irreducible to one another; however, outside of the everyday spaces that regulate and influence the subject, there exist two curious spaces which contradict all others. These are spaces that are linked to all other sites, yet reinvent the relations that occur within. The first of these is utopia which is a non-real place yet is related to other

spaces by being analogically related. The other kind space that exists is what Foucault will term *heterotopias*. He describes this concept in the following manner:

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. (24)

To clarify this point, Foucault conjures the concept of a mirror which he states functions like a utopia, a virtual representation that is not real—therefore a placeless place. The reflection that one sees is not real but an image that has been projected on a space, the space of the mirror, which is in and of itself a real space. Most importantly, the relations between the placeless place with the position of the viewer enables a set of interactions, allowing the viewer to understand that the image in the glass is real and “connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there” (24).

The reason for appealing to Foucault’s analysis of heterotopias is to manage the contradictory properties of Brocade Valley in relation to the main character and her epiphany at the termination of the novella. As with the notion of heterotopias, Brocade Valley is on one hand a natural location containing within it an air of mysteriousness in which the female protagonist gets lost with her newfound lover. On the other hand, it is a space that is not real, a location that has been projected as a site of an extramarital affair with a writer who remains unknowable and is lost once she leaves the location. In the analysis of heterotopias, Foucault describes several principles, of which, in terms of analyzing *Brocade Valley*, the relationship of heterotopias with segments of time proves most pertinent. Subjects act and react with a space when the space

constitutes an exception from common time or offers punctuation with flowing and transitory time. In *Brocade Valley*, the opportunity for the protagonist to break from her work routine in the big city and spend a non-specified amount of time away from her personal life allows the scenic resort to formulate a space beyond time. The space that is real yet unreal similarly exists outside of a time that the main character, once she heads back to her real life, barely perceives. The only reminder that indicates that time existed, and in turn that the space existed, is a seasonal change. In the closing of the novella, the time that *she* will spend in Brocade Valley will correspond only to a minute change in the seasons, “She felt indeed, in fact, in reality, that nothing had happened, nothing at all had happened, except that the parasol tree outside the window had lost all its leaves” (122). This brief period of time will allow her to encounter a transcendent experience which formulates the grounds upon which she will experience an epiphany in terms of her married life once the words of her husband begin to merge with her conversations with the writer, meshing to form her understanding of the experience.

As the time draws closer for the end of the convention, the main character begins angrily regretting the reality that waits for her when she must return. Finally the day arrives for her to return home. She returns to the apartment, and finds that it is has not been kept by her husband. She angrily begins picking up. Suddenly she remembers back to the conversations that she had had with the writer. She has the sudden realization that their interactions were awkward and contained no content but consisted of a statement or question followed by a repetition of the very same line. She construed the chance encounters as a constructed progression of lines and interactions and reconstructs a completed sequence formed through tattered phrases that were shared between her and her husband as well as her and the writer:

Suddenly it occurred to her that nothing, in fact, had happened. But a string of chance remarks which had turned out to be prophetic sprang into her mind and were enlarged: they were—

All right, all right

You're about to leave

I don't want to start a fight

It's stuffy inside

Let's go for a walk outside

First

Let's go

It's time now

We have to be getting back!

Putting these remarks side by side into one line, she discovered that they formed a complete sequence: they formed a complete sequence.

She indeed, in fact, in reality, that nothing had happened, nothing at all had happened, except that the parasol tree outside the window had lost all its leaves. A story in which there is no story is finished. (122)

The description by the narrator is a moment of epiphany for the protagonist and reveals as well the most intricate secret of the work: the entire sojourn and Brocade Valley itself is no more than a state of mind reconstructed by the narrator as her thoughts wander as if getting lost in the valley. Repetition in the lines mirrors the repetitive nature of the dialogue between her and the writer as well as her and her husband. All dialogues that were given between them consisted of a statement followed by the exact same statement, and these snippets of conversation now rebound in her head to form what the narrator refers to as a "sequence." The completion of the sequence forms one dialogue, made from the statements of two men, though it still seems to lack coherent understandability. As a whole, however, the sequence formulates the manifestation of her psychological crisis and its resolution.

Though the first two novellas of the *Love Trilogy* are not didactic, the protagonists arguably experience a tragic end as a result of their affairs. The man and woman in *Love on a Barren Mountain* commit suicide. The protagonists in *Love in a Small Town* are reprimanded by society, and are forced apart. With *Brocade Valley*, however, possibility of an affair proves

cathartic for the lead female character. The novella represents a thematic evolution of Wang's writing. As with her other two novels, Wang explores how the "gendered body is socialized, sexualized, and politicized," *Brocade Valley* demonstrates how sexuality can be "explored with a noticeable absence of qualms or troubled conscience" (Zhang, Jingyuan 164). This is what makes the novella the most controversial of the three works. Not only does the protagonist not suffer consequences for her desire of an affair, the work describes her subjective position, aligning the story with a desire of the protagonist that in the end proves cathartic. The lack of a conscience of the narrator-protagonist relates to the power of the space and time of Brocade Valley. It is a space outside of everyday life, and its temporality also exists outside of traditional time. Within this particular spatial-temporal valley, she can experience emotions and desires prohibited within the confines of her regular life. Because she is able to escape to a utopian space, she transforms her life through the narration of an intense affair that proves to be nothing more than a period of time in which leaves fall. The Brocade Valley is a state of mind, a real location that permits the main character to explore daydream like desires—an illicit affair, through which nothing actually happens. The "story without a story," that the narrator describes throughout the entirety of the novella, is ultimately a simple story of leaves falling.

Conclusion: Seasonality

In the 1990s, Wang Anyi's works begin taking a slightly different thematic turn, though certain particularities, such as emphasis on place, remain important. Her later novels experiment with a more subjective narrative method in which the characters become lost in a nebulous nostalgic memory of a past replete with representations of melancholia (Xiao, Jiwei 514). The most representative novel of this period is *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow (Changhen ge)* which

was published in 1995. This work begins with a long introduction that describes in great detail the *longtang* of Shanghai before any character even enters the scene. When the first character Wang Qiao appears, she is narrated as part of the Shanghai neighborhoods:

Wang Qiyao is the typical daughter of the Shanghai *longtang*. Every morning, when the back door squeaks open, that's Wang Qiyao scurrying out with her book bag embroidered with flowers. In the afternoon, when the phonograph plays next door, that's Wang Qiyao humming along with "Song of the Four Seasons." Those girls rushing off to the theater, that's a whole group of Wang Qiyaos going to see Vivien Leigh in *Gone With the Wind*.¹⁶ (22)

The interweaving of nostalgia with melancholia fills an allegorical space that neither calls for redemption nor crafts an urban imaginary responding to a new China optimism. As Zhang Xudong sees it, Wang's fiction is indicative of her post-Cultural Revolution generation. She searches for the lost past that has to be re-narrated within a global context. She responds to the modernity of Chinese history by ironically making peace "with all the dead in modern Chinese history" (Zhang 383). Interestingly, "nostalgia" is a term that Wang herself rejects, claiming that she did not experience pre-1949 Shanghai; rather, it is the heroine's nostalgia that is being recreated by artistic imagination (Berry *Song* 436). The novel traces several decades until the mid-1980s with no mention of major political events—which, conversely, play a role in her *Love Trilogy*. This exemplifies one of the intrinsic components of nostalgic representation—it is a predicament grounded in the present that in turn inverts teleology.¹⁷

Wang Anyi's turn to melancholic representation of urban areas, particularly Shanghai, is in many ways the logical progression of her literary evolution. The prominence of nostalgia within literature and film of the 90s is a direct result of discourses modernization and modernity that has saturated "modern" life with material goods as well as forced drastic changes in social

¹⁶ All references to *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* refer to Michael Berry and Susan Chan Egan's translation.

¹⁷ For a more complete analysis of nostalgic representation, see Chapter 3 about Jia Zhangke's cinema. As will be discussed, Jia exposes nostalgia by exaggerating its tenants, thus offering a full critique of how it operates in relation to the disappearance of space.

relations, often with traumatic consequences (Wang, Ban 670). However, Wang's later novels like *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* remain thematically related to her previous works in that they cast topography as inextricable from the social interactions of her characters. Within her *Love Trilogy*, this topographical emphasis grounds the intertwining of socio-political interaction with the natural world, an interaction which has been referred to as *seasonality* within the context of this chapter. Wang's *Love Trilogy* explores the potentials, possibilities, and dangers of sexuality in a time of swift social change—specifically the era of the 1970s and 80s. Seasonality can thus be understood as an intimate connection of the characters with their time periods. Wang Anyi's use of this particular historical temporality stresses the importance of understanding human sexual relations as natural though running in tension with society, ideological codes of ethics of the political, and most importantly, the individual human subject herself.

As linear political time progresses, the social lives of the characters are multidimensionally punctuated by a seasonality mirroring the natural environment. By pitting the naturalistic libidinal urges of her protagonists against the political, social, and moralistic conventions of each temporality, Wang crafts the intrinsic intrapersonal problematic of sexual relations as in opposition to the human construct of society. The resultant problems express themselves as the tensions of each novella. In *Love on a Barren Mountain*, the protagonists must flee to the wilderness, the barren mountain, in order to inhabit a space exterior to social constraints. It is here that they can actualize their forbidden yet natural desires for one another, thus ironically contrasting the 'barren mountain' with profound passion. In *Love in a Small Town*, the two main characters must come to understand their own sexual maturation in light of the moralistic ideology of the state apparatus which denies them sexuality though forcing them in close physical proximity. Finally the misty and mysterious valley in *Brocade Valley* offers the

lonely urban worker a psychological space in which she can ponder the possibility of an extra-marital affair, which in turn resolves a larger malaise and discontentment with her life. In all of these scenarios, there is a dualistic tension of human as cast through ‘natural’ sexuality, and the human as an inhabitant of a political/social space. Each of Wang Anyi’s main characters finds him and herself bound by these conflicting political spatial-temporal arenas. All of her protagonists of the *Love Trilogy* attempt to “flee” from these arenas in one form or another.

Wang Anyi’s *Love Trilogy* promotes an understanding of humans through the lens of sexuality and during a time of great social change. The ecological implications of each work designate entry passages through which to approach the tension between human realms and social constructs. The ultimate tragedy or redemption found in each of the novellas occurs not because humans and nature are separable entities, but because they remain inseparable realities. Understanding these novellas in light of the historical and political shifts that are occurring in Mainland China—Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, the fall of the Gang of Four, the Open Door Policy with its dynamic economic and social effects of the 1980s, etc—provides a linear temporality upon which these tensions play out. To approach these tensions from the manner in which the author casts natural phenomena expands the interpretive means to assess ideological shifts upon human subjects. The term *seasonality* then implies an internal friction—a linear history which rubs against discontentment, lust, libidinal maturation, sexuality, suffering, and desire which are punctuated by the natural world that remains aloof in its cyclicity. In these works, seasonality formulates the manner in which incompatible temporalities negotiate themselves, and these are wrought through the sexuality of the protagonists. Therefore, Wang’s *Love Trilogy* advances a multidimensional critique of Chinese society in a time of vast change, and her novellas remain insightful into the manner in which the human subject must continually

endure, as she finds herself constantly reevaluated by the temporalities which attempt to define her.

Chapter 2

Han Shaogong: Excavating the Linguistic to Re-imagine Modernity

Whereas the ecocritical implications of Wang Anyi's works rest among structural relations between competing temporalities and physicality, Han Shaogong's fiction adheres to a different agenda— forging an intervening consciousness of Chinese modernity deriving from autochthonous linguistic roots. Han's assertion of an alternate modernity corresponds with his intellectual engagement, and by imagining modernity away from an industrialized and teleological paradigm, he establishes a particular ecocritical stance towards contemporary Chinese cultural consciousness. Through his numerous essays and works of literature, Han Shaogong promotes a cultural identification that runs independent of scientific, economic, and technological developmental narratives. Han's literary works address a current state of cultural and environmental crisis by exploring and mobilizing the power of language and its internal cultural heritages as well as contradictions to compose an imaginary space in which to cast conflicts and tensions of contemporary society. By crafting this space, Han constructs a method of narrative intervention that puts forward the possibility of a Chinese cultural consciousness of modernity, not inextricably linked to industrialization, but thriving in the inherent contradictions of language

This chapter begins by chronologically tracing Han Shaogong's literary career from his early works to the dramatic thematic shift following his seminal and influential essay "Roots of Literature". Much work has already been done on the major pieces of Han's mid-1980s root seeking literature, and referencing scholarly research on his well-known novella *Pa Pa Pa* as well as performing a close textual reading will demonstrate how this work defies allegorical

readings. *Pa Pa Pa* also exemplifies how the search for roots creates non-historicized space from which a new cultural imagination can be constructed—an aspect not directly addressed in previous scholarship. This chapter will then proceed to read particular parts of his first full length novel *A Dictionary of Maqiao* to demonstrate how the heterogeneity of language narrates the crisis of contemporary culture through its own internal contradictions. Understanding Han Shaogong's literary project in conjunction with the dual post-colonial notion of history as forwarded by Dipesh Chakrabarty will elucidate how the novel promotes an alternate narrative of modernity. Attaching this notion to Han's preoccupation with the unconscious realm of human existence allows an understanding of his broader literary project, which casts consciousness apart from the hegemonic trajectory of what has been termed developmentalism. As will be shown in the conclusion, the ecocritical and political implications of Han Shaogang's literature, then, derive from linguistic regional roots, which for him are located in rural Hunan Province, and his narratives, tied to the land he describes, formulate an alternative comprehension of a Chinese modernity.

From “Scar Literature” to the “Roots of Literature”

The thematic development of Han Shaogong's literary career parallels a dynamic biography which has witnessed Maoist Communism, Cultural Revolution, and rapid economic expansion and global capitalism. His literary emphasis, following this historical timeframe, becomes more focused on regionalism and regional linguistics as exemplified by his call for a “Search for Roots” and his inauguration of Root Seeking Literature. Han was born in 1953 in Changsha in Hunan Province and was sent to the countryside as an Educated Youth (*zhiqing*) between 1968 and 1974 during Chairman Mao Zedong's re-education campaign during the Great

Proletariat Cultural Revolution. The place of his reeducation continues to remain thematically important as the setting for the majority of his literature. After the Cultural Revolution, Han studied Chinese at Hunan Normal University. He began his literary career as a member of what has been termed an “Urbling” group of writers whose works speak of the experiences during their reeducation (Barmé 101). His early works are therefore associated with the cathartic literary movement that immediately followed the Cultural Revolution which has been termed “scar literature” (*shanghen wenxue*). Han broke free of this stifling and easily outmoded movement with an appeal to a search for literary roots, a moment of which he is often held as the founder. His 1985 essay “Roots of Literature”—hailed by some as a manifesto—sparked much interest in bucolic portrayals of non-traditional characters. Such a maneuver experimented with a freedom from the prescribed Maoist ideal outlined in the 1942 “Talks of Yan’an forum of literature and the Arts” which saw art as in service to the masses and the masses as its direct audience (McDougall 16). In 1988, Han moved to Hainan Island in off the coast of southern China but keeps close contact with rural Hunan, where he draws much inspiration for his essays and fiction. In 1996, he published his first full length novel titled *A Dictionary of Maqiao* which has since grown in international recognition with its translation into numerous foreign languages including Dutch, English, French, German, and Japanese among others.

From the mid-1980s, Han Shaogong’s writing thematically evolved from a fixed focus within specific historical conditions to a larger schema that sought to provide a robust critique of Chinese culture in a state of crisis. His earlier works remain influenced by issues specific to the historical-political—notably his reeducation and the Cultural Revolution. The earlier works associated with scar literature where therefore interpretively limited to their time and place where the “message is the medium” (Lau, “Text and Context” 20). By turning to the “roots of literature,” Han Shaogong accomplishes a move that emancipates the text from historical context, finding a modern cultural

imagination within an alternative space embedded in those roots. His works during the period of the root seeking literature opened possible detours from the infatuation with nation and national issues while remaining committed to cultural critique. The most notable works from this period include the short stories “Homecoming?” and “The Blue Bottle-cap” as well as the novellas *Pa Pa Pa* and *Woman Woman Woman*.

Various historical shifts set the stage for the emergence of Chinese literature after the Cultural Revolution and initially dictated its thematic purpose. As Educated Youth who had been reeducated in the countryside began to return to urban areas, there arose a literature that served the purpose of exposing past experiences to release the repressed anxieties of the previous ten years. Referred to as “urbling literature,” these works would be associated with the concurrent “scar literature” (also translated as “literature of the wound”) whose purpose was therapeutic (Lau, “Visitation of the Past” 23). Han Shaogong’s early works exemplify some of the themes that pervade the literature of this time. Han began his literary career in the late 1970s and early 80s with works such as “Yuelan,” “Echoes,” and “Distant Trees,” to name a few, which are clearly embedded in the tradition of the Educated Youth who had been narrating the indignant feelings of senselessness of the sent-down generation.¹⁸ From the perspective of the state, there needed to be a literary prescription that continued Mao Zedong’s previous literary dictates yet promoted socialist modernization and made scapegoats of the “gang of four,” all of which is spelled out in Deng Xiaoping’s 1979 *Congratulatory Message to the Fourth Congress of Chinese Writers and Artists* (7-14). Thus, in the years immediately following the post-Mao era, a serious introspective literature assumed within it a logic of victimhood that “fell short of a genuine introspection or interrogation of the historical past” (Wang, Jing 237).

¹⁸ Many of the works from Han’s early years are collected in the volume titled *Tongzhi Shidai*.

Han Shaogong took a brief hiatus from writing initially following the publication of his early works but reappeared in 1985 with his short yet influential essay “Roots of Literature.” His literary career would then take an important turn that has proven essential in providing the seminal thematic elements of his works since. After the publication of his essay many stories and novellas appeared from various writers that identified themselves with a literary search for roots, and the works produced from this movement have been termed “root-seeking” literature. The essay “Roots of Literature” stakes the claim that Chinese writers wanting to locate the cultural origins of literature must look towards the creativity of indigenous peoples such as ethnic minorities to re-envision a cultural link between present day literature and heritages of the past. As Han mentions in the most quoted line from the essay, “Literature has roots. These roots of literature should be deeply planted in the native soil of the traditional folklore and legends, for if the roots are not deep, then its leaves will not flourish.” As for Han Shaogong and his writing, he personally appeals to the cultural legacy of the Chu Kingdom, generally corresponding to the area of present day Hunan during several centuries of the Spring and Autumn as well as Warring States period of Chinese history. Specifically, Han petitions the literary legacy of the poet Qu Yuan. Han’s literary vision finds its strength in the heterogeneity of contemporary language from which he believes he can excavate the linguistic and cultural roots of the Chu Kingdom—thus imagining an alternative to modern cultural identity, juxtaposing industrial development which he cites throughout the essay as a destroyer of heritage.

Han Shaogong admits that the remnants Chu culture only exist within the realm of the cultural imagination, yet it is through petitioning this imaginary locality and temporality that he stages the possibility for social critique. The essay immediately promotes the linguistic as the method through which he can revitalize heritages to circumvent global cultural homogenization

brought about industrialization. Through this same linguistic route, Han wrests the conceptualization of Chinese cultural identification from the mono-lingual, challenging as well the narrative of a mono-cultural and mono-genesis narrative. The essay begins with the simple description of a self-pondered question,

I have previously thought about this question: where has the magnificent Chu culture gone? I once settled in the countryside by the Miluo River, the place where I lived only twenty kilometers from Qu Yuan's ancestral temple. Carefully scrutinizing local customs, it is obvious to see that several dialectical words are linked to Chu poetry.¹⁹

Han continues to give brief examples of how certain place names resonate with many words that are associated with literature of this time, in particular the works of the scholar Qu Yuan and his poem “On Enduring Trouble.” There is a sense throughout this essay that Han is concerned about the future of literature and its relationship with globalization—though he does not use the exact term. He gives particular examples of words that have been imported from the English language which have replaced indigenous lexicon and are used phonetically through Chinese characters such as *taxi*, *bus*, *jeans*, *boss*, and *OK*. He also brings forth the “economic miracle” example of the city of Shenzhen, which is known for its capitalist success with awe-inspiring new architectures, but he claims that it lacks a cultural depth. Han sees this depth as endemic to the history of China itself, and modernization and industrialization, though having brought economic prosperity, has also effaced this cultural profundity. Most importantly the essay praises the diversity of Chinese history and reestablishes a manner of viewing Chinese culture and literature as heterogeneity, not as a monotone with a single common narrative. For example, Han equates the Miao people with the Chu cultural past, mentioning that their war deity, Chi You, was defeated by the Yellow Emperor—who represents a common ancestral symbol for ethnic and

¹⁹ All translations of “Roots of Literature” are mine.

cultural identity. Tu Weiming, in his essay about Chinese cultural identity, makes the following observation,

Although it is often noted that culture, rather than ethnicity, features prominently in defining Chineseness, the cultured and civilized Chinese, as the myth goes, claim a common ancestry. Indeed, the symbol of the “children of the Yellow Emperor” is constantly reenacted in Chinese literature and evokes feelings of ethnic pride. (3)

Han Shaogong stages a rupture of a mono-genesis cultural narrative of Chinese identity. He states, for example, that the peoples of the northern territory become equated with being the children of the dragon, those of the Chu are the children of birds. Throughout the essay, Han prioritizes of the polyphony of cultural pasts, mentioning diverse groups such as the Miao, Hui, and Wei which share an Islamic culture, as well as other migrant groups from the east such as Russian minorities. Han’s intervention in the cultural genesis narrative and prioritization of cultures challenges discourse which narrates a centralized identity. Han’s turn to the linguistic is a purposeful strategy to challenge dominant ideological understanding of modern culture as necessarily one of a unified national identity which in turn must seek full-scale industrialization as the means for self-realization.

Han Shaogong’s essay gives an open ended appeal to writers to find the roots of literature in whichever folkloric literary tradition writers find at their feet, “Recently, one joyous phenomenon has occurred: writers cast their sights, gazing anew at the land under their feet, looking back towards the peoples of yesterday, possessing a new literary consciousness.” The appeal to a search for roots can perhaps be best described an ambiguous call through its open-ended rallying cry to search for history within literature (Feuerwerker 207). Han Shaogong’s works of the root-seeking period, for example, situate the plot within a particular geographic setting, and latent within the geography linger the linguistic traces of that territory’s legacy

which must be excavated. The search for roots of literature, therefore, exists outside of a temporality/spatiality, using the linguistic as the medium for a rediscovery of a heterogeneous and rich cultural identification in an industrializing age that seems to pad down and smooth over the internal cultural diversities while advocating teleology and linear historical, industrial progression.

Though Han is seen as one of the most influential founders of the root seeking appeal, it is difficult in the end to see root seeking as a movement at all. Leenhouts' extensive structural reading of Han's career underscores the creative verve of the writer and his influence on many intellectuals. He assesses root seeking in the following way:

Though it is sometimes referred to as a literary movement guided by a manifesto, 'root-seeking' should perhaps rather be seen as a pervasive theme that preoccupied writers during the mid-1980s. The main characteristic shared by these writers is that they all stressed in some manner the importance of their cultural identity for their creative work. In other words, they considered their Chinese or ethnic minority identity as relevant or even crucial to successful Chinese Literature. (*Leaving the World* 1)

It must also be noted that the notion of a search for a cultural legacy (roots) differs greatly from Benedict Anderson's evaluation of "cultural roots" which form the imaginative ground for the creation of nationalism (9-36). As will be discussed in the next section, the works that come out immediately after the publication of "Search for Roots" (and in particular *Pa Pa Pa*) defy national or allegorical readings. Furthermore, the notion of "roots" associated with Alex Haley's novel (which was published in Chinese in 1979) in no way influenced the context in which Han uses the term. In fact, Haley's work grew in popularity relative to issues of emigration (Leenhouts 16). The search for roots should be best understood through the notion of searching rather than assuming a theoretical goal of unearthing and discovering the roots themselves. The reading of Han's popular novella *Pa Pa Pa* in the next section will also demonstrate how the work circumvents temporality and allegory

through a simultaneous preoccupation with and ambivalence to the superstitions and violent naïveté of its characters.

***Pa Pa Pa* as Resistance to Allegory**

The 1985 novella *Pa Pa Pa* describes the misadventures of a backwater village and their interaction with the story's protagonist—a severely developmentally disabled man-child.²⁰ The story takes place in a rural village in Hunan province, but the actual historical timeframe remains mostly amorphous, though certain clues, such as the use of the term “baogao” for report, suggest that it occurs generally between the 1930s and the first decade of the People's Republic (Choy 28; Kinkley 101). Han Shaogong's novella is purposefully ambiguous and lacks a clear central plot. The overall work, though, is eventful, extremely violent and narrated by an unidentified villager. Perhaps for these reason, the characterization of the villagers and the protagonist Young Bing has been the site of debate about a larger cultural and historical interpretation.

The novella begins with the troubled and fantastical birth of Young Bing. He does not breathe for the first two days after being born, but on the third day he begins to cry. Throughout his life he never grows larger than a young toddler, and his vocabulary only consists of two expressions: “Papa” and the expletive “F__mama”:

After each meal, he [Young Bing] left the house, a grain or two of rice sticking to the corners of his mouth, a large oily stain on his chest, and rocking and swaying, tottered up and down the village, greeting passers-by of all ages and sexes with a cordial “Papa”. If you scowled at him, he would return the compliment at once—staring at a certain point on your head, he would slowly roll his eyes skyward, showing the whites of his eyes, and then spit out the words, “F__Mama.” Then he would turn and make his escape. (35-36)

²⁰ *Pa Pa Pa* has also been translated with the title *BaBaBa*, and Young Bing has been translated more phonetically as Bing Zai. For sake of convenience, this chapter will use the place, people, and title names in Martha Cheung's translation in the collection *Homecoming? and Other Stories* except when referring to secondary sources that choose to use alternate spellings or names.

The two expressions of Young Bing's vocabulary do not necessarily refer to parental units but mood and temperament. Young Bing's vocabulary, therefore, does not refer to specific genders. As the text explains "F__Mama" could be understood as "F__Haha" (35). The fate of Young Bing's biological father is relatively unclear. It had been said among the villagers that he left the mother out of disgust for her ugliness combined with the birth of the monstrous child. Villagers circulate numerous rumors about the father's final fate, but the narrator comments that in the end it is a "mystery of little importance" (36). During the course of the story, it is revealed that the name of the father is Delong who is a singer that entertains the villagers at one point; however, his presence in the overall plot is negligible. Young Bing grows up with his mother in their mountain town called Cock's Head Village, and he is often bullied for fun by the local children. In particular, a villager named "Stupid Ren" takes his anguish out at Young Bing by boxing his ears. Such attacks are easy to carry out since the only reply to such aggression is the phrase "F__Mama".

The villagers are extremely superstitious; for example, it is believed that Young Bing's mental state came as a direct result of his mother smashing a spider that was perhaps a spirit which could cast spells. One year, when bad weather conditions are blamed for a bad crop yield, the villagers search for a solution. They decide in the end that a human sacrifice to the rice god will be needed. The righteous choice, for them, would be to sacrifice Young Bing. As the narrator comments, "To take the life of this useless blockhead was in fact to do him a good turn. He would be spared the pain of having his ears boxed, and he would no longer be a torment to his mother" (62). When the time comes to behead Young Bing, a thunder clap occurring at the same time as the raising of the cleaver startles the villagers who now believe that heaven is upset with such a meager sacrifice.

The village then turns to a sorcerer for help in finding how to placate heaven. The sorcerer believes the source of the drought to be the presence of a large mountainous precipice, known as “cock’s head” from which the town gets its name, and explains how it appears to be pecking at the fields on their land. The village then decides to explode the cock’s head. Unfortunately, the rock formation separates Cock’s Head Village from a larger village on the opposite side named Cock’s Tail Village. The decision to destroy the mountain range leads to tensions between the two villages, unavoidably ending in a bloody feud. The resulting violence takes a large death toll on Cock’s Head Village. As the fancifulness of the villagers’ imagination rises to address the present disaster, Young Bing inadvertently assumes a mystical place in the strategies of the locals to address the ensuing violence and hunger:

A lad suddenly remembered something peculiar. He said that that day when they were about to offer up Young Bing as a sacrifice to the rice god, a clap of thunder had come out of the blue. Afterwards, they had tried to read their fortunes in the battle by killing an ox, but it didn’t work. It seemed to have been a bad omen when Young Bing swore, “F__Mama”, and something bad did happen . . . Wasn’t it strange? Now that he’d mentioned it, everyone found Young Bing most mysterious. Just think: he could only say “Papa” and “F__Mama”. Could it be that these two expressions are actually the divination symbols for *yin* and *yang*?
(76)

The promotion of Young Bing’s idiotic vocabulary to theoretical Daoist metaphysics embodies a false mixture of the mundane with the sublime. His idiotic ramblings assume a strong spiritual significance for the villagers, highlighting the superstitions and the naïveté of the townsfolk as they enter into a disastrous and violent confrontation with the neighboring town. The narrator relays the successive defeats of Cock’s Head Village, and the presence of suffering and corpses becomes commonplace in the village. Dogs roam the countryside feasting off corpses, sometimes mistaking a living villager for a dead body. Young Bing’s mother can no longer take the stench of the village and her situation in life, abandoned to solely take care of her idiotic son, and she

sadly bares him in the wilderness. After she bids farewell, the mother walks off into the woods and is never heard from again. Young Bing hobbles around and eventually finds the corpse of a deceased female. He sucks at the breast and falls asleep on top of the body.

The conclusion of *Pa Pa Pa* remains just as ambiguous as many of the other episodes in the novella. In the end, Young Bing is one of the few to survive the feud between Cock's Head Village and Cock's Tail Village. The elders of the town, in an attempt to react to their fate and defeat, circulate a poisonous drink. Though Young Bing is forced to drink the poison, he does not die, rather certain wounds show signs of improvement. As members of Cock's Tail Village enter their adversary's abandoned town, Young Bing appears out of nowhere. Young children arrive and wondrously marvel at his large navel and offer him pebbles, and Young Bing shouts with a loud voice, "Pa Pa Pa Pa Pa!" ending the story with his idiotic and meaningless phrase (90).

Immediately following the publication of *Pa Pa Pa*, there were many attempts by scholars to interpret the work in varying and conflicting ways. Some saw the novella as a piece of satire in the tradition of Lu Xun. Others saw it as a cultural critique designed to expose the traditional ritualistic and spiritual dimensions of Chinese culture by revealing the naiveté of the novella's characters. There were even those who derided Han's story as an easily outmoded attempt to dabble in the exotic (Cheung xvi). Whichever way the work is interpreted, within Chinese historical, political, and literary contexts it is impossible not to at least attempt a comparison between Han's Young Bing and Lu Xun's anti-hero Ah Q. Among May 4th intellectuals, Ah Q's name became synonymous with national shame and disgrace. Lau comments that certainly similarities in reception can be found among contemporary intellectuals towards Young Bing (*Visitation* 35). Indeed in many secondary sources there are references to

Ah Q and a relationship of some sort to Young Bing. A brief comparative reading between *The True Story of Ah Q* and *Pa Pa Pa* will expose the absurdities of both protagonists while emphasizing the thematic differences between their portrayals, thus pointing out where the textual project of Han Shaogong diverges greatly from Lu Xun's. A close reading of the execution scene in Lu Xun's novella with the sacrifice scene and the ending in *Pa Pa Pa* will demonstrate that even though Han Shaogong is conscious of critiquing the general state of culture of the post-Mao era, the character of Young Bing defies an interpretation that resonates with national allegory—which is overtly prominent with Lu Xun's text.

