WOUNDS IN TIME:
THE AESTHETIC AFTERLIVES OF THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

BY

YIJU HUANG

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in East Asian Languages and Cultures
in the Graduate College of
the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2011

Urbana, Illinois

Doctoral Committee:

Associate Professor Gary G. Xu, Chair
Professor David G. Goodman
Associate Professor Rania Huntington, Univ. of Wisconsin, Madison
Professor Michael Rothberg

Abstract

My dissertation, "Wounds in Time: the Aesthetic Afterlives of the Cultural Revolution," departs from the traditional historicist approach to the Cultural Revolution, contributing instead an investigation of the Cultural Revolution through its aesthetic afterlives. This study crosses disciplines and seeks to grasp the traumatic traces embedded within works of literature, art, and cinema that deal with the Cultural Revolution consciously or unconsciously, in lucidity or encryption. My analysis of the Cultural Revolution as a traumatic wound endeavors to bring the concealed political crimes, disavowed pains and absent feelings into historical consciousness. Figures central to this study include writers Han Shaogong, Yu Hua, and Hong Ying, artist Zhang Xiaogang, as well as filmmakers Jia Zhangke and Jiang Wen. Drawing on classical theory of trauma by Freud as well as works by subsequent theorists such as Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra, I maintain that the Cultural Revolution is not a fixed temporal entity but a phantom that stretches beyond history, finding contemporary cultural avenues of expression, and rematerializing to demand recognition and reparation. Further, by means of bringing trauma theory into a new historical/cultural context, this study translates/revises trauma theory beyond its Eurocentric provenance.

Acknowledgements

Much is owed to many.

My advisor Gary G. Xu has been an ideal and compassionate mentor throughout my entire time in graduate school. He has provided me with invaluable opportunities, unyielding support, and essential intellectual guidance and insight. He has instilled in me intellectual confidence by simply trusting me. To him, I am eternally grateful.

I have benefited immeasurably from the wisdom and sustenance offered by Prof. David G. Goodman. His teachings have challenged, animated and shaped much of my thinking. I hope he can see the traces of his critical voice in my writing.

I own a tremendous debt of gratitude to Prof. Michael Rothberg who first systematically introduced to me the fascinating world of critical theories and later on, contemporary trauma studies. His expertise in trauma theory and his intellectual sparkles have been inspirational in my research.

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Prof. Rania Huntington who not only showed me the beauty of details, of close reading but took me into the phantom land of ghosts, demons, fox spirits, mirror images and etc. She taught me the language and will to communicate with them.

I am also deeply grateful to my dear friends, Tonglu Li, Yanjie Wang, E.K. Tan, I-In Chiang, Liyu Li, Eric Dalle, Chia-Rong Wu, Minjie Chen, Mei-Hsuan Chiang, to name a few. They have been invaluable interlocutors and a great source of happiness during my graduate school years.

If there is a single debt of gratitude, it is to my parents. Without their love, nurturance, intelligence and sagely advice, I simply and literally don't know where I'd be. My dissertation is lovingly dedicated to them (unfortunately they don't read English!).

I'd like also to acknowledge the support of my entire family, especially my sisters in China, Yongxue Huang, Tiantian Huang and Xiaoran Huang, my mother-in-law Adrienne Slavens who has contributed tremendously by babysitting and my father-in-law Dennis Slavens who has shown an acute interest in my dissertation by laboring through my chapters and commenting on them.

My deepest gratitude goes to my husband, Martin Slavens whose love always sustains me. My dissertation would have been absolutely an impossible project without his support, companionship, astute listening and sensitive editorial skills.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the co-author of my dissertation, my baby girl, Avery Yuhe Huang Slavens (Ruru), who worked on the first two chapters with me while in the womb. The joy and hope that Ruru has inspired in me bespeaks the very purpose of my dissertation – a healthy transmission of past knowledge to the future generation.

Yiju Huang, CA

April 21, 2011

Table of Contents

1
Introduction: The Cultural Revolution beyond Official History, A Healable Scar or a Festering Wound?

My dissertation concerns one of the landmark catastrophes in twentieth-century China, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). For almost thirty five years now, there has been an academic void in efforts to interpret and reflect on the psychological, moral and social legacies of the Cultural Revolution. Relying on traditional modes of cognitive explanation,[1] the existing scholarship on the Cultural Revolution has largely failed to address two important issues: what lies outside the scope of historical rationalization and the enduring aftereffects of the Cultural Revolution beyond its temporal confinement.

I wish to depart from the traditional methodology of empirical objectivism that concerns the events of the Cultural Revolution and contribute instead an investigation of the Cultural Revolution from unforeseen vantage points beyond historical archives. That is, *my dissertation wishes to extend history in its aesthetic afterlives*. Indisputably, what occurred during the Cultural Revolution is immensely important. But equally important are the internal processes of sense-making, i.e., how people derive meaning or fail to do so in the aftermath of a historical catastrophe. The main interest of my dissertation thus resides in the aesthetic afterlives of the Cultural Revolution. By

[1] See for examples: Lubell, Pamela. *The Chinese Communist Party During the Cultural Revolution: The Case of the Sixty-One* Renegades. Palgrave: New York, 2002; *The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History*. Joseph W. Esherick, Paul G. Pickowicz and Andrew G. Walder. Eds. Stanford University Press, 2006; and MacFarquhar, Roderick and Michael Schoenhals. *Mao's Last Revolution*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 2008.

aesthetic afterlives, I mean works of art – including paintings, literatures and films – created in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution that have aesthetic, ethical, political, psychological or metaphysical significances. I see aesthetic afterlives as symptoms of history that most directly reveal to us the complexity, the contradiction, and the very presence of an unfinished past. I see poetics as a means to access what history has consigned to be invisible and silent –the unaddressed, unregistered and un-worked-through remnants of historical trauma.

I map out an already existing and yet not necessarily recognized or theorized cultural enterprise that lurked in the direct shadow of the Cultural Revolution. Multifaceted in form and content, these works of art carry traces of traumatic excess unseen in historiography and thereby present an ongoing emotional, ethical and intellectual challenge. They are the eyes fixated onto the past and behold a different face of the Cultural Revolution –a coffin, a wound, a living phantom. More significantly, a different vision beheld via these works helps to bring forth the otherness intrinsic to the teleological trajectory of history and thereby remake the historical condition that China is immersed in – the extreme fetishization of progress and development with little attentiveness to the ruins of the past and psychological wellbeing of the people.

*****

The Cultural Revolution as history: the official interpellation

Within the official discourse of the CCP, the Chinese Cultural Revolution is admittedly a disastrous chapter in modern Chinese history, a decade of chaos (*shi tian*

dong luan) from 1966 to 1976. The massive crimes that involved the participation of millions of people under Mao's inspiration, however, are believed to have been instigated by and attributable to a definitive group – the Gang of Four. Mao Zedong was allegedly manipulated and misguided by the group's evil schemes.[2] With the extermination of the Gang of Four, the names of those wronged are supposedly rectified; the dust has settled. Through using the Gang of Four as scapegoats and upholding the ideology of "looking forward" (*chao/toward qian/forward kan/look*), the CCP betrays a desire to disavow the continued presence of the traumatic past by bringing it to a premature closure and thereby transfer China's attention to future, the "hard truth" of economic development as named by Deng Xiaoping, or rather, the fetishism of money (the term *qian*, meaning "future or forward," is an ironic homonym for "money" in Chinese). Art and literature, in the wake of the recent catastrophe, were prescribed to look forward as well. Reminiscent of Mao's "Talk at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" in 1942, Deng Xiaoping delivered a similar decree to the Chinese writers and artists at the Fourth Congress of Chinese Writers and Artists in 1979. He reasserted Marxist literary tradition – literature is to serve the masses of the people; literature is to weed out the old and bring forth the new.[3] Deng's speech in essence is a continuation

---

[2] Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party Since the Founding of the People's Republic of China (关于建国以来党的若干历史问题的决议), available online at <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/shizheng/252/5089/5103/20010428/454968.html> (last visited April 18, 2011).

[3] Deng Xiaoping, "Congratulatory Message to the Fourth Congress of Chinese Writers and Artists," In Chinese Literature for the 1980s: The Fourth Congress of Writers and Artists, ed. Howard Goldblatt (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1982), pp. 7-14.

of Maoist dogmatism in the sense that art and literature remain a material extension of ideology. He simultaneously departs from Mao through deemphasizing Mao's mandate of class struggles and art as products of class society. Instead, Deng prescribed to the Chinese artists and writers a new orientation: "[T]he sole criterion of deciding the correctness of all work should be weather that work is helpful or harmful to the four modernizations."[4] In the wake of the recent catastrophe, Deng attempts to root out potential melancholic dwelling in the traumatic past. Under his injunction, the damaged bits and pieces of the past should be left behind or overcome in the march of progress.

*****

The Cultural Revolution as scar vs. as wound: a theoretical and ethical difference

Instead of understanding the Cultural Revolution as a history safely bounded in the past with its waste documented in the book of history, I suggest that the Cultural Revolution is a nexus of unresolved and unfinished problems that spilled beyond the threshold of the past. Specifically, as the title of my dissertation shows, I understand the Cultural Revolution as wounds in time. The crucial question then emerges: What is the wound? What does it indicate about my dissertation project as a whole? Before defining the wound, my initial step here is to distinguish it from the scar. *The most fundamental difference between a wound and a scar, in my definition, is that while a scar entails hard tissue and the desire/outcome of healing, a wound is open, deep and festering.* In what

[4] Ibid.

follows, I first discuss an important literary phenomenon known as scar literature in the immediate aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. I hope to show that the scar that heals is a symbol of parting with the past, of celebration of a new era. I further argue that scar literature remains an integral part to the official developmental narrative.

Emerging from the debris of the Cultural Revolution immediately after Mao's death in 1976, scar literature openly addressed the pathos of the catastrophe and seemingly created a cultural space of mourning. Yet such an autonomous space proved to be only a delusion. Lu Xinhua's story "Scar" (*shang hen*) is generally seen as the initiative piece of scar literature. Published in Shanghai Wen Hui Daily on August 1978, it depicts the painful alienation between a daughter and a mother during the Cultural Revolution. The daughter severed the kinship tie in favor of class love when the mother was labeled as a rightist, a new category of class enemies. The first story that delineated the family disintegration and its attended traumas ubiquitous during the Cultural Revolution, "Scar" resonated so powerfully with the public that Shanghai Wen Hui Daily printed an additional 1.5 million copies. There was a common expression that followed the phenomenon: Across the nation, the tears of each reader have joined to form a river.[5] On one hand, "Scar" became an immediate code that allowed people to connect, express their experiences and articulate their pathos in the wake of the catastrophe. On the other hand, it is ambiguously cathartic in nature and helps people to overcome the traumatic past via scapegoating and cheap sentiments. By the end of

[5]The original Chinese saying is: 全国读者的眼泪足以流成一条河.

Lu's story, the agonizing pain was curiously sublated and transformed into something else. Reunited with her mother who is now dead, the daughter deeply regrets her past severance from and misunderstanding of her dear mother. She is nevertheless consoled by the official rectification of her mother's blemished name. Thus speaks the daughter with shining eyes in the end:

> Dear mother, rest in peace. I will never forget who was responsible for your wounds and mine. I shall never forget Chairman Hua's kindness and closely follow the Party's Central Committee headed by him and dedicate my life to the cause of the party.[6]

The overt didactic tone aside, the passage unwittingly betrays something disconcerting. Equating her wounds with the mother's, the daughter blurs the boundary between the perpetrator and victim. Although not a firsthand perpetrator herself, the daughter is all the same responsible for her mother's death and deeply complicit in the ideological violence. Instead of looking inwardly, she projects outwardly thereby ridding herself of her immense guilt. Locating responsibility elsewhere, the daughter disassociates herself from moral obligation. On a different and related level, the daughter is notably interpellated into a new subject and her grief is effectively surmounted. Indeed, the story concludes on a note of optimism as pain is negated in eulogizing/identifying with the redeemer of the catastrophe, the new leader of the party. Under this light, the popular readership of the story is profoundly problematic by extension. On the one

---

[6] Geremie Barme and Bennett Lee, Trans., *The Wounded: New Stories of the Cultural Revolution* 77-78 (Hong Kong: Joint, 1979), pp. 23-4.

hand, the readers participated in the process of scapegoating, purged themselves of the burden of their inner guilt and contracted moral responsibility which in truth looms large in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. On the other hand, the readers have similarly become fully formed subjects of the four modernizations and thereby transcended their melancholia over the loss. The corpus of scar literature is immense. And yet if one teases out the sentimental and ornamental details of different stories, a similar language structure comes into the light. It is the language of Hegelian-Marxist redemption and transcendence. Rather than a literature that reflects on the catastrophe and its attendant traumas, scar literature betrays the desire of healing. It is a literature of accusation, of integrating present trauma into history and of shoring up the ideological imperative of looking forward. The very naming of the genre as scar literature is laden with ambiguity. On one hand it feels the trauma caused by the Cultural Revolution and on the other hand articulates a will to heal. And such healing disconcertingly involves displacement of burdens of guilt and mourning; a new start is attempted through moral polarizations between a victimized us and the Gang of Four. The villains are punished, the losses are redeemed and we now can move on. Scar literature, the officially acquiesced cultural forum of commemoration, pays lip service to the system that has inflicted the trauma to begin with. It also plays a social and psychological role as a Freudian screen that displaces inner guilt, covers up the ongoing trauma out of the fear of no longer desiring a future and attempts to prevail over any potential melancholic fixations with the catastrophe.

Scar literature's deep complicity with the official decree became crystallized when it was highly celebrated by Deng Xiaoping during his talk to the Chinese artists. In the words of Deng Xiaoping,

> Through a thorough repudiation and exposure of the ultra-leftist line of Lin Biao and the Gang of Four, many excellent novels, poems, dramas, films, examples of folk art, and reportage, as well as music, dance, photographs, and other art works have been produced over the last couple of years. These works have played an active role in smashing the spiritual shackles put into place by Lin Biao and the Gang of Four and eradicating their noxious influence; they have also helped to emancipate the people's thought and have promoted unity among the people in working tighter for the four modernizations.[7]

As clearly unveiled in Deng's talk, scar literature remained a developmental narrative for promoting "unity among the people in working tighter for the four modernizations." In this light, it has become part of the normalizing force that homogenizes the memory of the Cultural Revolution and promotes the climate of looking forward communally. Betraying a desire to heal, scar literature subscribes to the teleological vision of history and is implicitly complicit with its inherent violence.[8]

Now let us return to the crucial question I raised earlier: What is the wound? The choice of the title of my dissertation – "Wounds in Time," reflects a methodological

---

[7] Ibid.