The lead character in Lu Xun's *The True Story of Ah Q*, an impoverished outcast, adheres to a pompous sense of spiritual superiority. He is beaten repeatedly by local villagers as passersby simply stand around and laugh. The more that Ah Q is beaten, the more he feels a great sense of moral righteousness over others. In the last chapter of the novella, Ah Q is arrested as a scapegoat for revolutionaries that had been pillaging local residences. Ironically Ah Q wanted to join them in order to be called a revolutionary, but he misses the opportunity. The local governor forces Ah Q to sign a confession. The concluding scenes, which detail his journey to the execution grounds, create a complete sense of anti-climax:

He still recognized the road and felt rather surprised: why were they not going to the execution ground? He did not know that he was being paraded round the streets as a public example. But if he had known, it would have been the same; he would only have thought that in this world probably it was the fate of everybody at some time to be made a public example of. (65)

The position of superiority and spiritual righteousness of Ah Q through defeat is suddenly exacerbated into a spectacle of anti-climactic annihilation, only emphasizing the pathetic. He wishes to sing opera as a demonstration of defiance, but he cannot even bring himself to find the

words and the right frame of mind. The narrator of the story gives the final events of Ah Q's life through details of the protagonist's inability to communicate:

Ah Q suddenly became ashamed of his lack of spirit, because he had not sung any lines from an opera. . . . But when he wanted to raise his hands, he remembered that they were bound together; so he did not sing *I'll thrash you* either. "In twenty years I shall be another . . ." ²¹ In his agitation Ah Q uttered half a saying which he had picked up himself but never used before.

After feeling the eyes of the onlookers who are compared to a pack of hungry wolves wishing to devour his soul, Ah Q wants to say "Help! Help", but he is unable to utter these words. After his execution, the villagers become disappointed, for the execution was a shooting not a beheading. The finale of the novella narrates Ah Q's final defeat and humiliation through a relationship to language. Preceding the execution scene, for example, the governor forces Ah Q to sign the confession, but because he cannot write, he signs by drawing a circle. Due to his nervousness, Ah Q draws something that resembles a melon seed. The termination of Lu Xun's story demonstrates how the ultimate defeat and humiliation of Ah Q is precisely the defeat of language.

In *Pa Pa Pa*, the thwarted human sacrifice of Young Bing as well as his final meaningless pronouncement in the novella provides illuminating comparison with Ah Q's final execution. As Young Bing sits on the chopping block ready to undergo a ritualistic murder, his only words are "F__Mama". The actual spoken words of Young Bing do not save him from the violence of the villagers. Rather a coincidence with the natural phenomenon of a thunder clap remands his sentence—ironically elevating him to the level of a demigod. The idiotic statements of "Papa" and "F__Mama" then assume cosmic powers similar with the *yin* and *yang*. Similarly Young Bing's final words of the novella "Pa Pa Pa Pa Pa" differ from Ah Q's truncated

²¹ An important footnote in Hsien-yi Yang and Gladys Yang's translation, which this chapter uses, makes the following clarification: "In twenty years I shall be another stout young fellow" was a phrase often used by criminals before execution to show their scorn of death. Believing in the transmigration of the soul, they thought that after death their soul would enter other living bodies." (66)

statement in the face of defeat. Young Bing's vocabulary carries no linguistic relevance whatsoever. In a sense they are pre-idiotic in that they do not even convey semantic meaning. Though Young Bing utters sounds which refer to the father, all signification was lost prior to his birth. As the narrator explains, "he clumsily clapped his hands once, and mumbling in a very very soft voice, he called again and again the man whose face he had never seen" (90). Young Bing has no access to language, whereas Ah Q possesses the ability to speak and interact with the villagers, though he is defeated and humiliated through a collapse of language in the end.

Young Bing's failure to grasp any semantic relevance of his own vocabulary facilitates an interpretation of double alienation of the protagonist, thus relegating the protagonist to an exaggerated peripheral position in the text. Zhong Xueping, examining the political ramifications of male marginality, reads *Pa Pa Pa* as a village in search of identity and comments that the character of Young Bing has failed to even enter the psychoanalytic Symbolic order (102). Why, then, should the text intersperse a doubly marginalized subject (alienated from the village as well as language) into the fray? On one hand Young Bing's words carry no semantic weight as the character inconsequentially weaves in and out of the dramatics of the village. On the other hand, he simultaneously manages cosmic signification through the utterances of his idiotic phrases. Zhong sees this as a "constant paradox throughout the story in which his [Young Bing's] peripheral position functions to make visible and/or highlight the absurdity of the villagers' efforts to interpret" (103). Ironically, this peripheral position forms the center of the novella, and any emphasis on a symbolic meaning to the status of Young Bing leads many to rush to allegorical readings of the work.

The danger in comparing Young Bing with Ah Q lies within the interpretive risk of equating the narrative of *Pa Pa Pa* with national allegory. The Jamesonian notion of national

allegory, within what he terms “third world texts,” asserts a convergence between the private and public simultaneously with the poetic and the political which is split within “first world texts.” The libidinal dynamic of the private individual is inherently invested in the “embattled situation of the public” (Jameson 69). Thus the personal account of Ah Q’s life history becomes synonymous with China and China’s relationship with foreign influences as well as with itself. It should be noted that Lu Xun’s account of Ah Q has indeed left an enormous cultural mark on the philosophical development of a Modern Chinese consciousness. The dialogue that Jameson has with Lu Xun exemplifies how “third-world” literati assume a presupposed position of the engaged intellectual. The problem with Jameson’s paradigm lies in an inherent assumption that the concept of the national forges the route upon which the artist should have always already ventured in order to metamorphose into the intellectual that Jameson lauds and eulogizes. In summarizing his initial arguments, Jameson writes:

All of which slowly brings us to the question of the writer himself in the third world, and to what must be called the function of the intellectual, it being understood that in the third-world situation the intellectual is always in one way or another a political intellectual. No third-world lesson is more timely or more urgent for us today, among whom the very term “intellectual” has withered away, as though it were the name of an extinct species. (74)

Though Han Shaogong is an intellectual that has proven engaged in the problems of Mainland China in the post-Mao era, and has indeed reacted to historical conditions which have contributed to his creativity (his literary beginnings with the “scar literature” for example), his root seeking texts restrict themselves from the theoretical grasp of Jameson’s polemical maneuver. Jameson’s interpretation of Lu Xun’s texts do indeed show that there is an intellectual preoccupation with the national—a preoccupation that other scholars of Chinese literature most notably C.T. Hsia have defined as an “obsession” (533-554). However, Jameson’s totalizing assessment proves insufficient when addressing the textual project of post-Mao intellectuals as

they reestablish narrative that addresses challenges of characterization congruent with the waning of Maoism.

What occurs in Han Shaogong's text is the manifestation of a character that promotes a conundrum of interpretive possibilities. The main difference between Ah Q and Young Bing is that the former interacts as an individual within a larger politically and allegorically charged space whereas the latter fades into the setting of a carefully constructed anti-normative backdrop, thus defying strict allegorical readings. Ah Q interacts with the larger social structures at play, which ultimately form the textual allegory. Young Bing, conversely, becomes a normalized abnormality among villagers who prove futile in their endeavors to act against cosmic and territorial challenges. The purposeful ambiguity of the relationship between the characters in *Pa Pa Pa* and the surreal world that surrounds them opens the narrative to vastly different and multiple interpretations (Lee, V "Cultural Lexicology" 149). As Lau didactically notes about the overall interpretation of Han Shaogong's work:

We would not be reading "Ba Ba Ba" properly if we understood Bing Zai as an isolated syndromic manifestation of China's cultural malaise. Indeed the stigma of curse that pervades the tale would not have been so pronounced if his abnormalities were seen as the exception rather than the norm. For, though his fellow villagers are neither mentally retarded nor physically deformed, they are nevertheless disadvantaged by their state of insularity. (Lau, "Visitation" 33)

Young Bing's severely impaired mental state does not offset him against the villagers in a dramatic fashion— such as with Ah Q, his misplaced pompousness, and the resultant skirmishes between them. Young Bing is meaninglessly beaten and abused by the villagers, and this senseless violence against him signifies nothing. If one agrees with Zhong Xueping that Young Bing has not even entered the Symbolic Order, one would also have to comprehend that he is a character who possesses no interiority whatsoever. To return briefly to the Jamesonian paradigm, the "third world text" relies upon the inversion of the private space of the individual with the

public sphere, thus Han's characterization of Young Bing disallows the existence of a private interior space of the protagonist in turn refuting any allegoric reading following in a nationalist fashion.

Mark Leenhouts acknowledges that *Pa Pa Pa* conditionally lends itself to an allegorical reading but asserts that there are two objections that must be understood. First, an allegorical reading with China excludes the possibility of a social critique that could extend to other communities or cultures, thus denying Han a larger critical possibility. Secondly, the narrator's sympathetic portrayal of various characters "transcends simple political commentary" (*Leaving the World* 39). As Lau's assessment makes clear, Young Bing is not an isolated symptom, but part and parcel of the dynamics of the insularity of the village. This demonstrates that the narrative as a whole is a narrative of place, echoing a call sounded by Han Shaogong in his essay "The Roots of Literature." But as Feuerwerker notes, there is a paradox that emanates from the gap between the root-seeking project and its actualization through literary representation. The project of the return to roots is vague, and purposefully so, making its actualization ironically a representation of that which cannot be represented (207). Ultimately cultural roots are everything that is apolitical, forging a new space within which the text can wrest itself away from party dominated prescriptions of the previous decades. As Feuerwerker continues:

What the new "cultural agenda" of such stories as "Ba Ba Ba" did first of all was to provide writers with a new area of literary exploration, a means to break away from dominant ideological molds in representing the "peasant others" by reconstructing them as forming the base of Chinese society and culture, however understood. Nothing could be further removed from the glorified images of the vanguard peasant masses with their boundless revolutionary potential that had filled the party-approved pages of socialist realism than the bleak portrayal of Bingzai and his ignorant and backward community. (207)

Pa Pa Pa situates itself in a position contrary to high Maoist narrative by characterizing peasants as superstitious, naïve, self-deprecating and hopelessly violent against themselves as well as

towards the neighboring village. This maneuver and its appeal to the root seeking project produce a particular space that has pertinent meanings for the overall textual project particularly when the narrative is read through its relationship to temporality.

The appeal to a search for literary roots is indeed a vague proposal, but it is through this resolute ambiguity that Han Shaogong's narrative finds its critical strength. As previously mentioned, the timeframe of the events in Cock's Head Village is purposefully ambiguous. The story, which is narrated from the subjective point of view of an unknown and unidentified narrator, consciously deviates from any socialist realist project. Han's literary imagination resides in an amorphous temporality, circumventing teleological understanding. Most importantly, the text, by being circular, temporarily indefinite, and lacking any clear resolution or termination, frees itself from a particular ideology necessarily tied to historicity. By being *ahistorical* Han Shaogong's root seeking project provides an imaginative realm in which literary creation does not serve the purpose of the state but performs a critique consciously tied to an understanding of a general sense of uncertainty following the end of the Cultural Revolution. This realm is particularly interesting for Han, as an engaged intellectual, because his literary texts can thrive through a purposeful reevaluation of modern consciousness while residing away from national and historical demands. Han's first full length novel *A Dictionary of Maqiao* will further particular themes inherent the root seeking project, but this later work will demonstrate a strengthened emphasis on the linguistic as the primary source for literary imagination.

A Dictionary of Maqiao and the Contradictions of Language

A Dictionary of Maqiao was originally published in 1996, a decade after Han Shaogong's call to search for the roots of literature, and the work was greeted with much interest as well as

controversy.²² In many ways Han's first full-length novel extends concerns inherent to "root seeking literature"—such as stylistic innovation rather than realistic portrayals of hardship and tragedy, which is a main component of scar literature of the late 1970s. Critical weight given to the political or the folk aspects of Han's root-seeking literature inadvertently neglects his intent literary interest which also revitalizes older Chinese literary forms. Han's literary nostalgia encompasses his lauding of Chu poetry, as previously stated, as well as traditional Chinese fiction writing (Leenhouts, *Leaving the World* 83). *A Dictionary of Maqiao* broadens Han's literary interest of appealing to heterogeneous literary and cultural imaginary through a resolute analysis of a fictional village via its language.

The dictionary, which is in fact a novel that hides itself in the form of a dictionary, is the notebook of an Educated Youth's interest in the history, customs, and dialect of a village named Maqiao.²³ Each chapter is an entry in the dictionary, and the analysis of the various meanings of words leads to descriptions of village life. The dictionary's entries are listed in an introductory glossary by stroke order in the original version and by alphabetical order in the English translation, though the order of entries in the work proceeds thematically.²⁴ The original intent of the work appears to be purely a detailed study of vocabulary. For example, the novel's opening entry titled "River" contains the following analysis:

The word for river (*jiang* in Mandarin) is pronounced *gang* by Maqiao people (in southern China) and refers not just to bodies of water, but to all waterways, including small ditches and streams. . . In English, difference in size can be

²² A debate ensued after the publication about Han's moralistic views. The debate raged beyond the bounds of literary interpretation when Peking University assistant professor Zhang Yiwu published a work claiming that Han's novel was modeled after *Dictionary of the Khazars. A Lexicon Novel* by the Yugoslav writer Milord Pavić. Han found this assertion to be a personal attack and sued in court for libel and eventually won (Leenhouts *Leaving* 95).

²³ In his article "Is it a Dictionary or a Novel?: On Playfulness in Han Shaogong's *Dictionary of Maqiao*", Leenhouts comments, "Because of its (explicitly) subjective narrative agency and its unmistakably linear narrative and plot *Dictionary of Maqiao* can and should be called a *novel* written in the *form* of a dictionary" (170).

²⁴ According to the translator Julia Lovell in the introductory note about the translation, five of the entries and part of the conclusion were too reliant upon puns between dialect and Mandarin, thus losing too much in translation. With Han Shaogong's permission, she decided to omit these sections (xiii).

expressed by “stream” or “river.” Yet in French, *fleuve* refers to rivers entering the sea and *rivière* indicates an inland river or tributary entering another river. . . It seems that the world contains many systems of naming, which do not necessarily relate to each other. (1)

Eventually the analysis will begin to envelope the inhabitants of Maqiao as well. Per the “Guide to Principal Characters” included as an introduction to the original, there are over twenty specifically named characters. The novel also contains numerous others that are not specifically named such as lovers in neighboring villages, multiple children, spouses, as well as the narrator and other Educated Youths. This episodic story telling technique of *A Dictionary of Maqiao* exemplifies a particular aspect of the return to roots which circumvents the Maoist and May 4th literary style for a more traditional Chinese storyline—though innovatively performed through encyclopedic documentation. Traditional fiction writing, such as the classical tale *The Outlaws of the Marsh* as one of many examples, has an episodic structure, following an assortment of characters as their adventures intersect. Similarly, the plot of *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, meanders among interrelated lives of the many characters.

As the entries proceed, two narrative elements are revealed. First, the identity of the writer of the entries becomes slowly discovered. The dictionary is written by an Educated Youth during the Cultural Revolution, and he begins to assume the role of narrator of the events of Maqiao, though they are represented as entries. The narrator’s relationships with the villagers appear sympathetic, though there are tensions and misunderstandings between them, sometimes cultural and sometimes linguistic. It is later noted through two different episodes in the text that the writer of the dictionary has the family Han and that his surname is Shaogong—an obvious homage to the writer himself. Though the entries take the form of a dictionary, which initially appears scattered though organized with a glossary, the narrative begins to advance chronologically. The entries in the first half of the novel explain events that take place during the

Cultural Revolution. Towards the end of the work, the entries describe the narrator who lives in the city years later as one of the characters returns to find him. The conclusion which takes the form of an “afterward” blurs the lines of fiction and non-fiction with an essay about language.

Because of the episodic nature of *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, it is difficult to perform a critical analysis without neglecting a piece of the plot that intersects with another subplot, for there is no main character but a cast of many whose lives are all interrelated. The many subplots of the work create an intricate web of narratives, and extracting a few for a close reading will inevitably fall short in grasping the overall complexity of the novel. Nevertheless, the following section will read three episodes: the narrator’s interaction with the villagers in an entry titled “Science,” a longer plot thread involving the narrator years later as a villager seeks him out in the big city, and finally a chapter that describes who possess the right to speak and be spoken for in Maqiao in an entry titled “Speech Rights.” These three particular parts of the work will lead the narrator through detailed linguistic interrogations which arguably transform themselves into narrative essays. They will also show how the narrator of the dictionary is preoccupied with the potential for redemption through language as the world faces intensified globalization and development—leading to wars, confusion, and environmental destruction. Finally a close reading of each section will provide insight into the text’s larger project: evaluation of the power of language, its inherent dangers, and the way in which language can become the instrument to construct the modern imagination at the turn of the century.

Performing a structural reading of this novel, Leenhouts finds similarities in chapter formation throughout the work. A word is introduced by the narrator, and ironically he will discover, through his interaction with locals, that the original connotation of the word that he had known would in fact prove to carry the opposite meaning for the people of Maqiao. This leads to

a larger discussion of the power of language often from a more universal perspective (*Leaving the World* 87). For example, in the entry “Science” the narrator explains how the word *science*, often held in a positive light by many including the Educated Youths in Maqiao, had semantically shifted and became associated with a local lazy loafer. A group of Educated Youths had been carrying wet firewood and discovered a better way of hauling it. Instead of transporting the wood wet, they decided to let the wood dry in the sun before carrying it back to the village—allowing them to move more wood and at a lighter weight. The narrator proudly describes this new hauling process to the village chief, Uncle Luo. Much to his surprise, the village chief dismisses the new system, decrying it as scientific. The chief further states that if they allow such scientific methods to enter the village, they will all end up lazy like a notorious villager by the name of Ma Ming.

The narrator then switches to a discussion of this character. Ma Ming is the leader of a band of ‘dead beats’ known as Daoist Immortals. Ma Ming is too lazy to cook, so he often eats his food raw, claiming that animals do the same thing. Instead of using a urine bucket to go to the restroom during the night, he cuts a hole in the wall and pisses out of it. He never washes because it takes too much time, and when he carries water, he purposefully uses a circuitous route in a “z” formation. Ma Ming claims that his actions were in fact more “scientific” than the usual methods. Not washing his face is therefore more scientific because it saves time. The word “scientific” becomes known around Maqiao as the lazy way of performing tasks. In fact the villagers begin to consider the Daoist Immortals to be an “academy of science” and refer to them as such. The result of this semantic shift is a demonizing of the notion of scientific. This shift eventually indirectly leads to a violent incident. One day a group of young boys from Maqiao are travelling down the street and come across a bus being repaired by the driver. The boys are so

fascinated and bewildered by such mechanical “scientific” innovation that they throw rocks at the bus, hitting it and leaving a few dents. The driver, who is under the bus at the time repairing it, chases the children away who from a distance continue to throw stones at the “scientific” novelty. This incident leads the narrator to ponder who precisely was at fault in this incident. The boys were simply awe-inspired by mechanical repairs, and they harbored no animosity towards the driver. Their notion of science had been semantically shifted towards a negative connotation, and they acted out accordingly. The narrator asks whether in the end Ma Ming is at fault because his laziness shifted the connotation of “scientific” from *progress* to *lazy oddity*. In the end the narrator discovers that the blame for the incident potentially rests upon a web of relations. He states:

To blame this assault on a bus on Ma Ming is, of course, rather far-fetched, and not entirely fair. But the process behind understanding a word is not just an intellectual process, it’s also a process of perception, inseparable from the surroundings in which the word is used and the actual events, environment, facts relating to it. Such factors often largely determine the direction in which understanding of this word proceeds. (45)

The narrator immediately takes this linguistic essay to a larger historical and political level. He gives the example of revolutionary opera in the days of the Cultural Revolution. Though these opera are notoriously terrible, they might bring forth fond memories of someone whose youth was associated with this period of time. Conversely, an individual whose life was affected by the red terror of this period would react with fright and disgust at rehearsing these revolutionary pieces.

The contradictions that the narrator encounters in Maqiao with semantic discrepancies to his idiolect produce a window to the heterogeneity of linguistic experience. Through this prism, the narrator can comprehend the multi-dimensional relations among vocabulary, empowering him to offer a study of a place. This geographical location, hidden from the

mainstream, exposes the counter-intuitive notions of the linguistic, unfolding conventional logic and crafting the possibility of reworking notions of a unified language and culture. The site of Maqiao as the center for this linguistic etude also implores further discussion about the text's literary agenda. In many ways Maqiao, as a fictional town in Hunan province, resonates with Gabriel Garcia Marquez's Macondo and William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, and Han does not hide his literary inspirations that include these two writers ("After 'Literature of the Wounded'" 149). Marquez and Faulkner particularize the local as a site to cast their literary project. Though these two locales of the writers' imaginations represent the bucolic and life beyond the mainstream, there is no purposeful hierarchical thematic categorization of rural over cosmopolitan. Similarly, as Lee aptly observes in her analysis of Han's text as cultural lexicology, "unlike the 'rural,' which in Maoist discourse takes on sublime characteristics, the 'local' is not a political or cultural ideal but is treated as a source of new metaphors with which reality can be redescribed" ("Cultural Lexicology" 156). Whereas the Maoist ideal sought to politicize the peasant in service to ideology, the exploration of the peasant in Han's text emphasizes heterogeneity of rural life, the superstitious components of their existence, the violence of semantic shifting, and the dynamics of human existence that resides outside of the mainstream narrative of Chinese life.

In a second narrative thread, the relationship between the narrator Shaogong and a sudden visitor from the past leads to a series of linguistic discoveries that indicate generational changes in language as well as produce several poignant observations about the potential dangers of linguistics. When the narrator lived in Maqiao as an Educated Youth, he worked with an unseemly cheapskate named Ma Zhaoqing (also known as Shortie Zhao). Zhaoqing's life story is detailed throughout the previous dictionary entries previous to the sudden arrival of the visitor.

Zhaoqing is notorious for borrowing money off of the Educated Youths and never repaying them. Similarly he would blatantly borrow soap and towels without asking and find whatever scam possible for personal gain. Zhaoqing's first and favored son died by being buried alive while repairing a reservoir. He then turned to his other son Kuiyuan as his method to get to the front of the food line to receive more meat. Zhaoqing dies mysteriously—being found decapitated near a stream, and the ultimate cause of his death was never discovered. Years later, the orphaned son Kuiyuan arrives looking for Shaogong, producing a letter confirming his identity. Kuiyuan had no inheritance, so he arrived in the city with a friend to find a way to make a living. Through contacts, Shaogong finds both of the men a job. Several days later they arrive back at his place having been fired for being lazy. Kuiyuan admits that back in Maqiao he never did any of the household chores, nor did he even know how to do them. This leads the narrator to berate Kuiyuan and come to a particular linguistic understanding about the changing semantic connotations of the notion of “laziness”:

The word “lazy”—which was abhorrent to me—represented to them a medal for which they strove, competed, and struggled to have decorating their own chests. The indolence I had just been criticizing had to them become a synonym for ease, comfort, ease, skill, to be pursued and coveted, which made their eyes shine. What else could I say to them? (326)

The entry, which bears the title “Lazy (as Used by Men)”, continues to explain how some of the original use of the term “lazy” is still existent in the conversations of Kuiyuan and his friend when they speak about wives who are lazy. There has developed, then, a new men's dictionary from which they would have exclusive gendered access, thus possessing the ability to wield the traditional connotations of the term as well as the new one. The two men have forged a separate vocabulary to which they have access and do not acknowledge any ignorance of its existence from other people: “If, as they saw it, there were still men who didn't acknowledge this

dictionary, this was not proof the dictionary didn't exist, it was proof only that these men were linguistic aliens, pathetic nobodies, all washed up by the tide of innovation, lagging behind the shadow of History" (326). The conclusion of this encounter is the narrator's realization that human conversation simultaneously utilizes several dictionaries.

Furthermore, the use of multiple dictionaries would affect the act of speaking and hearing. Kuiyuan's companion was not from the countryside like him. His friend had had a decent job with a film company; however, he lost his job for violating the one child policy. The pregnancy had not been a natural mistake, nor had he not heard the state sponsored propaganda which warned against exceeding the quota. The narrator's conclusion was that this man simply "operated on another vocabulary system, one in which a great many words transgressed ordinary people's imaginings" (329). The propaganda campaign was therefore useless in the face of someone that would ingest its semantics with an alternate system of meanings. His audacity at producing a baby girl that would have him incur negative consequences was nothing more than a misfiring of language. The girl, "was a mistranslated sentence made of flesh and blood" (330).

Language has been an instrument (politically and culturally) throughout 20th century Chinese history. The May Fourth writers began writing in the vernacular in order to construct a modern literature. This attempt at a literary and linguistic modernity was in many ways was a result colonialism of the previous century as well as the unfair treatment of China on the world stage. Similarly, the PRC standardized the language system by simplifying characters in order for language to be available to the masses for education as well as control. Thus the language of the masses became the language as conduit from which Maoist thought was to proceed.

Since they operated on a conflicting lexicon, Kuiyuan and his friend were working against a propaganda that adhered to the hegemonic and monolithic state-sponsored linguistics. As Lee asserts about the project of the text,

By revealing the semantic disunity in language use that affects both official and unofficial languages, the trivial stories [of *A Dictionary of Maqiao*] throw a critical light on the relationship between language and perception. The semantic disunity caused by the disjunction in old and new words and meanings is then rechanneled onto personal reflections on history, memory, and human destiny. (158)

The textual project challenges official state discourse which would have a unified language. Han's novel celebrates the heterogeneity of language, not just of the Chinese language, nor of world languages, rather his work celebrates the variances of language between people, among generations, between the state and its citizens, and the human with itself. But these variances of language also come with an inherent danger.

The narrator is heavily invested in the outcome of Kuiyuan's life, and his interactions with this villager from the past gives him the interpretive energy to address language and its manifest complexities that all border on the sublime and dangerous. In fact, the ultimate demise of Kuiyuan begins with the misappropriation of a semantic marker. After Kuiyuan leaves the city, Yanwu, the richest person in Maqiao, orders a banquet to serve for an ancestral rite. When Kuiyuan receives the invitation card, he sees that the "kui" in his name, which carries the character for "chief" or "great," had been replaced with another character meaning "lack." Even though the character mishap was probably due to an accidental oversight, Kuiyuan decides to take it personally. This episode parallels another linguistic observation by the narrator during his days as an educated youth. Shaogong was placed on a committee to condemn a local cadre by investigating all of his family members. This committee membership allowed him to visit several prisons around the country to find a particular male cousin. The cousin was a broadcaster at a

prominent station. One day during a live broadcast, he mispronounced the name of a Communist Party member named “An Ziwen” instead blurting out the name of a KMT member named Song Ziwen. This cousin was sentenced to fifteen years in prison. This realization allows the narrator to ponder, “In the great, gloomy amnesiac void that renders all memories impermanent, is history nothing but a war of words” (356). The story of Kuiyuan’s defeat narrates this possibility.

Once Kuiyuan receives the invitation with the misplaced character, he decides to enact revenge. He refuses to attend the event, but becomes more envious when he sees the returning guests wiping the grease off their mouths whereas all he had to eat was a cold sweet potato. He steals Yanwu’s drill but is found out and roughed up. Kuiyuan then decides to attack Yanwu and cut off his ear. In the dark of night, Kuiyuan attacks from behind but mistakenly cuts the ear off of the village chief. He is arrested and charged with the crime. After a year in prison, he turns ill and dies. The misplaced semantic marker instigates a series of events that ultimately end in death—highlighting the potential risks of semantic oversight.

The prelude to Shaogong’s narration of the demise of Kuiyuan follows a lengthy essay about language and its place in the history of events. The narrator acknowledges that the twentieth century will soon come to an end, leaving behind one hundred years of violence, wars, environmental destruction, and skepticism. He notes that more individuals have died in wars during the twentieth century than in the past nineteen centuries combined. Though there have been great strides in communication, (such as the Internet) the question of human’s relationship to language remains. This century has seen a fueled linguistic growth; however, he asks whether there is a guarantee that these advancements in language will not spark new wars. Shaogong states his purpose for his linguistic interest in a lengthy passage, and in many ways this paragraph communicates the ultimate thesis of the novel:

The fetishizing of language is a civilizational disorder, the most common danger faced by language. This observation of mine won't for a minute stop me from inhaling and absorbing language every day . . . All that my continuing recollections . . . have done is increase my wariness toward language: the moment language becomes petrified, the moment language no longer serves as a tool searching for truth but comes to represent the truth itself, the moment a light of self-adoration, of self-adoration appears on the faces of language users, betraying a fetishization of language mercilessly repressive of their enemies, all I can do is think back to a story. (357)

The relationship between Shaogong and Kuiyuan reach into the depths of the linguistic concerns that the text attempts to expose. Language is the generational distance between Shaogong and Kuiyuan. Through their conversations, the narrator discovers the use of multiple vocabulary sets which semantically change traditional meanings. The arrogance of the men's use of their "dictionaries" demonstrates their ambivalence about the linguistic changes over time as they age. Finally, Kuiyuan purposeless demise exemplifies how language, even from the simplest of its intrinsic components on the syllabic level, can insight a mission of revenge, even hurting innocent bystanders.

Language is obviously the main focus of this novel—hence the packaging of the narrative as a dictionary; however, does the narrator's insistence on the dangers of fetishizing language defeat itself? In other words, if the textual project warns of the dangers of language, does the dictionary, as a product of and for language itself, not a reproduction of the very fetishization that the narrator of the text describes as a "civilizational disorder"? In the aforementioned quote, the narrator defies the dangers of the disorder, and the completed text is an end product of a massive examination of language and different language systems. Taken from a historical perspective, the language fetishization that the narrator is defying is in part the larger state-sponsored hegemonic language of the Maoist years. It appears as though the fetishization that the narrator speaks of is rather misrecognition of the unity of language and its literalness.

Challenging this misconception is a challenge to official state discourses, including propaganda. Similarly it is a challenge to the state-sponsored modernization campaign, for if the state speaks in one breath about modern development, a fracturing of the conduit of this message lays the foundation for the possibilities of its ineffectiveness.

Finally, the chapter titled “Speech Rights” solidifies Han’s textual project in relation to language and the power of those who possess the right to speak and be heard. The villagers of Maqiao feel sorry for individuals who live in the big cities because according to Ben Yi, the local party branch secretary, “people in the provincial capital didn’t drink pounded tea, didn’t know how to weave cloth shoes, . . . many families—imagine how pitiful!—hadn’t enough cloth for pants and work shorts no bigger than a palm, like the girdle that women wore on horseback, pulling in agonizingly tight at the crotch” (175). Therefore the locals all pity the Educated Youth who come from such a backward area. The Educated Youth find such remorse for their urban existence humorous and try to correct these false rumors only to no avail. The reason that they are unable to convince the villagers otherwise, they come to learn, is that they possess no “speech rights.” This term, which has no synonym in Mandarin Chinese, signifies “the right to claim a very definite portion of the sum total of linguistic clout” (175). The possession of speech rights is clearly demarcated by class, age, and gender. Women and young people have no speech rights in Maqiao. Poor families and those who owe debt, similarly, possess no speech rights. Finally, the Educated Youth who live in the village have no speech rights, though they personally believe themselves to be more worldly and knowledgeable as compared to the backwards Maqiao locals. Benyi is an incessant babbler, who talks to himself about anything and everything. Because he holds the rights of speech, whatever he says goes. Therefore, when he makes large pronouncements such as “Everyone should work on their thinking, on making progress, on the

world” which do not make sense, the locals accept it but the Educated Youth reject such nonsensical ramblings—only to be laughed at by the locals for not understanding.

A question inherently posed in regards to “Speech Rights” but not directly answered is who ultimately possesses speech rights? Within the village of Maqiao, the speech rights are clearly distributed; in fact, they dictate where guests and hosts can sit during important ceremonies. The Educated Youth clearly feel that their views of the world, coming from a more educated and urban background, hold more weight than the ridiculous banter of the local party branch secretary, yet they hold no communicative merit in the town. However, the Educated Youth who becomes the writer of the dictionary and narrator of the novel possesses the ability, like an Anthropologist, to write about the language and customs of Maqiao and offer it to others to read. *A Dictionary of Maqiao* purposefully plays with this linguistic power. The organization of entries, for example, does not follow any standardization of sequencing, neither alphabetical nor adhering to stroke order. In this sense it reacts against the linguistic hegemony of standardized linguistic texts, arranging the sequence of entries in terms of the narrative inherent to them, rather than by a dictated normative structure. Reaching against the grain with this altered sequencing, the novel’s plot threads move forward, detailing the interactions of the town’s inhabitants, whose lives are neither enviable nor desirable in any way. The characters are petty, ignorant, superstitious, vindictive, and in the view of the Educated Youth backwards and crass, yet within their society, he does not own the rights to speak or be heard. The narrator, however, inhabits a privileged position in regards to the text. Though he has no “speech rights” as an Educated Youth having been sent to live in Maqiao, he can regain communicative ability by replicating the lives of all those involved with his past through the auspices of a dictionary. It is interesting then that the dictionary that is employed circumvents normative structures of

dictionaries, just as the language and customs that this dictionary describes fall outside of mainstream society, occupying a liminal space neglected by larger state narratives and representative of an indigenous cultural tradition. The role of the dictionary thus forms a linguistic paradox. It gives voice, by occupying a privileged position, to the non-mainstream and indigenous culture; simultaneously it is penned by a visitor to the region who is not allowed to speak for it. Meanwhile, the dictionary attempts to encapsulate the area by studying the customs and habits of the people while shirking the standardized and normative form of dictionaries. The paradox within which *A Dictionary of Maqiao* thrives, allows it meticulous descriptive power because the stories and people that it describes, just like its language, run against standardization, normalization, and, as a result, larger hegemonic notions of linear history.

Provincializing the Unconscious

Han Shaogong's fiction starting in the mid-1980s performs a particular maneuver that recasts an imagination towards an alternative to historicity. Han's post-scar literature began exploring illogicality, mixing the unconscious realm of human existence with the cultural melancholy of post-Cultural Revolution China, all while circumventing the larger state-sponsored discourse on modernization. Han's works of fiction do not directly voice opposition to the four modernizations plan of an industrialized China, nor do they act to purposefully contradict the prescription of literature set by Deng Xiaoping in his talks on literature. Han Shaogong's fiction from the mid-1980s to the present is decisively not polemical, nor is it a type of narrative manifesto. Rather the thematic quality of Han's fiction constructs the capability for a cultural imagination existing exterior to discursive state modernization plans and aside from hegemonic power trajectories. His works forge space of imaginative possibilities into the arena

of linguistic hegemony challenging the prioritizing of the concept of advancement through *developmentalism*. A post-colonial reading of Han's textual project with his admitted psychoanalytic preoccupation elucidates how these texts conform to alternative strategies of narrative, foregrounding the ability to address the negative effects of industrial development through culture.

In his work *Provincializing Europe*, Dipesh Chakrabarty closely reads Marx's *Capital* and finds a dual notion of history. On one hand Marx acknowledges a history of capital that has assumed a global position in the current world that is secular and seeks to perpetuate capital through a naturalization of historical time. Concurrently there exists an alternate history that is not dialectical with the previous one. History 2 (as Chakrabarty will term it) is the history of abstract labor which is "embodied in the person's bodily habits, in unselfconscious collective practices, in his or her reflexes about what it means to relate to objects in the world as a human being and together with other human beings in given environment" (66). The former history is the global narrative, whereas History 2 encompasses the superstitious, the religious, the provincial, and the peasantry. This global narrative of history (History 1) carries with it the idea of transition. Post-colonial areas are in a conceptual waiting room to be serviced by modernity when the time is right. Thus narratives of modernization and capital assume a developmental narrative that posits that countries are with an inevitable process. How can, for example, a state reassume modern and political nationhood as its peoples who are granted the rights as prescribed by European Enlightenment hold to provincial views that seem contradictory to the secular narrative of statehood itself? Furthermore how does one conceptualize modernity while the modern citizens cling to gods, superstitions, traditions, and witchcraft, all the while having been bestowed the representative power of the secular state? For Chakrabarty the simultaneous

existence should not be viewed as contradictory but as a position of power in the larger post-colonial condition. Thus he reads the possibility of critique of History 1 through History 2, and asserts that this underdeveloped aspect of Marx's analysis of capital provides possibilities of resistance. A further hermeneutic move that Chakrabarty describes as Heideggerian, positions the past of history's participants in a "narrative scheme." The citizens possess within themselves a *pastness* non-sequentially related to the future. Futures are in fact a dependant resultant of the culmination of *pastness*; "the problem of the past cannot be thought about until we think about the question of the future as well. A human being simply cannot avoid being oriented toward the future . . . All our pasts are therefore futural in orientation" (250). Furthermore the *futureness* that will be are not necessarily a predestined reality, rather they are possibilities, one of many that have within them the depth of the *pastness* which is always already embedded.

Han Shaogong's theoretical move in the mid-1980s towards a root seeking literature—as opposed to a continuant of a cathartic scar literature that bemoaned the *pastness* of the Cultural Revolution—contained within it the possibilities of superseding the transitional developmentalist narrative of the state—liberating *pastness* as anchor for the semantic and topological meaning in his texts. As Chakrabarty states in the final assessment of the history of capitalism:

A problem arises when the demand is made that the objectifying relationship to the past be our only relationship, for then any return of other relationships seem like a "nightmare of the dead," as Marx put it. For those who give themselves over completely to objectifying modes of thought, the past retains a power to haunt and deliver the shock of the uncanny. (252)

In Han Shaogong's appeal to search for the roots of literature, there is a decisive directive to expose, describe, and even revel in the illogical and superstitions. Hans theoretical shift moved his literary career away from the scar literature which only saw the past as a source of catharsis and hence the only inspiration for literary imagination. His career after the call for root seeking

performs what Chakrabarty sees as an important critical resistance against the dominant notion of historicity. This alternative non-historical provides the agency to counter the dominance and hegemony of the global History 1—a history which sees modernity as the culmination of nation-states and their power supported solely by technological, scientific, and economic advancement. Within these narratives resides the ability to absorb the non-rational as a means to understand the contemporary, not through adherence to state ideology, but through stark representations of the unconscious.

In an interview with Xia Yun, Han Shaogong offers his personal view towards the relationship of literature and rationality. Han feels that the irrational is an integral part of the human condition, often found in alcohol, dreams, and instinct. For him literature is in the service of reinstating this irrationality to the human condition as technology, science, and industrialization have sought to de-prioritize its existence, if not kill it. He declares:

As humanity has entered the scientific and industrial era, the entire spirit of mankind has tilted toward the rational. Instinctive, nonrational thought has been cast off by the busy, busy people of today. It has entered a concealed, subconscious realm, where it is fast asleep. Only during drunkenness, dreaming, insanity, or youth—in short, when rationality is weak or out of control—can people even begin to get a hold of fragments of this type of thinking. (*Self Portrayals* 153)

Taking this assessment into context, the root seeking project, as well as the later novel *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, becomes clearer. They are not works which are designed to critique culture through metaphors or parodies. The narratives that Han puts crafts celebrate the primitiveness of the contemporary human experience by allowing the rustic, superstitious and the unconscious to be inherent components of the overall human experience that literature should explore. It is neither superior to science nor inferior to it; rather, Han exclaims, “When people

become adults, life becomes hard, and they need to revive the sweet dreams of youth. This is how art is born. Art is the countercomplement to science” (153).

For Han Shaogong then, the work of Lévy-Bruhl, Piaget, and Freud are modern attempts that have sought to reaffirm the importance of “wine,” “dreams,” “madness,” and “youthful innocence” that for the ancients were clearly directly linked to the production of literature (153). The relationship between the modern desire to understand the irrationality of human existence and its relationship to art exists solely through instinctive thought. This is of course one of the major preoccupations of *Civilization and its Discontents* which throughout assesses the establishment of society and its relationship with the instinctual and its renunciation. For Freud, conscience is the result of instinctual renunciation, and paradoxically, instinctual renunciation which is imposed from the exterior, creates conscience demanding further instinctual renunciation (91). For Han Shaogong, literature then needs to reestablish the fragments of the irrational that have been suppressed to establish clarity as a necessary component of modern life. Taking Chakrabarty’s notions of history as existing outside of historicity into account, the instinctual, the irrational, and the superstitious add a robust reading of the dictionary in the context of contemporary conditions of Mainland China. Han Shaogong’s narrative stakes its claim against the overzealousness of the need for modernization on a scientific/industrial front, one that succumbs to as well as remains viable through a historicist paradigm. The greater modern need to celebrate the instinctual, as Han sees it, is therefore neglected. As for the claim that Han celebrates and even advocates “non-rationalism” to use the author’s own term, his position is very clear. He is an advocate of rationalism; however, as had occurred in the previous decades in China, the permission of non-rationalism was quelled, thus when the state produced official slogans such as “long live. . .” or crafted a call to “destroy the enemy,” a terrible slippage

between the non-rational and the rational occurred. These inherently violent rallying cries were, according to Han, just as superstitious and religious in fervor as irrationality. Furthermore, because artists and writers were only allowed to follow in line with official state discourse, there was “no room for nonrational thinking” (“After ‘Literature of the Wounded’ 154). Through prism of language, the conduit of rationality as well as nonrationality, Han elucidates the cohabitation of humans with this modern and globalizing world. Exposure of the instinctual unveils the problems of self-understanding of human nature in an industrializing age in which the notion of being instinctive holds no relevance to the larger hegemony of historicity. A close reading of one particular episode describing insanity in *A Dictionary of Maqiao* elucidates Hans’s larger project, from the irrational to the linguistic.

In one of the dictionary entries titled “Dream Woman” the writer of the dictionary explains the linguistic relevance for the Maqiao people of the semantics of dreams through the fate of one of the female residents named Shuishui. One of the characters in Maqiao named Zhihuang is a stone mason who married Shuishui, originally a well-known talented beauty from another area. Together they had a son Xiongshi. In a previous entry, titled “Dear Life” the narrator explains the fate of their child. One day Xiongshi is playing with some young boys, and they go to hunt snakes hibernating in their burrows. After digging a hole, Xiongshi unearths a large metallic object. He does not know what it is and strikes at it with a cycle. The object is an unexploded Japanese bomb that had been dropped from an airplane in 1942 and forgotten in the ground. Xiongshi sets off an explosion that obliterates his body, only a few fingers and bone fragments remain after the accident. Because of the violent death of her son, Shuishui goes insane. She screams Xiongshi’s name in the forest, and because she refuses to believe in his death, the villagers decide to show her the fragments of his remains. The narrator explains that

Shuishui “became a dream-woman, what’s known in Mandarin as a mentally ill person” (86). She begins to show an extreme hatred towards potato plants and rips them out of the ground as if her son were attached to the tuber. Similarly, the sight of the moon sends her in to a neurotic state, and she takes on and off a head scarf. Her husband has to tie her hands together to get her to stop these repetitive movements.

Shuishui and her husband Zhihuang eventually get divorced, and her parents take her home to live with them. When the narrator returns back to the village a few years later, he inquires about what had happened to her. The villagers are surprised to discover that Han does not know about her surprising turn of events. The dream-woman is recognized among the locals as a potentially auspicious predicament, as they believe that the insane often possess the ability to predict winning lottery numbers. Shuishui’s ability to choose the correct numbers is well known in the region, and the news that she had made several individuals wealthy overnight spread quite far. This revelation about the ironic fate of Shuishui (her insanity bringing her fame and an ironic mixture of pity and respect) allows the narrator to ponder the importance of the irrational in the role of human society. In the following passage, the narrator pinpoints the relationship between the irrational and human behavior via theoretical attempts to comprehend it:

I’m perfectly ready to admit that knowledge and reason are certainly not able to resolve all life’s problems. But I’m still surprised at how much stronger the forces that reject knowledge and reason are than we often think. . . Sigmund Freud used his study of psychoanalysis to produce a precise and systematic theoretical account of this. He . . . [placed] greater emphasis on the role of the unconscious; he believed that the confusion, the triviality, the secrecy of the unconscious were not lacking in their own significance. Quite the opposite, in fact: as the source and impetus of consciousness, the unconscious concealed a yet more important truth requiring careful exploration. (88)

The narrator’s realization at the strong role the unconscious plays in the lives of the people of Maqiao allow him to make links with psychoanalytic theory and its rigorous questioning of the

role of the unconscious as a means to comprehend society. The narrator takes from the episode of Shuishui an understanding of the “nonrational” that Han Shaogong, as writer, emphasizes in speaking about his literature. The narrator ponders the significance of dreams in people’s daily lives. He sees a semantic similarity between the Maqiao’s dialectical use of the term *dream-woman* with the English use of the term *lunatic*. Both describe a dreamlike state: the former that lives in a constant state of dreaming the latter as a gazer of the moon. Both, though, signify an altered state of consciousness which is dismissed by society as crazy. The narrator then reminds us of Shuishui’s disturbances at the sight of the moon. For the narrator of the dictionary, this revelation brings about a fascinating similarity between dialects and lunatics, yet for him it represents a greater understanding of the role that the illogical can play against the realm of logic. The narrator ends this dictionary entry with this final assessment about the presence of the moon in the lives of those with mental illness. He concludes, “By this reckoning, all mental hospitals should consider moon-light the most dangerous of contagions. By the same logic, all religious institutions, all absolute faiths and forms of consciousness that transcend science should consider moonlight to be the highest form of enlightenment” (90).

Conclusion: the Political and Ecocritical Implications of Han Shaogong’s Fiction

To bring the textual project of Han Shaogong full circle within the framework of this reading, it is essential to understand that for him the superstitious, the illogical, the unconscious, all cast through the linguistic, contribute far more than a mere alternative representation of human nature. The textual project of Han Shaogong calls into question the discourse that has been titled *developmentalism* by challenging its very logic from within. To make sense of Han’s

narrative project, it is necessary to briefly turn to the concluding remarks of the Nanshan Seminar to locate this specific discourse that Han is writing against.

The Nanshan seminar, held in October 1999 on Hainan Island, addressed concerns about the environmental crisis in Mainland China and the relationship between ecology and literature. A series of intellectuals, including Han Shaogong, attended this seminar, and their concluding summary stakes the following claim about the relationship between environmental problems and the failure of technological and industrial development to curb it:

There is a widely held view that environmental pollution and ecological destruction are inevitable in the process of economic and social development but the problem will be solved as science and technology develop, and economic growth itself will generate investment in environmental and ecological restoration. The issue is this: in the past several decades, the world did not lack the technology needed for the basic and necessary protection of the environment, and the world did not lack the funds to solve such problems as water pollution and industrial air pollution, but this did not stop the spread of environmental pollution. This indicates that there are deeper social, political, and cultural causes behind the pollution. The environmental problem is absolutely not just a matter of science and technology. (Han et al. 238)

Most importantly, within the summary the scholars of the Nanshan seminar call for a separation between the logic of *development* and *developmentalism*. Whereas development advocates an indisputable “improvement in material production and quality of life,” developmentalism is the perpetuation of an antiquated modern ideology that seeks industrialization and urbanization at the expense of economic disparity, though promising a better quality of life (239).

Developmentalism, then, is a discourse of European and American modernity which had spread after the Cold War, has been vastly disseminated, particularly to developing countries, and has now become a global phenomenon. The assertion of a conceptual separation between development and developmentalism proves particularly important for Chinese scholars whose concerns over the ecological effects of rapid industrialization of the past twenty years run in

opposition to state sponsored projects which are promoted by being shrouded in the discourses of modernity as development. Furthermore, the scholars of the Nanshan seminar terminate their assessment with a call to think beyond ideologically formed, simplistic dichotomies, in particular, “humanity/nature, market/government, society/state, modern/traditional, capitalism/socialism, growth/poverty, development/environment” whose influential explanatory power prevents discussion and harbors the danger of easily becoming doctrines and superstitions (446). Because Han successfully reconstructs this charged imaginative space for a consciousness of modernity, his alternate temporality frees itself from the teleology of “developmentalism” that the Nanshan scholars have extracted from the notion of development— a prescription for example that was laid out years earlier by Deng Xiaoping with his agenda of four modernizations.²⁵

Han literarily addresses endemic 21st century predicaments by asserting an alternative consciousness within a paradigm that remains autonomous, defying subordination to the destructive logic of developmentalist historicity—a logic which asserts that modernity and development possess the inevitability of environmental destruction in order to achieve economic advancement. Industrial development on the national and global level exists through the protective logic of historicity—what has been theoretically labeled by Chakrabarty as History 1. Han’s work casts an imaginary space in direct confrontation with the logic that national discourses of modernity are necessarily “logical” which in turn assume a developmental teleology positing that post-colonial spaces are held in a holding pattern awaiting their time for complete modernity. This particular conceptualization of history is in fact only one trajectory

²⁵ The Four Modernizations as championed by Deng Xiaoping to allow for a self-sufficient China included the areas of Agriculture, Industry, National Defense, and Science and Technology. It is not the intended purpose of this article to critique the Four Modernizations. Rather the aim is to demonstrate how modernity can be contextualized within the realms of culture (rather than science and technology) and comprehend Han Shaogong’s literary project from this perspective.

among myriad possibilities from which modern Chinese culture can narrate diverse and heterogeneous experiences, providing complex re-conceptualizations of 20th and 21st century history against linear time which remains obsessed with advancement out of a deeply troubled past.

Han Shaogong's works of fiction therefore give the reader another imaginative space to ponder the trials, loves, and sufferings of humans. Inherent to human experience are the personal histories, the illogical instincts, and the omnipresence of naïve superstitions that make everyone even more human. It is the call for a literary excavation of roots and its exposure of linguistic and cultural contradictions accompanied by the unconscious that allows an understanding of the modern human subject in a globalizing world. The ecological aspects of Han's fiction manifest themselves through this very project. By tying his narrative to location (and for Han this location is an out of the way, underdeveloped area rife with superstition and the illogical violence of human existence) he mobilizes another consciousness of modernity. Alongside the modernity of the contemporary Chinese state that purports scientific and industrial achievement, there exists unconscious realm of human existence on the ground. Excavating this realm via the linguistic intervenes in the prevailing logic of developmentalism, resists the hegemonic modern trajectory of the nation, and crafts an alternate space in which to understand human existence.

Chapter 3

Narrating Topography: *Still Life* and the Cinema of Jia Zhangke²⁶

In the previous two chapters, the works of Wang Anyi and Han Shaogong have been closely read to show how their texts contribute to a critique of ideological shifting from Maoism to global neo-liberal capitalism by mobilizing natural imagery and localized linguistic contradictions. The film of Jia Zhangke differs from the projects of the previous writers in that his fiction directly addresses environmental damage. As this chapter will argue, Jia's ecocritical stance derives from his infatuation with comprehending topographical changes. Specifically, his fifth full-length feature film *Still Life* (2006) depicts the environmental destruction as a result of the Three Gorges Dam while exposing social injustice and the human toll of ecological degradation.

The construction of the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River, which reached various levels of completion during the first decade of the 21st century, has become an intensely controversial issue among environmentalists, the government of the People's Republic of China, and the millions of residents who have been displaced due to flooding caused by the dam's construction. Ecologists warn that the dam will cause massive erosion, endanger local plant and animal species, and carries the potential of being extremely disastrous due to the fact that the reservoir runs over two active fault lines.²⁷ Set upon the backdrop of Three Gorges Dam, Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* follows the inter-personal intricacies of two couples from opposite sides of

²⁶ An earlier version of this chapter has been published as an article in the online journal *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*. No. 53 Summer 2011. (www.ejumpcut.org)

²⁷ See for example the article by Mara Hvistendahl in *Scientific American* from March 25, 2008 titled, "China's Three Gorges Dam: An environmental catastrophe?" (WEB). The article mentions the relationship between the governments push for the construction of the dam as well as their admitted reticence at possible disasters that it might cause.

the economic divide of an industrializing China. The characters' lives play out in relation to the construction and demolition associated with the damming project, and the film explores how the impending flood highlights the complexities of the socio-economic while contemplating the human limits of understanding massive changes in topography.

One prominent long take of the film occurs after Han Sanming and Missy, two of the main characters from the initial narrative thread, reunite after sixteen years of being apart. The estranged pair dawdles in a gutted building in Fengjia, a city undergoing demolition due to flooding as a result of the Three Gorges Dam. The man and woman are placed in the right-hand side of the frame of this long shot: she standing to his left, and he squatting. To the left of this pair, a wide hole made by the demolition process exposes the backdrop of the city. Missy gives Sanming a piece of candy, and she squats facing him—he continuously smoking a cigarette. The dialogue between the pair, involving the brand of candy, is inconsequential to the overall shot-sequence. The only diegetic sounds within this minute-long shot are distant car horns and even more distant sounds of mallets striking concrete buildings. Suddenly within the panorama of the cityscape, of which the viewer has access through the wide demolished gap in the wall in the background, one of the larger buildings falls—hiccupping ash and rubble along its rumbling descent. The two characters stand and turn in the direction of the massive movement and accompanying noise that invades the city view. Sanming gently places his hands on Missy's arms from behind.

When taken in context of the overall plot of the film, this particular shot narrates an implosion of disparate forces in terms of labor, migration, economics, human trafficking, and environmental destruction. Sanming works as a migrant laborer in the city of Fengjie, manually tearing down the village with a mallet. This labor has funded his trip from his hometown in

Shanxi to Fengjia where he hopes to find his estranged spouse. Sanming and Missy are brought together specifically because of the demolition and eventual encroachment of the Yangtze River. The reunion occurs through the resultant labor of the demolition project and the larger socio-economic development of China. The wife Missy has similarly been directly affected by the flooding of the city. Her original home has now been submerged by the rising waters. It is also revealed in the film that the marriage between the two was not legitimate because Sanming had purchased her from the area. She is a victim of human trafficking. The nostalgic Sanming, though, hopes to return to Shanxi with his estranged wife and continue working in the dangerous coal mines to pay off the debt to the man that purchased Missy from her brother. The predicament of the two characters projects an endemic situation of the economics of the locale—they are physically relocated by the commerce environmentally affecting the area of Fenjie, and to a larger degree the economics of an industrializing China.

The damming project and the resultant flooding forms the backdrop of *Still Life*'s double narrative story of an inversely reuniting/disintegrating relationship of two couples from different social milieus—Sanming and Missy and Shen Hong and Guo Bin. Though the former couple had been apart for over a decade, a series of events, all involving the drastically metamorphosing city related to socio-political realities, brings them together again. It could therefore be argued that the long take of demolition is not one of tearing down but of bringing together. Though the building tumbles in the background, calling attention to the inevitable destruction of the location, the two figures stand up, this time together as a couple. In the beginning of the shot, the two figures are inferior in size to the large structures in cityscape backdrop. By the end of the shot, they stand in the foreground as taller figures to the rest of the city skyline. Though they stand

triumphant over the cityscape, their fate will remain unresolved as economic forces will dictate whether they may start over again as legitimate husband and wife.

Still Life encapsulates the environmental side of Jia Zhangke's larger filmic project. Since the beginning of his career, Jia's works have sought to expose the evolution of China in relation to rapid economic development, the aesthetic implications of globalization, and all resultant effects of neo-liberal market capitalism. Among these rapidly changing dynamics, individual characters are forced to act in accordance with personal desires. Most importantly, Jia's films are invested in the possibility of agency on the part of his characters as global changes affect local lives. For these characters, who are often unconsciously aware of changes in their lives, this possibility of agency will prove successful at times and unattainable at others. However, Jia's preoccupation with change allows for the vestiges of human resolve to survive among the shifting socio-economics of contemporary society, all wrought by larger interrelated forces, whether state-sponsored, global, or imposed through economic structures.

This chapter will offer a reading of Jia Zhangke's films in relation to the environmental crisis in Mainland China. First, looking at Jia's biography and reading his early films will explicate how his work has become invested in describing the advancement of neo-liberal capitalism and the direct impact on people—specifically his generation which simultaneously matured with economic development. This initial part of the chapter will thematically analyze his independent works *Pickpocket* (1997), *Platform* (2000), *Unknown Pleasures* (2002), as well as his first international film *The World* (2004). Providing the historical base of Jia's work and his filmic style will set the foundation for a reading of his 2006 work *Still Life* which will be approached from two different theoretical perspectives. First, the heterogeneity of environmental impact will be explained via the migrant experience as a result of development and

construction/demolition. Second, a reading of the notion of nostalgia in relation to ecological change will show how it operates within the Jia's work. This chapter will then show that between the de-centered polarities of home and homelessness, Jia's characters strive for emotional vitality, regardless of vanishing topography and consequential difficulties. Finally, the conclusion will read *Still Life* against Jia's concurrent documentary titled *Dong* to explicate how the filmmaker blurs the boundary between documentary and narrative film and how this obfuscation describes Jia's preoccupation with the limits of comprehending changes in topography.

Technology and Topography

The cinematic evolution of Jia Zhangke's career has accompanied and developed alongside technological advancement, globalization, and the development of unprecedented communicative circuits contributing to his recognition as auteur and allowing his filmic aesthetics to flourish. Jia was born in Fenyang, in Shanxi province in 1970, and his place of birth will remain an important aspect in the majority of his films. Admittedly, Jia believes that the notion of a home is of primary importance of an individual's emotional and rational understanding of the world, thus it is understandable why Shanxi would be his choice of locale for his early independent work (Teo 4). In various interviews, Jia has offered an anecdote about the beginning of his interest in filmmaking. In 1991, he was a student at Shanxi University in Taiyuan studying art. A nearby theater was showing Chen Kaige's 1984 film *Yellow Earth*, and this work is one of most influential works of the 'fifth generation'—those who began working just after Deng Xiaoping's Open Door Policy. Until this point, Jia had not seen the film nor knew who Chen Kaige actually was, but it left a deep impression on him. He left the theater wanting to become a director (Berry 'interview' 185).

Jia studied film theory at the Beijing Film Academy beginning in 1993. At this time the ‘fifth generation’ directors were garnering international interest, and this attention allowed Jia as well as his classmates, to experience a feeling of great confidence regarding the future and potential of Chinese film (Berry ‘interview’ 186). As Jia believes, however, the appeal and creativity of ‘fifth generation’ directors as auteurs was relatively short-lived, mostly as a result of global demands on them at too great a pace. Jia admits, for example, not liking any of Chen Kaige’s other films outside of *Farewell my Concubine* (1993), and no films of Zhang Yimou (Teo 13). Because he immediately follows the first internationally recognized group of post-open door Chinese directors, Jia is therefore considered to be a member of the ‘sixth generation’—though this term is loose at best and not without inherent problems. His work has grown alongside the concurrent international recognition of Chinese directors; conversely, Jia’s filmic style developed within the cinematic academic tradition of China yet eventually went beyond its borders.

Jia admits that the biggest influence the Beijing Film Academy had on the development of his career was the extensive library which allowed him to access international as well as Chinese cinema. Furthermore, the library held works of film theory that were not readily accessible. He explains:

PRC film theory is based upon all the classic Western theorists like Bazin and Eisenstein; then there are more contemporary theories like feminism, new historicism, and semiotics that we learn later. But there are very few available books that contain biographical writings on film directors or even primary sources featuring interviews with film directors. So when I went to the Hong Kong-Taiwan Film Library I was finally able to read books like *Scorsese on Scorsese*, Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema* and volumes of collected interviews with Hou Hsiao-hsien and other directors. At the time, none of these works had been published in China and the library was the only place you could get your hands on them. (Berry ‘interview’ 186)

Though Jia's formal schooling at the Beijing Film Academy was in film theory, his purpose throughout was to make film. With several colleagues, Jia participated in a practical film group, and the students would produce three shorts *One Day in Beijing* (1994), *Xiao Shan Going Home* (1995), and *Du Du* (1996). The experience of shooting and directing these works would lead Jia to create his first full length feature *Pickpocket* (or *Xiao Wu*) in 1997 after his graduation.

Jia Zhangke attributes much of the success and innovation of the new generation of independent directors to the digital revolution. In an article in *Cahiers du cinéma*, Jia pinpoints three areas in which digital technology has ameliorated the technique and status of younger Chinese directors as well as the sophistication of Chinese film viewers. First, digital cameras have allowed a closer proximity between the image and the audience. Young directors have been able to take the cameras into areas with greater ease and approach subjects with fewer obstacles to filming ("Trois révolutions" 21). Furthermore, the diffusion of DVDs throughout markets in China (and in particular through non-legitimate routes) has in fact allowed a greater circulation of works from young directors as well as international titles that have allowed Chinese audiences to develop a more profound taste in cinema. Though Jia does not believe pirating to be a good practice, he acknowledges that this circuit of cinematic dissemination has become an integral part of Chinese film culture (23). Finally, the internet has allowed public forums for discussions of film among young Chinese cinephiles. These three aspects of cinematic evolution of the past decade have, according to Jia, allowed Mainland independent film makers to grow in number. Though Jia acknowledges limitation of digital shooting, he believes that it has given directors more liberty to film as well as explore aesthetic routes. Furthermore, Jia is impressed that this technology has been adopted by established directors of the New Wave such as Agnès Varda and Eric Rohmer whose respective films *The Gleaners and I* (2000) and *The Lady and the Duke*

(2001) were projected in China via the French embassy (“Le Cinéma français en Chine” 99). Therefore, Jia Zhanke, like the characters in his works, has been affected by contemporary changes in technology and the distribution means of information, and these changes have allowed his works to receive high praise from Chinese and international audiences. An overview of the major themes of his early works, tracing the independent works to his first state-approved international hit, will clarify many thematic preoccupations of his cinema.

The first full-length independent films of Jia Zhangke are generally referred to as “The Hometown Trilogy”, though this general term also includes his film short *Xiao Shan Going Home*.²⁸ Jia’s first major length film *Pickpocket* was a project that instantaneously evolved upon the site for shooting and became the seminal thematic preoccupation for all subsequent film.²⁹ Jia was paired with a newly formed Hong Kong based production crew Hu Tong Communications, and their partnership solidified auspiciously on the eve of the Hong Kong handover. According to Michael Berry, though Jia definitely had the ability and ambition for film making success, much of his early achievements are directly related to the “professionalism and international training of his core Hong Kong production team” (“Hometown” 23). He continues to state that such trans-Chinese collaboration, involving locally as well as internationally trained professionals, created a scenario not unlike New Taiwan cinema directors like Hou Hsiao Hsien. Such collaboration of diverse talents would “go on to produce some of the most exciting and visionary cinematic works of contemporary Chinese cinema” (23).

²⁸ *Xiao Shan Going Home* along with *Pickpocket* and *Platform*, takes place in Fenyang—Jia’s hometown. All three of these films also use the actor Wang Hongwei for the main character. Xiaoping Lin in his article “Jia Zhangke’s Cinematic Trilogy: A Journey Across the Ruins of Post-Mao China” reads *Xiao Shan Going Home* as part of the trilogy, whereas later secondary sources see the first three full-length features as a trilogy of his independent film career.