[8] This cultural trend of standing on the shoulder of the dead to embrace the future is also reflected in the popular idiom at the time, 忆苦思甜, which means remembering the bitterness of the past while savoring the sweetness of the present/future.

centrality of trauma theory. I would like to discuss three major characteristics of the wound in Freud's "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," to which my dissertation is prominently indebted: 1. Unlike the scar which is healable, the wound is interestingly not a physical phenomenon inflicted on the body but a psychological wound inflicted upon the mind. Trauma occurs when, in words of Freud, "the pleasure principle is for the moment put out of action. There is no longer any possibility of preventing the mental apparatus from being flooded with large amounts of stimulus."[9] That is to say, the wound is a psychic phenomenon where the mind's protective shield is so violently and extensively breached that the mind cannot understand or register the stimuli initially. The neurotic soldiers' repetitive and traumatic dreams that baffled Freud function to "master the stimulus retrospectively, by developing anxiety whose omission was the cause of traumatic neurosis."[10] Such insights demonstrate that the wound comes into being through a dialectical relationship between external stimuli and the subject's psychic interpretation and reinterpretation of it. 2. The wound entails a re-conceptualization of time, hence "*the Wounds in Time.*" *A purposeful combination of wound and time in the title of my dissertation intends to highlight that the wound is constant, affective and festering (instead of healing) in an inner, psychic, still time.* The inner time of the wounded lurks tenaciously in the shadow of historical time and disturbs its logic of progress and development. In it, the unmastered catastrophe, the unworked-through

[9] "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," Gay, Peter, ed., *The Freud Reader*, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1989. p. 607.

[10] Ibid. p. 609.

historical wreckages, the unappeased ghosts moaning in the dark are painfully dragged into the light where the past is always imminent in the present. Indeed, the idea of "inherent latency,"[11] of belatedness, of repetition allows trauma theory to bend the rule of temporal sequence and conventional causality. Precisely because of such temporal indeterminacy, the history is preserved in the psychic field of the traumatized and therefore safe from the erosion of linear time. 3. The wound demands a creative endeavor, hence, "*the Aesthetic Afterlives of the Cultural Revolution*." The wound instinctually elicits aesthetic response and artistic creativity from the wounded. This becomes clear where Freud unites the objective with the subjective in a creative synthesis: he implicitly draws a parallel between the literal dreams (literal return of the traumatic events) of the traumatized soldiers and the fort/da game *played* by his one and half year old grandson in attempt to assimilate the trauma of the mother's absence. I argue that this peculiar and implicit parallel is of significance. It shows that the retrospective process of psychic assimilation of an external impact necessarily involves mimetic attributes such as play, fantasy, imagination and creation.

[11] I am using trauma theorist Cathy Caruth's term here. Caruth attributes the literal return of the original event in the traumatic dreams of the neurotic soldiers to "an inherent latency of within the experience itself." Thus, "the traumatized carry an impossible history within them." Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). p.8.

*****

The Cultural Revolution: a colossal trauma

In the previous section, I have defined the wound embedded in my dissertation title and distinguish it from the notion of scar. I have highlighted three characteristics of the wound: a psychological wound, a wound in time and a wound that requires aesthetic endeavor. The term 'wound' captures my attempt to advance a certain version of the Chinese Cultural Revolution beyond history itself – not a healable scar but a psychic wound that protracts beyond the historical time and finds aesthetic avenues to rematerialize. Such a wound is made and left festering by a series of traumatic events of the Cultural Revolution.

Indeed, in my reading the ten-year process of the Chinese Cultural Revolution presents itself as the powerful stimuli, to use Freudian language, that have violently breached the protective shield (social and cultural fabric) of the Chinese mind and Chinese society. The scale and extent of the destruction brought on by the series of violent political campaigns is simply unimaginable. I want to discuss this destruction from two aspects – its murderous assault on the tradition as well as on the bodies of the Chinese people. These two aspects largely reflect my understanding of the Cultural Revolution. First, there has been a complete destruction of traditional cultures, values, belief systems and even language – all those smashing of religious buildings and book-burnings, physical torturing of intellectuals (the most respected social group in traditional culture), the disintegration of family systems, the complete collapse of educational and economic system, exile of millions of youths to the countryside and so

on. Echoing the destruction of a whole culture was the most abhorrent destruction of the people – the death toll resulting from the Cultural Revolution ranges anywhere from 2 – 7 million.[12] Given the scale and extent of the destruction – the murderous assault on both culture and body – the Cultural Revolution must first and foremost be understood as a colossal trauma.[13]

The enormity of the destruction is indicative of the legitimization of violence during the Cultural Revolution. The mass violence – the unlimited purging, beating and killing, endless denunciations and vandalism – were not lightly borrowed in a trance. Unlike Nazis who confined the Jews behind the barbed wire fences and committed unspeakable crimes outside the public eye, most of the collective persecutions and killings during the Cultural Revolution were performed in public by the people's tribunal, a unique court independent of the regular court of civil justice.[14] More often than not, the watching crowds were not innocent bystanders but lynching mobs incited by a loudspeaker. They are part of this twisted mass justice found in the Cultural Revolution where courts were directly brought to the people and the 'justice' was instantaneous on the spot. They roared calls for blood of the class enemies, even

---

[12] Source List and Detailed Death Tolls for the Twentieth Century Hemoclysm: <http://necrometrics.com/20c5m.htm>. (Last accessed April 18, 2011).

[13] Disconcertingly, there are dissenting voices within the academics whether the Cultural Revolution has a positive side. And there have been academic attempts to de-traumatize the Cultural Revolution.

[14] Zheng Shiping's elucidation of the people's tribunal is helpful here: "Presided over by leaders of a work unit and consisting of political activists as judges, the people's tribunals had enormous judicial powers, ranging from summons for interrogation, arrest and detainment, to passing sentence and awarding the death penalty." *Party vs. State in Post-1949 China: The Institutional Dilemma*. Cambridge University Press, 1997.

joined in the physical abuse of the condemned and participated in this all-consuming power that had engulfed China at the time.

What is the nature of this power that has mobilized a people to engage so fervently in a violent hysterical carnival? How do we account for the enigmatic readiness of a people to fall under the spell of Mao's absolutism? In answering these questions, I wish to draw attention to the utopian dimension of the Cultural Revolution. Mao's inspection of one million youths in Tian'anmen Square in August 1966 unveils a romantic element of the Cultural Revolution which is infused with poetic delirium. Carrying giant portraits of Mao and wavering feverishly the Red Treasure Book, the masses were fused as one in a transcendental vision as they trembled, screamed and wept in ecstasy. It was a vision of Utopia suffused with power and beauty. All the horror produced during the Cultural Revolution is intimately linked with Mao's vision of a utopian society of class purity where the revolution passion is eternal, unpolluted and good. The realization of this utopian dream has proven to be dystopian and indeed traumatic.

*****

Between Western theory and Chinese texts: a reconsideration

Before I turn to the specific chapters of my dissertation, there is one more package I wish to unravel first. I feel obliged to answer the following questions: Does trauma theory carry with it the stain of Eurocentrism? Should it be used in discussions of experience of pain and suffering in non-western cultural contexts?

Cultural critics have taken issue with the western provenance of trauma theory.[15] What do we mean by saying trauma theory is Eurocentric? And must such a claim be absolute? It is my contention that Eurocentrism should not be reduced to a matter of territoriality. That is to say, trauma theory should not be stigmatized as Eurocentric and narrowly limited to western cultural contexts only because of its geographical provenance. For the dichotomy between the west and rest not only effaces the complexity and heterogeneity within the west but in reality no longer sustains in our age. Although unevenly subjected to its coercive and consensual violence, the world as a whole is undeniably caught in the money-nexus webs of development – global capitalism, our present. The relevance of trauma theory in a global context therefore lies in the following point: trauma theory as a critical mode against a teleological vision of history, of perpetual warfare and of unattended historical ruins left in oblivion.[16]

---

[15] See, for example, *positions: East Asia cultures critique*, 16:1 (Spring 2008).

[16] In addition to its western provenance, the alleged Eurocentrism of trauma theory also lies in its alleged theoretical complicity with violence toward the other. Here I address this aspect and my answer to it in the footnote. Is trauma theory indeed linked with egocentrism in both philosophical and sociopolitical senses? Fanon has convincingly argued that the traumatic neurosis, as initiated by Freud, assumes the coherence of ego as a universal condition. For the black subject in a colonial context, indicative of a de-humanized people, ego is a sickly constitution and the so-called universality has become an omnipresent snare/totality that entraps, ridicules, and condemns the black subject as backward and savage-like. Fanon's critique echoes with the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas' criticism of western philosophy since Plato, which according to Levinas, has been preoccupied with epistemological inquiries of being and totality at the expense of ethical inquiries, of what lies beyond the totality of Being. Freud's concept of trauma at first glance seems to be continuous with the traditional inquiry into the questions of being and knowledge. And yet one has to recognize that his theory at the same time departs from this referential structure by disrupting the normalcy of coherence and displacing the ego as the centerpiece of being. One might even go further to argue that Freud and Levinas are in truth engaged in a similar enterprise of destructing the totality of being and only from different angles. While Levinas has rejected ontology and resorts to ethical relation to uncover the exterior, the other, Freud looks on internally and unveils the exterior, the other that lurks within. With the aporia of trauma, Freud has opened a door for a radically new vision of being which is anything but egocentric. And having inverted the hierarchical binaries of consciousness and unconsciousness in understanding the mind, Freud unauthorizes reason

Indeed, I see resonance between trauma theory and the aesthetic afterlives of the Cultural Revolution. I have elaborated at length in a previous section on the Chinese official ideological of looking forward (looking toward the money), which is in truth part of the global phenomenon of modernization and development. *Trauma theory offers crucial resources to my dissertation precisely as a critical mode in response to the ideological imperative of looking forward.* The three characteristics of the wound that I have delineated demonstrate that trauma theory has bent the iron rules of history through breaching the polarity between events (external stimuli) and their psychological reception. History ceases to be a chain of events as the event dissolves as the sole legitimate component of history in light of trauma theory. By shifting from thinking of trauma as an event to a structure of the experience, trauma theory highlights the symptoms of history rather than the facts of history and thereof suggests an alternative mode of historicity. Facts alone do not attribute affect or meaning. Acts of consciousness/unconsciousness do. Such insights allow me to probe more confidently the aesthetic afterlives of the Cultural Revolution. Such insights allow me to perceive aesthetic afterlives of the Cultural Revolution as an epistemic practice that shares the same ontological universe with the original events.

The relevance of trauma theory also comes from an innate desire of my dissertation as a whole: namely, to incorporate the study of the Chinese Cultural Revolution to trauma studies in North American academe and to bring its traumatic

---

and brings forth an infinitely mythical, melancholic and critical subject that has hitherto been non-existent in the empire of western philosophy.

legacies to a global visibility. Trauma theory has largely developed in the study of the Nazi genocide of Jews; can we study the Chinese experience of suffering with it? While I remain sensitive to the specificity of the Chinese Cultural Revolution and the fact that "there is no timeless or spaceless universal shape to suffering,"[17] the broadest purpose of my dissertation is precisely to deemphasize the Chinese Cultural Revolution as a Chinese case. For the Chinese Cultural Revolution has been long marginalized as a Red-China phenomenon, a communist carnival, a distant echo of Mao's infamy instead of being appropriately understood from a humane angle and studied as a phenomenology of human suffering. For instance, the Great Famine under Mao (whose aesthetic afterlife has been included in my project as I see Mao's famine as an immediate prehistory of the Cultural Revolution), the most devastating famine in the world history, both in terms of its disheartening death toll and temporal duration, has received shockingly little scholarly attention in North American academia and remained largely invisible in public consciousness. To use trauma theory to orient my study of the traumatic legacies of the Cultural Revolution means to counter the public silence and invisibility, and bring it to the global histories of holocaust, slave trade, racism, atomic bomb and so on – the subjects that have been intensively and extensively studied in light of trauma theory.[18]

---

[17] Kleinman, Arthur and Joan Kleinman "The Appeal of Experience; The Dismay of Images: Cultural Appropriations of Suffering in Our Times." *Daedalus* 125:1 (Winter, 1996), pp. 1-23, 2.

[18] Michael Rothberg's concept of Multidirectional Memory lends trauma its transmissibility where one traumatic site opens itself ethically to a different traumatic site and connects with the other in comparative remembrance rather than unbendingly insisting on its uniqueness in isolation. Rothberg,

Lastly, I emphasize that that task I have undertaken here – reading aesthetic afterlives of the Cultural Revolution alongside trauma theory – is not a simple or convenient matter of giving a psychoanalytical interpretation of literary texts. It is a mutual exchange between theory and texts. On the one hand, trauma theory transforms aesthetic afterlives into *symptoms*, an invaluable source of historical and political insights rather than a mimetic site of life-scenarios. On the other hand, aesthetic afterlives of the Chinese Cultural Revolution can enrich trauma theory by adding nuanced, deep strained and specific cultural forms used in understanding trauma. To give an example, I parallel hungry ghosts in Chinese popular and religious imagination with the Freudian notion of melancholia in Chapter 4 and foster an open dialogue between the two.

*****

The Chapters

The intention of my individual chapters is not to offer a thorough survey of all the cultural narrativizations of the Cultural Revolution in its aftermath. Rather, through selecting and constructing a constellation of texts, I have hoped advance certain vision of the Cultural Revolution against the official position of Cultural Revolution, the literature grows out of this official position as well as the conservative nostalgia toward Mao era that China has witnessed in recent years. I have also hoped to bring together Chinese artists from different disciplines – writers, painters and film makers – to share

---

Michael. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization (Cultural Memory in the Present)*. Stanford University Press, 2009.

their resonating preoccupation with the wound of the Cultural Revolution. The outcome of my dissertation as a whole is a combination of interdisciplinary, theoretical and intimate textual analysis. The mood that saturates my dissertation is melancholia and indeterminacy intrinsic in history – such mood constantly unsettles China's new found faith in the market and her elated confidence in the future. Working at the intersection of history and literature, my dissertation is a continued effort to explore the entangled relation between history, violence and trauma, an immensely important issue which has been addressed by scholars such as David Wang, Ban Wang, and Yomi Braester.

My chapter on Hong Ying's memoir, *Daughter of Hunger*, contemplates on the pressing issue of psychological and historic legacies of mass deaths during Mao era. Specifically, it examines the institutionalized secret, the encrypted knowledge of the great famine under Mao, the most immediate prehistory of the Cultural Revolution. This chapter investigates three tropes in The Daughter of Hunger that are linked with the question of the encrypted Great Famine: First, I examine how the novel reinvents the city Chong Qing into a haunted river, a secretive landfill to address the city's layered traumatic pasts and deal with the horror of mass deaths. Second, I focus on the representation of body and examine how the novel fantasizes historical trauma – hunger – belatedly through aesthetics of the somatic. Third, I reflect on transgenerational transmission of the difficult knowledge of the Great Famine. I examine how the institutionalized secret, the suppressed history of the Great Famine, insidiously reaches its tentacles into everyday life and manifests/transmits as shameful

familial secrets. These three tropes – the spatial one, the bodily one and the psychological one –mutually implicate and are preoccupied with the mass deaths made by the Great Famine. Together they generate an aura of secrecy that permeates the entire novel. Such secrecy, I argue, exceeds personal character as it is indicative of the collective psychological economy of post-famine China.