²⁹ Jia Zhangke will admit later on that although he was not immediately conscious of it at the time, he realized later that the work was heavily influenced by two films that he had immensely enjoyed: Robert Bresson’s *Pickpocket* (1959) and Vittorio De Sica’s *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) (Berry 40).

The original intent of the film script was a simple screenplay written by Jia about a couple's first night at a hotel, and it was intended to be a short of about thirty minutes and shot mostly in the interior. Upon arriving in his hometown of Fenyang, however, Jia was struck by the changes that had taken in such a short time. The project immediately became a filmic attempt to capture the rapidly changing topography. The film was shot in twenty-one days using a *mélange* of hand-held camera work and long takes that emphasize the decaying rough dimensions of the local architecture—often carrying the character *chai* indicating impending demolition³⁰. Sound work also stresses the dominance of the hectic atmospheric noise of the cityscape. A brief overview of the plot of each of Jia's first full-length features will set the base for a broader discussion about his thematic preoccupations which will evolve alongside his filmmaking career and lead to the close reading of his 2006 *Still Life*.

Pickpocket (1997) is a homecoming story of a man named Xiao Wu, a petty thief, who returns in order to see his once close friend's wedding. An early close up of Xiao Wu's hands lighting a cigarette reveal the characters "Shanxi" on a packet of matches, reminding the viewer about the location of the plot. The film then follows Xiao Wu through three sequential disintegrating relationships between friend, his love interest, and his family. First, Xiao Wu is upset because his friend is getting married but did not tell him about it. Xiao Wu confronts him, and it is made apparent that this friend was also a pickpocket like him but had since cleaned up his act—eventually becoming respected in the community. Xiao Wu fronts the customary red envelope with money, but his friend refuses knowing that the money is stolen. In fact Xiao Wu had been active in stealing wallets and then returning the identity cards to a local police station. Rejected by his friend, Xiao Wu ventures into a karaoke bar where he meets an entertainer

³⁰ This chapter will read further into the thematic significance of *chai* as signifier of demolition as it pertains to the film *Still Life* and its relevance in regards to the notion of home vs. homelessness.

named Mei Mei. He is awkward in front of her and refuses to sing a duet, explaining that he is not capable of singing. The manager of the karaoke bar allows the two to wander into the city until dark. However, Xiao Wu, in all his awkwardness, does not know what to do with the girl, and they continue aimlessly. Later Xiao Wu returns to the bar to look for Mei Mei, but she is sick. He locates her in her room and takes care of her, and a tender relationship develops. Then an interesting scene demonstrates a tenderness of heart of the main character which will set him up for inevitable defeat. Alone and naked in a bathhouse, Xiao Wu begins singing the male part of the duet that he was incapable of singing earlier with Mei Mei. Later returning to the bar, Xiao Wu discovers that Mei Mei has left with another man. Rejected from an interpersonal relationship a second time, Xiao Wu returns to his parents' home. However, he immediately angers them and is driven out of the house by his father. Xiao Wu is eventually caught while pick pocketing and taken to a police station. The officer, who had been receiving the stolen identity cards, takes Xiao Wu out on the street and because he has to run an errand handcuffs him to a cable attached to a street pole. In an intense yet anti-climactic final sequence, Xiao Wu is surrounded by onlookers as they stare at him attached to the pole. The camera pans the various faces that multiply around him, simply staring.

Jia's second film *Platform* (2000) is more ambitious than *Pickpocket*, expanding his preoccupation with changes in his hometown Fenyang from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. The film charts the progress of this era from the perspective of the interconnected lives of four main protagonists: Cui Mingliang and the girl he likes Yin Ruijuan, and Zhang Jun and his girlfriend Zong Ping. These four are members of a larger song and dance troupe. They begin by performing propaganda pieces hailing Chairman Mao Zedong, and over the course of the 80s the group mutates into a private group known as the Shenzhen Allstars Rock and Breakdance

Electronic Band. Their lives continue alongside socio-political and economic changes to the topography of their hometown (for example the introduction of the one-child policy and electrification of the city). As they grow older their lives and relationships change. Cui Mingliang and Yin Ruijuan eventually marry, and the relationship between Zhang Jun and Zhong Ping, though initially close, eventually falls apart. The film carefully documents the slow disintegration of relationships among newfound and unprecedented freedoms. For example, the relationship between Cui Mingliang's parents grows stale, and although in the beginning of the film they uphold the ideology of the strong family unit of the socialist state, the father leaves and lives with his mistress. This leads Cui Mingliang to ask his mother towards the end of the film why she does not file for divorce. The film also explores the lives of those left behind in the economic advancement of China. A character named Sanming (who will become the protagonist of *Still Life*) must work in the dangerous mines in the area for only ten Renminbi per day. He gives a large portion of his income to his sister so that she can go to school and flee the hometown to better herself. The last shot of the film is a long take that shows Cui Mingliang and Yin Ruijuan, now married and with a baby, in their home. As Ruijian holds the child while heating water on the stove, Mingliang is slumped over on a couch, apparently struck by a severe state of ennui. The television in the background, that used to excite the two when he was courting her, now lulls him to sleep.

Jia Zhangke's third full-length feature film *Unknown Pleasures* (2002) recounts the adventures of two friends Binbin and Xiao Ji and their meandering purposeless lives among the streets of Datong. Both men are young products of Deng's Open Door period, not having lived through the Maoist past. Neither of them has a job, and both men come from single-parent homes. Binbin attempts to join the military, but it is discovered that he has Hepatitis and is not allowed

to join. The men spend their days hanging around pool halls, karaoke bars, markets, and other public places. Binbin has a girlfriend who is a high-school student hoping to go to college and study international relations. They often meet in karaoke bars, and their relationship is uncommunicative, finally ending in a silent breakup. Xiao Ji is forward in his advances towards a dancer named Qiaoqiao despite her violent boyfriend who carries a firearm. Xiao Ji and Qiaoqiao eventually get together, and both pay the consequences of being battered by the boyfriend and his cronies. The film is punctuated by larger geo-political events such as the mid-air collision between a Chinese fighter plane and American spy plane off the coast of Hainan in 2001, thus framing the work in a larger temporality. In the end, both of the dreams of the two men fail, and influenced by the opening scene in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*, they decide to hold up a bank with a fake bomb. The plan, which has Binbin enter a bank and Xiao Ji waiting on his motorcycle, goes immediately awry. Binbin is taken into custody, and Xiao Ji takes off on his motor cycle which then breaks down on the highway.

Though he is invested in the nostalgia, ambivalence, and transitional state of China in the 1980s, Jia Zhangke's films are also conscious of the globalizing forces at play at the turn of the millennium. *The World* (2004) will transition from an analysis of hometowns to the larger and more ambitious understanding of the local in relation to the global. *The World* takes place in an 'Epcot-esque' world simulacrum amusement park located in Beijing. It houses miniature models of iconic world structures: the Eiffel Tower, the Leaning Tower of Pisa, etc. The protagonist Tao is a dancer, and her boyfriend Taisheng is one of the security guards working in the park. He is from Shanxi province like many other migrant workers that work in the park. Certain characters come in and out of the narrative—encapsulating not only the socio-economic situation of migrant work of Mainland China, but migrant work on a global scale. For example a Russian

dancer Anna arrives to work in the park, and she and Tao become friends. She wants to quit her job to see her sister but must become a prostitute in order to do this. The relationship between Tao and Taisheng initially becomes strained when Tao's ex-boyfriend visits. The remainder of the story details the deterioration and eventual demise of the couple.

The plot of *The World* is subordinate to much of the mise-en-scène, which offers a deeper narration about globalization, migrant workers, and the negotiation of what is local in face of the global. As Berry comments about the thematic shift between the “Hometown Trilogy” and *The World*,

The World features not only a scathing critique of globalism, a mediation of the place of simulacrum in postmodern society and a probing take on post-socialist alienation, but also places Jia's ‘Hometown Trilogy’ in a completely new context. With *The World*, it seems the hometown (the local) has finally been forsaken for the world (the global), or at least its image. (‘Hometown Trilogy’ 123)

The World thus extends Jia's thematic preoccupations in his first few films which examines the changes of the local, and particularly his hometown. Bringing his filmic analysis to the world and globalization, Jia forwards an even more powerful critique of the changing meanings of the local in the face of the global. From a more theoretical perspective, the rich textuality that represents a simultaneous cohabitation of socialist and capitalist ideologies that are continually negotiated among the characters in Jia's works performs a self-reflective maneuver against global forces that merely construct passive spectators (Lu 163). This cohabitation, inherent to the transformation of society from Communism to global capitalism, requires a re-politicization that allows critical thinking.

Music, Popular Culture, Intertextuality

Due to his use of digital recording, hand held cameras, and sound recording intended to pick up as much digetic background noise as possible, Jia Zhangke is often described as a documentary-style director. Furthermore, his film manipulates a multitude of internal texts (television screens, piped in music, trinkets that play particular songs, etc) which contribute to a rich and multi-layered narrative. As Michael Fitzhenry and Zhang describe, “The authenticating image—of virtual destinations, popular music, radio and TV programs that appear or are heard in Jia Zhang Ke’s films—is an abrogation of narrative in favor of image intensity” (51).

Particularly, the prevalence and thematic importance of popular music often strikes viewers of Jia’s films, and indeed this idiosyncratic part of his filming has led to much discussion about the thematic implementation of music within his work. Jia admits to the importance of popular music—the titles for both *Platform* and *Unknown Pleasures* derive from popular songs.³¹ Jia explains the historical importance of popular music as a socio-political bridge that affected the lives of those who experienced Deng Xiaoping’s reforms in the 1980s,

Before the mid-eighties all the songs we heard in China were propaganda, revolutionary songs. All of a sudden in the eighties, rock’n’roll was being written in China. This is the meaning that the song Zhantai [“Platform”] has for people. It inspired me when I was thinking about the script. It is a love song but the lyrics are also about expectation. (Kraicer 31)

Of his full-length films, *Platform* is the best at purposefully exploring the musical evolution from the late seventies to the early nineties. In the beginning of the film, for example, the Peasant Culture Group begins by performing a tribute to Mao Zedong titled “Train Heading for

³¹ An entire study could be done just documenting the various songs (popular Chinese, popular Western, state-sponsored, operatic, etc.) in Jia’s film. Michael Berry’s book *Jia Zhangke’s ‘Hometown Trilogy’: Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown Pleasures* does an excellent job of documenting all influences, not just musical, that operate in Jia’s works. Similarly Kin-Yan Szeto’s article “A Moist Heart: Love, Politics and China’s Neoliberal Transition in the Films of Jia Zhangke” as well as Tonglin Lu “Music and Noise: Independent Film and Globalization” explicates much of the theoretical importance of prominent popular songs in his films.

Shaoshan.” After several years, when the troupe becomes privatized and tours the country, they perform popular rock songs accompanied by choreographed dances—heavy opposition to the stylized performances of high Maoism.

Popular music then becomes a historical marker of radical social and ideological transformation at work in the years following China’s Open Door Policy. Popular music, however, is not just a signification of change, but a culturally charged reality that does not escape the critique of Jia, even as he uses it to situate temporality in his works. Through the prevalence of particular songs, such as those of Teresa Tang that valorizes individuality, a certain resistance to state hegemony occurs all the while remaining as a fantasy that lingers among the lives of the characters encountering change. As Kin-Yan Szeto comments in the conclusion to an overview of Jia’s film and the arena of music as political field,

Jia Zhangke’s films examine how China’s 30 years of radical socioeconomic change have deeply affected ordinary people on many levels, including their material, emotional and family lives. Jia simultaneously valorizes and criticizes the realm of popular music, associating it dialectically with both passionate desire to resist state hegemony as well as to lament the circumstances that have turned these desires into unattainable fantasies of transcendence. In Jia’s hands, the popular song becomes a site of limited possibility showing the contrast between what is and what might be; conditions he perceives to be mediated by capital, power and ideology. (106)

Along with music indicating deep change in the personal lives of the characters in Jia’s film, language also plays into a framing that intermingles with the separation of public and private space and the hegemony of state power. Jia’s filmmaking style attempts to capture as much as possible the local flavors of his locations, most notably through the employment of local dialects in his works.³² Music complicates the linguistic make-up of the work, since Chinese language propaganda music broadcast through loudspeakers (which occurs throughout Jia’s films) is in

³² The part of the chapter that thematically reads *Still Life* will engage in a discussion of linguistic heterogeneity as represented by Jia’s films.

official Putonghua. Mandarin is also the language of education and upward social mobility. Thus as Jin Liu comments on the assessment of language in the Jia's work, "Although broadcast-standard Putonghua Mandarin continues to be used in this film [*Unknown Pleasures*] as the mainstream media language largely for its ideological connotation, the film seems to ironically confirm its elevated position in the hierarchy of linguistic practices" (183). Therefore, there is a tension throughout the works between the privileging of local linguistic representation, which occurs interpersonally through interactions of people in private space, and the linguistic heteroglossia of public space in which various peoples cohabit with broadcast propaganda, media, and various musical genres (Liu 170).

The rich textuality of Jia Zhangke's films illustrate most importantly a world undergoing vast and rapid change which affects all those living through the transition, though they are not completely aware of the significance of such change. The hodgepodge of artifacts from the Culture Revolution to 1980s global popular culture produces a disjunctured blend that is interrelated as byproducts of rapid social, economic, and ideological transition. Such textuality in Jia's film has been seen as "kitschy" in that it arises "from the degraded mishmash of traditional and modern, local and global. . . [it] is ubiquitous and penetrating, until it looms as large and real as the inescapable experience of the day" (Ban Wang 213). Coupled with heavy use of long takes and extreme long shots, Jia's retelling of the era of transition also assumes a form of nostalgia. This particular nostalgia, however, represents a reflection upon changes rather than mobilizes a call to go back to the pre-reform era. As McGrath explains:

The almost exclusive use of long shots and extreme long shots maintains a distance between the viewer and the object of nostalgia that mitigates against easy sentimentality even in the most dramatic scenes. Long takes, meanwhile, convey the sense of time as endured, demanding reflection by the viewer rather than the simple consumption of nostalgic images or narrative formation. (100)

The world that Jia represents is a fleeting one that can only be captured by his emphasis on textuality. The nostalgia that pervades his works reminisces upon much of the ambivalence of the characters to the changes more than on a lauding of the changes at play in his characters' lives.

Tonglin Lu employs Agamben's analysis of *dispositif* to explain how independent film-makers react to the integration of Chinese film-making into the global market. The *dispositif*, as Lu explains, represents an administrative control which separates humans from critical thought by making sacred a series of rituals and rules which are thus imposed. In the globalizing world, *dispositifs* multiply and procreate discursively in the realm of technology and institutions that regulate human lives. The resistance to the *dispositif* is the creation of its logical opposite: the *conterdispositif* which wrests what has become sacred into the critical hands of humans. Lu sees the young film-makers of China (the 'sixth generation') as having the advantage of utilizing digital technology to create low-budget works that expose, "a different side of China's integration into the global market: its alienating effect on a large percentage of Chinese population" (164). Thus Jia's films call critical attention to the changes of China over the last three decades. His film project then extends beyond the descriptive and grabs the viewer's attention using a variety of camera techniques that form a complex textuality (which includes an abundance of popular music as well as old propaganda 'classics') and signifiers of global culture to craft a critical assessment of the profound changes at play in Mainland China and indeed the world.

In the transition from the "Hometown Trilogy" to *The World*, the avenue of Jia's film-making has also undergone change. His first three films were independent and shot without official government approval. Though he is seen initially as an 'underground' director that then

sought official government approval to continue directing, the notion of ‘underground’ itself is not unproblematic. Like many directors that are known as “sixth generation” Jia shot without the approval of the state-owned studio system due to digital technology as well as national and international funding, but then showed his film at international festivals (Lu ‘Music and Noise’ 59). The tag “banned in China” does carry a certain weight that appeals to international audiences, though Jia’s work would more than likely have been highly honored whatever production channel he had taken (Jaffee “World to Nation”). For production of *The World*, Jia did approach the Film Bureau. When asked why he decided upon this change, Jia replies,

I didn’t change; the environment for Chinese filmmakers changed. Because, starting last year [2003], a group of us young directors communicated with the Film Bureau quite a bit; we were fighting for a freer, more relaxed filmmaking environment. Then this year they’ve announced a lot of new policies. (Jaffee “interview”)

Jia continues to cite some of the new policies, mostly a slackening of censor oversight. Before, the entire screenplay needed censors’ approval, but currently only a fifteen hundred word synopsis will suffice. Also the censoring mechanism has changed. Originally film was subject to censoring by the Ministry of Radio, Film, and Television. Currently there are regional offices to seek approval (Jaffee “interview”). The grand irony in Jia’s transition from independent to state approved film-maker is the inversely directional thematic interest from hometown to the world.

As Jaffee comments,

another of the several ironies surrounding *The World* is that this film, about the treacherous and thwarted advance toward cosmopolitanism, is slated to the the work through which Jia Zhangke may make the transition from international to domestic success. By making a film legally sanctioned by the authorities and that thus may be shown in Chinese theatres, Jia is coming home, in a sense. (“World to Nation”)

Jia is very much a member of the generation of young Chinese that experienced first-hand the drastic social and economic transformations of Mainland China. His craft similarly has worked

with and negotiated the varying forces, such as state censorship and international/domestic recognition, which have allowed him to now become recognized as one of the premier artistic directors of China. After *The World*, Jia will set his filmic agenda towards one of the larger environmental issues of the day—the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. His 2006 film *Still Life* will expand his thematic preoccupation present in his first four films and explore human interaction, social/linguistic heterogeneity, nostalgia, and the notions of home and homelessness, all in relation to the large state project on the Yangtze River.

Still Life: Heterogeneity of the Linguistic and the Socio-economic

The plot of *Still Life* involves two parallel narrative threads, the initial one following Sanming in the search for his wife, which is split by a second narrative of Shen Hong who is trying to locate her husband. The story is divided into four parts: “cigarettes,” “liquor,” “tea,” and “toffee” which highlight the importance of “modest daily pleasures” that are initially seemingly unimportant (Bíró 37). The film begins with the arrival of the character Sanming to the city of Fengjie at the base of the Three Gorges Dam. The purpose of the visit is to find his estranged wife and daughter of sixteen years³³. The wife once lived in a building whose address was written on a cigarette box sixteen years earlier. When Sanming arrives at the address, he discovers that it has been flooded by the rising Yangtze. The local relocation bureau proves ineffectual. Similarly Missy’s family is unfriendly to Sanming and unwilling to help him locate her. Sanming finds lodging and work as a demolition worker to fund his stay. He befriends a fellow worker “Mark” (MaGe) to whom he tells of his desire to reunite with his wife. Mark has

³³ Sanming is a recurring character from Jia’s 2000 film *Platform* in which works as a coal miner and gives money to his sister so that she can attend school.

been harassed by a competing local demolition team, and throughout the film retaliations and brawls will break out among the workers highlighting the lawlessness of the condemned locale.

The narrative then breaks, with a segue of a UFO that Sanming sees flying along the horizon, and which Shen Hong, the main character of the second narrative thread, sees as well. Shen Hong, like Sanming, is also from Shanxi province. She comes to Fengjie to locate her husband Guo Bin who has been away at work for two years. Guo Bin works for a construction company that has been building bridges and other structures. Because he has been so busy, he has not returned home, nor has he answered any of her calls. Shen Hong enlists the help of a friend of Guo Bin named Wang Dongming, an archeologist. The two try to contact various locations with the hopes of finding Guo Bin, but they are unsuccessful for quite some time. Eventually, Guo Bin does arrive, and Shen Hong walks away from him in anger. After an awkward and unsuccessful attempt to converse or reach an understanding, Shen Hong asks Guo Bin for a divorce.

The narrative then jumps back to Sanming, who finds his friend Mark's body in a pile of rubble. Mark becomes a victim of the demolition and its inherently violent culture. Sanming eventually locates his wife and asks her to return to Shanxi with him. As for his daughter, she has set off down South looking for work, and Sanming only is able to see pictures of her. Though Missy agrees to return to Shanxi with Sanming, they must first repay the debt incurred when her brother sold her to a local. Sanming agrees to repay thirty thousand RMB and arranges a deal with the man in which he can repay the debt over the course of one year. He will therefore return to Shanxi and work in the dangerous mines to regain his marriage.

Still Life represents the experiences of individual characters from a perspective of heterogeneity caused by migration and movement which is intricately related to environmental

change. In one of the introductory passages of the film, Han Sanming searches for an apartment. Upon finding one, he has a brief dialogue with the owner, an older gentleman named Mr. He. Sanming asks a question, and the landlord, asks what he has said because he did not understand him. Sanming repeats himself, but the Mr. He replies that he did not understand the dialect that is being spoken. Sanming is from Shanxi province, and his migration to Fengjie presents an interesting linguistic encounter when he and his landlord interact. Sanming represents the reality of the migrant experience. *Still Life* is a linguistically rich representation that reflects upon the migrant experience, yet the heterogeneity remains imbued with socio-economics and class issues as well.

Shih Shu-mei's work *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific* begins with a reading of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. She comments that for Chinese speaking audiences, the linguistics of the film were strange. The major stars (Michelle Yeoh from Malaysia, Chang Chen from Taiwan, Zhang Ziyi from Mainland China, and Chow Yun-fat from Hong Kong) presented a cacophony of Sinophone voices within the work. Shih claims, however, that such a cacophony is not unusual to the citizen walking the streets of any Chinese metropolitan area—there will always be a mixture of voices, dialects, and accents in any place that speaks Chinese. What Shih argues is that the representation of Chineseness in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is in fact an overdetermination of the notion of the Chinese characteristics purveyed through the martial art genre. The spectators not versed in Mandarin or other dialects view past the languages and see instead a homogenized view of Chineseness. Thus there is a dichotomy between visual language and oral language. The visual language responds to the hegemony of Euro-American global visual culture. If it is the primary means in which people negotiate identity, it must be rigorously critiqued in order to avoid the trap of homogeneity.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon shows anything but homogeneity; however, a theoretical assumption of heterogeneity proves equally problematic. Shin warns that the appeal to heterogeneity can slip into a unifying category without meticulous theoretical investigation:

To assert heterogeneity and multiplicity, as the reading of *Crouching Tiger* above requires, however, cannot be the end point of an analysis or an argument (as is the case for some contemporary theories). Heterogeneity as an abstract concept can itself be easily universalized to avoid the hard work of having to sort it through and become instead contained by a benign logic of global multiculturalism. To activate heterogeneity and multiplicity therefore means, above all, being historical and situated, because not all multiplicities are multiple in the same way, and not all heterogeneities are heterogeneous in the same way. The question is one of both content and structure, which are sensitive to multiangulated overdeterminations by such categories as history, politics, culture, and economy, both locally and globally. (7)

Shih's project is to address cultural identity among globalizing forces. She appeals to the notion of the Sinophone in order to challenge the notion of diaspora, to question identities formed through migration, and to establish a "critical position that does not succumb to nationalist and imperialist pressures" (190). Shih's belief that "routes can become roots" elucidates the reality of migration, global flows, and transnationalism and inadvertently offers a critical stance to the reality of environmental migration that is a growing reality in Mainland China. Jia Zhangke purposefully highlights the Sinophone heterogeneity in his film, putting forward the representation of migrant experiences which are cast through cacophonous dialectical conversations. The brief interaction between Sanming and Mr. He attests to a growing linguistic interaction that naturally occurs and will occur as literally millions are displaced by flooding. Therefore, Jia's film represents the heterogeneity of the linguistic encounter of the migrant experience as representational of the heterogeneity of the environmental experience.

Michael Berry's detailed analysis of Jia's career from the perspective of the hometown trilogy comments on the use of artificial homogeneity as present in Jia's film. Looking at *Xiao Wu*,

Berry comments that the lead character, though going back to his hometown of Fenyang, actually speaks an Anyang dialect (of the actor Wang Hongwei's Henan background). The majority of the other characters speak a Shanxi dialect. Berry's discussion of linguistic and dialectical authenticity speaks in conversation with Shih Shu-mei's critical assessment of global heterogeneity. He states:

Aside from those from Shanxi or Henan, most audiences (especially international audiences) never notice the lead characters are speaking different dialects to one another, but we should not forget that Jia's ambitious challenge to the artificial hegemony of the Chinese language as represented by standard Mandarin is, in fact, another construction. The use of non-authentic dialects to produce the illusion of authenticity is but one example of how *Xiao Wu* creates a documentary-esque mood through meticulous employment of various aspects of the cinematic apparatus. (28)

Whereas Jia's depiction of his hometown in *Xiao Wu* clusters the different dialects against each other for documentary style effect, in *Still Life* he goes one step further in purposefully making the viewer aware of the dialectical differences between Sanming and the locals. However, taking into account Jia Zhangke's larger project of showing conflicting class positions, migrant experiences, the role of the state, and the benefits reaped by certain classes involved in the Yangtze project, the linguistics of the film extend beyond simple dialectical differences and point to the heterogeneity of environmental encounters that touch many demographic categories.

In *Still Life* the displacement of locals within Mainland China also demonstrates the socioeconomic conditions that connect individuals within a drowning city. *Still Life* represents the heterogeneity of socioeconomics in relation to the Three Gorges Project and in terms of labor through a brief encounter with Shen Hong and a young girl, who represents the predicament of Sanming's daughter, as well as the polar economic positions of the two male protagonists, Sanming and Guo Bin. Sanming's purpose for leaving his native Shanxi is to locate his wife and child, and though he does find Missy, he never finds his daughter. He is only able to view a few

photographs, one from the mother of a classmate and another from Missy's home. The film allows the possibility of an intersection between the daughter's economic-migrant position and Shen Hong of the parallel narrative thread. Early after being introduced into the narrative, a tracking shot follows Shen Hong as she walks along the river's banks and comes across a young girl who asks her if she is a local. The girl then asks if Shen Hong can help her. Her name is Chunyu, and she is looking for work and wondered if she could get employment as a domestic worker. Shen Hong says that she is not from the area but from Shanxi province. The girl admits that she is sixteen years old, and Shen Hong replies that the girl is so young and slowly walks away leaving her alone beside the river.

Because Sanming mentions on several occasions that his child is sixteen years old, it is possible that the meeting between the unidentified girl and Shen Hong represents a narrative intersection. However, when Sanming is finally able to see a picture of his daughter, a close inspection reveals that this is probably not the case, though the film remains as ambiguous as possible. In fact, the daughter never appears in the film. Missy informs Sanming that she had left south to Dongguan for work. Regardless of the identity of the girl who confronts Shen Hong at the river bank, she is in a similar position to Sanming's daughter. Because the area is going to be flooded, the inhabitants must leave. For those of a lower social class, like Sanming's daughter who must find work elsewhere, the inevitable destruction makes her a forced migrant. The interaction between Shen Hong and the girl presents a brief intersection between different social strata and their relationship with mobility and movement. Chunyu must leave to look for work, so she asks Shen Hong if domestic help is a needed commodity in her province. Shen Hong, on the other hand, is visiting from Shanxi because her husband's job lies on the other side of the technological/environmental divide. She is able to move into the abandoned area to find her

estranged husband in order to reinstate her life. When she finally asks for a divorce, she admits that she and her new lover are going to move to Shanghai. Her mobility within the country is completely different from that of the girl she encounters at the riverside and from Sanming and Missy's daughter. Furthermore, Shen Hong's position as volunteer traveler to locate her husband contrasts the position of Missy, who was purchased as a wife by Sanming two decades earlier. Missy is a victim of human trafficking. Once she flees Shanxi to go back to her hometown, she is then resold by her brother to a local man. Sanming must repay this man the brother's debt in order to get Missy returned to him. Throughout the entire scenario, Missy is an economic product that is negotiated by the various forces at play.

Sanming works his way to Fengjie in order to find his wife and daughter. He is invested in the demolition of the city—as exemplified by the many takes that show his manual labor as he works on a demolition crew in the area. He is invested in destruction, whereas Guo Bin, being contracted to several construction companies, is invested in demolition as well as construction projects of dams and bridges. He controls the labor, and is able to use it to flee his wife and hide behind his busy business schedule. The two men are on opposite sides of the social spectrum, Sanming acting as a migrant laborer and Guo Bin as an entrepreneur. Sanming wants to locate his wife and child, thus he engages in the labor of destruction. Guo Bin separates from his wife by travelling to the dam area and working in construction. The only relationship between the two is in fact the demolition/construction divide that inversely defines their lives. Therefore their travel from Shanxi to the area of the dam occurs through different economic channels. Their migration into the area is that of a heterogeneity directly related to flooding. Thus the environmental creates a layer of heterogeneity, represented by different dialects and social milieus, which enrich the narrative, offering Jia's assessment and critique of the changing

dynamics of China. The positionalities of the characters mirror the multilayered realities of locations, origins, and socio-economic backgrounds. Accompanying these realities is the feeling of nostalgia among the characters that remains inextricably related to environmental issues.

Nostalgia and the Environmental Experience

When Sanming first moves into his dorm residence, he encounters a group of demolition workers. One of them asks if he had seen KuiMen (or Kui Gate of the Qutong Gorge) as he was arriving. He then shows Sanming a ten Renminbi (RMB) note that has a painting of Kui Men on it. Sanming then says that his part of China is also represented on money. He shows the man a fifty RMB note with Hukou Falls on it. The next shot shows Sanming staring at Kui Men as well as a ten RMB bill. As present topography disappears, individuals cling to fabricated memories of different pasts and locations. Jia Zhangke plays with the concept of nostalgia throughout *Still Life*, conjuring images and sounds of different cultural legacies. He also shows how present experiences imbued with nostalgic elements and desires to regain certain pasts craft a particular nostalgia that formulates itself as a manifestation of the impending environmental predicament. Jia recasts the complex relationships between individuals and memories as a state of crisis, and the film leaves the characters with either unintended consequences or uncertain fates.

One of the first men Sanming befriends in Fengjie is a colorful ChowYun-fat enthusiast who goes by the name “Mark” (*MaGe*). Mark adheres to the tough-guy image of Chow Yun-fat. When introduced in the film early on, Mark stares at a television showing *A Better Tomorrow* and the shot of Chow lighting a cigarette with a one hundred dollar bill. Later, Mark uses a strip of paper to light a cigarette mimicking the iconic introduction of Chow Yun-fat in John Woo’s film. A one shot-sequence narrates a burgeoning friendship between the two men. The shot is

four minutes long and contains within it many of the key ideas threaded through the interpersonal relations of the film, such as friendship and in particular nostalgia. Initially the shot begins by focusing on a wall in front of which are some bowls and a thermos. The camera immediately slowly pans right revealing the room in which Mark and Sanming are sitting—Mark on the left of a table and Sanming on the right. The camera pans for a total of twenty seconds and then focuses on the table—a bottle of alcohol strategically placed in middle being the center of the shot. The camera then very slowly zooms in on the table, going from more of a medium-long shot to a medium shot. This almost imperceptibly slow zoom occurs for a total of two minutes, then stabilizes with the bodies of Mark and Sanming framing the shot, the bottle continuing to remain in the center. The remaining two minutes of this shot will remain focused in this manner. The slow focus on the two men together around the table reveals an initially unforeseen closeness between the two. Mark is able to understand many of the gaps in Sanming’s biography, surmising that he has purchased his wife. From the personal story that Sanming recounts, Mark is also able to locate their specific predicament existing within their circumstances—quixotic nostalgia within the contemporary world.