In my chapter on Han Shaogong, one of the most important writers and cultural theorists in contemporary China, I reread his root-seeking project and excavate what I call the aesthetic of heterogeneity. By aesthetic of heterogeneity, I want to highlight the often overlooked significance of plural forms of roots that Han Shaogong has engaged with –what Han seeks after is not a canonical cultural *Root* but a constellation of *roots* scattered in different spatial temporalities. And I situate such an aesthetic in the long shadow of the Cultural Revolution. From Root to roots, Han mourns and interrogates a culture, a history, a language that has hitherto valued centralization and universalization, out of which the events of the Cultural Revolution emerged and exploded. Indeed, for Han Shaogong, the Cultural Revolution is not an isolated historical trauma. The Cultural Revolution itself can be read as a cultural symptom of a deeper prehistory, the celebration of the same at the expense of transforming others. His aesthetic of heterogeneity emerges from the marginalized sites of others – it not only institutes multiple roots in theory but carves a mythical space in his literary performances for the damaged but recalcitrant other to rematerialize against the progress of history, to splinter the prevailing cultural dreams of centrality, mastery, universalism and developmentalism.

In my chapter on the prominent Chinese artist Zhang Xiaogang, I explore how his series of paintings 'Bloodline: Big Family' represent the artist's profound preoccupation with the work of mourning so lacking and hence urgently needed in Chinese society today. Zhang's work presents itself as an enormous contribution to the understanding of the traumatic entanglement between past, present and future – a daunting task that China has yet to face. The melancholic, repetitious fixation with a ghostly family in 'Bloodline: Big Family' speaks to the traumatic disintegration of family system during the Cultural Revolution. An affective visual memorial space par excellence, 'Bloodline: Big Family" series function as a cultural remedy that starts to fill the hole of the state's failure in building a physical memorial space for the historical catastrophe.

My chapter on filmic re-representations of the Cultural Revolution asks if it is still possible to narrate a poetics of youth during the Chinese Cultural Revolution without reinforcing the logic of high Maoism. On the one hand, the very image of youths during the Cultural Revolution immediately conjures up the Red Guards. Mao's beautiful children also reenacted the most horrible violence: endless book-burning, smashing and torturing, killing, the cruelty of it all. In addition to the youth-violence symbiosis, another image of youths has come out of this same era. This is of the youths who have been largely seen as the victims utilized and in turn disposed of by Mao. This chapter seeks to go beyond the double image of the youth – Mao's flower children and Mao's forsaken children - and imagine a poetics of youths in redemptive narratives. Drawing on Robert Jay Lifton's important notion of Chinese wanders coming to us from

1968 as well as his insights into the protean self, the imagination of a redemptive poetics of youth from the Cultural Revolution beyond the dual bindings of Maoism becomes feasible. This chapter thus attempts to explore narratives revealing an alternative poetics of youth characterized by pluralism, malleability, self-interest and indeterminacy. I accomplish this through a juxtaposed reading of two filmic texts: *In the Heat of the Sun* and *Postmodern Life of my Aunt*. Ultimately, their varied styles expose the limits of the prevailing monistic ideal of Maoism. I argue that both texts, in their varied ways, may be engaged in protecting the protean life force from the damage made by history.

The last chapter is a coda devoted to Ba Jin to highlight the voice of a different generation, Chinese senior writers. The significance of Ba Jin's writing on the Cultural Revolution lies in its ethical relationship to history. And this ethical relationship to history consists of three parts: 1) its affect: Ba Jin's writing has repetitively, emotionally and powerfully voiced out the subjective experience of trauma. 2) Its somber reflection on history: Ba Jin significantly does not portray a binary understanding of the Cultural Revolution. His writing brings out a more complex picture of the Cultural Revolution. He raises the important question of responsibility and moral ambiguity. 3) Its plea: Ba Jin does not only gaze into the past and dwells in his personal trauma. He makes a plea on behalf the future generation: China needs to build a Cultural Revolution Museum for her children.

2
The Aesthetic of Heterogeneity: Unraveling Root in Root-seeking project (On Han Shaogong's theoretical and literary writings)

> The Cultural Revolution is China's catastrophe. It is a concentrated explosion of the deeply rooted ills of the system, culture and human nature. But it is also a flash of lightning that enables people to see through many things.
>
> –Han Shaogong[19]

> Literature is forever like a returnee who sails against the current, a reactionary who transforms any era into the same era. Literature eternally locks our gaze onto some unchanging themes: for instance, conscience, sympathy, and public exchange of knowledge.
>
> –Han Shaogong[20]

In the forward to his most recent anthology of his major writings, *Contemporary Chinese writers: Han Shaogong series* (2007), Han Shaogong reflects on his thirty-year career as a writer and states that if it were not for the whims of fate casted by the Cultural Revolution, it would have been unlikely for him to embark on the road of writing. He intimates that writing is a choiceless response for there lurks in the mind a certain unshakable grief and secret anguish *(jiyu he yintong*). Rather ambiguously, he expresses that he lifts his pen for it is difficult for him to abandon certain enduring ideas

---

[19] All quotations of Han Shaogong are taken from their Chinese texts and have been translated by me. Han, Shaogong. "Hu si luan xiang – da bei mei huaqiaoribao ji zhe Xia Yu [胡思乱想 – 答北美华侨日报记者夏瑜]." *Da Ti Xiao Zuo [大题小作]*. Ed. Yang Liu. The People's Literature Publishing House: Beijing, May 2008. p.102.

[20] Han, Shaogong. "Jin bu de hui tui [进步的回退]." *Da Ti Xiao Zuo [大题小作]*. Ed. Yang Liu. The People's Literature Publishing House: Beijing, May 2008. p.5.

and a deep wish (*changnian he shenyuan*).[21] Han's comments immediately locate the Cultural Revolution as a constitutive base of his thirty-year long journey of writing – a traumatic base indeed. The "accumulated grief and secret anguish" articulated by Han Shaogong time and again illustrate the correlation between trauma and the creative endeavor. For Han Shaogong, this has been the Cultural Revolution, that is, Han's writings can be seen as an artistic response that the trauma the Cultural Revolution has elicited.[22] The "enduring ideas" and "deep wish" intimated by Han similarly point to a different correlation – that between trauma and illumination. They are the revelatory insights endowed by the "flash of lightning" of the Cultural Revolution. By the end of this chapter, a meditation on both Han Shaogong's theoretical and fictional writings, I hope those "enduring ideas" and the "deep wish" which haunt the writer and underline his often vague and opaque writings will be elucidated.

Han Shaogong's influence in post-Mao literature is vast and profound. His 1985 theoretical essay, "Roots of Literature" (*wenxue de gen*), sparked a constellation of responses and was seen as a manifesto marking a decisive break from social realism that had prescribed Chinese literature since Mao's 1942 *Talks of Yan'an forum on Art and Literature*. The success of "Roots of Literature" is followed by a series of attention-

---

[21] Liu, Yang. Ed. "Forward." *Da Ti Xiao Zuo [大题小作]*. The People's Literature Publishing House: Beijing, May 2008. p.1.

[22] The correlation between trauma and creative response is not only theorized by Freud in his famous case of fort/da game played by his grandson, but has a deep root in Chinese tradition as well. It is well known that the completion of the *Records of the Grand Historian* (*shiji* 史記) by Sima Qian (145 or 135 B. C. – 86 B. C.), who is later considered as the father of Chinese historiography, is motivated by great suffering – the most humiliating and painful punishment, castration.

arresting novellas: *Homecoming*, *Pa Pa Pa*, *Woman, Woman, Woman* and etc. And indeed, Han Shaogong's work remains a major and recognized influence on the Root-Seeking Movement – "one of the key liberating developments in post-Mao literature" that reopened "fiction to influences from Chinese traditional cultures, aesthetics, and language, rebelling against decades of stifling Communist controls."[23]

Born in 1953, Han Shaogong came from an intellectual family and lost his father during the Cultural Revolution.[24] A youth when the political upheavals swept through the country, Han Shaogong naturally belongs to the generation of "educated youth" (*zhiqing*) and was sent to villages in northern Hunan province to work alongside the peasants. Unshakable, the traumatic past bears a relation to his formation as a writer as it is repetitively configured in the corpus of his writings. Diverse, complex, obscure and even seemingly contradictory at times, his writings provoke a cluster of crucial questions pertaining to the aesthetic afterlives of the Cultural Revolution: Is Han Shaogong's appeal to writers to seek their roots a pure interest in excavating traditional aesthetics and cultures? Or is it a camouflaged preoccupation with the violence of Cultural Revolution and a theoretical attempt to come to terms with historical and cultural ills? How should we make sense of the salient and baffling gap between Han's cultural theory and his ensuing literary practices, i.e., why are the roots, allegedly fine and splendid, configured as alarmingly appalling, deformed and disquieting such that

---

[23] Han, Shaogong. "Translator's Preface." *A Dictionary of Maqiao*. Trans. Julia Lovell. Columbia University Press: New York, 2003. p.vii.

[24] His father committed suicide due to political pressure during the Cultural Revolution.

they are constantly stumbled over and gaped at by the reader? And how should we understand Han's disinterest in directly addressing the events of the Cultural Revolution, particularly when considering that China was enveloped in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution throughout the 1980s and these events are a crucial subtext of his theoretical and literary work? Does Han Shaogong's conscious or unconscious avoidance of the traumatic core universalize the catastrophe? Does it in the end serve or weaken the purpose of coming to terms with the legacy of the totalitarian violence? This chapter will address these questions through critically engaging with Han Shaogong's writings. It contends that the richness of his work does more than convey the experiences or the facts of those volatile years – it significantly allows us to approach the Cultural Revolution via an intellectual engagement with the uneasy relationship between catastrophe and culture at large.

Han Shaogong's life style in connection with his writing is worthy of being briefly stressed here. Han is an organic intellectual. His intense critique of culture, of civilization and its complicity with catastrophe is not limited to his texts. Han's actions echoed the strong sentiments in his writings. Since the 1990s, Han has chosen to live a simple life in the countryside alongside the peasants. In his own words, "[such a life style] helps me to reflect on modern civilization."[25] Han Shaogong's embracement of an austere lifestyle in opposition to China's recent economic miracle is of significance on two levels: first, Han is critical of the logic of development – its complicity with and

[25] Han, Shaogong. "Wen xue: mengyou yu suxing [文学： 梦游与苏醒]." *Da Ti Xiao Zuo [大题小作]*. Ed. Yang Liu. The People's Literature Publishing House: Beijing, May 2008. p.79.

continuation of the historical violence. Second, Han is fully aware of the often perverse symbiosis between the artists and culture they critique and he tries to break free from it.[26]

*****

The aesthetic of heterogeneity: from Root to roots

Han Shaogong's 1985 essay, "Roots of Literature," famously initiated the Root-seeking movement which dominated the Chinese literary scene into the 1990s. Much scholarly work has interpreted Han's essay on a temporal level, i.e., how Han sees traditional culture as the vital spring for reenergizing Chinese literature. For instance, Feuerwerker forcefully argues that "traditional culture and its ancient myths are evoked to emphasize a sense of loss, a decline from or impoverishment of what had been before…the past is used both as a vehicle for questioning the present and as a source of renewed creative energy."[27] A keen interest in the past, as Feuerwerker suggests, is intimately connected with the present. In light of this critique, Han's response to the trauma of the Cultural Revolution and its entailed loss takes the form of nostalgia for Chinese traditional culture buried in a deep past and severed from the future. While enriched with important insights, a sole emphasis on the temporal structure, however,

[26] It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to address the important and ambiguous question of the symbiosis between the artists and culture they critique. Unlike Han Shaogong, most of the artists discussed in this thesis not only conscientiously dance with the ghosts but problematically with the capital. In other words, they are supported by the culture they critique. For instance, how should one make of the economic structure that the traumatic images of the Big Family conceal? Is Zhang's art fatally and politically compromised by its success in the circuits of international art markets? The answer is certainly not black and white and I hope I can explore these issues in a future project.

[27] Feuerwerker, Yi-tsi Mei, "Ideology, Power, Text: Self-Representation and the Peasant 'Other'." Modern Chinese Literature. Stanford University Press: Stanford, CA, 1998. p.193.

tends to veil the past in a uniform cloak and thus obscure the intricacies of roots that Han Shaogong seeks after. We can think of this temporal line – from past to present to future – as a vertical dimension. I wish to add to this a horizontal dimension, namely, the heterogeneous traditions that make up Chinese culture. Not only was Han interested in shaping the future of literature by reconnecting with the past, he was also interested in broadening writers' understanding of Chinese roots beyond that of the canonical to include China's historically marginalized roots.

This section thus reads Han's seminal piece and traces how Han's thoughts are saturated in what I call *the aesthetic of heterogeneity*. By aesthetic of heterogeneity, I want to highlight the often overlooked significance of plural forms of roots[28] that Han Shaogong has engaged with – what Han seeks after is not a canonical cultural *Root* but a constellation of *roots* scattered in different spatial temporalities. And I situate such an aesthetic in the long shadow of the Cultural Revolution. In other words, I understand it as a keen response to the events of the Cultural Revolution, an intense preoccupation with the historical and cultural ills that the Cultural Revolution has exposed. From Root to roots, Han mourns and interrogates a culture, a history, a language that has hitherto valued centralization and universalization, out of which the events of the Cultural Revolution emerged and exploded.

[28] In Chinese language, root and roots are both rendered as "gen" and thus engender certain ambiguities in terms what Han Shaogong means by "xun gen" (searching for root/roots). I contend that a differentiation between root and roots are politically, culturally and philosophically significant.

On the surface, "Roots of Literature" is primarily concerned with excavating traditional aesthetics, termed ambiguously as *gen* (root/roots), to renew Chinese literature. My reading of the piece wishes to bring forth the subtext of the Cultural Revolution and highlights it as a hidden kernel, an essential historical and cultural context, in which Han's work must be understood. Although unspoken and implicit, the Cultural Revolution is all the more powerfully the unconscious language and intension of "Roots of Literature." By way of tracing the nature of *gen* and highlighting the aesthetic of heterogeneity prevailing in the text, I contend that Han's seminal essay, "Roots of Literature," is in truth a reflection on the relation between violence and culture at large. In his dialogue with Wang Yao, Han Shaogong warns against a superficial understanding of the Cultural Revolution as an accidental tragedy on an ethical level – a dangerous simplification that "some bad people did some bad things."[29] His persistent concern with understanding the Cultural Revolution in relation to the complicity of culture[30] suggests that Han Shaogong is interested in a philosophical, political and moral prehistory of the Cultural Revolution, the deeply-rooted cultural milieu that has provided soil for such "concentrated explosion."[31] That is to say, Han Shaogong is more concerned with detecting the source of the crime than articulating the

---

[29] Liu, Yang. Ed. "Da ti xiao zuo-Han Shaogong, Wang Yao dui hua lu [大题小作 – 韩少功，王尧对话录]." *Da Ti Xiao Zuo [大题小作]*. The People's Literature Publishing House: Beijing, May 2008. p.151.

[30] See also the opening quote on his understanding of the Cultural Revolution as a concentrated explosion of some deeply rooted ills.

[31] Han, Shaogong. "Jin bu de hui tui [进步的回退]." *Da Ti Xiao Zuo [大题小作]*. Ed. Yang Liu. The People's Literature Publishing House: Beijing, May 2008. p.102.

moans and grievances of the wounds left by the 'concentrated explosion.' In my opinion, "Roots of Literature," Han's first important theoretical essay, begins his lifelong devotion to detecting the ills of a culture, an endeavor that cannot be thought apart from the impact of the Cultural Revolution.

So what is this philosophical, political and moral prehistory of the Cultural Revolution that Han Shaogong implicitly interrogates and dismantles in "Roots of Literature"? We should approach this question through exploring the conventional meaning of *gen* (root) and contrasting it with Han's unique characterization of *gen*. *Gen* has been a matter of established knowledge in the Chinese context – it conventionally implies a single origin of Chinese civilization. When speaking of *gen*, Chinese people would usually refer themselves as 'Descendents of the Yellow Emperor' or 'Descendents of Dragon.' Both terms are keenly associated with the Culture of the Central Plains originating from the banks of the Yellow River commonly believed to be the cradle of the Chinese civilization. Amidst the decedents of the Yellow Emperor, the Confucian moral and political systems gradually become rooted and authorized. Indeed, *gen* is a historically and culturally created myth that revolves around the same region and confabulates a *continuous, homogenized* and *centralized* Chinese civilization. In modern times, it is this same region – the landscape of the Yellow River – where the Chinese Communist Party founded their revolutionary base. Since Mao's 1942 *Talks of Yan'an forum on Art and Literature,* an alternative *gen* was established. Yan'an immediately became a Mecca of sort where Chinese artists all look to and follow a new standard. Significantly, from the centralized civilization of Confucian moral and

political systems to high revolutionary ideologies, there is an intrinsic continuation between these two forms of Root – while the regional connection is remarkable, their continuity essentially lies in the fact that both are manifested dreams of a singular and universal ideal. The fulfillment of such dreams inevitably entails a systematic and structural violence toward others. In Analects, the master (Confucius) expressed a desire to go and live among the Nine Yi Barbarian tribes. Someone asked him, how could you bear their uncouthness? The master replied, "If a gentleman were to dwell among them, what uncouthness would there be?"[32] Confucius's reply speaks to the power of a dominant culture to assimilate others in that all those who come in contact with Chinese civilization will recognize its value and desire to conform themselves accordingly. Confucius is certainly not speaking of a forced domination – an explicit form of violence. What he concurs and eulogizes is the transformative power of the Way and its universality – which in essence is a philosophically, morally and politically monistic view of the universe. Such perception has a long-standing influence on Chinese culture: China is a central kingdom and its civilization represents that all-encompassing quintessence of the universe.[33] Chinese contemporary revolutionary ideology founded on Marxism, in my view, is continuous of such tradition. There is a prevailing desire for universality at the heart of the new ideology. The realization of

---

[32] Confucius. *Confucius: Analects (full translation with running traditional commentary, glossary, and extensive introduction). Trans*. Edward Gilman Slingerland. Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003. p.91.

[33] Such a perception was traumatically shattered when China encountered the western imperial powers during the 19th century.

this universality – a teleological orientation toward a classless society – entails assimilating otherness in a more aggressive and antagonistic manner. Indeed, in the Marxian perspective, the fulfillment of this ideal society necessarily takes a long and treacherous historical process defined by relentless wars between self and other (different classes). Such thinking is profoundly indebted to Hegel's dialectics of self-consciousness wherein a life-and-death struggle between the master and slave asserts itself as a most famous example.[34] In short, the enduring cultural dreams of universality are the philosophical, political and moral prehistory of the Cultural Revolution – the Cultural Revolution can be seen as the dramatic culmination of an attempt to create a universal culture eliminating all that is perceived as different and impure.

In "Roots of Literature," rather than searching for Chinese cultural and literary Root in centralized Canons in official historiography, Han Shaogong surprisingly highlights the aesthetic of heterogeneity in defining Chinese history, culture and literature. His essay shuns the conventional knowledge regarding Root, be it Confucian doctrine or the tradition of Yan'an literature, and opens instead with a deep interest in alterity – "I have often ruminated over this question in the past: where has the splendid Chu culture gone?"[35] Later on, Han joyfully writes that his poet friend found the "still

---

[34] Geoge Wilhelm Friedrich. "Phenomenology of Spirit." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. Norton: New York, 2001. 630-35, 631.

[35]Han Shaogong, "Wen Xue De Gen," in *Zuo Jia*, Vol. 5 (Peking, 1985).

animated Chu culture" among the minority groups scattered in xiangxi area.[36] Han's choice of opening his essay with an earnest quest after the ancient and mysterious Chu culture is of significance. As Han Shaogong asserts in the essay, "[Chu] culture clearly differs itself from that of 'descendents of dragon' along the banks of Yellow River."[37] People of Chu are descendents of birds – "they worship birds, eulogize birds and emulate birds."[38] On an even more controversial note, people of Chu (or Miao minority in modern times as Han intimates in his essay) are the children of Chi You, an infamous figure who was defeated by the Yellow Emperor in numerous legends regarding the genesis of Chinese culture. Through displacing the established symbol of an authoritative father of Chinese race – the Yellow Emperor – Han Shaogong cultivates a counter-current awareness of the heterogeneity of China's cultural pasts. The time-honored monistic ideal of a single, pure and ancient cultural Root is thereby replaced with openness toward multiple roots. Indeed, throughout his essay, Han Shaogong consistently highlights the traditionally marginalized cultural peripheries such as regional folklores, folk music, local dialects and rural hinterlands as multiple sites to search for literary roots. In his words: "Literature has roots. Roots of literature should be planted deeply in the cultural soil of the ethnic folklores and legends. If the roots are not deep, then leaves [of literature] will not thrive."[39] Deemphasizing Han ethnicity's

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid.

cultural domination, Han Shaogong evinces a vigilant attentiveness to diverse minority and migrant groups across China mentioning Miao, Dong, Yao, Tu Jia, White Russians and Muslim groups such as Uighur and Hui. According to him, "the convergence of different cultures" is essential to cultivate "phenomenal flowers and extraordinary fruits" of literature.[40] Notably, the phenomenal flowers and extraordinary fruits of literature come from mutual recognition and acknowledgement among different cultures which are not synchronized in systems of standards. His view forms a critical contrast with both the Confucian celebration of the universalism of the Way and Marx's theory on class struggles between self and other. The uniqueness of Han's view resides not only in his attentiveness to the difference but his wholehearted welcome to such difference on both epistemological and ethical levels. No longer perceived as an epistemological gap in need of being overcome, for Han, the difference should be preserved rather than being assimilated. Elevating *the difference* as the important element to revive Chinese literature, long stranded in the suffocating ideological dessert, Han in truth propagates a moral rectification by means of acknowledging and respecting others. I see an intrinsic connection between Han's manifesto and Levinas's influential work, *Totality and Infinity*. A phenomenal philosopher who emerged after the catastrophe of the Holocaust, Levinas holds the fort against traditional western philosophy, which according to him, is fundamentally egocentric. The potential cure for this tradition and its entailed violence comes from an ethical relation with the other:

[40] Ibid.

"A calling into question of the Same – which cannot occur within the egoistic spontaneity of the Same – is brought about by the Other."[41] In a similar vein, Han Shaogong's deep interest in the aesthetic of heterogeneity both intellectually and ethically is above all a powerful critique of the dominant ideology of a pure origin of Chinese culture and its celebration of the same (*da tong*). And such critique is Han's polemic against the logic of the Cultural Revolution, which can be seen as a "concentrated explosion" resulting from a deep-seated desire in Chinese culture for universality, totality and unity. The meaning of *gen* has been implicitly interrogated and explicitly transformed in Han Shaogong's essay: for Han, *gen* signifies *roots* of cultural *difference* instead of *Root* of a *universal* culture. And the cultivation of roots and their potential political significance entails the renunciation of Root and its ancient hegemony.

Han Shaogong's critique of a homologized culture and its complicity with violence goes beyond his interest in excavating a prehistory of the Cultural Revolution. He is also concerned with the continuance of such a tradition (of universalism) into China's present and future. Another recurring theme in "Roots of Literature" is how social phenomenon of modernity and its logic of progress and development function as a destructive force to China's cultural pasts (differences). For instance, he warns against the "cultural dessert" of Hong Kong and infers that it is caused by the "commodity

[41] Lévinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and infinity: an essay on exteriority*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Duquesne University Press: Pittsburg, PA, August 1969. p.43.

economy of modernity."[42] He expresses repugnance towards modernity characterized by high rises as well as the popularity of loan words from the west such as 'taxi,' 'bus,' 'jeans,' 'boss,' and 'OK.'[43] It should be emphasized that for Han Shaogong, modernity and its logic of development are not a post-Cultural Revolution social phenomenon. In his conversation with Wang Yao on the issue of whether the Cultural Revolution has challenged modernity as some scholars have indicated, Han contends:

> Since the 1950s, China's goal was to 'surpass England and catch America.' And she had been obsessed with the records of steel output and coal output. The goal of Four Modernizations was also raised by Zhou Enlai with the support from Mao Zedong. In light of these aspects, the modern aspects (of the Cultural Revolution) – its principles of development and progress – are easily perceptible.[44]

This passage makes clear that Han understands the occurrence of the Cultural Revolution as deeply immersed in the logic of development. In this light, Han's literary vision – his elevation of the aesthetic of heterogeneity – posits itself as a decisive theoretical advance, a critical countercurrent against China's growth toward a modern monoculture modeled after the west. It is not surprising that rural hinterlands, as opposed to the cities, are particularly highlighted by Han as a crucial site to search for roots. In his words:

---

[42] Han Shaogong, "Wen Xue De Gen," in *Zuo Jia*, Vol. 5 (Peking, 1985).

[43] Ibid.

[44] Liu, Yang. Ed. "Da ti xiao zuo-Han Shaogong, Wang Yao dui hua lu [大题小作 –韩少功，王尧对话录]." *Da Ti Xiao Zuo [大题小作]*. The People's Literature Publishing House: Beijing, May 2008. p.161.

> Rural hinterlands are the past of the cities and the museum of people's history…More importantly, traditional cultures embedded in the rural hinterlands are likely to fall into the category of the non-standardized. Slang, unofficial histories, legends, jokes, folk songs, stories of spirits, local customs, sex styles and etc – they are rarely seen in the canons and do not enter into the realm of the orthodoxy.[45]

This passage illuminates that for Han Shaogong, rural hinterlands encapsulate layers of *non-integrated* cultural ramifications in spite of time, still vibrant and full of life. Such thinking immediately calls into mind the realm of the unconscious in Freudian language. And indeed, Han's indebtedness to Freud becomes exceedingly visible when he continues:

> Reminiscent of the deep layers of the earth that are warmly animated, enormously powerful and yet obscure beyond comprehension, they [cultural roots] lurk beneath the earth's crust and support its surface – our standardized Culture.46

In other words, far away from being unified and stabilized, the cultural roots embedded in the rural hinterlands are layered, disjointed, hidden, primal and yet present and enduring – roots are the unconscious/preconscious of the standardized cultural Root. Therein, Han Shaogong decenters the cultural hegemony of meaningfulness,

---

[45] Han Shaogong, "Wen Xue De Gen," in *Zuo Jia*, Vol. 5 (Peking, 1985).

[46] Ibid.

development and universalism in defining history. In an implicit manner, he ridicules the absurdity of attempting to create a standardized culture and unveils that universalism is at best a surface phenomenon – the earth's crust. In this light, a desire for universalism is doomed to be unfulfilled since the surface phenomenon can never terminate its internal heterogeneity – its internal negation indeed. As Han concludes in his metaphor of the earth: "It is the earth's hidden magma, rather than its crust, that should arrest writers' attention."[47]

*****

Discordance or concordance? From theory to literary creation

Between Han Shaogong's theory and his literary creation, critics have often detected a difficult discordance therein. In Leenhouts's words: "there is a relationship of opposition, struggle and distrust."[48] Feuerwerker similarly contends that "[t]he gap between root-searching theory and narrative performance" indicates "how undefined that hope or quest [searching for roots] may well be."[49] In his fine discussion on the problematic subject in contemporarily Chinese literature, Rong Cai likewise begins with a note of pessimism regarding the root-seeking literature, intimating that there is a "dilemma inherent in the xungen (root-searching) writers' vision of reinventing China

[47] Ibid.

[48] Leenhouts, Mark. *Leaving the World to Enter the World: Han Shaogong and Chinese Root-Seeking Literature*. Leiden: CNWS Publications, 2005. p.24.

[49] Feuerwerker, Yi-tsi Mei, *Ideology, Power, Text: Self-Representation and the Peasant "Other" in Modern Chinese Literature*. Stanford University Press: Stanford, CA, 1998. p.207.

through cultural exploration."[50] At the heart of this perceived dilemma lies the seeming disjuncture between the romanticized roots in Han's theory and the twisted violence central to his literary performance. Han Shaogong's passionate call upon writers to seek for roots and his manifested admiration for minority cultures do not seem to translate easily into his stories. One is compelled to ask: from theory to literary creation, why are the roots rendered the darkest corners of the Chinese soul in literary performance when they are supposedly the hidden spring that reconnects Chinese literature to its splendid cultural pasts? Instead of a rediscovery of cultural gems, why are the roots portrayed as, to use Feurerwerker's language, "repositories of mindless stagnation and backwardness"?[51] Instead of a historical movement of rejuvenating Chinese literature by resorting to its lost roots, why is root-seeking literature suspiciously a project of, to quote Rong Cai, "condemning China to recycle its decrepit past"?[52]

From theory to literature, instead of seeing this as where Han's project breaks down, I wish to bring into light the opposite. I will reassess the alleged discordance seen as problematic and inherent to root-seeking project by previous scholarships. Specifically, I look into two fundamentally interconnected issues. The first concerns the nature *gen* in "Roots of Literature" and the second involves the overlooked link

---

[50] Cai, Rong. *The Subject in Crisis in Contemporary Chinese Literature*. University of Hawaii Press: Hawaii, 2004. p.25.

[51] Feuerwerker, Yi-tsi Mei, *Ideology, Power, Text: Self-Representation and the Peasant "Other" in Modern Chinese Literature*. Stanford University Press: Stanford, CA, 1998. p.237.

[52] Cai, Rong. *The Subject in Crisis in Contemporary Chinese Literature*. University of Hawaii Press: Hawaii, 2004. p.25.

between Han's theoretical piece and writing of pain and violence in the Chinese tradition.