Mark admits that there is much lawlessness between the demolitions teams. In a preceding shot to this conversation, Sanming rescues Mark from being trapped in a bag—a retribution from a competing demolition crew, which will escalate throughout the film. Sanming shares information about his past and the reasons for leaving Shanxi and coming to Fengjie. Sanming explains how he had purchased his wife from the region and brought her home, but she was unhappy and fled back to her hometown, taking their daughter who would now be sixteen years old. After listening to the story, Mark says to Sanming, “you are quite nostalgic”. Sanming

replies that “personal affairs are all that we can forget about.” In a quote attributed to Chow Yun-fat, Mark replies, “Today’s society is not suitable for us because we are too nostalgic.”

The two men exchange cell phone numbers, and the ring tones of each man’s phone convey nostalgia as well. Cell phones add an additional intertextual layer to cinema, a trope in many of Jia Zhangke’s works—adding at times even additional screen platforms to the film (Fitzhenry 203). The ringtone of Sanming is the tune “Good People Will Live a Life of Peace.” Mark’s ringtone, on the other hand, is the popular tune sung by Ye Liyi “*Shanghai Tan*” which was the theme song for a television program of the same name during the 1980s. The lyrics provide the segue that ends the shot-sequence reads, “Waves ebb and flow, the river runs incessantly for ten thousand miles.” As the ringtone proceeds, the scene ends as it jumps to a shot of the Yangtze with a boat travelling on the rough waves. The same song blares over the loudspeakers of the boat. Mark’s ringtone thus provides the textual and thematic bridge between the friendships of the two men to the final sequence of Sanming standing over the destroyed city—the last portion of the initial thread before turning to the story of Shen Hong’s search for her husband.

Nostalgia is a complex recasting of the relationship between the present and a perception of a *pastness* through which one attempts to revision a future. Bakhtin refers to a “historical inversion” of the poetic and artistic imagination, through which universal themes such as “purpose, justice, perfection, the harmonious condition of man and society” are housed in the past. This same enrichment process of the past and the present at the “expense of the future” describes the counter-teleological conceptualization of *pastness* inherent to the feeling of nostalgia (146). For example, Sanming and his wife parted sixteen years earlier, yet the immediacy of the present transforms itself into an emphasis of the *pastness* of the relationship—

though perhaps there never had been a perfect relationship at all between them. Therefore nostalgia, which will seek the *pastness* in the present, is in fact the structural makeup of the relationship. Sanming re-seeks the past to enrich the present.

Linda Hutcheon crafts an assessment of nostalgia that similarly breaks the hegemony of the teleological in her essay “Irony, Nostalgia, and the Post-Modern.” She traces the etymologically rich history of the notion that is associated with its Greek roots meaning “to return home” and “pain”, but in fact was employed initially in the 17th century to describe a pathological phenomenon of homesickness. Within the twentieth century, the notion evolved with a slippage of the longing for home with the *pastness* of that home. Hutcheon cites critic James Phillips’ description of this semantic shift as the longing of Odysseus for Ithaca being transformed within the 20th century into Proust’s search for lost time (194). Most importantly, this semantic evolution encompasses an impossibility of return. The “home” that remains in the imagination of the individual as a location to which to return, is now an irrecoverable entity, thus complicating the teleology and anchoring the longing with the predicament of the present. There is a striking similarity between the contemporary notion of nostalgia and the Chinese etymology. Nostalgia in Chinese “huaijiu” contains two semantic markers, the former *huai* to keep something in mind, and *jiu* indicating the past. Most importantly, inherent to the concept of nostalgia, regardless of its linguistic representation, is the relationship of the present in regards to the irrecoverable past. As Hutcheon states:

Nostalgia, in fact, may depend precisely on the *irrecoverable* nature of the past for its emotional impact and appeal. It is the very pastness of the past, its inaccessibility, that likely accounts for a large part of nostalgia's power--for both conservatives and radicals alike. This is rarely the past as actually experienced, of course; it is the past as imagined, as idealized through memory and desire. In this sense, however, nostalgia is less about the past than about the present. (195)

For the characters in *Still Life*, however, this present is also encountering a specific danger once the encroaching waters eradicate physicality.

Rey Chow's understanding of nostalgia echoes Hutcheon's emphasis on the present and the irrecoverability of the past. In her article on the prevalence of nostalgia within Hong Kong film, Chow theorizes the utilization of ghost characters that return from the past and bring with them signifiers from a lost temporality. Rey Chow's writing about nostalgia (though in context of Hong Kong and its colonial past) mobilizes a similar teleological inversion. Chow begins with the traditionally held view of nostalgia as a search for an object which is lost by directing it away from the conventional inherent linear historicity and teleology. Then Chow claims that nostalgia can be reversed and understood as "a feeling looking for an object" and asserts that nostalgia is ultimately a "subjective state that seeks to express itself in pictures imbued with particular memories of a certain pastness" (211). By interjecting the concept of the environmental into the understanding of this pastness and space, the analysis of *Still Life* builds upon Chow's use of the teleological reversal to form a contextualization of nostalgia that focuses more on spatial and temporal relationships. What was once a space known to a character or community has been displaced from its temporality, the resulting affective response has been recycled into the form of a loss. Particular disastrous ecological predicaments, energy projects (such as the damming of the Yangtze River), rapid industrialization, urban renewal that razes traditional housing in favor of modern high-rises, and the resultant migration as a result of these events has all fostered a new form of nostalgia.

In a similar fashion, nostalgia for the environmental, though embedded in the present, has always been a prevalent emotional representation throughout Chinese literature and art—

particularly in its use of natural scenery to express longing for time. Chow sees the mechanics of such nostalgic imagery as a projection of lack/loss onto physicality:

Poets lamented that while the seasons, scenery, architecture, and household objects remained unchanged, the loved ones who once shared this space with them were no longer around. Idioms such as *taohua yijiu, renmian quanfei*—“the peach blossoms are there as always, but the human faces have completely changed”—summarize the feeling of lack/loss peculiar to this kind of nostalgia by contrasting the stability of the environment with the changefulness of human lives. (210)

Historically within the Chinese artistic tradition, poetry and painting have often used depictions of the pastoral for emotional representation. Within depictions of rivers and mountains as well as certain natural occurrences (such as migrating birds, the august moon, or the Yangtze River) the literature creates an embedded sense of nostalgia. Though this chapter is concerned with contemporary film, this analysis aligns itself with the history of the Chinese literary tradition by furthering the discussion of nostalgia and bringing it to the present geo-political situation.

For the film *Still Life*, Chow’s assessment of the traditional representation of nostalgia encounters a pertinent permutation. Her reading of nostalgia in art finds a stability of the spatial with a simultaneous changing of human lives, thus the space envelopes within it the loss of the object. In *Still Life*, human lives are being changed within a rapidly changing environment. The one item that Sanming brings with him to locate his wife is a slip of paper that was once a package of cigarettes. The film begins by showing that this address, the one indication he possesses to locate Missy, signifies a location that has already been submerged by the river. Object loss is thus further destabilized as spatiality disappears, and within it the links with the past. The past thus experiences a danger, for pastness is quickly experiencing an eradication caused by the disappearance of space which houses the representations of cultural history.

In the second narrative thread of the film, Shen Hong finally finds an acquaintance of her husband named Wang Dongming, who is leading a team of archeological investigators attempting to unearth any remaining historical artifacts. Because the waters are rising, his job is to excavate as much as possible. Towards the end of their exchange, Shen Hong asks Wang Dong Ming what they are retrieving, and he replies, “artifacts of the Western Han dynasty.” The waters of modernity will overrun the past, limiting any human attempts to reclaim a past through an adherence to physical objects. In this sense Chow’s assessment proves relevant in that it is the feeling of the characters in a subjective state of searching which perpetuates the nostalgic. Environmental nostalgia, as represented by *Still Life*, is a particular subjective state that problematizes personal relationships with historical and cultural pasts. When the spatiality of the present is forced to change, a loss between the temporal and spatial causes a deep need for signification of cultural history. Without the temporal/spatial in concert, all memory will be lost just like the artifacts that Wang Dongming attempts to retrieve through his archeological digs.

Still Life furthers Jia’s filmic preoccupation with the search for the local amid rapid industrialization, development, and globalization, and most importantly he forms an analysis of emotional reactions to environmental change. The environmental aspects of the dam first allow a particular heterogeneity to occur, similar in structure to the cacophonous linguistic registers of a global visuality, yet tied more intimately with the realities of changing local topography and the economic situation of various classes. Furthermore the environmental impact creates a particular nostalgia, for hometown, for a previous family life, and for reconciliation with a former love. Occurring in the shadow of impending environmental destruction, this environmental nostalgia is like the heterogeneous non-monolithic demographics involved in the project. As will be demonstrated in the last section of this article, the heterogeneity of the migrant/social economics

of the environmental coupled with the nostalgic offset the polarity of the notion of home and homelessness. Finally, Jia's film asserts the possibility of emotional vitality which is cast among multiple changing signifiers of the post-industrial era.

Home and Homelessness

In a well-known passage from "Theses on the Philosophy of History" Walter Benjamin refers to Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* in which an angel, facing the past and with his back towards the future, views the accumulation of successive debris over the course of history. He is propelled towards the future and witnesses the debris growing higher, and according to Benjamin, the storm which moves this angel we refer to as "progress" (257-258). In the introduction to the first collected volume of essays looking at ecocriticism and Chinese film titled *Chinese Ecocinema*, Sheldon Lu references this section of Benjamin's essay to theoretically call for the study of filmic representation in order to attempt a redemption of physical reality, which he states film can accomplish. In many respects, Mainland China offers a perfect contemporary example of Benjamin's metaphor of material history.

In his work *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics*, Sheldon Lu makes the translinguistic pun that contemporary China should be renamed "*chai-na*" ("tearing-down") to represent the perpetual demolition and reconstruction throughout the country (167). His assessment of China's current predicament challenges the traditional notions of home and homelessness and recasts it as a problematic signifier of China itself. In the last scene of the interaction between Sanming and Mr. He (who rents the room to him during his stay in Fengjie), Sanming points to a worker who has been ordered to paint the marker *chai* or "demolish" on the property. Markers of destruction are a recurring theme throughout the film as various buildings

carry the painted sign “156.5 meters” representing the estimated water level by May 2006. Thus the local area of Fengjie, which is home for many and represents a several thousand year history, implodes not from the impending demolition and flooding but of its very contradictory signification: home imbued with the markings of destruction. In fact, the notion of having a home and being homeless are two de-centered polar conceptions that pervade contemporary China as it attempts to provide homes but at the expense of causing homelessness. As Sheldon Lu further comments in his work:

The supreme goal of the Chinese nation at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first has been the “all-out construction of a society of moderate affluence” (*qianmian jianshe xiaokang shehui*), a main component of which is the realization of the dream of a sweet home for each and every citizen. As per capita housing space increases, the domain of memory and history diminishes proportionately for those who have lived in the past. While dreaming about the new in their heads, many citizens do not let the old go so easily in their hearts. (169)

As Lu insinuates, even though there is a state effort for the creation of a home, the notion of home will reside ultimately with the past as its location. One long take involving Sanming and a local motorcycle taxi driver illustrates the ironic relationship between construction and destruction in relation to the notion of having a home. After Sanming arrives in Fengjie, he asks to be driven to a specific address. This address was written on a cigarette pack sixteen years earlier when Missy left him. It is the one signifier that allows Sanming to relocate with his past. Sanming dismounts from the motorcycle to see not a home but only weeds sticking out of the water’s edge. He accuses the driver of attempting to trick him, but the driver shouts back that he was not the one that had ordered the village to be flooded. The driver points to the water and proclaims that his home used to be over where a boat is docked, and the gravity of the current situation behind the dam coalesces into the actualization of a personal experience.

The missing contextual gap narrated in this exchange is the fact that the encroaching Yangtze eliminates previous logical thinking. The advancement of eradication created by the Three Gorges Dam project causes a feeling of homelessness while projecting modernity for the citizens of a global China. Later in the film, an intertextual shot of a television screen shows old black and white footage of Chairman Mao on a boat on the Yangtze expressing a desire to revitalize the area with a large waterworks project. The shot of the television footage, which dominates the screen, reveals the exact same location passing by in the background in color. The television screen is on a boat designed to show the technological innovation being actualized in real time to tourists. This shot shows how the actualization of the dam is a historical actualization, yet through its very establishment, the dam showcases technological development through the harnessing of the river. Meanwhile on the ground, demolition is at work, and the emotional lives of the four main characters are slowly being played out.

Sanming does reunite with his wife; however, the narrative does not resolve all interpersonal relations. Sanming never finds his daughter. Furthermore, the movie ends with a question as to what the future holds for those involved. In assessing *Still Life* as a postscript to his detailed analysis of Jia's corpus, Berry forms an assessment that negatively reads the outcome of the characters implicated in the destruction related to the dam:

Returning to *Still Life*, it is only towards the end of the film that we are presented with a moral twist to the problematises the simple, tragic figure of Sanming. . . It becomes clear that the happy, homogeneous family Sanming searches for probably never even existed. . . With the hometown destroyed and relationships in shambles, Jia seems to leave us with a dark and bitter postscript for his 'Hometown Trilogy' and cinematic search for home . . . But once the hometown has been abandoned, destroyed or submerged, what is left? Perhaps the answer already lies in Jia's 2005 film *The World* where the characters find themselves trapped between an artificial world of model reproductions of historic cultural sites and the virtual world of mobile phones and digital reality. (122)

Though Berry's assessment does point to the distinct possibility that Sanming's entire journey is all in vain, what continues to exist within the submerging terrain are the interpersonal emotions that provide the impetus for the characters to seek each other out to begin with. Jia's film asserts the possibility of personal emotional triumph over changing structures of contemporary life. The destruction and construction of physical home, though tied to memory, remains in a state of contradiction. As Jia comments in an interview,

When I was making *Still Life*, what I first saw was a site of destruction, a two-thousand year old city that was destroyed in two years, leaving a sense of void and emptiness. But at the same time, the people are still going about their daily lives—which is evidence of a strong life force. So there's a sense of contradiction between destruction and an ongoing urge to live. (Rapfogel 47)

The coming together scene of Sanming and Missy (discussed in the introduction) as well as the break-up scene between Shen Hong and Guo Bin in the shadow of the dam demonstrate the possibility of emotional urgency of living despite the destruction of topography.

The final scene between Shen Hong and Guo Bin occurs through a four and a half minute tracking shot that begins by following Shen Hong along a water bank as she angrily walks away from her husband's car. He follows a few steps behind her as they walk towards the camera, and he eventually catches up with her. In profile against the backdrop of the river, they stare at each other in silence. In a gesture seemingly intended to reestablish an emotional bond between the two, Guo Bin offers Shen Hong his hand and attempts a ballroom-type dance with her to the diegetic piped-in music in the distance. In an earlier scene, Shen Hong admits that Guo Bin does to like to dance, and this gesture is an awkward one. The two slowly proceed, turning and dancing to the right, and the camera follows, capturing her face which exhibits an expression of apathy. As the tracking shot continues with the two characters, it is revealed that they are in the reservoir under the large dam which overtakes the background. Finally Shen Hong breaks

away from the stance of the dance, and the two stare at each other in silence with the dam dominating the background. Shen then calmly admits that she has found a new love. Guo Bin asks who the person is and how long the relationship has lasted, but his wife replies that it really does not matter. She says that she and her new love are going to move to Shanghai and that she would like a divorce. Guo Bin unemotionally agrees, and the two characters slowly part ways. Shen Hong continues walking towards the right, and Guo Bin stares at her back as she walks away and towards the dam. He then leaves to the left and eventually moves off-screen. All that remains for the last twenty seconds of the shot is the dam that looms in the distance as Shen Hong walks towards it, shrinking smaller to an almost imperceptible figure on the screen.

The dam is a grand and imposing edifice and it will affect the lives of millions. Yet this construction is not as powerful as the potential of humans to actualize emotional agency against the backdrop of changing signification, as represented by the breakup shot of Guo Bin and Shen Hong. This particular scene, which takes place under the dam, presents the inverse scenario inherent to the shot of Sanming and Missy in the gutted apartment building as they witness the crumbling city. As opposed to Sanming, whose work as a migrant laborer involves the destruction of buildings, Guo Bin is the manager in a construction business and responsible for much of the construction and demolition done in the area. When Shen Hong and Guo Bin finally confront each other in the shadow of the large state project, she enacts a long awaited breakup and inevitable divorce. One relationship re-assembles itself above the horizon of destruction while the other, lingering in the presence of the processes of construction, disintegrates at last.

Boundaries of Representation—*Dong, Still Life, and the Supernatural*

The majority of *Sill Life* uses Jia's typical filmic style employing long takes, an emphasis on conversational pauses, and the highlighting of diegetic sound to focus on the surrounding destruction and changes in topography, giving the film a documentary feel. However, several particular episodes shock the seemingly realistic trajectory of the work with glimpses of unexplained and supernatural elements which in turn point to Jia's interest in pushing the boundaries of fiction, particularly the relations between documentary and film.³⁴ One such shot, and arguably the most startling of the film, occurs in the absence of all the characters.

In an earlier scene, when Shen Hong goes to stay at Wang Dongming's apartment, a peculiar looking building is shown near his residence without any introduction or clarification. The building is a many storied concrete architectural structure made of squares, and it is larger in the middle than the base. Later, the bodies of Shen Hong and Wang Dongming frame the structure in the background as they converse on his balcony. The shot centers on the odd-looking structure, but as the two characters converse, the building camouflages itself in the mise-en-scène. Finally, later in the film, a thirty second shot shows the structure resting still on the horizon. The shot begins very quietly with only the diegetic sounds of birds in the background. Shen Hong goes to the balcony and hangs a shirt on a line and walks back into the apartment. Suddenly, the structure launches like a rocket ship with bright light, though the launch occurs almost silently. Once the structure disappears, the remaining seconds of the shot show the horizon from the perspective of the balcony, with the shirt on the clothesline resting as if nothing had occurred. Because there are no apparent witnesses to the launching, it is if as nothing has even happened.

³⁴ Jia Zhangke's next film *24 City* will further play with this dichotomy. The film documents the destruction of a Mao era airplane factory to make way for a high-rise. The film documents the individual stories of those involved with the factory, but half of the interviewees are real workers and the other half are actors.

The structure turned rocket ship is one of several supernatural or unexplained appearances within *Still Life*. For example, the last shot of the film shows a tightrope walker balancing between two buildings slated for demolition. Also, and as stated earlier in this article, the segue between the first and second narrative thread occurs as Sanming is staring at the horizon. From over the mountains a bright light, appearing to be a spaceship of some sort, flies across the sky and disappears, resurfacing for Shen Hong to see. This two-shot segue initially jars the tranquility of the spectator in relation to the tone Jia sets to portray the events in *Still Life*. A closer look at the first shot of the sequence contains deeper levels when taken in context of Jia's simultaneous documentary project *Dong*. The documentary follows two painting projects of artist Liu Xiaodong and is composed of two parts. The first takes place in the Three Gorges area, and is directly related to Jia's *Still Life*—the two being filmed at the same time. The second half of the documentary follows the same artist as he travels to Bangkok to paint female entertainment workers.

In the first half of the documentary, Liu Xiaodong paints the semi-naked bodies of demolition workers who are tearing down the city to make way for the floods. The finished painting titled *Hotbed*, represents a long fascination of the artist with the Three Gorges and the people affected by it. Earlier, Liu Xiaodong had painted two works titled *Great Migration at the Three Gorges* and *New Settlers at the Three Gorges*; however, these works were done in his Beijing studio, and he used images from photographs and film clips (Wu 30). For *Hotbed*, Liu travelled to Fengjie, the town in which the narrative film *Still Life* takes place, to paint actual laborers. Several shots alternate between a close-up of the artist painting a crouched demolition worker who sits with his head on his hand, a pose similar to Rodin's sculpture *The Thinker*, and a long shot which reveals that the model is none other than Sanming, back to a close-up of the

artist painting, and then a close-up of Sanming. Then, in one shot the camera pans from the canvas to the left as Sanming slowly stands up and gazes at the horizon over the river. From this point in the documentary, the shot is an exact replica of the shot of Sanming in *Still Life* when he witnesses the UFO that then becomes the segue leading to the second narrative thread of the film. The supernatural intervenes in the narrative of *Still Life* at the moment the documentary and narrative film intersect.

A second aspect of *Dong* further confuses the viewer in relation to *Still Life* and the representation of the death of the character MaGe. In *Dong*, demolition workers along with Sanming carry the body of a fallen construction on a bier. This scene is a replication of a shot of the workers and Sanming taking care of the body of MaGe from *Still Life* after he is killed. The documentary, however, goes on to follow Liu Xiaodong, who then visits the home of the wife and daughter of a fallen construction worker whose body was taken from the demolition site. The death of the character MaGe in the narrative film is replaced with the real life death of a construction worker who has travelled to Fengjie to work in demolition.

Representations of The Three Gorges Project in relation to the effects on the natural world coupled with the human toll of the dam's construction only exist among multiple and conflated boundaries of several mediums: including painting, documentary, and narrative film. Jia Zhangke pushes these boundaries within his different works, showing the limits of documentary filming and where narrative elements defy human comprehension. In his article about the Three Gorges and film, Sheldon Lu speaks about a "jarring juxtaposition" between the natural scenery of the film, which resembles traditional landscape paintings, and the reality of demolition, ruins, and the character "chai" which signifies impending destruction (52). The illogical and supernatural elements that Jia throws into the otherwise realistic representation of

the demolition in Fengjie add another jarring element that complicates the boundaries of the diverse artistic projects occurring simultaneously. The appearances of supernatural moments shock the tranquility of the *documentary* effect, but the blow of this shock reminds the viewer that the work *Still Life* is no more than a narrative—a fabricated story, though resonating heavily with true events of contemporary China. Jia's filming of Liu Xiaodong's *Hotbed* similarly pushes what the viewer of a visual work of art would assume to be the documentation of the workers on the Yangtze. By inserting the amateur actor Han Sanming, a character in several of Jia's works, the documentary again blurs what the spectator knows as real and what is representation. As Jason McGrath points out, the boundary between truth and fiction are even blurred once again when it is taken into account that Han Sanming is also Jia Zhangke's cousin named Han Sanming. He is a non-professional actor that has appeared in several of Jia's works. In real life he worked as a coalminer in Shanxi province ("The Cinema of Displacement" 45). Here Jia's work points to the crisis of representation, particularly when the representation of one character logically ushers in the reality of millions of stories. As McGrath aptly points to this accumulation of consciousness and the dilemma of the act of representation in his conclusion:

When the camera pans from the painting of squatting figure to show the real squatting model, we immediately become aware that even this real figure is only an image on the screen, but it is one that presses upon our own consciousness the fact that there are countless individual human stories, more than we can ever know, that have been caught up in and profoundly affected by the Three Gorges Project. (45)

As opposed to Jia Zhangke's previous work *The World*, which intentionally crafts an allegorical space representing globalization, *Still Life* purposefully defies allegorical readings and instead points to cracks in the act of representing the massive destruction that accompanies the Three Gorges Project. Along with narrating topography, in *Still Life* Jia Zhangke exposes the limits of narrating change.

The corpus of Jia's films can be understood as, and as argued by this chapter, a study in narrating topography. From the very beginning, changes to physical space, accompanied by unprecedented access to technology has shaped Jia's cinematic career. With *Still Life*, however, Jia goes a step further in this narration as he exposes the gaps in the contextualization of topographical changes, rather than highlight and capture topography with his camera. What is most important, then, is what is missing, contradictory, and illogical: Missy's house which no longer exists, the daughter Sanming does not find, the rocket ship which goes unexplained, and the myriad other entities which will disappear. These entities evade the grasp of the camera but enhance Jia's narration of topography all the same.

In the end, the two narrative threads of *Still Life* narrate an indirect relationship between the changing challenges of contemporary Chinese society haunted by impending disappearance (as signified by the character "chai") and individual emotions. As the destruction of Fengjie takes place, the concepts of home and homelessness become offset from their original signification, not unlike the homelessness of the migrant worker Sanming who travels to find his estranged wife to recreate a home—though their future together is left unknown. These circular dynamics of economic and social change highlight the heterogeneity of the migrant experience and the social strata that all remain affected though different levels of relationships to the means of production. Nostalgia brings Sanming back to his wife, hidden in the crumbling and flooding area of her hometown; similarly the necessity for Shen Hong to reestablish her emotional life becomes the impetus to relocate her husband only to break up with him. These parallel and inverse stories, that only cross paths through the appearance of supernatural elements, are the same story of love; they are the search for emotional agency amid the economic and environmental changes of China. The need to establish humanity within these multidirectional

dynamics, and the emphasis on what one *cannot* explain, exemplifies the textual project of Jia Zhangke's films as he narrates topography and its emotional impact in the 21st century.

Black Breakfast: a conclusion

As has been outlined by this chapter, Jia's career straddles important dichotomies such as local/global, hometown/ nation, documentary/ narrative film and in a thematic sense nostalgia/apathy. Historically situating Jia's career reveals as well that his work attempts to uncover a larger dichotomy between economic development in Mainland China, which has directly affected his career, and the negative effects of industrial development which ironically established the base of the great social and ideological shifts which he visually describes. From this, an important question can be forwarded to conclude this discussion on Jia Zhanke's cinema and topography. How does Jia's emphasis on topography capture the tension between the dual logic of globalization (understood through economic advancement) that benefits certain individuals and environmental destruction which acts as a detriment (politically and environmentally) to other individuals? A brief reading of his 2008 film short *Black Breakfast* offers a way to answer this question and conclude this chapter.

Jia Zhangke's short film *Black Breakfast* is one of twenty-two film shorts by international directors together titled *Stories on Human Rights* (2008) in honor of the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations. *Black Breakfast* offers a series of scenes of a town that follow a visiting tourist played by Zhao Tao. At the beginning she shoots pictures of local historical attractions, such as a Buddhist statue. As she enters the town she becomes aware of the pollution and its effect on the daily lives of the villagers, signified by the surgical masks worn by many of the locals. The mask has become a normalized way of life

for the townsfolk, and the visitor also begins to don a mask. Meanwhile a power plant looms over the town and spews smoke over the inhabitants. At the end of the sequence corresponding to a two day stay of the tourist, she visits a shack where local laborers are eating breakfast, their faces smeared with carcinogens. The steamed buns that they are eating have been dusted with the black soot of the plant. The tourist then appears beside the locals, not wearing a mask, and her face also smeared with grit. She eats the polluted steamed buns as well.

Black Breakfast can be understood as a condensed version of Jia's environmental preoccupation via his cinematic project of narrating topography. The juxtaposition of images, namely the historic site with the polluting industrial complex, produces tension between the embedded history of human existence and its post-industrial deterioration. Jia, as with all his film, demands where the limits of comprehension reside between human experience and changes in culture and topography. As with *Still Life*, he maneuvers his camera to capture the different social strata inherent to the location. *Black Breakfast* presents the viewer with a visiting tourist, two young students in love, local city dwellers who live in apartments, white collar workers wearing ties and gas masks, and the dirty laborers that live in the shack and who eat the black breakfast. As with *Still Life* the impending environmental doom affects all strata, but through different levels of intensity as mediated by socio-economic positions. The white collar workers at the power plant, for example, are the most guarded against the pollution, and the laborers in the shack eat the polluted breakfast. Most importantly, the revelation of the tourist to the polluted conditions of the inhabitants materializes an enigmatic entity, pollution, and places it on white steamed buns, highlighting the contrast between nourishment and poison.

It is important to first engage the trope of pollution within *Black Breakfast* and position it among inter and intra-national discourses on ecology and developmentalism. The ecocritic Greg

Garrard begins with *pollution* as a point of departure for his full volume work on ecocriticism and literature precisely because of its ambivalent position from which it can be redirected and mobilized. Pollution is at once a material reality of industrialization, and industrialization has had positive effects in the economic development of Mainland China on a national and international level. Pollution is also a toxin that has affected the local populations in dramatic ways, slipping into water and air. However, Garrard points to how the entry of environmental tropes, such as pollution, wilderness, or nature, into the rhetorical realm manifests disproportionate power dynamics among competing ideological positions:

Another critical feature of rhetoric is that tropes are assumed to take part in wider social struggles between genders, classes and ethnic groups. Cultures are not shaped equally by all their participants, nor are the many world cultures equally powerful and we must remain aware that even tropes that might potentially confront or subvert environmentally damaging practices may be appropriated. (8-9)

Garrard takes as an example the trope of wilderness which, if left untouched by a critical eye in regards to how it is mobilized, would seem to possess an inherent subversion of environmental destruction and waste. However, as he points out, the concept of wilderness can be manipulated as with advertisements for Sports Utility Vehicles, as a means to portray ruggedness and naturalness which one can tame while driving a polluting piece of machinery into the woods. Thus the notion of wilderness serves ideologically to legitimize consumption of a vehicle that requires inefficient and heavy use of non-renewal energy sources for the enjoyment of more affluent individuals from developed countries and/or regions (9). What must be understood is *how* a particular trope, such as pollution, assumes its position within a work.

A gap exists between sets of academic disciplines between which environmental tropes are left to assume the ambivalent positions Garrard describes. The disciplines of science and technology introduce and describe elementary particles into the daily lives of individuals. For

example, science provides the nomenclature “carbon dioxide” to describe a particular gas, and science in conjunction with technology introduces more of that gas into the atmosphere through the promotion of vehicles and power plants. However, carbon only becomes a pollutant when it is appropriated by discourses which humanize the effect of the overabundance of such a gas, narratively transforming an industrial byproduct into a toxin. An ecocritical work stakes an “implicit normative claim” which assumes an ethical position that such a substance is in overabundance, altering the function of ecological interactions, and that this alteration should not be occurring (6).³⁵

Jia Zhangke’s film takes an ecocritical stance directly from his determination to narrate topography. By showcasing a specific location and pushing his characters to act in accordance with personal desires he is able to humanize the effects of an industrializing China and expose its negative byproducts as a toxin. The pollution in *Black Breakfast* remains unnamed; however, Jia shows it as a deteriorating factor to the quality of life of the individuals who live near the factory. Take, for example, the shot of the two young students who stand in the foreground with the factory looming in the background billowing fumes. The young school girl first takes off the surgical mask of the young boy, he then takes off her mask and gives her a small kiss. This scene exposes the viewer to a reality that has become commonplace in this village. The tourist, because she is able to enter into the everyday interactions of the locals, views past the commonplaceness of the airborne elements that pervades the town, thus exposing the material as pollution.

Throughout the film, the actual pollution is not necessarily seen. It is suggested that there is an

³⁵ The example *par excellence* of an ecocritical work is Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) which made a cultural claim that DDT was a pollutant and would have disastrous effects on the environment. Garrard utilizes Carson in his descriptions of the role of ecocritical works not only because she is able to bridge a gap between cultural and scientific discourse, but also because she, in the end, proved influential in the eradication of the practice of using DDT as a pesticide. The title of Carson’s work derives from the chapter titled “And No Birds Sing” which bemoans the loss of singing birds to usher in the beginning of spring due to a specific ecological interaction caused by DDT which has resulted in the disappearance of bird populations in certain areas.

airborne toxin, and the air in the village appears hazy, but it does not coalesce into a material reality until it appears as a coating on the white steamed buns. The willingness of the dirtied tourist to consume the poisoned food along with the locals presents the progression of consumption, literally, and consumption is what creates the pollution to begin with.