In my view, there are a couple of commonly misconstrued ideas with regard to *gen*'s very nature in "Roots of Literature". First, *gen* has been widely understood as a *romanticized notion* regarding the ancient cultural and literary glories. I want to suggest that a pure and romanticized interest in excavating traditional literary aesthetics is but a guise. Something disconcerting and shadowy lies reticently behind the very sensibility of romanticism. That is, Han's positivism towards *gen* (*roots* as opposed to Root) is primarily *a poetic gesture of rectification* responding to a dark kernel – the Cultural Revolution. Given this, his literary creations – such as *Pa Pa Pa*, *Woman Woman Woman*, *Homecoming* and *the Blue Bottle-cap* which seem to entertain a passion for apocalypse – should not be read as Han's failure in fulfilling his literary vision laid out in his theoretical piece. Instead of a contradictory deviation from his theory, Han's literary creations perform a meaningful and purposeful digression from a ready-at-hand utopianism. Instead of discordance, they concordantly echo his theoretical engagement with the aesthetic of heterogeneity – a poetic form that the absence of the 'universalism' and 'utopianism' assumes.

The second commonly misconstrued idea comes from a presumption among critics that the root-seeking project is a unified endeavor in nature. For instance, Leenhouts sees "Roots of Literature" as essentially *nationalistic* and *China-obsessed* in its

approach.[53] The prominent Chinese scholar Wang Zenqi critiques root-seeking as "a kind of hope, a quest, an impulse, *without a unified norm or measure*."[54] I want to suggest that assigning a default "unified norm or measure" to Han's quest after the multiplicity of roots is a simplification, even a distortion, of his ideas. For Han's intention of root-searching is not to entertain a utopian imagination but to resist compliance to social demands governed by the very notion of a norm. Therefore, it would be out of character for Han Shaogong to presuppose the old, hegemonic pattern, to enthrone a different logo and to rearticulate an alternative form of totality. Contrary to being "China-obsessed," "Roots of Literature" thus takes a conscious departure from the habitual and totalistic obsession with China and posits itself as a cultural critique against nationalist and centralistic approaches. When returning to the question of root-seeking during his interview with North America Overseas Chinese Daily, Han Shaogong refined his position and made clear that root-seeking has never meant to be a unified movement:

> There is an intention to seek for roots. But such an intension should not be defined as a school of thought. The rhetoric of a certain school unfailingly invokes the sentiment of camps and campaigns. But true literature is similar to an internal monologue – it has little to do with scenes bustling with noise and excitement. In fact, writers who concur with the idea of

---

[53] Leenhouts, Mark. *Leaving the World to Enter the World: Han Shaogong and Chinese Root-Seeking Literature*. Leiden: CNWS Publications, 2005. p.24 (emphasis added).

[54] Feuerwerker, Yi-tsi Mei, *Ideology, Power, Text: Self-Representation and the Peasant "Other" in Modern Chinese Literature*. Stanford University Press: Stanford, CA, 1998. p.207 (emphasis added).

> seeking for roots differ from each other in every possible way. Therefore assigning a same hat to them is indeed problematic.[55]

Han Shaogong's rejection of a particular label shows his aversion to any ideological association. His denigration of "a same hat" time and again unveils his fundamental denunciation of systems of standards, norms or measures. His root-seeking project, in this light, becomes the very play of differences rather than a movement with a univocal orientation. Hence this play of differences does not lapse into a utopian solution as they do not form new camps or advocate meaningful campaigns in Han's vision. Still we need to ask: what is the significance of the sheer proliferation of differences at the heart of Han's vision? In theory, the play of differences constantly unknots the "same hat." In literature, the play of differences provides the raw materials of Han cultural critique. As we shall see in his literary creation, what is played out is the unruly, uncanny and internal fissure of the subject, culture, history and language.

After tracing the nature of *gen* in Roots of Literature as un-romanticized and non-integrated, let us now turn to the second issue to reconsider more thoroughly the alleged disjuncture between the romanticization of roots in theory and condemnation of roots in practice. I wish to highlight the essential and yet often overlooked link between Han's theoretical piece and writing of pain and violence relating to the Cultural Revolution. *Gen* has been largely interpreted as a romanticized notion by previous

---

[55] Liu, Yang. Ed. "Hu si luan xiang – da bei mei huaqiaoribao jizhe Xia Yu [胡思乱想 – 答北美华侨日报记者夏瑜]." *Da Ti Xiao Zuo [大题小作]*. The People's Literature Publishing House: Beijing, May 2008. p.98.

scholarships for good reasons. Han Shaogong opens his influential essay with a summons of the splendid Chu culture, Chu poetry (*Chu ci*) and the great poet Qu Yuan (ca. 340 BCE - 278 BCE). A legendary figure indeed, Qu Yuan is renowned for his poetic adventures through unbounded imagination and rich imagery. The very invocation of his name unsurprisingly brings out a poetic tradition keenly associated with romanticism. Yet, what I want to emphasize here is not Qu Yuan's romantic spirit. I contend that Han Shaogong's invocation of Qu Yuan alludes to an essential subtext embedded in "Roots of Literature" that has been overlooked by critics, namely, the Chinese tradition of writing pain and violence. More than a romantic poet, Qu Yuan most significantly commenced the literary tradition of writing pain. A loyal counselor in the court of Chu, Qu Yuan was banished by his king who had relied on slanderous accusations from corrupt officials. A melancholic figure in exile, Qu Yuan collected legends, folk odes (notably Han has a similar fascination with folklores and legends) and produced his most influential work, "Encountering Sorrow" (*Li Sao*), through which he voiced his grief of being misunderstood, rejected and expressed his deep apprehension over the fate of his state. Upon hearing of the loss of the Chu capital to the state of Qin, Qu Yuan leaped into the Miluo River (where Han Shaogong was exiled during the Cultural Revolution) with a stone gripped in his hands and drowned in the torrents.[56] Beneath Qu Yuan's adorned language and at the heart of the imaginative

[56] There is an another personal connection between Qu Yuan and Han Shaogong aside from the locale of Miluo River where both writers lived – the tragedy of Han Shaogong's father's suicide by drowning himself during the Cultural Revolution.

realms conjured up by his elaborate poems lie his enduring sorrow and pain which had engulfed him in the end. Therefore, I contend there is a deeper significance of Han's invocation of the great poet Qu Yuan other than his romantic spirits. By summoning Qu Yuan, Han has in fact summoned a tradition of writing pain and violence.[57]

In the spirit of Chu poetry, which Han summarized as "mysterious, wondrous, *unruly and indignant*,"[58] Han Shaogong's stories wander among the historically marginalized sites – the ancient myths, legends, odes and religions – and continue in the tradition of writing pain and violence following the catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution. Far from being an easy path of redemption in concurrence with the therapeutic force of historicism, it is a route that purposefully digresses from the modern consciousness of development – the imperative and prevailing ideology that navigates China – and journeys instead into the heart of the apocalypse. Such a route leads to a discovery of aporias and brings forth elements of unobserved violence, unacknowledged pain and unsaid uncertainty internal to a homogenized culture.

---

[57] I believe such a reading is not a fanciful one. Although Han does not write it in explicit terms in Roots of Literature, he is very much preoccupied with the Chinese tradition of writing pain and violence in his numerous essays. For instance, he expresses that labeling literary works by Mo Yan, Yu Hua (and implicitly his own works) as modernist fails to see that these works continue in Chinese tradition of humanistic writings in melancholic compassion beginning with Qu Yuan. These works can be read as "spiritual revival of *Book of Odes* and *Encountering Sorrow*." Han, Shaogong. "Jin bu de hui tui [进步的回退]." *Da Ti Xiao Zuo [大题小作]*. Ed. Yang Liu. The People's Literature Publishing House: Beijing, May 2008. p.5.

[58] Han Shaogong, "Wen Xue De Gen," in *Zuo Jia*, Vol. 5 (Peking, 1985) (emphasis added).

*****

Transformation in Literary Forms: from loss to absence

In the previous section, I deviated from the usual perception by scholars that there remains a gap between Han Shaogong's root-seeking theory and root-seeking literature. I pursued instead the possibility that his theory and literary creation are in truth connected via a dark kernel – the catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution. If his theory interrogates the complicity of a homogenized culture with violence and dismantles it by means of the aesthetic of heterogeneity, his stories wander back into the abyss of the apocalypse and speak to the cultural melancholia that inundated China in the 1980s. And indeed, in concordance with his theory, Han's stories from the mid-1980s can be read as an elliptical response to the catastrophe, a critique of the complicity of culture in literary form. Before delving deeply into the labyrinth of his literary world conjured up in *Pa Pa Pa*, this section aims to account for the literary form of Han's root-seeking literature and highlight its significance. Specifically, I call attention to the internal transformation of literary forms adopted by Han Shaogong. From his earlier stories to his root-seeking stories, the traumatic kernel of the Cultural Revolution goes from present to absent. Yet Han seems to have found a more adequate literary form of writing the catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution in the latter.

Written in the late-1970s and early 1980s, Han Shaogong's earlier stories, such as "Yuelan," "Looking Westward to the Land of Thatched Sheds," "Echos" and "Distant Trees," belong to the genre known as 'scar literature.' Recounting in unambiguous terms the excruciating experiences of the sent-down generation (*zhiqing*), these earlier

works assume a literary form directly lamenting on the catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution. With this genre, the loss of the historical trauma is reified, the culprits are identified, tears are induced and the chaos of the 'incident' is organized in the book of history. Years later, when revisiting the issue of scar literature as "a primary genre of imagining the Cultural Revolution," Han Shaogong spoke of the dual nature of scar literature – how it both reveals and conceals truths regarding the Cultural Revolution:

> My dissatisfaction with scar literature does not indicate it tells false stories. Yet when emphasizing one kind of truth, many works conceal another kind of truth and are thereby utilized by certain ideology.[59]

Clearly, Han Shaogong is commenting on the danger of reifying a selected loss or moment in history – in other words, he is reflecting on the restrictiveness and partiality of a historicist mode in writing literature. He desires instead "a complete and deep revelation of the catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution."[60] In my view, Han's root-seeking project following his early literary career can best be interpreted within such a vision. The appeal to the aesthetic of heterogeneity becomes a powerful means for him to address the loss of historical trauma – in absence, in metahistorical time, in imaginative and mythical realms of the other.

Han Shaogong's series of novellas following his influential essay, "Roots of Literature", *Homecoming, Pa Pa Pa,* and *Woman Woman Woman*, to name a few, are

---

[59] Han, Shaogong. "Wen xue: mengyou yu suxing [文学： 梦游与苏醒]." *Da Ti Xiao Zuo [大题小作]*. Ed. Yang Liu. The People's Literature Publishing House: Beijing, May 2008. p.80.

[60] Ibid.

tinged with a surrealistic, nightmarish aura and indeed are ambiguous to the reader. Often evoking ancient myths, they do not seem to bear any relevance to contemporary realities. A clear shift in literary form has occurred from his earlier stories to his later works; namely, there is now a palpable void of direct reference to the present, the historical context and the national issues in the latter works. Abandoning the topical focus on the trauma of the Cultural Revolution, Han Shaogong's new literary form carries its reader beyond a selected historical loss, a reified trauma, an individualized wound, makes melancholia an eternal and recurrent human condition[61] and thereby circumvents the prevailing ideology of healing (via scar literature), of moving forward, of development. Meanwhile, it must be stressed that Han's appeal to transcend the specific historical context should not be read as an attempt to universalize the catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution. For Han sees the Cultural Revolution as more than an act of chance or a singular wound. It not only has a prehistory but possibly a repeatable presence if not reflected on comprehensively and dealt with conscientiously. Han's methodology of tracing its prehistory and thereby preventing its repeatable presence necessarily involves a digression from the direct reference to the historical trauma. This new literary form avails to free the narrative time, open up an aesthetic space for the other and delve beneath the wounded skin into a deep history of the cultural ills. On the other hand, although detouring from the delimiting genre of scar

[61] For an fruitful discussion on the political significance of de-historicizing/re-historicizing trauma and making melancholia a constant dilemma, see Gary Xu's book chapter, "The Smell of the City: Memory and Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Millennium Mambo*." *Sinascape: Contemporary Chinese Cinema*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., December 2006.

literature, Han's root-seeking literature nevertheless remains scarred by the historical trauma and is firmly embedded in the cultural melancholia of the 1980s facing the legacy of the catastrophe. Yet, it raises its voice beyond the immediacy of the dark kernel, posits as a dynamic answer to it and commits to a cultural critique reflecting on, in his words, "the deeply rooted ills of the system, culture and human nature."[62]

*****

Pa Pa Pa: a labyrinth of aporia

I propose that a systematic rereading of Han Shaogong's signature novella *Pa Pa Pa* (1985) would be fruitful in reassessing the significance of his root-seeking project at large. A multilayered text which resists being fully brought to light, *Pa Pa Pa* allows us to explore the ways in which Han Shaogong continues the aesthetic of heterogeneity in his literary creation through dramatizing the other, interrogates a homogenized culture through highlighting cultural illogic and reckons with the legacy of totalitarian violence through recourse to ancient myths and calamities.

Pa Pa Pa is so irreducibly obscure, fragmented, dark and mysterious that it remains utterly *other* to our reason and the telos of history. The story takes place in a strange land known as Cock's Head Village buried deep in the density of clouds and mountains. Except for a few encounters with the outside world, the village is an insulated world that falls out of the temporal process of a linear history. The inhabitants here speak an archaic language that indicates a mythic time, adhere to

[62] Yu, Xia. "Hu si luan xiang – da bei mei huaqiaoribao [胡思乱想 – 答北美华侨日报记者夏瑜]." *Da Ti Xiao Zuo [大题小作]*. Ed. Yang Liu. The People's Literature Publishing House: Beijing, May 2008. p.102.

exotic customs such as "casting the insect spell", and practice terrifying rituals such as human sacrifice to the rice god. The fate of the inhabitants of Cock's Head Village is subjected to a series of catastrophes, both natural and manmade. A devastating famine is ensued by the ghastly warfare with the neighboring village – Cock's Tail Village. The unremitting blows of the catastrophes eventually turn Cock's Head Village into a ghost land fermenting in the smell of death. The old and the weak calmly follow the tradition of collective suicide to save scant resources for the survival of the clan. Life continues on in a cyclical pattern – emulating their ancestors, the young and the strong now embarked on a migration.

The protagonist of *Pa Pa Pa*, Young Bing, is a profoundly haunting figure bordering between animality and humanity, nature and culture. Mentally retarded and physically deformed since his birth, Young Bing has commended only two expressions – Papa and F__Mama. In his own eccentric way, he uses these two expressions alternatively to deal with the world. Seen as a worthless blockhead, Young Bing is routinely ridiculed and bullied by the villagers. His abundance of uselessness and lack, on the other hand, is contrasted with his resilience – the man-child Young Bing is mysteriously insusceptible not only to the passage of time but to death itself. In the end, his deformed body uncannily emerges from the ravage of death and his very soft voice haunts the now deserted village – "pa pa pa pa pa."

Han Shaogong's ambiguous delineation of Cock's Head Village and its central figure Young Bing has elicited impassionate debate among the critics over its larger cultural and historical implications. Most notably, it immediately incited a sense of

uneasiness among scholars. Yan Wenjin, for instance, in his letter (1985) to Han Shaogong, expressed a certain deep anxiety over the figure of Young Bing:

> The idiot you have portrayed has been threatening and frightening me. I constantly ruminate over if I am Young Bing who has grown old. This useless thing that cannot be poisoned to death gets by the world with two simple phrases…Young Bing seems to share certain blood relation to Ah Q. Yet this monster is even more terrifying. It seems easy to deal with him. But in fact, you cannot deal with him.[63]

Yan Wenjin's anxious awareness of the self in connection with Young Bing and his invocation of the iconic literary figure Ah Q indicate an allegorical reading of *Pa Pa Pa* in affinity with May Fourth tradition. In other words, Young Bing is seen as a symbol of national character comparable to Ah Q created by Lu Xun, the representative of May Fourth writer and the father of modern Chinese literature. Such allegorical reading of *Pa Pa Pa* proves to be prominent among critics across China and North American academia: Zhang Peiyao interprets Cock's Head Village and its dwellers as an epitome of China and its people.[64] Feuerwerker similarly sees *Pa Pa Pa* as "a much broader, more generalized portrait of China as a whole."[65] Zhang Fa asserts that the root-

---

[63]Yan, Wenjin [严文井]. "Wo shi bu shi shang le nian ji de Bing Zai? [我是不是个上了年纪的丙崽?]." Wen Yi Newspaper [文艺报]. August 24, 1985.

[64] Zhang, Peiyao. "Cong Zi Yan Zi Yu Dao Zhong Sheng Ding Fei: Han Shaogong de Wen Hua Fan Si Jing Shen de Cheng Xian [从自言自语到众声沸腾:韩少功小说的文化反思精神的呈现]." *Contemporary Writers Review* (June 1994): 12-18.

[65] Feuerwerker, Yi-tsi Mei, *Ideology, Power, Text: Self-Representation and the Peasant "Other" in Modern Chinese Literature*. Stanford University Press: Stanford, CA, 1998. p.203.

seeking project has secretively transformed itself into an interrogation of roots in *Pa Pa Pa*.[66] In a similar vein, Joseph Lau writes that the roots Han Shaogong is obsessed with are the "roots of China's backwardness."[67] "Han Shaogong is spiritually closer to Lu Xun than to Zhuangzi or Qu Yuan" as *Pa Pa Pa* demonstrates that "the 'roots' he now seeks are no longer the faint echoes of the distant past, but the atavistic deformities of his benighted countrymen."[68] Indeed, Han Shaogong's root-seeking literature in general, and *Pa Pa Pa* in particular, has been largely interpreted as inheriting the spirit of May Fourth generation. That is, his works are often read as allegories of China's ignorance, backwardness and stagnation – external and obdurate to modern consciousness.

But the common observation of the affinity between May Fourth tradition and *Pa Pa Pa* has failed to perceive the *fundamental difference* between the cultural projects of the May Fourth generation and that of Han Shaogong. A key word must be highlighted here: development. While there is an intersection between May Fourth generation and Han Shaogong with regard to development, it must be noted that they diverge towards drastically different, if not opposite trajectories. While May Fourth generation launched an iconoclastic attack on Chinese tradition to fully welcome 'Mr. Democracy' and 'Mr.

---

[66] Zhang, Fa. "Xun Gen Wen Xue de Duo Chong Fang Xiang [寻根文学的多重方向]." *Jianghan Tribune* (June 2000): 83-88.

[67] Lau, Joseph S. M., "Visitation of the Past in Han Shaogong's Post-1985 Fiction." *From May Fourth to June Fourth: Fiction and Film in 20th-century China*. Eds. Ellen Widmer and David Der-wei Wang. Harvard University Press: Boston, MA, January 1993. p.30.

[68] Ibid.

Science' from the west, Han Shaogong is profoundly skeptical about development and a teleological vision of history. While May Fourth generation regards China's indigenous culture as cannibalistic and looks to western modernity as a guiding light out of its backwardness, Han Shaogong indicates that the root of violence lies in a homogenized culture and a universal history. Significantly, what China has become in the modern era – its blind faith and deep immersion in development – is but a perverse repetition of universalism.

The essential question still looms large: if Han Shaogong's cultural project distinguishes itself from the nationalistic approach of the May Fourth generation, if indeed his literature is not an exposure of China's backwardness and its incompatibility with modernity, then how should we understand Han's descent into gloomy, stagnant and often apocalyptic worlds? When answering the question concerning the thematic vagueness of his works such as *Pa Pa Pa*, *Homecoming*, *Woman Woman Woman*, Han Shaogong comments: "Sometimes works of fiction do not necessarily lead to conclusions – they bring out aporias instead."[69] Significantly, *aporia* is highlighted by Han as essential to understand the sensibility behind his stories. Contrary to forming a conclusion, aporia signifies the writer's rejection to provide any closure to or perform any mastery over his narratives. Han's refusal to fill gaps in narratives and his passion for apocalypse must be understood in light of the traumatic legacy of the Cultural Revolution. Spilling beyond the clear-cut parameters of history and shunning away

[69] Yu, Xia. "Hu si luan xiang – da bei mei huaqiaoribao [胡思乱想 – 答北美华侨日报记者夏瑜]." *Da Ti Xiao Zuo [大题小作]*. Ed. Yang Liu. The People's Literature Publishing House: Beijing, May 2008. p.100.

from its preconceived telos, Han's narratives appear to be a bottomless, aporetic labyrinth of history's own nightmare into which the reader plunges deeper and deeper. Journeying into this labyrinth, Han Shaogong tries to grasp, in *emotion* and in *thought*, the traumatic kernel. 1) It is an emotional journey in the sense that the darkness of his literary performance illuminates *a profoundly melancholic mind* in the aftermath of the catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution. The aporetic is also psychic. *Pa Pa Pa* can be read as a psychological rendering of the real apocalyptic events during the Cultural Revolution. In a post-traumatic context, history assumes a perversely burdensome, uncanny, deformed and traumatic body stranded in time, resisting the desire and possibility of complete mastery. 2) It is a sober and intellectual journey in the sense that it unfolds as a critical endeavor – *a counter-discourse of history* instituting the other and playing out differences. When asked to comment on the irrational, primitive cultural elements in *Pa Pa Pa*, Han Shaogong addresses the deep connection between these elements and the unconscious/subconscious of modernity.[70] A crucial point misinterpreted by many comes into light here: Pa Pa Pa is not an allegorical representation of the obstinate backwardness and stagnation of China in the May Fourth tradition. Rather, its irrational and primitive elements are the undercurrents of modernity itself. Put differently, *Pa Pa Pa* is a literary critique of historical violence – profoundly profoundly skeptical of a universal history and keenly aware of its intrinsic violence toward the other, Han intentionally highlights its internal *illogic*, *contradiction*,

[70] Ibid.

and *fissure* by means of relapse into a mythic time, imaginative realms and the opaqueness of otherness. The fervent dream of universalism, of progress, of mastery prevalent in the Cultural Revolution thereby stumbles upon its own ghosts in the mythical grotesque conjured up in Han's root-seeking literature.

*****

History's recalcitrant other: Chicken's Head Village

From scar literature to root- seeking literature, Han Shaogong shifts from the historicist approach of constructing concrete historical time and space to a narrative discourse characterized by aporia and ellipsis. De-territorialization and evocation of non-consecutive time, in my view, are two common strategic devices underlining the very ambiguity of Han's writings. Before engaging with the substantive content of *Pa Pa Pa*, I wish to first look at its framework. In this section, I trace the essential elements structuring the daily life of Chicken's Head Village: *space and time*, *the founding myth of ancestor, and language*. I analyze how such a framework counters linear history and its progressive spirit, and challenges universalism by highlighting history's hidden and recalcitrant other.

Han Shaogong's opening delineation of Chicken's Head Village immediately envelopes it in a mythical aura instead of situating it in a tangible historical milieu – the village is so remotely located that it is elliptically otherworldly:

> The village perched high in mountains above the clouds. When you left the house, you often found yourself stepping into rolling clouds. Take a step forward, and the clouds would retreat, while those at your back

> would move in behind you, bearing you up on a solitary island without end, floating.[71]

Significantly, it is an organic spatial corner insulated from the world below by deep clouds and vast mountains. The depiction of the village, almost fairytale-like and tinted with lyrical color, hardens the space into a timeless realm. Indeed, space and time are intimately bound together in the matrix of Chicken's Head Village. As ancient as the local armoured birds, the reader is left with the impression that the village has "remained unchanged since time immemorial."[72] Hence the dreamtime – the space is immersed in a nebulous temporality impervious to the exterior movements of history:

> What happened below the clouds was of no consequence to the inhabitants of the mountain villages. In the Qin dynasty, the government had set up a county in this region. In the Han dynasty, the government had also set up a county here. Later on, during the Ming dynasty and the Qing dynasty, administrative and other major reforms had been introduced…But all these accounts came from the lips of cattle-hide dealers and opium traders plying their trade in the mountains. And for all that had been said about government policies and reforms, the people still had to depend on themselves for livelihood. Growing crops was reality for the people; so were snakes and insects and miasma and malaria.[73]

---

[71] Han, Shaogong, "Pa Pa Pa." *Homecoming? and Other Stories*. Trans. Martha Cheung. Cheng & Tsui: Boston, MA, October 1995. p.45.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Ibid., p.41.

Essential to this passage is a subtle juxtaposition of history one and history two: history as a chain emitting from a succession of central governments – Qin, Han, Ming, Qing vis-à-vis history as an amorphous, mythical body absent of states and governmental institutions. The juxtaposition of history and its hidden other (in the density of mountains and above the clouds – or in nature itself) has significantly shattered the centrality and universality of the ideologically inflected notion of history.

Chicken's Head Village as a symbol of history's other is also illuminated through the villagers' archaic identification with a mythical ancestor, Xingtian. The sole existence of the village rests upon a founding myth of their ancestors. "When there was a celebration or a sad event, or on New Year's Day and other festivals, everyone in the village would observe an age-old custom and sing '*Jian*'."[74] *Jian* turns out to be an informal and lengthened *oral history* patiently tracing the villagers' mythical ancestors – from Jiangliang to Fufang, Huoniu, Younai and finally to Xingtian. The founding myth of their ancestor is elaborately fantastic eulogizing a fearless hero:

> Xingtian raised his axe in one mighty blow and severed heaven from earth. But he packed much force into this blow, and his axe swung round and lopped off his head as well. From then on he used his nipples for eyes and his navel for a mouth. He laughed till the earth shook and the mountains swayed; he swung his axe and with mighty blows, knocked the sky upwards for three years until it reached its present height. He

[74] Ibid. p.45.

> hammered down the earth for another three years until it descends to its present level.[75]

It is important to note that the founding myth that has been passed on from grandfathers to fathers is not absent of violence and brutality – Xingtian himself is tragically beheaded. Yet the violence is compensated with transhistorical meaning. It is a myth of origin and creation – the brutality of beheading serves for the heroic cause of the separation of heaven and earth.

Jian not only narrates the founding myth of Xing Tian but also traces the fantastic migration of the villagers' ancestors: initially residing in the "shores of the East Sea," the family grew so big that their dwellings became too crowded. With the guidance from a phoenix, they migrated to "the glittering River of Gold" then "the dazzling River of Silver" until they found "the glorious River of Rice."[76] The credibility of the villagers' oral history, however, is overshadowed by the intrusion of words from an outsider – an official historian who visited a region close to Cock's Head Village. Asserting that the peasants' songs bear no inkling of truth, the official claimed that "Xingtian's head was chopped off by Huangdi (Yellow Emperor) when the two were fighting for the throne."[77] In addition, the four families of the mountains were not from the shores of

---

[75] Ibid.

[76] Ibid., p.46.

[77] Ibid. p.47.

the East Sea but refugees who "fled southwest along the five rivers into the land of barbarians" during the war between Huangdi and Yandi.[78]

With the clash between the historian's authoritative words and the villagers' mythical songs, it becomes exceedingly clear that the contention between official history and its recalcitrant other dominates the consciousness behind *Pa Pa Pa*. This clash illuminates the writer's intentional tumbling of the hierarchy between history and its other. I shall suggest that the incommensurability between the two versions of history can be understood on three levels. First, history's recalcitrant other can function as a spatio-temporal *escape* from historical violence, such as atrocious wars and mass deportations (both are prevalent symptoms of the Cultural Revolution). That is to say, the shards of traumas are softened, if not completely absorbed in the myth of history's other. The villagers' oral history becomes a benevolent home for the mutilated and the exiled. The defeat and terror of a passive beheading is transformed into a fabulous heroic action; the forced exile is rendered into a pursuit of happiness following the auspicious and mythical creature, phoenix. The traumatic content of history is altered into fantastical songs. Secondly, and contradictorily against its own desire to escape from historical traumas in myths, history's recalcitrant other also dramatizes historical traumas and hosts the moaning specters from the past that historicism refuses to see or acknowledge. This can be discerned once we gain a glimpse of the central character's deformed form and listen to his broken language. He manifests as history's own

[78] Ibid.

perverse body, so weighty that it holds back its progress, so grotesque that it troubles history's triumphant story. The issue of *Pa Pa Pa*'s dark content, central to the understanding and reevaluation of the text, will be critically addressed in my later discussion. Thirdly, Han's very juxtaposition of history and its recalcitrant other must be understood in connection with his theoretical piece, "Roots of Literature." The reappearance of Huangdi (the Yellow Emperor) in *Pa Pa Pa* is of significance. Root is de-centered by roots as the Yellow Emperor, the common ancestral symbol of China, time and again encounters his unruly other "who fights fiercely for his lofty aspirations."[79] In this light, we might understand the mythical content of the villagers' oral history as a powerful form of *resistance* rather than a compromised *escape* from historical traumas. What villagers are resisting is the ubiquitous violence of the universal history in petrifying their ancestors into beheaded victims, barbarians and refugees deprived of dignity and grace. Indeed, while the official historian highlights the myth of a stable past, repressing its multiple roots into a common Root, a singular narrative, "the folks of Cock's Head Village never cared for the words of the official historian."[80] The villager's apathy towards the historian's words implies their fundamental rejection of historical time and adherence to history's other in a mythical time.

The otherness of the Chicken's Head Village is further highlighted in the language spoken by its inhabitants: "[T]hey still use a lot of archaic words – they said

[79] Ibid., p.45.

[80] Ibid., p.47.

'watch' instead of 'see' or 'look', 'speak' instead of 'say', 'lean' instead of 'stand', 'lie down' instead of 'sleep'."[81] Interestingly, kinship terminologies are also used differently – "they addressed their father as 'uncle', their 'uncle' as 'father', their elder sister as 'elder brother'…"[82] The linguistic difference has often taken on a negative connotation in critical readings. For instance, it has been interpreted as a symptom of China's "non-development" in an allegorical mode.83 Differing from previous scholarship, I maintain that Han Shaogong's attentiveness to linguistic differences is in truth central to his aesthetic of heterogeneity in countering universalism.[84] And perhaps even more significantly, it unveils Han's fundamental distrust of language in its written, material forms. The Cultural Revolution, according to Han Shaogong, is a rare and violent campaign of linguistic inspection. He writes that "written words are fearful things for they can be well preserved in time. Appearing in gestures of unrebuttable evidences, they reveal or distort history."[85] In his essay on cruelty, Han Shaogong further underlines the abuse of language as the ultimate culprit of violence during the Cultural Revolution: "the radicalization of class struggles originates in a

---

[81] Ibid., p.43.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Lau, Joseph S. M., "Visitation of the Past in Han Shaogong's Post-1985 Fiction." *From May Fourth to June Fourth: Fiction and Film in 20th-century China*. Eds. Ellen Widmer and David Der-wei Wang. Harvard University Press: Boston, MA, January 1993. p.31.