By emphasizing the topographical conditions, Jia's ecocritical turn exposes a violence that conceals itself in the everyday which in turn camouflages the accumulation of toxicity. There is a divide between the spectacularity of the omnipresent poison and the unspectacularity of its appropriation into the mundane. The power dynamics inherent to globalization favor the spectacular which overdetermines its importance and neglects festering forms of violence which are equally if not more perilous. This condition is described by ecocritic Rob Nixon as "slow violence" whose presence within global conditions elucidates privileging of particular narrative forms. He adeptly describes slow violence in the follow way:

The role of what I call slow violence in the dynamics of concealment derives largely from the unequal power of spectacular and unspectacular time. In an age that venerates instant spectacle, slow violence is deficient in the recognizable special effects that fill movie seats and flat-screen TVs with the pyrotechnics of Shock and Awe. Instead, chemical and radiological slow violence is driven inward, somatized into cellular dramas of mutation, into unobserved special effects. From a narrative perspective, such invisible, mutagenic theater is slow-paced but open-ended, eluding the tidy closure, the narrative containment, imposed by the visual orthodoxies of victory and defeat. (445)

The concept of "slow violence" clarifies different strategic emphases of diverse works that approach natural disasters and environmental pollution. The Sichuan earthquake of 2008, for example, immediately inspired many documentaries to capture the horrible disaster that killed scores of thousands, the government's response, and the willingness of the survivors to endure. Such grand disasters easily lend themselves to the cameras gaze and the attention of different

directors, and the subject of natural disasters has become a recent subject of many different works.³⁶

Jia's cinematic technique as well as his emphasis on topography forces the slower natural disasters (the flooding of the Yangtze or the accumulation of carbon into the atmosphere) and makes it immediately visible. Jia's camera unmasks the concealment of the tragedy occurring all around, making him an acute critic of the accumulation of toxins and the subsequent changes within the environment that do not necessarily shock world spectatorship as do large national tragedies. Rather, Jia speaks to a greater tragedy of the contemporary condition which perniciously normalizes its very existence with the process of developmentalism. The cinema of Jia Zhangke is therefore a method of exposing camouflaged violence of contemporary Chinese society. By lingering on particular locations and placing his characters in relation with the natural world under drastic change of slow violence, he performs the ecocritical task that explores how contemporary individuals in society function in dissonance with the progression of a globalizing China.

³⁶ Isabella Tianzi Cai and Kevin Lee comment on the popularity of the narrative film about the 1976 Tangshan Earthquake *Aftershock* (2010) as well as the documentary *1428* (2009) about the Sichuan Earthquake in their online article "Cinematic Earthquakes: Thoughts on *Aftershock* and *1428*" on the dGenerate Films website.

Chapter 4

Dai Sijie and the Impossibilities of Return

The films and novels of Dai Sijie have become quite popular but have also incited criticism for eroticized and romantic depictions of rural China during the Cultural Revolution. Dai has been considered a Francophone Chinese (*chinois-francophone*) writer, having now lived in France for two decades. All of his works, however, turn to China as both the setting of his narrative as well as the source of memories that haunt many of his characters. The thematic elements of his works include the depictions of the Cultural Revolution in a variety of lights (serious, humorous, and sentimental) and exploration of his position as outsider to China as the country rapidly develops into the twenty-first century. The scholarship on Dai's work thus far mainly focuses on his popular novel and subsequent film *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*—often highlighting either his *orientalizing* view of China, his fascination with French culture, or the work's intertextuality. Taking Dai's works as a whole, and particularly when reading his first two novels off each other, several complex relationships between Dai and his homeland surface, offering entry passages for interpretive insight. Furthermore, when Dai reworked his first novel into a Chinese language film he added an ecocritical section about the flooding due to the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. This addition not only offers a lens in which to reevaluate the many themes of his earlier works, it also demonstrates how environmental factors play an integral role in the complex negotiation process of identity among Chinese diasporic writers.

Dai Siie was born in Putian, Fujian Province in 1954. During the Cultural Revolution he was sent for reeducation in rural Sichuan between 1971 and 1974. In 1984 he accepted a

scholarship to move to France for study, where he continues to reside. In Paris, Dai studied filmmaking at IDHEC (*Institut des hautes études cinématographiques*). His first full length feature film *China My Sorrow* debuted in 1989 and won several recognitions such the Prix Jean Vigo. He produced two films in the 1990s *Le Mangeur de Lune* (1994) as well as *Tang Le Onzième* (1998). In 2000 Dai published his first novel *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, which immediately became an international best-seller with translations into numerous languages. Dai would immediately rewrite the novel into a script and direct the film version in 2002. Dai's second novel *Mr. Muo's Travelling Couch* (*Le complexe de Di*) won the Prix Fémina in 2003, though this novel did not enjoy as much popularity as his first. Dai has continued to be productive in literature and film having published *Once on a Moonless Night* as well as the film *Daughter of the Chinese Botanist* both in 2006. Dai Sijie has been identified with a group of writers from Mainland China and who use the French language for their writing and have been termed "*chinois-francophone*". This group also includes François Cheng, Shan Sa, Shen Dali, and Ying Chen among a few others (Détrie 65).³⁷

This chapter begins by reading Dai Sijie's first full-length film *China My Sorrow* to demonstrate his preoccupation with the Cultural Revolution and reeducation as a place in which a character experiences a coming-of-age. The horrors and injustices that permeate this first work will grow in complexity in Dai's first novel *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* which highlights the sexual, exotic, humorous, and the romanticized as inherent to reeducation during the time of the Cultural Revolution. A reading of this work demonstrates the emphasis on space

³⁷Dai, however, has identified with an assembly of international authors that have rejected the notion of francophone in favor of a "World Literature in French": *littérature-monde en français* (Barbery, Muriel et al.). This chapter, however, does not engage with the various debates about how to contextualize Dai's relationship with French or Francophone writers. Rather, the readings of this chapter engage his interaction with China as source of past, his self-conscious distanced position, and most importantly the environmental problems that have unconsciously affected his narrative.

and its relationship to memory, and this reading will also complicate the role of the narrator within the text. This work, read against his second novel *Mr. Muo's Travelling Couch*, demonstrates how the diasporic subject can physically return; however, psychic forces distance him from the concept of homeland. Through what will be termed an “overt intertextuality,” these two works will be read against each other to demonstrate how they explore a distance between the characters and their positions in regards to China and the past. This positioning will be shown to become more problematic when the environmental factors are taken as a prism to refocus an understanding of Dai's corpus. Reading the works that span Dai's career will show how his narratives resonate with one another, offering a more nuanced way of understanding his novels and films as well as his position with regards to his past and the dangers of environmental destruction which challenge the existence of that past.

Thematic Origins: *China, My Sorrow*

Dai Sijie's first film *China, My Sorrow* recounts the injustices of the Cultural Revolution, but at a distance from mainland Chinese political constraints— it was shot in France using diasporic actors. Though the film explores the hardships of the Cultural Revolution, the work's themes are quite different from “scar literature” of the previous decade. The work does highlight direct and indirect victimhood from “the drama of Chinese Socialism” (to borrow Lau's phrase), but most importantly the film is about a coming-of-age through injustice (“Text and Context” 24). Other themes, such as the relationship of humor to political consequences as well as the importance of the relationship between space and place are examined throughout the film, and they will become preoccupations of Dai in his later works.

China, My Sorrow begins in a fashion reminiscent of Milan Kundera's first novel *The Joke*, in which a pleasantry leads to serious political consequences (Young 107). The film's thirteen year-old protagonist plays a record of a love song out his window to a young girl in the neighboring courtyard. Because it is a banned record, the boy (referred to as Four-Eyes) is deemed an enemy of the state and sentenced to a prison camp.³⁸ Four-Eyes befriends two individuals in the camp—a young pickpocket and a Buddhist monk. The monk does not speak, and he spends his days taking care of the many pigeons that roost in the area, with whom it appears he can communicate. In the camp the boy encounters numerous hardships from the camp's leader. Forced into hard labor, he contracts a plague and at one point is dismissed as dead. With the aid of his friend the monk, he regains his health. One day Four-Eyes asks the monk the best possible way of escape, and the monk in return points directly to the sky. This scenario will thematically demonstrate how the place of relocation contains a gravitational pull. Four-Eyes tries to leave, but after a while must return to the camp because he is not able to survive in the wilderness. The monk's indication of the sky as the direction of escape insinuates that a spiritual path is perhaps the only direction of true escape, and the end of the film will follow this logic.

The theme as represented by the premise of the film, a joke which leads to dire consequences, continues in the camp as well and leads to the dramatic conclusion of the film. At one point, the leader suffers from an illness, and the monk concocts a tonic that proves effective. Four-Eyes and his friend the pickpocket discover that a certain root, when added to the tonic, will lead to diarrhea. They lace the leader's food with this diuretic, and when the leader eventually suspects that his food had been tainted, he blames the monk of poisoning him. He then seeks vengeance and orders all of the inmates to kill the local pigeons and use the meat in

³⁸ Four Eyes is a recurring character name in Dai's works. In *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, Four-Eyes (in French "*le binoclard*") is the name of the character that possesses the suitcase of banned novels. Similarly the protagonist in *Mr. Muo* is referred to as "Four-Eyes" by others.

order to strengthen their diets. The directive results in a massive slaughter of the monk's pigeons and the slaughter will prove to be too devastating for the monk to bear. Late one evening Four-Eyes comes across the monk in the woods giving a private puppet show to a non-existent audience. From behind the shadow screen, he sees the monk poised to stab himself in the throat. The boy rushes to his rescue, and saves his life, though the monk does succeed in injuring himself. In their room later that evening, the monk actually speaks to the boy (the first and only time he has the ability of speech) and states that Four-Eyes, in saving his life, had committed a crime worse than killing. As a result Four-Eyes grabs a pillow and carries out the intended wishes of the monk by suffocating him to death. In the last scene of the film, Four-Eyes takes off one of his shoes, in memory of the monk, and flees the camp. Four-Eyes' escape leaves the insinuation that he will either become like the monk himself, or flee like the birds in the direction of the sky—the direction that the monk had indicated earlier in the film as the true path of escape.

Several themes inherent to *China, My Sorrow* will remain important to Dai in his later work. The first is the seriousness of humor. It is the act of innocently wooing a neighborhood girl with a banned song that leads Four-Eyes into political banishment. Similarly, his practical joke on the camp leader leads to the killing of the monk's birds, the resultant attempted suicide, the boy's coming to terms with his actions, and his decision to euthanize his friend. The humor in these instances leads to the worst possible outcomes. Evans Chan understands this type of humor to be "amiable comic touches" in *China, My Sorrow* that will be "reprised" in *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* and its film adaptation (Chan 108). This assessment of humor in Dai's works does not account for the fact that in his first film *China, My Sorrow*, the humor will lead to horror and death. With Dai's later works, the humor will be able to survive within and among the political climate, demonstrating a thematic shift in his works in which he will allow space for

humor alongside seriousness, but humor in his first film is not like the humor in his subsequent works. *China, My Sorrow*, as the title suggests³⁹, is not intended to have any comic touches, for any humor that does exist will mutate into horror, sorrow, or death. Such a shift in Dai's position towards humor in his later works possibly shows a distancing from the events, and the ability of him to utilize the Cultural Revolution as a space for nostalgic adolescent sexual awakening along the lines of films such as Jian Wen's 1992 *In the Heat of the Sun* (Chan 109). Therefore, Dai's later works will undergo a serious permutation in regards to humor as will be evidenced in this chapter's reading of *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, and most prominently of the novel *Mr. Muo's Travelling Couch*.

The Second major theme inherent to Dai's first film which will remain important in his later works is the placement of the narrative in a remote and seemingly impenetrable location. The reeducation in the countryside becomes a space in which the politics create a scenario through which the child has no recourse but to mature as a man. The maturation process in the case of *China, My Sorrow* involves taking the life of a monk and spiritually fleeing the location. The place itself has a particular gravitation pull which keeps the characters trapped. In an early scene in the film, Four-Eyes asks the monk which direction to flee, and the monk points towards the sky. Though baffled by this direction, he decides to escape all the same, but after a time, he must return because he is not able to go very far in the wilderness by himself. The location then becomes a prominent actor in the work.

As will be discussed in the proceeding section of this chapter, the location within *Balzac* will also remain an important agent in the narrative. The narrative is situated within spatiality thus creating a primacy of place. Within the field of Cultural Geography, the philosophical

³⁹ The English title is a direct translation of the French title *Chine, Ma Douleur*. The Chinese title *Niu Pen* means a cowshed in which prisoners were often housed during the Cultural Revolution.

conceptualization of the differences between the notions of space and place proves pertinent to this discussion. The physical space of the prison camp houses the inmates and their interactions, and the area will become imbued with larger significance:

The continued repetition of particular sorts of behavior come to be associated with particular places, and newcomers are socialized into the sorts of behavior found at those places. The result is places provide an anchor of shared experiences between people and continuity over time. Spaces become places as they become 'time-thickened'. They have a past and a future that binds people together around them. (Crang 103)

The space of punishment will become significantly charged, allowing the characters to anchor it as a place of the past, a place of memory, and a place of trauma. The time-thickened characteristic of places mirror's Yi-Fu Tuan's evaluation of the relationship between space and place in which he asserts that the transformation of the more ambiguous nature of space into place occurs once space has been endowed with value (7). Within this space of reeducation, the main character must negotiate with the political, social, and spiritual forces in order to assert himself in the end. In the case of *China My Sorrow*, a final catharsis assumes the shape of the escape of Four-Eyes in the end, perhaps from the camp, perhaps from society, or perhaps from mortality. The exact fate of the main character will remain ambiguous, but in the end, it is the ability of the main character to interact within a particularized and heavily signified space that allows his maturation.

This interplay between the creation of spaces into places and vice versa is described by de Certeau as an inherent component of narrative itself. His assertion that all narratives are travel stories indicates the primacy of the spatial in relation to the actors, human, animate, or otherwise. Stories necessarily describe the relationship between a character who either leaves one space to another or develops a particular relationship with a locale—in other words, narratives articulate spatial practices (115). Four-Eyes's comic yet politically charged transgression forces him to

leave his home and assume a life within the confines of the rural place of reeducation that in turn casts a gravitational pull on all of the characters. The entire narrative leads up to the point at which the character must exit the location—either spiritually or physically. Finally, it can be asserted that perhaps the location of the prison camp within Dai's narrative assumes structural similarities to what Augé would deem to be a non-place—a place not concerned with identity or historicity and promoted instead within the realm of memory (78). The narrative assumes within its framework a retelling of the traumatic past that situates its actors in the confines of a place removed from society. The prisoners have been extracted from their regular locations due to ideological difference, yet it is with this remote location that Four-Eyes must come of age. One could even go further, taking into consideration the filming of the work itself, that Dai as director was not able to return to China to make this film. Rather, this place of traumatic memory was filmed in France. Space as location of memory, and as integral component of a filmic text, provide an interesting reevaluation of the mechanics of Dai's craft which will become more entangled with identity politics and the environmental as his career continues and he gains more popularity as a filmmaker and author.

The primacy of place, therefore, sets a backdrop that will become integral to the discussion of Dai's later works, particularly when between the production of *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* and its film adaptation. As the Yangtze rises to endanger notions of place, the relationships between individuals, memory, trauma, and identity become intimately tied to the relationships one has with space and place. Because Dai's first film remains heavily invested in the 'time-thickened' aspect of the place of reeducation, it will become the point of departure for an environmental critique of Dai's overall corpus.

***Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*—Problems in Narration, Primacy of Place.**

Much of the reviews and criticism of Dai Sijie's first novel *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*⁴⁰ are quick to point out that the work is autobiographical. Indeed Dai was reeducated in rural Sichuan, as are the two protagonists in this work, Luo and the narrator. Much of the scholarship, however, is hasty to assume that the narrator is the personification of the author.⁴¹ In a 2002 interview with Dai Sijie for *Avant Scène Cinéma*, the interviewer also assumes this connection, to which Dai responds that the actual group with which he was associated consisted of four people. For the novel and the subsequent film, he collapsed the individuals of his past into two protagonists (Aknin 77). A close reading of several episodes in the novel reveals that the connection between the narrator and the author is not a direct relationship, but a complex of possibilities. Furthermore, the novel's narrator Ma is not the best narrator among the characters, nor is he the one most likely to become a future writer. Finally, it will be shown that one of the main actors in the narrative is not a person, but the locale itself— Phoenix of the Sky.

Balzac begins as two reeducated youths, Luo and the narrator, climb rugged mountain peaks to see their place of reeducation. This remote area is comprised of a precipitous valley named Phoenix of the Sky, and it holds a series of villages connected by dangerous mountain passages. The two protagonists adapt slowly to village life and sense the chasm between themselves and the local villagers, who the two boys look down upon yet fear since they now inhabit the lowliest position in the town. Luo and Ma are forced to engage in physically demanding tasks such as hauling feces out of the village and working in the mines. Since they

⁴⁰ Henceforth *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* will be referred to as *Balzac*.

⁴¹ The narrator is never named in the novel; however, there is a hint about the characters that comprise his name—the family name being represented by the symbol for horse or “ma.” In the film version of the work, the character will have this name. References to the narrator as character will use the name Ma for sake of simplicity.

are educated, they are also in charge of going to the village to see propaganda films from North Korea and retell the plot to the local villagers. In one of the neighboring towns, a childhood friend of the two name “Four-Eyes” undergoes his reeducation. Luo and Ma surmise that Four-Eyes is hiding a stash of classic novels. After much persistent asking, the two are lent a copy of *Ursule Mirouet* as a tradeoff for completing some of Four-Eyes’ work after he breaks his glasses. The boys devour this novel and then become convinced they must locate the treasure trove of books hiding somewhere. Four-Eyes stubbornly refuses to allow the Luo and Ma access to his library, and when it is announced that he will be released early from his reeducation, the two boys conspire to steal the books. They know that Four-Eyes would not dare turn them in for fear of admitting that he had been housing banned books. Once they successfully obtain the suitcase of novels, they undergo a sentimental education. Luo presumptuously wishes to apply to a local beauty known as the Little Seamstress—the daughter of a local tailor of Phoenix of the Sky who had developed a great reputation in the region for his fine work and is consequently treated like a local aristocrat.

Luo and Ma become infatuated with the Little Seamstress, and Luo leads the cause to educate her with their newly found classics of literature. They begin reading to her, and a relationship develops among them. The presence of the two boys with the seamstress inevitably sets up a triangular situation. Though both are infatuated with her, it is Luo that is able to woo her first. Ma harbors a particular jealousy towards their relationship and secretly falls in love with her. Ultimately it is Ma that the Seamstress asks to take care of her when she intimates that she is pregnant. Though dangerous and against the law, Ma arranges an abortion in the nearest hospital, and it is never certain whether Luo ever knows of this incident. One day, however, the tailor informs the two youths that his daughter has decided to leave the countryside. They chase

her down, but her only parting words to them are that their readings of novels taught her only one thing taken from Balzac, “a woman’s beauty is a treasure beyond price” (197).

Balzac is mostly narrated in first person by Ma, though towards the end of the work there are three brief segments, one narrated by Luo, one by the Little Seamstress, and another by an old miller. Ma and Luo are lifelong best friends; as Ma states, “I am not exaggerating when I say that Luo was the best friend I ever had. We grew up together, we shared all sorts of experiences, often tough ones. We very rarely quarreled” (9). It is obvious early on in the novel that the story takes place in the past, and the narrator is reminiscing about younger days. After a brief introductory exposé, which recounts Luo’s and Ma’s first adventures with the village, the narrator details historical information regarding the Cultural Revolution, the history of he and Luo’s relationship, and events leading up to their reeducation. The narrator retells his past in the following manner:

Between the ages of twelve and fourteen we had been obliged to wait for the Cultural Revolution to calm down before the school reopened. And when we were finally able to enroll we were in for a bitter disappointment: mathematics had been scrapped from the curriculum, as had physics and chemistry. From then on our lessons were restricted to the basics of industry and agriculture. Decorating the cover of our textbooks would be a picture of a worker with arms as thick as Sylvester Stallone’s, wearing a cap and brandishing a huge hammer. (8)

This opening paragraph contains several important items of interest. The loss felt by the narrator upon reentering school demonstrates a loss of the love of learning. During their reeducation, it will be this same desire for learned materials (and not the fruits of physical labor) that will drive the two characters to try and figure out whether Four-Eyes really has a treasure chest of classic novels. This drive will also incite them to procure that trove by all possible means, including theft. Learning had been replaced by revolution, yet as the narrator continues to explain, though they are forced to acquire revolutionary zeal, the students secretly remained obstinate:

Flanking him [the worker] would be a peasant woman, or rather a Communist in the guise of a peasant woman, wearing a red headscarf (according to the vulgar joke that circulated among us school kids she had tied a sanitary towel around her head). (8)

According to the narrator, there is a dichotomy between the state sponsored propaganda taught in schools and the students' willingness to accept it. These differences between the willingness of youths participating in the revolution and their experiences during the reeducation are explored in the novel—particularly with Luo and Ma's violation of the law by hoarding bourgeois literature. The aforementioned passages also establish a timeframe for the narration of the novel's events. The admission of Ma about the unwillingness of his participation in the zealotry of the revolution proceeds from a safe historical confessional distance. Furthermore, the description of the worker with arms as thick as Stallone's indicates a passage of time through a popular culture reference. This is one of the very few indicators in the novel, outside of a historical tone regarding certain incidents, which dates the distance between the narrator retelling the story and the events being told.⁴²

The role of Ma as narrator is quite complex. Throughout the novel, he ranks second to Luo in his story-telling ability. The only duty of Luo and Ma outside of manual labor is to retell the propaganda movies to the villagers. The boys are sent by the village head on several occasions to the nearest city where the films are shown. They will see these films a few times to make sure they have all the details of the work, for they fear retribution if they perform an inadequate job. Ma usually becomes nervous while retelling the story, and it is often Luo that has to come to his rescue:

I was overcome by stage fright and was reduced to a mechanical recitation of the setting of each scene. But here Luo's genius for storytelling came into its own. He was sparing with his descriptions, but acted the part of each character in turn,

⁴² As will be discussed in a later section of this chapter, the film adaptation will employ a temporal jump through an addition to the original novel and will show Ma living in Paris years later.

adjusting his tone of voice and gestures accordingly. He took complete control of the narrative, keeping up the suspense, asking the listeners questions, making them respond and correcting their answers. By the time we, or rather he, reached the end of the story in the allotted time, our audience was ecstatic. (22)

Ma admits throughout the novel that he is not a good storyteller. On one particular occasion, Ma and Luo go to the Seamstress's house. Upon the way Luo has another attack of high fever associated with the malaria that he had contracted earlier. When they reach her place, he falls extremely ill. The seamstress attends to Luo, and four old sorceresses come to cure him of his ailments. Ma decides to retell the story of the North Korean Film *The Little Flower Seller* in order to keep the older women awake as they tend vigil to his sick friend. Ma describes,

So I embarked on the strangest performance of my life. In that remote village tucked into a cleft in the mountain where my friend had fallen into a sort of stupor, I sat in the flickering light of an oil lamp and related the North Korean film for the benefit of a pretty girl and four ancient sorceresses. (42)

Ma attempts with as much detail as possible to convey the sadness of the story. The ending of the story has a poor flower girl rushing to her mother's deathbed, but she is too late. The mother whispers the girl's name in her last breath, but she was not there to hear it. Ma looks forward to this part of the story for its emotive depth; however, he grows disappointed that he is unable to reach his audience who appear to remain unmoved by the tragic end to the story. Luo, from his sickbed and suffering from Malaria, interrupts the story to save its retelling:

Suddenly, from inside the white mosquito net, came a voice that sounded as if it issued from the bottom of a well.

"The saying goes," Luo intoned, "that a sincere heart can make a stone blossom. So tell me, was the flower girl's heart lacking in sincerity?"

I was struck more by the fact that Luo had uttered the resounding finale before the story had ended than by his sudden awakening. But what a surprise, when I glanced around the room: the four sorceresses were weeping! Their tears spurted forth generously and coursed down their warped, fissured cheeks. (43)

This scene of the retelling of the story exemplifies how Ma remains subordinate to Luo in storytelling expertise. Ma had been given full attention from his audience, yet he fails to

captivate his audience though the story contains all necessary emotions to hold their attention. Rather it is Luo's interruption, while supine and hiding behind a mosquito net, that resurrects the tale's pathos.

Eventually Ma evolves as a storyteller and proves successful when he later recounts the plot of *Count of Monte Cristo* to the Tailor, after which Luo will comment, "right now you are better than me, you should be a writer" (133). However, Ma throughout the majority of the story will remain secondary in narrative might to his friend. Similarly, Luo's comment, though complimentary, admits the storytelling inferiority of Ma. The position of Ma as storyteller/writer of a retelling of his own reeducation points to the possibility that the full depth of the events being recounted, a period of the narrator's life that is filled with longing, hardship, and despair, will remain unsuccessfully conveyed to the readers. Ma is the lesser bard of the events of this novel, limited in talent and persuasive ability to his friend. He is unable to capture the inherently contained emotional impact of the propaganda film. His position as teller of this story as well as the events on Phoenix of the Sky is the penultimate position. Perhaps this position echoes Dai as a writer, crafting the narrative autobiography from a geographic and temporal distance and utilizing a foreign tongue. The position of Ma as the secondary teller of the story will resonate with the position of the protagonist in *Mr. Muo's Travelling Couch*—the two represent self-conscious and insecure positions.

Of all the character in the novel, the one that would best position himself as writer to the events of the reeducation would in fact be Four-Eyes. He is well-read and knows the classics of Chinese as well as European literature. He is the guardian of the suitcase of banned books that the other two try to locate. In fact Four-Eyes comes from a literary family. In pondering the

contents of the secretive suitcase, Ma and Luo begin to believe that it is probably filled with Western literature. They share the follow observations:

“What made you think of Western literature?” I asked Luo.

“Well I was just wondering. That might well be what Four-Eyes has got in his leather suitcase.”

“You may be right. What with his father being a writer and his mother a poet, they must’ve had plenty of books at home, just as there were lots of books about Western medicine in your house and mine.” (55)

Ma and Luo both come from medical families. Luo’s father is a well-known dentist. Ma’s father is a lung specialist, and his mother is a specialist in parasitic diseases. They are set to follow their parents’ footsteps and go into medical fields. Four-Eyes, on the other hand, is more than likely being pressured by his parents to follow more literary pursuits. In contemplating why Four-Eyes’ parents would take the dangerous chance of leaving him with a cache of forbidden books, Luo comments, “Just as your parents and mine always dreamed that we’d be doctors like them, Four-Eyes’s parents probably wanted their son to be a writer. They must have thought it would be good for him to read books, even if he had to do so in secret” (55). The character Four-Eyes plays an integral role in the development of the plot. Without his hidden trove of books, the relationships among the two main protagonists and the Chinese Seamstress would not have been the same. He instigates the events through the very texts he tries to conceal. Furthermore, the novel’s fascination with Francophilia, as critiqued by various critics of this work, takes another dimension. If it is Dai’s fascination with French culture that remains problematic in the novel, it is specifically the character Four-Eyes that is ultimately guilty. Dai’s autobiographical positioning in conjunction with the narrator meets a potential problematic limit, for the only

logical character that similarly harbors a fascination with French texts and is ultimately capable of retelling this story in the future is in fact the character Four-Eyes.⁴³

Ma is in fact better known as a musician than an author or storyteller. In the opening scene, as the two boys enter the village, the chief becomes curious about Ma's violin and wishes to burn it as a bourgeois toy. Ma explains that it is a musical instrument and plays a sonata to prove it. When asked the name of the piece, Ma explains that it is Mozart, but immediately backtracks fearing a backlash from the audience. Luo interrupts and explains that the piece he had just played is in fact called *Mozart is thinking about Chairman Mao*. In an inverse sequence of events, Ma and Four-Eyes trade places in regards to music. Four-Eyes catches a lucky break and is assigned to collect folk songs from the mountain dwellers in order to report back to the central government and offer songs from the people. Four-Eyes' attempts to procure these songs from a character named Old Miller, however, prove futile. In the end he actually insults the man and is not able to record the songs that he needs. In order to garner Four-Eyes' favor in an attempt to get the hidden books, Ma and Luo offer to speak with the Old Miller. They spend an evening with him and listen to his musical ability, eventually recording bawdy songs of the rural folk tradition. Four-Eyes receives these songs and becomes angry because they are vulgar and because the Communist government would not accept such "rubbish." Thus he proceeds to change the lyrics to the song, infuriating Ma who then hits him. Ironically it is the recording of these songs which leads to Four-Eyes' early dismissal from his reeducation. The paths of Ma and Four-Eyes are in a sense inversely linked. Without Ma's ability to musically collect the material from the mountain folk, Four-Eyes would have not been released. Furthermore, had Four Eyes not been released early, Ma and Luo would have never been able to successfully steal the trove

⁴³ Four Eyes (or the original *Balzac*, 'le binoclard') is also a character in *China my Sorrow* and *Mr. Muo's Travelling Couch*.

of books. Thus the position of Four-Eyes and Ma are intrinsically linked. It is therefore difficult to read Ma as a direct autobiographical representation of the author. Rather, understanding the relative merits of each character and their potential within the text gives larger understanding of its complexities. The novel insinuates that Ma will not aspire to be a writer, nor a doctor like his parents, but a musician.⁴⁴ The position of the author in relation to the text is thus fragmented, and one cannot assume a direct relationship between Ma and Dai Sijie.

The most important relationship within the novel is the connection of the characters to the place Phoenix of the Sky. In being the place of reeducation, it is also a place of that is highly politicized. This location will also become a space for maturity and sexual awakening. Furthermore, Phoenix of the Sky remains far from the city and civilization which was Chairman Mao's intent, but ironically, the presence of the suitcase of books will also make it a place of imagination which will lead the characters through a journey of maturity. Thus the mountain opens itself to myriad symbolic representations that show in many ways a transcendence (Flambard-Weisbart 429). From the perspective of Maoist ideology this transcendence is social and class based, and for the boys it will be one of literary and libidinal maturation. The dynamic nature of the location makes it an interactive agent within the story as it is negotiated from varying positions.

The location Phoenix of the Sky is introduced as a distant hidden rural location, unknown to most of the outside world, being described in the following manner:

There was no road into the mountain, only a narrow pathway threading steeply through great walls of craggy rock. For a glimpse of a car, the sound of a horn, a whiff of restaurant food, indeed for any sign of civilization, you had to tramp across rugged mountain terrain for two days. A hundred kilometers later you would reach the banks of the River Ya and the small town of Yong Jing. The only Westerner ever to have set foot here was a French missionary, Father Michel, who tried to find a new route to Tibet in the 1940s. (12)

⁴⁴ In fact in the movie version, this will be the case.

The notes of the missionary are then given as a description of the place, which comment on its history as far back as the Han dynasty and its natural resources, notably copper. The notes also speak of the prevalence of arable land for opium growing and warn that certain areas of this countryside should be avoided since bandits now rule large portions of it. The fact that only one Westerner had seen this place coupled by the fact that his description is one of admiration as well as caution, adds to the mystique of the locale.