[84] See his more recent full length fiction: Han, Shaogong. *A Dictionary of Maqiao*. Columbia University Press (1995).

[85] Han, Shaogong. "Zheng Ju [证据]." *An shi [暗示]*. Ed. Yang Liu. The People's Literature Publishing House: Beijing, May 2008. p.18.

series of complex manipulation and repetitious indoctrination of linguistic signs...with the aid of linguistic phantasma, the murderer manages to numb people's normal feelings and beheading becomes comparable to a deletion of a linguistic sign."[86] In light of Han Shaogong's consistent critique of linguistic dogmatism and its murderous desires, his inclusion of linguistic differences in his literary performance should not be glossed over or interpreted as a symbol of China's overall backwardness. Seamlessly woven into his literary narratives, Han's philosophical and political concerns regarding the issue of language is worthy of special scholarly attention. The archaic language spoken by the villagers in *Pa Pa Pa* might well be a counter-discourse designed by Han Shaogong that serves to unsettle the authorized, standardized language and its semantic phantasma out of which the catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution emerged. Enriched with political significance, two essential characteristics of this counter-discourse can be noted: first, the local language posits itself in an enigmatic multiplicity. This shows Han Shaogong's critical openness to *a pluralist understanding* of language against *a monistic ideal* that has haunted Chinese cultural imagination since the first emperor of the Qin Dynasty; secondly, the popularity of *Jian* (oral history in a singing form) demonstrates Han's critical attention to a form of language intimately tied to a living source – the unmediated voice of a singer or storyteller – as opposed to official language (of historians) in a written form which "can be well preserved" as authoritative evidences to make or "distort history."

---

[86] Han, Shaogong. "Can ren [残忍]." *An shi [暗示].* Ed. Yang Liu. The People's Literature Publishing House: Beijing, May 2008. p.346.

*****

History's uncanny corporeality: a child named Young Bing

Han Shaogong's recourse to history's other in *Pa Pa Pa* – his evocation of an amorphous temporal space, his telling of the legend of a different ancestor from the conventional myth of the Yellow Emperor and his highlighting of the archaic language spoken by the villagers – continues the aesthetic of heterogeneity initially advocated by him in "Roots of Literature." As I have argued, the aesthetic of heterogeneity does not serve a pure interest in excavating traditional literary aesthetics. It is essentially a critical response to the catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution, a creative endeavor to counter a universal history, a homogenized culture that Han sees complicit with the historical violence. Notably, Han Shaogong does not entertain a utopian imagination of remedy – not even in the realm of the other. And indeed, far from idealizing and fetishizing an idyllic and romanticized past, Han Shaogong's evocation of a cyclical time and a mythical space outside the concreteness of history does little to free him from traumatic entanglement with the historical catastrophe. In this section, I will turn to the grotesque image of the protagonist, Young Bing, and discuss how he not only functions as an aesthetic revolt against the progression of history but in truth configures history's own dark and violent undercurrent. In other words, Young Bing is a child made but abandoned and disavowed by history. Han Shaogong brings the child's violated body back and finds him a home in a figurative temporal space – literature indeed – where he commemorates historical violence, lingers, haunts, and unsettles history's triumphant course.

In his dialogue with Shi Shuqing, Han Shaogong significantly unveils the traumatic kernel behind the sensibility of *Pa Pa Pa*. The general context – the landscapes of Chicken's Head's Village – bears the imprints of the Miluo River region where Han Shaogong was exiled during the Cultural Revolution. The apocalyptic event – one of the most memorable sceneries of horror, cannibalism conducted by the villagers – is a literary incarnation of mass killing and cannibalism committed by peasants of Dao County in Hunan province during the Cultural Revolution. The central character, Young Bing, is modeled after a lingering figure from life – his neighbor's child when Han was sent down to the rural area during the Cultural Revolution.[87] The unseen and yet myriad ties between Han's literary world and the historical catastrophe crystallizes *Pa Pa Pa*'s intimate entanglement with the historical violence and its troubling legacies. By means of recourse to ancient myths, rituals and calamities, Han Shaogong images what is damaged, forgotten, repressed by history and figures the phantom of history's own scarred and cumbersome body – now let us turn to the image of Young Bing.

Born into a phantasmatic family with an ugly mother and an absent father, Young Bing remains an aberrant creature to the world he inhabits and is barred from the realm of human discourse. His failure to become a being-proper is crystallized not only in his deformity but his inability to grasp human language. His head is compared to "a green gourd turned upside-down" with "whatever oddities" veiled inside.

---

[87] Liu, Yang. Ed. "Niao de chuan ren – da taiwan zuojia Shi Shuqing [鸟的传人 – 答台湾作家施叔青]." *Da Ti Xiao Zuo [大题小作]*. The People's Literature Publishing House: Beijing, May 2008. pp.110, 112.

Neither the villagers nor the reader is provided with any pathways to his thoughts. He is a symptom of aporia par excellence. His language is eternally limited to two phrases: "Papa" and "F__Mama." Although linked with certain emotions – Young Bing utters Papa when happy and F__Mama when irradiated – these two phrases from an idiot's mouth, according to the narrator, are nothing but meaningless signs or symbols. In short, Young Bing appears to be none other than an excessive spectacle of lack. And the reader is compelled to ask: what is the significance of making this imagistic being the central character of *Pa Pa Pa*?

I propose that Young Bing's deformed corporeality and his despoiled humanity should be first and foremost interpreted as *a sign of history's appalling degradations of life*, *a registration of loss perpetuated by the historical violence*, *a traumatic memory embedded deeply in the collective unconscious*. The agony and troubling traces are overwhelmingly present and yet not readily readable – they are in truth left by the invisible hands of history. In his interview with Shi Shuqing, Han Shaogong only made a passing reference to the neighbor's child from the ruinous years of the Cultural Revolution that has haunted him. Nameless and faceless, we gain no glimpse of the child's life. We can only infer that he is a deformed child based on his literary incarnation. The scanty reference of the child falls into the restrictive parameters of history wherein the child was almost certainly decreed to be unseen and disposable by the historical violence – his life was as light as nothingness. The invisibility of the child in history becomes a telling symptom of history's repressive power. Outside the parameters of history, Han Shaogong brings back the degraded soul he witnessed. The disappeared child travels through time,

forks the past and the present, comes alive and addresses us in his twistedness and elusiveness. In his literary incarnation, the child essentially becomes a matrix where Han personifies the nameless, the faceless, the traumatized and the forgotten. The scars left behind by the events of the Cultural Revolution are metaphorically inscribed into Young Bing's small and sick body. Hence we encounter a profoundly scarred, damaged and forsaken child stranded in an abyss of meaninglessness, stigmatized as a ghoul, monstrous and threatening in his ghostly stagnation and sensational twistedness. The child is what hurts in *Pa Pa Pa* and in life. In the literary world, the child dwells in his helplessness and hopelessness as a deformed, retarded half-being. Exposed and vulnerable, he is still subjected to the gratuitous violence – he receives daily abuses from the villagers and is chosen as a sacrifice to the rice god though he magically escaped such a fate in the end. In real life, this child was ubiquitous – he did not just have a meager existence as Han's neighbor's child. We could envisage innumerous imperfect beings and disfigured lives from the Cultural Revolution, tossed off or rendered invisible as they were incompatible with the universal dream of the Cultural Revolution. And they form a hidden, traumatic and cumbersome body. The child is not simply a disfigured, singular life from the past, but an emblematic figure of the submerged lives of the dispossessed, of the damage and hurt inflicted on their collective body, of the social injustices unaddressed in the past and present. But has Han successfully salvaged these lives from the grip of historical violence by means of making the child a central character? Young Bing's humanity is still stripped away from him. His body remains a locus of gratuitous violence, gruesomely shaped and

deformed. And he is still silenced, deprived of meaningful voice. Or is he? Has Han journeyed back into the heart of apocalypse, reiterated rituals of torture, reanimated its horror and reinforced history's iron logic? Or has Han endowed critical force to such an idiotic figure in defiance of the violence of history? I want to suggest that on the one hand, the central figure of Young Bing does speak to the melancholic mind of the writer and the irreparable damage in the shadow of the terrible legacy of the Cultural Revolution, but on the other hand, the idiotic figure of Young Bing significantly and dialectically posits as a critical force in defiance of history's iron logic.

Young Bing's critical power essentially lies in his unassignability, non-cognizability, his uncanny glimmer and haunting effects. Against the usual interpretation of Young Bing as an allegory of China's *backwardness*, I read his very being as an effective counter-discourse of modernity and development. An unassimilated matter (as opposed to being-proper), Young Bing is the *residue*, the *stigma*, the *limit*, and the *flipside* of the utopian dream of universality. And I will explore his critical power in light of the following aspects: his physical distortion; his idiotic language; the temporality his being is locked in and ultimately his transcendence of death.

Most notably, Young Bing's distorted body is an aesthetic revolt against any conceivable standard of perfection and a break away from fantasies of unity and purity. Degraded and disposed in the universal dream of the Cultural Revolution, the disappeared child breaks hold from historical confinement, returns in his sensational ugliness and twistedness and wanders about in his uncanny surplus value.

Parallel with his disjointed body, the 'language' murmured by Young Bing, Papa and F__mama, is *antithetical* to the discourse of human language. As such, it has a profoundly haunting and disturbing effect. This effect is generated not only in its *emptiness* but more importantly, *in how Young Bing uses his nonsense to softly break the silence imposed upon him by history.* I contend that the nonsense mumbled by Young Bing is none other than the muffled noises made by the victims subjected to the violence of history – their groans and moans, their laments and cries, their aphasia. It would have been a utopian imagination to give Young Bing voice while returning him to the world. For the damaged and disappeared child never possessed a voice and his aphasia continues into the present. His 'language' thus remains *traumatic* and *other* and cannot be assimilated to the human discourse. Although it says nothing meaningful, Young Bing's 'language' is not devoid of power for it is never silent – the story ends with "pa pa pa pa pa!" eliciting great anxiety and bewilderment from the modern reader, displacing him from the realm of human discourse to the abyss of meaninglessness.

In a similar vein, the time in which Young Bing dwells critically opposes the forces of history's linear progression. Indeed, it echoes the nebulous temporality the village is situated in – stagnant and non-consecutive. The opening of *Pa Pa Pa* is charged with ambiguity: Young Bing makes his dramatic entry into the reader's vision as a *lifeless and inert corporeality* that "showed no sign of life for two whole days" as a new born.[88] Though alive, his repulsive body remains mysteriously a physical child

[88] Han, Shaogong, "Pa Pa Pa." *Homecoming? and Other Stories*. Trans. Martha Cheung. Cheng & Tsui: Boston, MA, October 1995. p.35.

impervious to the temporal progression. What is significant about Young Bing's ghostly stagnation is that he is not on the developmental curve of a being-proper, a historical subject. The child is suspended in time. Or rather, *the suffering individual suspends time and its teleological path.*

The most memorable scene of horror fusing rationality with irrationality is the mass death of the powerless – the weak, the sick and the old. It is ultimately Young Bing's survival of it that illuminates his critical power in his embodied limitation. Tailor Zhongman, a village elder, methodically gathers poisonous weeds, boils them into a stew, and brings the poisonous liquid door to door. He seeks out the houses he recognizes as those of the weak, the sick, and the old. It is with contemplation and civility that Tailor Zhongman is met by the victims who not only understand but anticipate the violent act of mass murder and participate in their own destruction. This scene of mass killing can be read as a literary revelation of *the deep connection between violence and human civilization*. The critique of human civilization in literary form can be traced in Han's theoretical contemplation on violence. In his essay on unconsciousness, Han Shaogong criticizes Freud for dogmatically locating the source of violence beyond the realm of culture: "this Austrian doctor rigidly parallels the duality of 'good' and 'evil' with the duality of 'consciousness' and 'unconsciousness,' establishing the metaphysical model that good is false and evil is real."[89] According to Han, Freud has failed to see different forms of ideologies as the driving forces behind scenes of

[89] Han, Shaogong. "Qian yi shi [潜意识]." *An shi [暗示].* Ed. Yang Liu. The People's Literature Publishing House: Beijing, May 2008. p.328

violence.[90] And his view on culture's complicity with violence is fully elaborated in his essay on cruelty, which is worthy of quoting in length here:

> The civilized beings use their theories of religion, nation, class, and civilization to transform their brothers and sisters into lifeless targets. Consequently, there emerged Crusades… Holocaust, colonialism…Chinese Cultural Revolution… These are stories of human beings, not animals, stories of civilized beings, not prehistoric beings. Rather than seeing mass-scale killing as an outburst of animal nature, we should see it as an outburst of human nature. Rather than seeing it as an outburst of human nature, we should see it as an outburst of rationality….Most 'scar literature' after 1978 finds scapegoats in animal nature for the human phenomenon of mass murder, shifts the blame of the cruelty of civilization onto instinct, desire, unconsciousness….we distort the tragedy and in truth leave an entrance for the arrival of the next tragedy.[91]

Clearly, Han is concerned with the uneasy relation between violence and culture at large. Particularly, he sees that violence emerges out of universalism structured by various human discourses such as religion, nation, class, and civilization – they implicate a frightening desire for a common and transcendental Root that Han detects complicit with historical trauma such as the Cultural Revolution. Under this light, it is of significance that Young Bing survives the scene of the mass killing in *Pa Pa Pa*.

---

[90] Ibid., p.327.

[91] Han, Shaogong. "Can ren [残忍]." *An shi [暗示]*. Ed. Yang Liu. The People's Literature Publishing House: Beijing, May 2008. p.347.

Emblematic of the powerless, he is the first victim to drink the poisonous liquid. In the end, however, Young Bing miraculously emerges from the ruins of death and appears ever livelier – "the running sore on his head had stopped festering and a scab had formed."[92] His obscure existence now shines brightly and animatedly under the sun. The child is alive. Young Bing's transcendence of death thus could be read as ultimate resistance of utopianism. A product of the malice of utopianism/universalism, Young Bing's twisted being is banished from human discourse and suffers a cultural death. Yet against culture's decree, he lives on in his embodied limitation and powerlessness. Demonstrating perseverance, he survives biological death and mocks cultural death in its eye. Between his perish and transcendence, Young Bing becomes nature, the recalcitrant and tenacious *other* inassimilable to culture.