It is obvious throughout the work that Luo and Ma are not willing participants in the Cultural Revolution. Their reeducation is one of horror, particularly after witnessing the events that led up to their banishment, including the public humiliation of Luo's father. Depictions of the location will also reflect negativity:

It rained often on Phoenix mountain. It rained almost two days out of three. Storms or torrential downpours were rare; instead there was a steady, insidious drizzle that seemed to go on for ever and the peaks and cliffs surrounding our house on stilts were constantly veiled in a thick, sinister mist. The unearthly panorama depressed us. What with the perpetual humidity inside the hut and the ever more oppressive damp in the walls, it was worse than living in a cellar. (17)

The notes of the visiting missionary are used to describe secretiveness, nefariousness, and the exotic. Ma's depictions will also heterogeneously color the countryside, and this dynamic representation contributes to Dai's textual project. Yvonne Hsieh writes that the fundamental thematic difference between the works of Dai Sijie and "scar literature" or "Urbling literature" lies in the author's dallying with the humorous as well as the horrific (94). The purpose of "scar literature" was to provide an outlet for burgeoning writers to find literary space after the Cultural Revolution as well as address grievances of the past. The time of Dai's first novel withstanding (scar literature being a product of the late 1970s and early 80s), he is not dependant on addressing the injustices of the past, though he does not hold back from criticizing Mao's ideas

and the revolution itself. Dai offers a cacophony of experiences, utilizing the humorous as well as the dramatic, for the depiction of time and place. Thus there is a point of resistance in his fictional autobiographical retelling.

As discussed in chapter 2 of this dissertation in regards to Han Shaogong's depiction of peasant life during the Cultural Revolution, the peasant and the 'local' within Maoist ideology was politicized through sublime characteristics (Lee "Cultural Lexicology" 156). Dai's narrative teases the overtly political, making it play a profound role in relation to his characters. Within Dai's text, he offers periods of political vacuums in which the characters are granted agency which they explore through the literary and the sexual. Once the boys have secured the suitcase of books, they have the fortunate advantage of being left relatively alone in the town. The head is sent to an extended conference. Once he leaves, the heavy hand of dogmatic scrutiny is lifted from Ma and Luo's activities as well as the lives of the villagers. As Ma narrates,

In the ensuing political vacuum our village lapsed into quiet anarchy, and Luo and I stopped going to work in the fields without the villagers—themselves unwilling converts from opium farmers to guardians of our souls—raising the slightest objection. I kept my door more securely locked than ever and passed the time with foreign novels. (117)

The political climate of the Phoenix of the Sky is malleable depending on the hierarchical structure at any given moment. Within this location, the two boys find the opportunity to escape into an imaginary literary realm far away. Similarly, Luo is able to experiment with a sexual awakening that he has found in the hidden trove of books—the local seamstress being his project. The location, therefore, is not static but interactive. It is on one hand the negative place that the boys have to go to. It is political when it is overseen by the village chief. It also houses the trove of books which allows the protagonists to cerebrally escape. Finally and most importantly Phoenix of the Sky is held in the memory of the narrator who describes it years later. Its

multifaceted and multi-dimensional descriptions of location are the means through which the narrator tells his story as well as stages his narrative. *Balzac* is the novel about a place, and it is this place which lingers in the memory of the narrator. It is also in the past, marking a period of history and will always be associated with that history among the participants in cultural reeducation.

Mr. Muo's Travelling Couch: a Relationship between Diaspora and Psychoanalysis

*Mr. Muo's Travelling Couch*⁴⁵ begins in the year 2000 when Muo, a blundering near-sighted student, returns from France to his native home in Sichuan only to be confronted by the biggest changes to his life and homeland. Having won an award a decade earlier by the French government to study abroad, Muo begins a new life in Paris that will arm him with an indelible belief in the power of psychoanalytic theory. As time progresses he becomes more confident in his ability in French as well as his ability to quote philosophers and poets in the original. The newly self-assured yet continually clumsy psychoanalyst puts himself on a mission: rescue his college sweetheart from the wrath of a tyrannical judge named Di. The mission forces Muo back to China where circumstance and travel tries his psychoanalytic prowess.

The novel begins as Muo returns from France and sits in a train compartment travelling across China. He has come back in search of a long lost love that he will call Volcano of the Old Moon. When Muo finally finds Judge Di, who is holding her in prison, the judge agrees to release her for a ransom—sex with a virgin which he hopes will cure his impotency. Muo then travels across China in hopes of finding a virgin. He sets out on bicycle which he uses to set up makeshift therapy sessions on street corners. He hoists a banner which reads, “Psychoanalyst Returned from France and schooled in Freud and Lacan” and offers to interpret dreams to local

⁴⁵ Henceforth *Mr. Muo*.

villagers for a small fee. Throughout the novel, flashbacks from Muo's life in Paris, as well as events from his college days and the insinuation of a reeducated during the Cultural Revolution, surface to offer insight into his past. In the end, Muo never finds his girlfriend; instead he is forced through a succession of incidents farther and farther away from his original goal.

Dai Sijie's 2003 novel unfolds across a backdrop of overt psychoanalytic homage (*Le Complexe de Di* and "le complexe d'Oedipe"⁴⁶). The novel is deliberately humorous, poking fun at the naïveté of the protagonist and mocking his understanding of psychoanalysis. Furthermore, the learned Muo encounters a miscommunication rift between his false sense of cosmopolitanism and the locals with whom he must interact. As the novel's protagonist scurries around Mainland China in a desperate attempt to save his girlfriend, the journey itself becomes the ground upon which the narrative unpacks the multi-layered relationships of desire. Behind the buffoonery of Dai's work, a structural resemblance of the diasporic experience assumes the form of psychoanalytic parody. All of this plays out among surroundings that he cannot recognize due to industrialization and development—creating a sense of the uncanny. Read against Dai's first novel, certain latent interpretations of *Mr. Muo* can be explicated that are not immediately apparent within each work, but offer insight into the positioning of the textual projects.

Dai Sijie's novel is blatantly absurd, putting forth the canonical works of psychoanalysis into common conversation of the protagonist. Direct references to this literature will also be used to position the main character in relation to his pretensions cosmopolitanism and the locals living in contemporary China. When the judge first informs him about the ransom for releasing Volcano of the Old Moon, Muo is incredulous. On one hand he frighteningly wonders how he will be able to find the ransom needed to rescue his girlfriend. On the other hand he encounters a

⁴⁶ *Le Complexe de Di* is the original French title of Dai Sijie's novel which sounds roughly familiar to "The Oedipus Complex" (Éditions Gallimard, 2003).

conundrum. Having read Freud's "The Taboo of Virginity", Muo wonders how it would be possible that the judge could cure impotence, since it is shown in this work that the woman's virginity houses a peril, one which could easily lead to psychotic disturbances:

Could the case of Judge Di, or indeed of the whole Chinese people, have simply escaped the notice of great master Freud, notwithstanding his demonstrable knowledge of every human perversion? No sooner does the thought enter his head that Muo remembers that in "The Taboo of Virginity," Freud argues that the man suffering from a castration complex, regards the woman and the moment of defloration as a source of danger. (84)

The humor of the novel thus lies in the literalness of psychoanalytic theory as applied to the various characters Muo encounters. His "dream interpretations" are only appealing to locals for their sorcery, and the interpretations he conjures represent no real analytic task on the part of the psychoanalyst. At one moment, for example, in order to annoy two sisters who are skeptics to his powers, Muo deliberately asks, "You weren't in love with your father, by any chance? . . . According to the theory I am applying, every young girl at some stage feels the desire to sleep with her father" (94). Both characters grow angry, but after a short argument have to admit that the analyst is, in fact, correct.

Behind the façade of Dai's overt psychoanalytic parody, however, a heavy structural resemblance emerges between the circuitous route of the main character and the Lacanian dialectic of desire. Both Muo and Judge Di hold as object of desire, the figure of a virgin. She is for the Judge, the fetish object, one that secures for him a defense against loss or castration. For Muo, she is the object to be had, one to secure the first virgin of his desire, Volcano of the Old Moon. Muo always desires a virgin through the form of his friend the Embalmer, the character named Little Road, and the daughter of the Panda Observer. The object of his desire, though, is never stable. The Embalmer loses her virginity. Muo secures a girl named Little Road, but their adventures render her lame making her an unsuitable mate for the Judge. Once she is cured with

the magic potion of the Panda Observer, she flees. Finally Muo hears a knock on the door of his apartment. It is the daughter of the Panda Observer that he has agreed to marry:

Muo staggers as if before an exploded shell. All his life he will remember this uncanny moment. Embarrassed, he wants to ask her to come in, to take tea with him, but his tongue betrays his indomitable nature, and taking her by the hand with avuncular interest he hears himself ask: "Tell me, my dear, are you a virgin?" (287)

As Muo wanders around China looking for the virgin, the objects which algebraically stand in for that desire, transform, flee, and shift into others. Thus what Lacan will term the "*objet petit a*" stands in for all that assumes the place within the grid of desire. One can surmise, for example, that the daughter of the Panda Observer will be just one other in an eternal sequence of objects that will never lead Muo back to the original Volcano of the Old Moon. Rather than getting closer to his girlfriend through desire, Muo finds that he continually distances himself from the original object; he becomes so distanced that she no longer exists in reality but as an actor in memories of the past. In fact, Volcano of the Old Moon, never appears in the novel. Muo will write letters to her, and her presence will be felt within certain flashbacks that Muo retells. Throughout the narrative, however, she will remain as a distant object, desired by the main character, but relegated to old memories. Thus what Muo desires experiences the alienating split of what he thinks he wants "a virgin," and what he intends to retrieve, "his girlfriend," producing the Lacanian question "*que vuoi?*" ("what do you want?") which originates *of* the Other—the Judge who can grant what Muo thinks he wants ("Supervision of the subject" 312). From here the novel continually poses a series of question: What does Muo want? What does Muo really want? What does he think that the Judge wants?

As he wanders around his native Sichuan in the attempt to retrieve a virgin for the Judge Di, Muo assumes the actualized relations which become the "dialectic that will henceforth link

the ‘*I* to socially elaborated situations’ (“Mirror Stage” 5). He always aims towards the release of Volcano of the Old Moon, yet his adventures will show that the objects of desire will sequentially change alienating him into a perpetual search that has no terminus. The dialectic of desire, in being dialectical, similarly, has no resolution:

The revelation of my true nature is dire: every woman I want to make love to becomes the woman I love. Volcano of the Old Moon’s absolute power is no more. The love of my life is in ruins. Another me resides within my body, younger and more vigorous, a species of underwater monster, in whose existence I have just witnessed a supreme moment. Which of us is the real Muo? (176)

Muo encounters a theoretical trajectory as represented by the dialectic by being exhumed from the texts of psychoanalysis and launched headfirst into the world he once knew. Within this realm he views the natural maturation process that creates the self. In a reflective return to the homeland, not unlike the visual rebounding of the image of the self to itself, Muo becomes a subject that desires an object that will prove unobtainable as those objects become continually elusive. What ensues are the structural mechanisms which in Lacan’s seminal essay allow for entry into what he will later term the Symbolic, the area of language. Entry into the Symbolic is the linguistically structural process of alienation. Once the image is beheld by the being, return to an imaginative whole of human experience fades as the subject forms the linguistic “letter” of its unconscious from it perpetuates all instinctual elements whose affects will be formed within the material world (“Agency of the Letter” 147). What is being articulated, then, through the mechanism of the novel is the alienating process of one towards one’s homeland. By placing the object of desire back to that place of origin, Muo undergoes the process of trying to retrieve that object. However, as with the structure of desire, the individual experiences the alienation of the self and the further distancing from the original object of desire. This alienation, then, is on one

hand the source of humor in the novel, and on the other the formulation of the identity of the diasporic subject, endlessly searching for the object of the past, yet never able to grasp it.

Though this similarity between the trajectory of Dai's main character and the dialectic of desire form the structural base of the narrative, the most direct and visible element that contributes to the diasporic aspect of this work is the relationship between the experiences of Muo and the uncanny. After a decade in Paris, Muo goes back to his native home only to find its familiarity lost and exclaims throughout the work, "how China has changed!" While traveling around Sichuan the scenery unleashes visions of his childhood, reminisces of interactions with Volcano of the Old Moon, and the memory of a reeducation that is never fully related to the reader. Within this native landscape, however, lies a frighteningly unfamiliar familiarity that appears over and over.

The uncanny refers to an intrinsically frightening element within the familiar. Freud describes the uncanny as the opposite of "familiar" or "native." From Freud's very famous line, "the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (930). The uncanny is, therefore, a distancing and estrangement of familiarity. At one particular point of the novel, Muo experiences in quick succession three episodes of varying degrees of the uncanny related to the gruesome, the feeling of being lost, and the estrangement of the familiar. Read together, these episodes demonstrate how the main character is lost, and will always be lost even though he is back in his native country and hometown.

One area the Freud describes as being uncanny in a high degree involves experiencing dead bodies and death in relation to ghostly spirits. After a mahjong binge, Judge Di dies and his body is rushed to the morgue for the Embalmer with the aid of Muo, to perform the autopsy.

They unzip the body bag and see his face. As the Embalmer turns her back to grab a pair of scissors to open the stuck zipper, Muo looks down and notices that the Judge's eyes are open:

Muo makes to shut them but then notices that the glassy globes are rolling their grotesquely wrinkled, red-rimmed sockets, fixing him with the dull glazed look of someone just returned from wandering in a blizzard. (143)

Judge Di leaps from the examining table and tries to have sex with the Embalmer. After a brief scuffle, the Embalmer escapes. Muo gets knocked out but flees once he regains consciousness. Judge Di, who till this point has been held as "larger than life" by all of the characters proves to literally be larger than mortality. His tyrannical presence, affirmed over and over in the thoughts of the protagonist, proves hauntingly powerful, setting in motion several other series of events that force Muo into various levels of the uncanny. As he leaps away from Judge Di's revitalized corpse, Muo ponders to himself, "Is this another communist miracle?" (143).

After this episode in the morgue, Muo runs after the Embalmer to see if she is injured. He wanders several streets and realizes that he is lost but has found the same street several times thus causing for him the feeling of the uncanny. Within his essay on the uncanny, Freud tells an anecdote of being lost in a strange town in Italy after arriving for the first time (390). In a scene that unfolds similarly to Freud's account of getting lost in a red-light district in Italy, Muo realizes that he cannot find his way around his own home town. While wandering around lost, Muo is struck with a frightening realization:

What is happenng to me? I was born in this town, I grew up here. I know this area like the back of my hand, and yet here I am, lost. Fighting down a rising panic, he distracts himself by inspecting the changes wrought by feverish capitalism. He strolls around the intersection, exploring one new street after another, all the same, row upon row of concrete apartment blocks. After a quarter of an hour of wandering he decides he'd best head north. But looking up to scan the sky, he can't tell where north is.

Muo finally thinks that he has found his way to the Embalmer's apartment, which is in the same building as his parents. He finally makes his way into the apartment. He is quite careful to walk past his parents' front door so that his mother does not wake up and come out and see him. As he tiptoes past the door up the stairs to the Embalmer's apartment he has a realization. The front door says Mr. and Mrs. Wang. He gives a quick cell phone call to the Embalmer who knows the Wang family and informs Muo that he is not in his own apartment building but in the apartment building next door.

For this novel and for the character of Muo, China is the uncanny. It is a place that he once found familiar but now only leads to a sense of loss and unfamiliarity. In the post-Mao era of rapid capitalistic development described in the dizzying scenes of getting lost, Muo encounters a frighteningly unfamiliarity within the familiar. During his stay in France where he buried himself in texts of psychoanalysis, China of his youth underwent great change. Upon returning he feels the frightening effects of witnessing the distance between the country he left and the one to which he returns. The uncanny that he encounters, even the scene at the morgue, becomes expressions of the reencounter of Muo with his home. Although most of the scenes of the novel play out humorously, they reveal a relationship between a familiar, native, and homely with the direct opposite—the uncanny. Muo the traveler, having returned from his years abroad, undergoes the layers of feeling that play out both aesthetically and within the realm of what is terrible, gruesome, and frightening. Furthermore, the unfamiliarity of Muo with China occurs on levels that are not just physical. Though Muo describes the unfamiliarity in terms of the high-rises and apartment blocks, the largest estrangement exists in his false sense of cosmopolitanism, his naïve views of psychoanalysis, and his personal relationships within China. The homecoming of Muo, then, is impossibility—the specific barriers of this return residing within adherence to

theories that prevent familiarity. The uncanny that is described throughout the work, and particularly in the selected scenes described above, narrate the very diasporic condition of the early 21st century. Interestingly the notion of uncanny is similarly endemic to fin de siècle China, as many of its writers search for identity among rapid economic development and industrialization.

David Wang's essay "Chinese Fiction for the Nineties" describes characteristics among the stories written in the 1980s and 90s which represent China. Wang admits that this is not an easy task because these new images of China represent "a China defined not by geopolitical boundaries and ideological closures by overlapping cultures and shared imaginative resources" (238). In this essay, Wang is referring to a collection of stories collected in his edited volume; however, he also asserts that the contemporary Chinese writer resides across the globe. The first major descriptive feature that he locates among the literature is a further repression of the Freudian notion of the uncanny, and this becomes important for reading Dai Sijie's works:

There is an additional dimension to the Chinese uncanny. In China, repression is not just an individual defense mechanism . . . The horrors and unpredictabilities of ordinary experience are legitimated; the temptation to see these everyday events as uncanny is repressed. This second repression is made possible by public exposure of the private, by normalization of the unnatural. To talk about Chinese uncanny, therefore, is to explore the paradoxical question as to why things that would be seen as dreary and therefore repressed in a Western, Freudian context have ever been taken as natural in China. (245)

The rapid paced narrative of *Mr. Muo's Travelling Couch* appears flippant and detached by humorously recounting the encounter of characters with macabre episodes of violence and death. Muo, through his quick and violent romp around the Chinese countryside, embodies the subject caught in a rapid meeting with inherent violence. He is attacked by a psychopathic criminal who knocks him out and exchanges clothes. He scurries across rural Sichuan amid attacks by ethnic minorities. Judge Di finds immense joy in jogging across killing fields the day of scheduled

executions. The Embalmer discovers on her wedding day that her husband is a homosexual when he commits suicide by jumping out of their apartment window right before the consummation of the marriage. The narrative hops from one wildly violent episode to another. The inherent violence of China becomes naturalized as the characters encounter their experience with reality. The naturalization, or normalization, of violence is the act of the second repression of the uncanny as described by Wang.

The relationship between psychoanalysis and travel manifests itself in Dai Sijie's novel within the narrative of the subject's physical return to China. Muo's physical travel back to China parallels a psychic move to the past that is hidden and repressed. The move itself instigates his desire towards the object of desire. The depiction of this desire as inaugurated by the physical return to China exposes the inherent violence and the grotesque that can only be called uncanny. As Muo bikes across China posing as psychoanalyst extraordinaire, his capricious romp humorously blankets the perverted and grotesque. The secondary repression familiarizes the inherently violent, offering a normalizing narrative of a subject's homecoming.

Overt Intertextuality and the Impossibilities of Return.

Dai Sijie's first two novels offer particular insight into the writer's positioning in relation to his past and his current career which utilizes the French language to explore fictionalized memories of this past. Dai's first and best-selling novel *Balzac* has garnered the majority of critical attention, much of which has focused solely on this novel (though often simultaneously reading the subsequent film) while neglecting other works in his corpus. However, when read against his second novel *Mr. Muo*, certain interpretive sympathetic vibrations resonate, offering a fuller reading of both texts. Initially the two works appear incompatible for various reasons. The

narratives occur during different historical time periods, the former during the Cultural Revolution, and the latter other at the turn of the 21st century. Though the time period and tone of the novels are quite different, the most striking similarity between them is the purposefully apparent and multilayered intertextuality that leads the plot (Fritz-Ababneh 97-98). This intertextuality, which will be referred to as “overt intertextuality” due to the gratuitous references that abound in both novels, will be the point of departure for an analysis of both works.

In *Balzac* the deliberate favoring of French literature in a time of literary desertion has been critiqued as a form of *Occidentalism* or an assertion of Western literary superiority (Bloom 311, McCall 163). This literary *francophilia*, however, will be lampooned in the second novel, which shows how a character’s naïve adherence to the tenants of psychoanalysis forms the psychological prevention of imminent return. A comparative reading of the two works exposes what has not been discussed in scholarship regarding Dai’s career. These works describe and mock the naiveté of the characters through references to the works rather than praise the European literary canon through the employment of overt intertextuality. If the ultimate purpose of these two novels is the demonstration of the limits of the literary and theoretical understanding—recast upon particular backdrops of Chinese modern history—the novels then potentially becomes self-referential in terms of describing the limits of the author himself. Therefore, *Balzac* and *Mr. Muo*, when read together, complement an initially unforeseen whole that narrates a diasporic condition peculiar to the author’s Chinese Francophone career.

As has been pointed out in McCall’s analysis of *Balzac*, the novel itself mentions the works of prominent French writers yet does not delve into their narratives. Taking *Ursule Mirouët* as an example, McCall explains that by using a lesser known novel by Balzac and denying analysis of its plot, “allows him [Dai] to portray France as superior to the Chinese

society in which his protagonists live, without the majority of readers being aware of the less savory aspects of life in France which are actually present in Balzac's novel" (163). Thus the novel "conveys an image of Western superiority and consolidates received Western opinion [sic]⁴⁷ about the countries in which the protagonists live" (164). The limitation of this argument resides in a latent assumption that by skimming the texts, Dai's intended purpose is a romanticizing and eroticizing of France via its literature thus asserting a certain cultural superiority. When taken at face value, *Balzac* appears to suggest that the hidden suitcase of books allows for a profound idealization which brings the two boys to an exploration of the sublime emotional realm of literary imaginations, thus leading to a passionate love affair. This interpretation, however, does not allow for the possibility that this cultural fawning is in fact a foible of the novel's protagonists. The point of the novel, through an alternate reading, is not to laud the literary tradition of France—a textual project of that sort would really not be that interesting anyway. Rather the intent of Dai's novel would be to narrate the limits of literary idealization, though recast upon a politically and historically charged backdrop.

The narrator is not fascinated with Balzac as much as Romain Rolland and the work *Jean Christophe*. Looking carefully at the descriptions the narrator gives regarding his initial encounters with literature reveals his idyllic fascination as well as naiveté:

Up until this stolen encounter with Romain Rolland's hero my poor educated and reeducated brains had been incapable of grasping the notion of one man standing up against the whole world. The flirtation turned into a great passion. Even the excessively emphatic style occasionally indulged in by the author did not detract from the beauty of this astonishing work of art. I was carried away, swept along by the mighty stream of words pouring from the hundreds of pages. To me it was the ultimate book: once you had read it, neither your own life nor the world you lived in would ever look the same. (116-117)

⁴⁷ It appears as though McCall intended the word "opinion" rather than "option" in his essay.

Ma then decides to possess this work of literature. He has the idea making Luo dedicate this work to him. In return Ma decides to dedicate three works by Balzac to his friend. He signs his name and in a fit of ecstasy declares, “I was so pleased with my dedication that I was tempted to add a drop or two of my blood, by way of consecration” (118). Ma’s retelling of his early fascination with the canonical works of the European tradition indicate a new literary exploration on the part of the lead characters. But the description of Ma and his fascination with Romain Rolland also includes a latent sarcasm designed to critique the naive romanticism of the two boys. This sarcastic criticism only clearly evidences itself when read through the events at the termination of the novel.

The ending scene of the novel is the final words of the Seamstress as she leaves her village and the two boys chase after her. The last chapter, however, is narrated through a temporal inversion. Until this point the narrative had been fairly linear, with a few flashbacks to situate the plot within historical time and provide background into the two main characters. The final chapter, though, ends with the parting of the Seamstress, but only after the initial events of the chapter—Luo burning all of the books that they had stolen. The chapter begins with the following lines: “That’s the story. Now for the ending. There is just time for you to hear the sound of six matches being struck on a winter’s night” (188). Luo, who is drunk, slowly burns all of the novels that they have between them, and then narrator describes the books that are burned with each match:

The match spluttered, was almost snuffed out in its own black smoke, then flared up again as it approached *Père Goriot*. The book was lying on the ground with the others, in front of the house . . . The next three matches made a funeral pyre of *Cousin Pons*, *Colonel Chabert* and *Eugénie Grandet* respectively. Then it was time for *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, with Quasimodo hobbling across the flagstones with Esmeralda on his back. The sixth match dealt with *Madame Bovary*. (189)

The ending of the novel, then, is not the departure of the Seamstress. Through a linear temporal perspective, the adventures of Lu and Ma end with the very cache of books that they found. Of course there is a relationship between the Seamstress' departing and the burning of the books. Though Luo and Ma had suspected that she would soon depart, the narrator admits that her leaving did take them by surprise. With the true ending of the novel being the burning of the books and not the departure of the seamstress, the interpretation can be forwarded that the end of the story is not about the departure of the girl and the loss of love. Rather the novel ends with the loss of naïveté and the romantic zeal which infatuated the two characters all along. The defeat of the literature was not due to party or ideological dominance—earlier in the work the town head discovered that the boys had access to literature but bribed them for dental work. The two protagonists are the ones that burn their own literature that they had cherished throughout the novel.

Whereas this reading of the relationship between Ma and Luo with their loss of idealism uncovers a particular cynicism perhaps on the part of Dai, his overtly sarcastic characterization of the protagonist in *Mr. Muo* purposefully produces comic effect. Muo is not shy to admit that he adores the classics of psychoanalysis from which he believes he can explain all secrets of the universe. In one particular humorous exchange Muo confronts the limits of knowledge in the face of a character names The Old Observer, a shamanistic Panda observer that lives in the countryside. At this part of the novel Muo asks the Observer to cure the leg of a girl named Little Road who had been injured during the course of their adventures. When Muo finds the Old Observer, he offers to teach him the ways of the universe in exchange for his services. He states:

“For the past ten years I have been studying psychoanalysis in France. Here’s what I propose: if you can put the girl’s leg to rights in ten days, I will teach you this new revolutionary science, with all its unequalled powers, from A to Z.”

For the first time the old man turns his head, and throws Muo a quick glance of appraisal.

“It is a science invented by Freud, which lays bare the secret of the world,” adds Muo. (254)

When it is revealed that the secret of the world is sex, the Old Observer bursts into convulsions of laughter and asks Muo how Freud would explain why pandas had been rubbing against a tree that he had been studying. Muo assuredly answers that Freud would give an explanation dealing with maternal frustration. The Old Observer dismisses such nonsense and explains, “All the panda wanted was to scrape his balls” (254). This statement leads Muo to once again (as in many instances in the novel) question his abilities and his capabilities in psychoanalysis:

Muo is stunned as he examines this evidence of self-castration, a behavior he has come across in biology books. The sun’s rays project leopard spots on the silent, radiant, enchanted trunk. He is disappointed to note that, as usual, his expert interpretation is mistaken. He crumbles with self-reproach while the Old Observer presses on. (255)

Muo thus experiences a discrepancy between his learned experiences in Paris through which he believes he can understand all of contemporary China and the reality of China. Upon returning, he realizes that the location of China has changed, most strikingly and visibly through new construction and development in general. Ultimately, however, he finds that he himself has changed. In both works, there is then a disconnect between the protagonists, the current socio-political/global situation, and history, and this chasm in comprehension is narrated through an overt intertextuality.

In *Balzac*, the two boys experience a misunderstanding or naïve adherence of the texts of 19th century French literature. This allows them to find a sexual awakening during a time of literary desolation. It also allows them to find a maturity but understand the limits of that maturity and the limits of their sentimental education with the sudden departure of the seamstress. This naiveté is not comic, as in *Mr. Muo*, yet neither is the actual situation for the boys that they

find themselves in. For Muo, the relationship between psychoanalysis plays out on the scene of a globalizing China. The China that he had known with all of its turmoil of the previous decades has now undergone a change, but the change takes part on the character. His inability to understand the changes are *méconnaissance* between himself and his homeland. His inability to reconcile his pompous learnedness with the character he encounters in trying to quixotically rescue his girlfriend highlights the relationship between naïve theoretical understanding and practice. The novel does not mock the development of China but the inability of the diasporic protagonist to understand it. Muo is specifically a buffoon, the one not understanding the place from which he came.

Placed together these texts narrate the past and present of a diasporic subject through a peculiar relationship with overt intertextuality. The fictionalized past of the author is cast through the limits of literature, and the present hope of an imminent return to China is similarly transmitted through blind adherence to the texts of psychoanalysis. In both narratives, texts fail the protagonists. Rather than coming to an understanding of romantic insight within the desolate lands of their reeducation, the design of sentimental education turns against Ma and Luo with the sudden departure of their own literary project. They react by actually burning the books which were their means to educate her. In *Muo*, the main character becomes the ridicule of everyone he encounters including himself. In the end, his mission to rescue the girl of his past will not terminate; he does not save her. The barrier to each experience is precisely the vehicle through which the experience is narrated, the literature itself, which becomes the stimulus that causes these novels to end in failure.

Balzac and the Narration of Environmental Memory

Dai Sijie wrote the screenplay and directed the film version of *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* with the same title, and it was released in 2002. Though the general storyline remains the same, with the love triangle in place between Ma Luo and the Little Seamstress, certain preoccupations in the film version shift the thematic emphasis from the original. Though any adaptation relocates thematic importance from one version to another, a brief overview is necessary to show how the themes present in the film version allow a rereading of Dai's previous works by casting them through a the contemporary prism of environmental damage. The issue that Dai takes up with the film is the flooding of the Yangtze River as a result of the Three Gorges Dam project.

Reading Dai's novel from the perspective of intertextuality, Fritz-Ababheh concludes with an assessment of the relationship between the novel and film. She finds major detours in the novel's adaptation to be a move away from Ma as narrator (though the film version focuses on his return years later), the minimization of the role of Four-Eyes, and an increased emphasis on the role of the Seamstress as fetish object between the two reeducates (112). The result is a deflation in the complex role of individual works that are stolen and an inadvertent reinvigoration of the overly romantic qualities of literature in the imagination of the boys. Silvester, also reading the film adaptation, examines the role of the camera to emphasize the Seamstress, facilitating her accentuation through visibility. Though these observations are pertinent in understanding the relationship between film and written texts, Silvester's analysis also brings up an important visual emphasis: the physical location:

[In] Dai's film . . . he emphasizes the visual experience of the landscape, compared to what he provides in the novel. In the latter, mountain ranges, caves, and pools are named and situated, but very few words are spent on describing their aspect and the reader's imagination has to work hard or revert to clichés. The

film, on the other hand, lingers on shots of vertiginous mountains, winding paths and panoramic vistas between significant episodes. (368)

As detailed in this chapter's previous textual reading of the importance of location, the novel relies on the place named Phoenix of the Sky for its interpersonal relationship rather than its physical description. In fact Phoenix of the Sky has a particular name that is represented in the next in a fashion not dissimilar to many of the other characters' names: The Little Chinese Seamstress, The Old Miller, etc. Part of the reason for a more pithy representation of the physical space in the novel version is Dai's writing style with uses shorter sentences, concentrates more on dialogue, and keeps the description of people and places to a minimum. However, the more obvious reemphasis on the physicality of the location in the film version is specifically the narrative function of the camera. As Silverster's analysis makes clear, various shots of the location actually serve as geographic intertitles between important events in the narrative (368).

The visual importance of the Seamstress and the physicality of the location serve an important function when taking into consideration the film version of *Balzac*. There is one recurring shot throughout the film—a mountain precipice with a 'natural arch' (a vertical almond shaped hole in the center of the rock formation) that the villagers will term the "eye in the sky". This geographic structure is not mentioned anywhere in the novel, but it is given a name and prominent presence in the film. The hole in the side of the mountain looks very similar in shape to the eye of a needle. The symbolic importance immediately becomes clear linking the geographic formation with the Seamstress. The fusion of the geography and the character of the Seamstress become extremely important in relation to the film's ending when the character Ma, years later in his apartment in Paris, sees footage of this "eye in the sky" on a television news report about the flooding of Sichuan Province as a result of the damming of the Yangtze River.

Ma then decides to return to the place of his reeducation one last time to film it. During this trip back, he also hopes to find the Little Seamstress.

When Ma returns to Phoenix of the Sky, he searches in vain for the Little Seamstress. Rumor has it that she eventually made it to Shenzhen and later Hong Kong.⁴⁸ What Ma finds when he returns to the same location of thirty years earlier is that it remains relatively unchanged. The houses they lived in are still there. The mountains continue to protrude up from the lush forests. Alongside the temporal immobility of the isolated village, hints of chronological progression camouflage themselves among the scenery. A white satellite dish juts from the house that looks exactly the same as thirty years earlier.

The Chief's son's wife knows that Ma is looking for the Little Seamstress and informs him that a common tradition is to place one's name on a paper boat with a lit candle and launched into the lake. Ma goes into the water looking for her candle, but he never finds it. As Ma wades chest deep in the water to find her candle, a reflection on the surface follows him. Rippling on the tiny waves of the lake is the reflection of the "eye in the sky" and this is the fifth appearance of the rock formation during the course of the film. The apparition of the "eye in the sky" now assumes a contemporary significance in light of the impending environmental crisis. The land will soon be flooded due to the damming of the Yangtze by the Three Gorges Project. The reflection is on the surface of the water, but while looking at it from above, it appears as if the rock formation is submerged in water. Indeed one day this will be reality when the Yangtze floods.

⁴⁸ Several critiques of the film have pointed to the ironic use of the casting of Xun Zhou in the role of the Little Seamstress. In a contemporary film by Fruit Chan titled "Hollywood Hong Kong" (2001), Xun Zhou plays the character of a mainland prostitute and scam artist that eventually makes it to Hong Kong where she blackmails several local men in order to get money to move to the United States. The heart of this critique lies in the ironic probability that the Seamstress probably would have taken a similar route as a sex worker in order to successfully move from Mainland China to the Special Economic Zone of Shenzhen, and then to Hong Kong (Chan, Evans 109, Liu, Xiomin 73).

Ma and Luo watch Ma's video he took while visiting Phoenix Mountain for the last time—his camera acting as the last effort to preserve the place. While the two reminisce over their past experience with the space captured in the film, the house where the two boys once lived appears. The transparent image of Luo reading to the Little Seamstress also appears. He reads out of a book by Balzac while she sits silently with her head supported by her hands, looking off into space. The image of Ma then emerges. He plays violin while his image floats around as if flowing in the water. Various objects appear as they float about the place. The bottle of perfume that was Ma's intended gift to the Little Seamstress wavers around the room that is submerged in water. The camera shifts to another part of the room. A sewing table similarly roams about the house being carried by the current. By the time the images of the perfume bottle and the sewing table float around, there are no more visions of the character's specters. Submerged in water, the objects are being transformed into nothingness. Everything in the submerged scene floats away; they are disappearing. The transparent images of Luo reading to the Little Seamstress, her aloof attention, Ma sawing playing a sonata of Mozart will all disappear. Their images are hinged to the space of the past which slowly disintegrates within the present. As the waters rise and the images drown, the space connected with Phoenix Mountain and the two men's past will disappear. The image of the house and its submergence does not capture the true flood as it encroaches upon Phoenix Mountain. The specters of the three characters solidify a sentiment that analogizes the disappearance of memory due to its dependence on place. The physical space of Phoenix Mountain will be washed away carrying with it any possibility of physical reminders of a past.

Disjunctive Global Flows and the Environment.

Dai Sijie's preoccupation with China as well as France evinces itself through his work. Rather than engage in a debate over Dai's categorization as a writer, the purpose of this study is to closely read the textual complexities of positioning *vis a vis* the narrator, history, past, and the environmental factors which complicate these relationships. To draw a conclusion about the understanding of Dai's novels and film, it would be helpful to begin by evoking Appadurai's contextual remapping of the global cultural economy. Clearly Dai Sijie's career, which wavers between France, China, the respective languages, multiple contradictory themes, as well as different media, falls within the vortex of disjunctures which makes a totalizing assessment of his corpus extremely difficult. As Appadurai notes, the previous models of cultural, economic, and migratory flows no longer fit established paradigms:

The new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models (even those that might account for multiple centers and peripheries). Nor is it susceptible to simple models of push and pull (in terms of migration theory), or of surpluses and deficits (as in traditional models of balance of trade), or of consumers and producers (as in most neo-Marxist theories of developments). . . The complexity of the current global economy has to do with certain fundamental disjunctures between economy, culture, and politics that we have only begun to theorize. (33)

Rather than sort out the different forces through conventional models of global fluctuation, Appadurai's reimagining mobilizes the suffix “-scapes” to formulate a kaleidoscopic view of disjunctive global flows. Appadurai sorts out five -scapes (*ethnoscapes*, *mediascapes*, *technoscapes*, *financescapes*, and *ideoscapes*) among which disjunctures grow and increase (37). This concept allows multiple perspectives to occur simultaneously without inadvertently engendering an inherent hierarchy.

Evoking the notion of “-scapes” does not secure a stable interpretive grasp upon Dai’s corpus. Contrarily, it allows vitality to the discrepancies within his career that are, in the end, a natural product of global culture. It could be argued that particular aspects within Dai’s work fit within particular “-scapes.” For example the conglomeration of financial support, state and private, which has allowed Dai to write as well as produce his films could be indicative of *financescapes*. Dai, as a resident in France and as a migrant who manipulates the capital of flexibility, could be argued to be an individual whose life is indicative of the vastly changing *ethnoscape*.⁴⁹ The mobilization of “-scape” nomenclature remains subordinate to its conceptual employment which allows an exploration of the texts through its disjunctive multiplicities. From this perspective, Dai’s works can be opened to further possible interpretive avenues. The reality of environmental destruction, whether residing consciously or unconsciously, weaves itself among the disjunctive orders as an actor which complicates the narrative project and further disrupts history, memory, and the position of the author.

When Appadurai speaks of deterritorialization, he is directing the discussion towards the relations between cultures and transnationalisms, overlapping political and ideological boundaries, and fractal-shaped webs of relations with nation-states. Though these arenas of relations facilitate a greater metaphorical explanation of globalization, deterritorialization implies a greater fluidity that neglects locally situated ruptures. This critique echoes Xu’s concern with Appadurai’s totalizing assessment of transnational cultural production which neglects the negotiation process artists and filmmakers deal with on a national and local level in the process of creating transnational works (18). Although the career of Dai Sijie could be conjured to offer an example of the fluidity of transnational cultural production that is cosmopolitanism or perhaps

⁴⁹ This line of argumentation would resonate with Aihwa Ong’s notion of “flexible citizenship.” In her words, “‘Flexible citizenship’ refers to the cultural logics of capitalist accumulation, travel, and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions” (6)

postnational, his works speak to a personal negotiation with his identity as writer and filmmaker. His emphasis on place, the eradication of space, and the psychological effects of development and returning home derive from environmental factors as much as his transnational identity. Most importantly, there is another “deterritorialization” at work with the era of the global economy, that of literal disappearance of territory through the rising oceans, industrialization and development, or the flooding of land for large waterworks projects. From this secondary and more literal deterritorialization, a discussion of Dai’s corpus provides important understanding to the concept of diaspora in regards to topography, and how the environment can play a role in national and transnational identities.

The addition to the film version of *Balzac*, though seemingly minuscule, nevertheless offers a consequential prism through which environmental realities problematize interpretive understanding of previous works as well as complicates the positioning of the author. In an interview, Dai Sijie discusses the purpose of the conclusion in the film as opposed to the ending in the original novel. He states that he had not originally intended to make a film version of the *Balzac*; however, the opportunity allowed him to construct a conclusion he felt was lacking in the novel. In thinking about the conclusion, he began thinking about the past which includes youth, first loves, the love of literature, and in the end these appear to him as a world that now exists under water (Aknin 75). Interestingly, in a response to a question about whether he is offering a metaphorical statement about this period of China as being drowned by progress for the advancement of a contemporary China, Dai admits that he had not considered this possibility in this succinct wording (75). This admission elucidates how the reality of the environmental, so prominent within the conclusion to the film version of *Balzac*, does not prominently figure in the original narrative intent, yet it nonetheless forms multiple metaphors which lead his works to

numerous interpretive prospects. Consequently, the environmental becomes a significantly charged disjuncture which complicates our interpretive understanding of the author's works. Most importantly, our interpretative task is no longer stable but encounters a continued changing flux as allowed by Appadurai's conceptual model. Taking this argument to another level, the environmental realities of a globalizing and industrializing China posit grains of intervening ruptures which stymie facile understandings of transnational identities through the possibility of disappearance—creating the impossibility of return.

To conclude, this study, which does not pretend to be exhaustive by any means, attempts to further the possibility of understanding environmental change in Mainland China as a potential interpretive tool in relation to diasporic writers. The works of Dai Sijie house an unforeseen complexity when taken from a larger perspective.⁵⁰ An interpretive endeavor which concludes that his works are either *orientalist* or *occidental*, though carrying some critical merit, merely establishes a dead-end to furthering an understanding of the complexity of his career which straddles linguistic and national boundaries. Most importantly, such a critique makes no attempt to closely read the internal positional negotiations that occurs within the texts. The self-conscious positions that are explored in *Balzac* and *Mr. Muo* highlight the perceived distance of the author from a psychic anchoring of the signification of China. From the reading undertaken by this chapter, the environmental becomes an unconscious realm in Dai's narrative formation which is not immediately apparent. The addition to the plot in its film adaptation offers one entry passage for reinterpreting the works from Dai's unconscious preoccupation with

⁵⁰ In fact, this study can be extended when considering his fifth film *The Chinese Botanist's Daughter* and third novel *Once on a Moonless Night*. However, those two works, being more recent, will warrant further investigation outside of this project. It can be hypothesized, though, that these two works further complicate our understanding of Dai's career. *The Chinese Botanist's Daughter* takes an even more overtly erotic portrayal of China, this time exploring lesbian love. *Once on a Moonless Night*, which is a romance of a French woman looking for a missing Chinese script, demonstrates advancement in the complexity of Dai's writing style in the French language.

the possibility of the eradication of space. This eradication is inherent to the environmental change ushered in by industrialization, the metamorphosis of landscape, and in particular the flooding caused by the Three Gorges Dam. This reading thus offers the opportunity to re-conceptualize the thematic elements that straddle Dai's career from one particular disjuncture (environmental change) as one of a multitude of disparate forces. Understanding its role within a critical assessment to narrative broadens the approaches to globalization, environmentalism, and literature and film of the Chinese diaspora.

Conclusion

Environmental Modernity on the World Stage

From the works of each of the writers or filmmakers read within this study, specific relationships narrated between the characters to the world which surrounds them produce a manner of comprehending ideological shifts historically following events in the People's Republic of China from the Cultural Revolution to the era of globalization. Whether a work links topographical changes to crises in identity or history, or whether the placement of wilderness in a narrative provides space to avert state ideology, the role of the natural world proves to be an instrumental key in assessing how post-Mao literature and film reflect historically situated cultural and political changes of the late 20th century. Similarly, because of the reality of environmental change occurring worldwide—but particularly in China due to unrestricted industrialization—the time has arrived to reassess how narrative can be instrumental in comprehending the psychological, cultural, economic, and personal impact of ecological degradation. The study does not assess reactions to ecological catastrophes per se (the Three Gorges Dam an exception); however, it mobilizes a critical rereading of fiction and film that is sensitive to how the world is portrayed to elucidate the philosophical impact an ecocritical reading of post-Mao narrative produces.

Much scholarship about globalization, particularly within the field of Chinese studies, focuses on comprehending paradigmatic fluctuation, social changes, and global movement as identity.⁵¹ “Movement and change” oriented aspects of contemporary Chinese studies appear to contradict what many ecocritical readings of texts within the European and American literary

⁵¹ Notable works could include Aihwa Ong's *Flexible Citizenship: the Cultural Logics of Transnationality*, Rey Chow's *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies*, or Shu-mei Shi's *Visibility and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific* among many others.

tradition attempt to accomplish—much of it invested in preservation of place or even “deep ecology.”⁵² Ecologically minded readings of Chinese texts need to be aware of the global issues related to Chinese studies while avoiding the assumption of an imperialist stance towards the literary tradition. Rather, ecological destruction as a means towards modernity can be comprehended as inheriting the logic of imperialism and authoritarianism. Furthermore, the reinvestment of critical inquiry towards an examination of the maneuvering of the natural world within texts allows a greater understanding of the Chinese literary tradition itself. In this vein, an ecologically critical reading can be actualized by taking into account changes in topography, the eradication of space, pollution of natural resources, the disappearance of culturally situated natural phenomena (the Three Gorges or the Yellow River for example), and the manner with which nature has served thematic purposes throughout the history of Chinese literature.

A conclusion can be undertaken by turning to the opening ceremony of the 2008 Olympics to reveal how its entire production demonstrates that state discourses of Chinese modernity assume a statement of ecological harmony. This statement of harmony runs in contradiction to what actually happened in 2008 because of the redirection of natural resources for the actualization of the Olympics. Nonetheless, it is interesting to conclude this study by exposing how particular human relationships with nature (employing references to traditional cultural symbols and literary portrayals—notably the “Peach Blossom Spring”) were crafted by artists in conjunction with the party for a spectacle that was intended for the entire world to see. From this analysis, a question remains as to why an environmental modernity is necessary for a modern spectacle. The underlying assumption remains that indeed ecological harmony is necessary for a projection of a globalized state modernity. Regardless of whether the

⁵² “Deep Ecology” assumes a philosophical stance that places an inherent ethical value on an ecosystem, prioritizing the fundamental being of an ecology apart from value as weighed by service to or for humankind.

actualization of such as harmonization really occurs, it is revealing to comprehend how these contradictions play out on the world stage.

The Beautiful Olympics

On August 8, 2008 the People's Republic of China began hosting the Olympic Games with a much anticipated opening ceremony located in the newly constructed Beijing National Stadium known as the Bird's Nest, and the performance has since been rated the most watched television sporting event of all time.⁵³ Because of the anticipation of the ceremony on a national and international level, much attention had been given on the part of the state to craft a modern and global China narrative. With the predicted interest in the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics, the creative forces involved purposefully orchestrated a massive celebration that consisted of 14,000 performers. Preceding the traditional lighting of the torch, the opening ceremony featured a cultural extravaganza which carried the title "The Beautiful Olympics". This performance was divided into two parts relatively equal in length, which were further divided into smaller performances. The first half was designed to showcase the pre-modern era of Chinese history. Titled "Brilliant Civilization" the first half featured the great inventions of Chinese antiquity as a guiding theme. The second half "Glorious Age" represented contemporary China and offered an optimistic view of the future.

With the expectation of international media scrutiny, the Chinese government heavily handedly formulated the opening performance that represented the positive aspects of a Chinese history, yet that did not stop inevitable critiques and controversies about certain aspects of the show. For example, Lin Miaoke, the young girl that sang along with the performance of pianist

⁵³ According to a study produced by Futures Sport and Entertainment, the opening ceremony had a live viewing audience of 593 million and a total viewing audience of 984 million. The second largest watched event in 2008 was the closing ceremony which had a live viewing audience of 252 million and a total viewing audience of 778 million.

Lang Lang, was in fact lip syncing. As was later revealed, Lin Miaoke was more photogenic than the actual singer, whose voice was then prerecorded and played during the ceremony. The production decision adhered to the logic that a more visually “cute” performer was needed to represent China during the spectacle (Spencer WEB). Also, the pyrotechnic footprints that walked across the Beijing skyline and led to the Bird’s Nest were added to the video footage which was shown on television. Many of the pyrotechnics also needed to be added to the overhead shots, because filming at such an angle and at close range would have actually been too dangerous. Much of this criticism, though, was often waged by international media that demanded an “authentic” China, though the performance in the end was designed more for television than for the live performance (Latham 42).

The enormity of the project, though promising to be spectacular, was not without political dangers as well. The ceremony could have been easily associated with totalitarian mass movements, such as Mao-era parades or the annual North Korean Grand Mass Gymnastics and Artistic Performance Arirang. Due to the televised nature of the opening, coupled with its subsequent release in DVD format, the ceremony could have assumed a grand Olympic spectacle in the vein of Leni Riefenstahl’s *Olympia* which documented the Nazi Party supported 1936 Berlin Olympics. Regardless of these associations, the production was put forward by a collaboration of several authorities: Zhang Yimou, who possessed general directorial authority, Zhang Jigang, the minister of propaganda of the People’s Liberation Army who was responsible for the first half of the ceremony, Chen Weiya, director of the Song and Dance Ensemble of the East who oversaw the lighting of the flame and the entrance of the athletes, and Zhang Heping, a party member who was in charge of this creative ensemble (Barmé 70). Most importantly, however, the cultural performance component of the opening ceremony offered the Chinese

government in concert with artists the opportunity to brand a traditional yet modern, open, and (pertinently as well as interestingly for this study) environmentally harmonious China.

Utopian visions were cast throughout the opening performance. One prominent vignette of the first half “Brilliant Civilization” celebrated the invention of printing with a large rectangular series of individual blocks which formed various designs. The series of blocks, each controlled by one performer, moved and shifted to form the character “*he*” or “harmony” for the audience. After repeating this character several times, the blocks formed a representation of the Great Wall. Because the Great Wall of China is also a symbol of a militaristic past as well as insularity, the termination of this performance attempted to redirect negative connotations. To obviate any negative implication, blossoms sprung from each of the printing blocks as a narrator claimed, “We find ourselves in a garden suffused with spring color. The peach-blossom fairyland of harmony and romance expresses the Chinese people’s love for peace.” This line, of course, is an overt reference to China’s deepest and well-known utopian ideals, the Peach Blossom Spring as briefly discussed in the introduction of this dissertation. As a utopian location, the Peach Blossom Spring represents Chinese culture untainted by dynastic change, and from more recent hindsight, vast ideological and political shifts throughout the 20th century. The appeal to the utopian ideal, though more readily understood by Chinese audiences than foreign audiences, nevertheless attempted to obviate contentiousness of history—represented even by the grandest of Chinese cultural symbols, the Great Wall of China.

Though the second half “Glorious Age” was intended to show the modern future of China, the lead-up to the finale revitalized traditional elements with the appearance of T’ai Chi martial artists. Their performance served to represent a readily interpretable and hopeful conclusion that portrayed “harmony” (one of the main themes of the entire performance) with the future and

with nature. Two thousand and eight T'ai Chi performers circled the large scroll housing an LED screen, which served throughout the work as a centerpiece. Earlier in the performance, a traditional landscape painting, which was created under the artistic supervision of artist Huang Yongyu, appeared upon the screen and remained as a constant fixture throughout the show. As the T'ai Chi performers worked through their choreography, forming multiple lines and designs centered on the scroll, schoolchildren colored on the painting as they chanted a warning: "The earth is getting warmer, the glaciers are melting, agricultural land is dwindling, the birds have disappeared. . ." ⁵⁴ After promising to plant trees, the children claimed that spring and the birds will return. On the rim of the Bird's Nest, a projection of multicolored birds appeared as the children shouted with merriment, and the T'ai Chi performers ended their routines and gazed in wonder and amazement at the images of birds hovering over the stadium. This performance would lead to the finale which featured Taikongnauts and a large globe which appeared out of the ground. On this sphere, referred to as the "shared homeland" indicating harmonious internationalism, singers Liu Huan and Sarah Brightman sang the official 2008 Olympic theme song "You and Me".

The easily digestible, environmentally friendly, and utopian view of the future represented the concerted effort of Chinese officials over the previous few years to promote a pollution-free Beijing for the Olympics. However, in the lead up to the Olympics themselves, the government would be forced to enact tough measures to ensure a pleasant experience for international spectators, often shifting the environmental burden to other areas of the country. ⁵⁵ Furthermore, the opening ceremony itself would have to battle the air pollution euphemistically

⁵⁴ The NBC footage and subsequently released documentary of the opening ceremony conveniently erased tracks with the Chinese narration during the ceremony. In its stead, the American commentators offer their commentary of the performance and at times offer snippets of the scripted narration.

⁵⁵ In an editorial of the *China Heritage Quarterly*, Dai Qing describes the drought situation in Beijing and how water was redirected from other areas in order to supply the events and guests to the Olympics.

referred to as “autumnal mist” by government officials. In fact, one of the reasons for the image transposition of the “footprints” in the lead-up to the ceremony was the haze of pollution affecting visibility of the pyrotechnics (Barmé 73). The projection of a harmoniousness of modern China with nature further cast an irony due to the extreme measures that were taken to control nature in an effort to host a fantastical representation of China to the world. It was reported by the Beijing Municipal Meteorological Bureau, for example, that over one thousand missiles were launched around Beijing in order to disperse ominous clouds, since rain was forecast for the day of the ceremony (Barmé 78). Rather than focus on the ironic discrepancy between the ecological consequences of Olympic preparations with the opening ceremony’s projection of an environmental China, the questions that remain more pertinent revolve around why such an environmental projection would be deemed necessary by artists in conjunction with the government-sanctioned grand China narrative.

The seemingly transparent and easily interpretable air of the opening ceremony, upon closer examination, contained camouflaged and indirect references to contentious aspects of China’s past—for example the (non)presence of Chairman Mao (Barmé 79). However, any direct references to problematic aspects of China’s history or internationally sensitive events were deflated. “The Beautiful Olympics” circumvented key historical realities in its representation of Chinese history leading the audience from the pre-modern directly to the Open Door Policy. The futuristic and optimistic visions of the ceremony point to the relationship between the historical control and the representation of China’s modernity. Continuing the discussion begun in the introduction of the dissertation, throughout the past century, artists and the state have been in a constant struggle over the tenets and content of modernist representation and expression. On a globalized world stage, this struggle will result in a homogenization of the intricacies of cultural

and historical contexts, thus simplifying a narrative for specific purposes. The crafters of the ceremony took a commanding control over the historicity of the cultural and historical contexts which, from a historical position, have led to industrialization and resultant pollution to begin with.

The performance of “The Beautiful Olympics” represents a concerted effort to craft a modern narrative that now contains sustainability along with openness and a harmony between the traditional and the contemporary. This chiseled statement about China also shows an intricate contradiction between the need for environmentally modern representation and the push for economic modernity in other international arenas in which environmental issues come to the forefront. Furthermore, advances in environmental sustainability promised in the lead-up to the Olympics have proven extraordinarily difficult as a result of a general increase in industrialization and consequential industrial accidents. Two years after the Olympics, studies have shown that despite concerted efforts, one fourth of China’s rivers and lakes are too polluted to use for drinking water, the concentration of particulates in the air in Beijing continue to violate World Health Standards, and acid rain continues to affect almost one half of the cities monitored.⁵⁶

Just as the narrative on the world stage is able to elide aspects of history to carve a harmonious narrative of China’s greatness, this command of temporality also enables the manipulation of cultural symbols at the service of narrative formation. Interestingly, “The Beautiful Olympics” offers a pertinent contrast to a controversial and complex earlier attempt at a re-narration of China in context of history and culture. In the late 1980s, the six-part documentary *Heshang* (or *The Yellow River Elegy*) shown on national television criticized the

⁵⁶ See, for example, Andrew Jacob’s article “In China, Pollution Worsens Despite New Efforts” in the *New York Times*.

dragon totemism of Chinese cultural identity and offered a stark, apocalyptic vision of China and its future. *Heshang* mobilized aquatic imagery of the Yellow River, capturing its turbulence, flooding, but terminating in the finale as peacefully flowing into the Pacific Ocean. Jing Wang writes that the documentary was criticized for advancing “historical fatalism, geographical determinism, the ‘fallacious backward ideology’ of grand unification (dayitong), Eurocentrism, total westernization, elite culturalism, the postulate of a nonsocialist new epoch, and the theory of the ultrastability of Chinese feudal society” (118). Though *Hesheng* was developed to play for an exclusively Chinese audience and “The Beautiful Olympics” was designed for a national as well as world audience, the two similarly mobilize cultural symbols and natural imagery to craft a modern narrative of China. It becomes evident that a command of history in concert with the manipulation of cultural symbols becomes the tool for national narratives. This demonstrates the most important ideological trait inherent to the crafting of a national representation: the ability to command “nature” for the service of modernist, nationalist representation. The facility of manipulating ecology to the service of national discourse points to the origins of ecological violence.

As demonstrated with the brief reading of “The Beautiful Olympics”, the global China narrative seeks to overlook particular historical realities of the past and present, including environmental realities. The global China narrative adamantly claims harmony with nature as an intrinsic component of modern self-representation. The PRC has had its share of criticism for what many perceive as stalling during the international meetings about climate change, most notably the 2009 summit in Copenhagen, though the government asserts that it is working as a representative for developing nations.⁵⁷ Other developed nations, particularly the United States,

⁵⁷ Mark Lynas’ article in *The Guardian* “How do I know China wrecked the Copenhagen deal? I was in the room” details the diplomatic maneuvering strategies at the talks to avoid commitments during the negotiations.

complicate the issues by in turn appealing to a “make fair the playing field” model of argumentation which simplistically argues “we are all in this fight together.” However, as developing nations are quick to point out, not all nation-states have had the “luxury” of an industrial revolution conveniently existing in the past as the current nation enjoys the fruits of that polluting era which was fraught with human rights and labor abuses.

The discrepancy between the global narrative and political reality demonstrates the irony of globalization. It dissolves borders through the homogenization of cultural images, and it appeals to global neo-liberal capitalism as the economic model of prosperity involving increased trade and transnational economic ventures. Simultaneously, globalization stimulates a reification of those very boundaries through nationalist imaginaries, particularly when international treaties and attempts of cooperation come to the table. At those very moments, the history and legacies which were watered down to craft the modern global narrative resurface with renewed vigor. This reality lays down the reasons to advocate further interest in ecological readings of literature, film, and cultural products. By clearly investigating how ecology is represented, one can comprehend the textual project and decipher the forces at work on the backdrop of global disjunctive flows.

The Ecological Turn and Chinese Narrative

The reading of texts via the narration of the natural world contributes to larger questions about Chinese modernity. Thus the introduction of ecocriticism to contemporary Chinese studies should utilize the bridge between ecologically informed readings and the polyvalent and sometimes contradictory discourse of 20th and 21st century Chinese modernity. In each of the works read within this study, the notation of modernity maintains a presence, though through

diverse permutations. The struggle for modern representation of China also highlights the competing discourses between intellectuals and the state. Literary and economic modernity are not one and the same, and the voices of intellectuals often find themselves in dissonance with the official projection of what is occurring in terms of progress, industrially and economically. However, though the state prioritizes economic and industrial development at the cost of environmental destruction, the need remains to portray an “environmental modernity” to the rest of the world. This internally contradictory assertion reflects the issues raised by this study.

These close readings of literature and film, through the careful understanding of how humans interact with locations and natural elements, uncover a profound dynamic to narrative. Narratives are human constructs as represented by the text, yet narratives can also be dependent upon the ways we comprehend our interaction with the natural world. Placing this view of narrative upon specific historical timeframes and locations reveals several key relations: how literature and film defer to the presence of the natural world for the textual project, how humans define themselves in relation to the world, how texts become prisms through which flora and fauna contribute to our understanding of the world.

The act of reading texts as an isolated anthropocentric study proves insufficient for comprehending the narration of cultural and political change of the past thirty years within the context of China. In fact, there are several narratives occurring simultaneously. On one hand there is the narration of ideological and cultural changes. Taken upon the historicized reality of the present ecological destruction that is occurring in China, as well as the rest of the world, literature and film also narrates humans as separate from and dependent upon the very world they inhabit. This here is the ultimate conundrum from which narrative proceeds: humans are 1) dependent upon the world they live, 2) have the power alter the world in which they live 3)

possess the ability to cast various conceptualization of the natural world. Thus the “world” is not just a social sphere, to repeat Glotfelty’s assessment about the methodology of ecocriticism, but a dynamic interplay of creation, recreation, dependence, destruction, preservation and representation. The world is therefore not an isolated entity but an ecosphere, a dynamic location within which one is continually being negotiated. Chinese literature and film of the post-Mao period offers a valuable look at how that ecological manners of approaching literature prove effective for the comprehension of cultural changes at the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century. Due to rapid ecological changes paired with the representation of modernity upon the backdrop of vast environmental devastation, these works of literature and film prove how the world as social sphere and the world as ecosphere are closely becoming one and the same.

Unlike other theoretical areas, ecocriticism does not have nor will likely have a watershed moment. This is not necessarily a negative theoretical state of affairs, for as Lawrence Buell makes clear, methodological paradigms are made, in many ways, to eventually be challenged or broken. Furthermore, the lack of a seminal breakthrough moment has in no way prevented the proliferation of environmentally minded readings of literature in recent years. Though much work thus far has centered on English language literature, particularly American literature which already possesses environmental genres and thus lends itself to more ecocritical work, scholarly attention has now begun to look at international literary traditions. Also certain artists in China, such as Wang Bing and Jia Zhangke, have begun to make the environment the center of their works. During the course of this project, a volume of collected essays titled *Chinese Ecocinematics* has been published, indicating that indeed ecocritical attention has begun to shift towards contemporary Chinese works.

These types of ecocritically focused readings lead to important questions that challenge the way one will conceptualize Chinese history if environmental pollution persists and destroys the signifiers of nation and culture. The Yellow River is a perfect example. It is a prominent natural phenomenon that carries with it an amalgamation of concepts regarding cultural and racial genesis within the national imaginary. However, one-third of the river is completely dead and unusable even for agriculture. The question then needs to be asked whether the Yellow River will continue to hold as much power in the national cultural imaginary if it is further destroyed. This question cannot be currently answered, but it will be an interesting point to pursue in the near future. At least for the time being, the anxiety about the loss of cultural and historical symbols holds a firm place within literature and film. Here, one can go back to the scene in Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* when Shen Hong finally meets the archeologist Wang Dongming by the Yangtze River. He is in the process of excavating artifacts from the Western Han Dynasty. The brief encounter contains within it more persistent and pervasive dangers. The encounter narrates the missing link between Shen Hong and her estranged husband but also shows that recoverable parts of the past (ancient artifacts) will soon be destroyed.

Literature has always sought to comprehend the notion of human or what it means to be human, and in many texts throughout the history of literature, these questions have been answered through a relationship to the natural world— whether by separating the human from nature or showing human subordination to it. Either way, the role of the human is explored in relation to natural phenomena. For texts of antiquity, what will happen if the natural world they explore no longer exists? Do these texts continue to explore the realm of the human, or are they historicized, becoming antiquated documents that now manipulate obsolete symbols to their service, no longer resonating with contemporary readings? Must contemporary literature

necessarily react towards ecological changes because environmental effects increasingly challenge the conceptualization of humankind?

Narrative works out the intricacies between human, places, and “nature” through diverse and conflicting manners of representation. One representation is not dominant over the other, yet the comprehension of the role of representation illuminates *how* humans understand themselves. Therefore, the recent “ecological turn” in China reflects a text’s manner of refracting morphing global structures. Within the context of contemporary Chinese literature and film, the ecology re-narrates the excesses and resistances that emanate from the concerted endeavor of understanding the world via perpetually metamorphosing paradigms of modernity and globalization. From a historical perspective, they construct a snapshot from which we may finally resolve the tensions between our comprehension of the world as separate from ourselves and the world that nourishes further understanding of the human species.

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