*****

Conclusion:

Interweaving Han Shaogong's theoretical essays and his signature literary work, *Pa Pa Pa* in concert, this chapter reexamines Han Shaogong's root-seeking project which has hitherto been interpreted as an opaque and frustrated endeavor with internal contradictions. This chapter proposes instead that Han's root-seeking project is threaded comprehensibly via the traumatic kernel of the Cultural Revolution. We begin with Han's forward to his anthology where he speaks of "unshakable grief and secret anguish" as well as "enduring ideas and deep wish" behind his writing career. We end

[92] Han, Shaogong, "Pa Pa Pa." *Homecoming? and Other Stories*. Trans. Martha Cheung. Cheng & Tsui: Boston, MA, October 1995. p.90.

with the literary return of the deformed child who disappeared and drowned in the violent torrents of history. Certain sadness and darkness saturate Han's writings, illuminating the unshakable burden of mournfulness and melancholia in the aftermath of the historical catastrophe. Certain "enduring ideas" overflow in Han's writings, crystallizing a *counter-discourse* against "the deeply rooted ills of the system, culture and human nature" that Han detects complicit with the outburst of the historical catastrophe. A certain "deep wish" permeates Han's writings, articulating a desire to break free from the authoritative Root and its transcendental rootedness.[93] His aesthetic of heterogeneity emerges from the ruinous sites of others – it not only institutes multiple roots in theory but carves a mythical space in his literary performances for the damaged but recalcitrant other to rematerialize against the progress of history, to splinter the prevailing cultural dreams of centrality, mastery, universalism and developmentalism.

[93] It is of no coincidence that in *Pa Pa Pa*, the community is in truth a nomad that migrates again by the end of the story.

3
Encrypted Knowledge: Mao's Famine in Hong Ying's *The Daughter of Hunger*

> 'Little Six', Mother said, 'You should be glad you were allowed to go on living. Being alive is all that counts.'
> –Hong Ying[94]

> "I believe memories of great suffering are heritable. My daughter has nightmares all the time. Chong Qing people call this phenomena '*fa meng chong*.' She cries disconsolately. It isn't like the typical way a baby would cry. I believe I have unwittingly passed on my memories to her."
> –Hong Ying[95]

Shrouded in secrecy: the greatest famine in human history (1959-1961)

The outburst of the Chinese Cultural Revolution should not be seen as an incidental or isolated event. It has its philosophical, political and moral prehistory. It is an obscene culmination of a totalistic dream. The national campaigns of the Great Leap Forward, *da xue jin* (1958-1960), which preceded the Cultural Revolution is its most immediate prehistory. It is a parallel expression of a totalistic dream which depended on unspeakable human cost – in this context, the makings of tens of millions of hungry ghosts from 1959 to 1961.

The Great Leap Forward was a maddening plunge into Mao's impossible dream for the instant industrialization and collectivization of China. The official slogans at the time are illustrative of his utopian vision/delusion: To surpass England within three

---

[94] Hong, Ying. *Daughter of the River: An Autobiography*. Trans. Howard Goldblatt. Grove Press: New York, 1998. p. 48; Little Six is the narrator, Hong Ying's pet name at home.

[95] Translation is mine. See her blog: http://blog.cqnews.net/?uid-24913-action-viewspace-itemid-370525

years and to catch up with America within five years; one day equals twenty years and let us run into communist future; one's courageous mind dictates that which the earth will produce.[96] Truths became elusive as China delved into this dystopian fantasyscape. The central government's irrational and ruinous policies combined with the extreme and extensive falsification of statistics at the level of local Party cadres resulted in the most devastating famine in Chinese and world history. Studies by scholars such as Vaclav Smil and Jasper Becker show a grim and repressed truth: between the years of 1959 to 1961, more than thirty million Chinese starved to death and at least same number of births were either lost or postponed.[97] The unprecedented death toll of the famine embarrassingly contradicts the ideological promise made by the communist revolution to cease hunger and improve the lives of the starving peasants[98] and points to its drastic failure and sociopolitical phoniness.

The official naming of the Great Famine is worthy of our critical attention as these names are symptomatic of the ideological obscenity. By ideological obscenity, I mean two things. One is the initial replacement of political understanding of the famine

---

[96] All the translations are my own: 三年超英，五年赶美；一天等于 20 年，跑步进入共产主义；人有多大胆，地有多高产。

[97] Smil, Vaclav. "China's great famine: 40 years later." *British Medical Journal (BMJ)*. 319(7225), 1619-1621 (18 December 1999); Becker, Jasper. *Hungry Ghosts: Mao's Secret Famine*, Free Press: New York, 1996.

[98] As David Wang points out the hunger motif inspired the Communist revolution: "Hunger is comparable to a libidinous drive – for revolution and for communism." Wang, David Der-wei. *The Monster That is History: History, Violence, and Fictional Writing in Twentieth-Century China*. University of California Press: Berkeley, 2004. p. 123; In a book chapter titled "Hunger Revolution and Revolutionary Hunger," Yue Gang also discusses how hunger has become an integral part of Chinese Marxist discourse symbolically. Yue, Gang. *The Mouth That Begs: Hunger, Cannibalism, and the Politics of Eating in Modern* China. Duke University Press, 1999.

with a discourse of natural disaster. The other is the latter displacement of immense human suffering with a discourse of a leftist mistake with good intentions. Before the 1980s, the Great Famine was referred to as "Three Years of Natural Disasters" (*Sannian Ziran Zaihai)*. After the Cultural Revolution, it was revised to "Three Years of Difficulties" (*Sannian Kunnan Shiqi)*. Significantly, the word "famine" (*jihuang*) is curiously missing in either account. The initial naming, "Three Years of Natural Disasters," interprets the famine through the lens of nature and thereby bluntly denies the formidable truth that the famine was human in origin and entirely avoidable, or in David Wang's words, "one caused not by nature but by Mao's ideological vanity."[99] The later naming is equally dubious in nature. It erases words such as famine or starvation and effectively *displaces human suffering* by appealing to an abstract word: "difficulties." Amongst the propaganda rhetoric of difficulties, the Great Leap Forward was largely understood as a leftist mistake resulting from revolutionary eagerness rather than an atrocious political crime; a failed economic experiment rather than a lethal moral negligence. This particular language of historical revisionism, a mistake out of good and genuine intention, sadly finds its resonance among people's perception of the famine, even including those of scholars. For instance, in his review of Jasper Becker's groundbreaking book, *Hungry Ghosts: Mao's Secret Famine*, historian Lee Felgon argues that "Mao's genuine desire to implement socialist ideals, although certainly not

[99] Wang, David, *infra note 5*, p.137.

an excuse for mass murder, is too easily dismissed by Becker."[100] The question remains: Can the starvation of tens of millions of people be understood as a tragedy induced by a genuine desire to do good, by positive intentions? Although not a genocide, some chilly facts point to the maliciousness of those behind the Great Leap forward and quickly strip away the ability to claim innocent intentions. The central government not only continued its destructive policies and rejected international aid while knowing full well about the rampant starvation and excessive deaths in rural areas since 1959, but continued exporting grains to foreign countries.[101] A quote from a national newspaper from May 20, 1960 reads:

> At a time when the threat of hunger is on an equal footing with the destructive capability of a nuclear weapon, the feeding of six hundred million fifty thousand people in China has been guaranteed…The people's commune which was founded in the fall of 1958 brought happiness...Tomorrow will be as today, we are certain not to starve again.[102]

The magnitude of the famine and the hopelessness of escaping from mass starvation in the midst of murderous lies have been shrouded *in deep secrecy*. It was not until 1982, when China's population census became accessible, that experts from

---

[100] Feigon, Lee. Book Review: Hungry Ghosts: Mao's Secret Famine. *The Journal of Asian Studies* 57(1) (Feb., 1998), 181-183. p.182.

[101] Kane, Penny. *Famine in China, 1959–61*. St. Martin's Press: London, 1988. p.137.

[102] 瑞士《合作报》载文赞扬我国人民战胜饥荒: (1960 年 5 月 20 日) Available online at <http://www.yhcw.net/famine/Reports/r010723a.html> (last visited April 10, 2011).

outside China could start to estimate the magnitude of the death toll.[103] In this light, there is no exaggeration when Jasper Becker contends that "one of the most remarkable things about the famine...was that for over twenty years, no one was sure whether it had even taken place."[104] The continued official reticence on the Great Famine since the 1980s has only perpetuated this prevailing sense of secrecy and relegated the collective experience of suffering to the background of public consciousness. This chapter takes up the issue of *secrecy* that has rendered the greatest famine in human history a point of impossibility. Alarmingly, the impossibility is not due to the inadequacy of language to accommodate human suffering on such scale. Rather, it originates from the art of statecraft, a treacherous symbiosis of secrecy and power.[105] In this context, the silence has yet to be heard. The secret history has yet to be disclosed. China has yet to openly work through the causes and costs of the Great Famine.

I want to end this section by suggesting that secrets formed in connection with great trauma are bound to unravel. I wish to articulate this point in light of Jasper Becker's book title: *Hungry Ghosts: Mao's Secret Famine*. There is an internal contradiction here: the secret can only remain sealed for so long as hungry ghosts almost always signify a phantomistic return. In Buddhism as well as in Chinese popular imagination, hungry ghosts are neither fully alive nor dead. They are a

---

[103] Smil, Vaclav, *infra note 4*. p.1620.

[104] Becker, Jasper, *infra note 4*. p.xi.

[105] In other words, the impossibility is not a representational issue. It still remains a simple (and yet not easy) issue of groundbreaking.

synthesis of wrath and desire. Their unsatisfied desire and extreme emotion compel them to return and linger. The making of tens of millions of hungry ghosts is the ineffable secret on which Mao's kingdom sits. But such a secret will be spoken by the hungry ghosts in their cryptic language. In other words, the transmission/exposé of the secret trauma necessarily takes the form of haunting in a totalitarian state.

*****

Beyond Autobiography: The Daughter of Hunger

Given the magnitude of the famine and the great damage it must have left behind,[106] the fact that the shelf of the Great Famine literature remains almost empty is deeply disconcerting.[107] Such a phenomenon is indicative of the pervasive secrecy and silence surrounding the Great Famine. Under this light, Hong Ying's (1962-) autobiographical novel, *The Daughter of Hunger* (2003),[108] is truly groundbreaking as it stands as the only direct, rigorous treatment of the trauma of the Great Famine via an intimate familial narrative. Unjustifiably, this novel has not received adequate scholarly attention. Jian Xu's "Subjectivity and Class Consciousness in Hong Ying's

[106] As Vaclav Smil's article informs us: "leading Chinese demographer found that even casual surveys of villages in areas that experienced the worst starvation show an unusually high extent of mental impairment among adults born during the famine years. Given the importance of nutrition for the development of mental capacities during infancy and early childhood this was a predictable tragedy. We will never know how many millions of survivors throughout China have had their lives twisted in this terrible way." *Infra note 4*. p.1621.

[107] Arguably, the horror of the Great Famine has been dealt with in an implicit or unconscious way by contemporary Chinese writers. Writers come to mind include Mo Yan, Yu Hua, Han Shaogong and etc. For instance, the image in Han Shaogong's *Pa Pa Pa* where Young Bing sucks at the breasts of his dead mother evokes the deep misery of the Great Famine. Nevertheless, the shelf of the Great Famine literature needs to be grown significantly.

[108] This novel is known as *Daughter of the River* (translated by Howard Goldblatt) to the western readers. But the original title in Chinese is 饥饿的女儿Daughter of Hunger

Autobiographical Novel *The Hungry Daughter*" remains the only in depth analysis of this important work.[109] Although a fruitful piece focusing on the subject formation from the viewpoint of class consciousness, this essay does not concern itself with the central kernel of the Great Famine. In David Wang's canonical essay, "Three Hungry Women," *The Daughter of Hunger* appeared briefly on the fringes. Wang's brief comments nevertheless remain highly suggestive as he points to the importance of future scholarship on this work:

> *The Daughter of Hunger* should be regarded as one of the rare fictional accounts that confronts the biological and psychological consequences of the national famine during the Great Leap Forward, whose atrocities still remain taboo today.[110]

Indeed, the significance of *The Daughter of Hunger* is beyond a personal narrative. Hong Ying's autobiography recounts a troubled familial history within the larger backgrounds of the Great Famine and the Cultural Revolution. It in truth personifies the historical disasters and guides its readers into the recesses and rhythms of the everyday and ordinary where the collective trauma has been absorbed or split open. In other words, the text's biographical and sensuous details of familial relations, of the body, of the psychological intricacies, of *being* reveal the inner workings of the history, of the system, of the larger possibilities of phenomena. Tens of millions of deaths are no

---

[109] Xu, Jian. "Subjectivity and Class Consciousness in Hong Ying's Autobiographical Novel The Hungry Daughter." Journal of Contemporary China 56 (Aug. 2008): 529-42.

[110] Wang, David Der-wei. "Three Hungry Women". *boundary 2*. 25(3), Modern Chinese Literary and Cultural Studies in the Age of Theory: Reimaging a Field (Autumn, 1998), 47-76. p.75.

longer a buried, cold statistic. The singularity of lives and their destitution in face of a colossal crisis stand right before us.

This chapter thus looks to *The Daughter of Hunger* precisely for its personal, emotional, psychological engagement with the legacies of the Great Famine. I discuss how the encryption, silencing or disregard of the collective trauma – the Great Famine – generates psychic phantoms in a different generation, in a different body.[111] Hong Ying's autobiographical storytelling may be understood as that of a daughter, and thus a latecomer's desperate attempt to understand this incomprehensible gap that she has inherited and to come to terms with the inexplicable intersubjective and transgenerational haunting.[112]

---

[111] Here one's thinking follows the important theoretical works done by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok. In their seminal essay "Notes on Phantom: A Complement to Freud's Metapsychology," *Critical Inquiry* 13(2) (Winter 1987) they explain the phantom to be the unwitting generational transmission of the submerged family secrets. The parents' unrevealed psychic burden can be unconsciously inherited by the children in an unspecified way. The phantom theory differs itself from Freud's theory of the unconscious as phantom is an *intersubjective* phenomenon. The phantom theory is reminiscent of Chinese cultural imagination of ghosts. Chinese ghosts and their spectral sisters such as dreams, fox spirits, mirror scenes, are similarly intersubjective. They have never been an individual matter as Freud's dream theory indicates (dream as a manifestation of an individual's unconscious driven by individual's desire of wish fulfillment). They redraw the psychic boundaries and are boundary crossers. And they transmit knowledge intersubjectively that otherwise cannot be communicated. Such transmission can be uncanny and traumatic. Within Abraham and Torok's theory, children unwittingly act out their parents' trauma. In a similar fashion, within Chinese ghostlore, the possessed unconsciously act out the trauma of the ghost as if it were her own. .

[112] A concept similar to transgenerational phantom is postmemory, a term coined by Marianne Hirsch. In Hirch's words: "Postmemory describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right." Nevertheless, there is an important difference between transgenerational phantom and postmemory. Whereas Hirsch's postmemory has a *textual nature* to itself as it relies on photos, images, stories passed down from the previous generation, transgenerational phantom, by contrast, is mythical and non-textual. The phantom appears precisely because the knowledge becomes a gap – it is engraved, hidden and unspoken. In other words, *the phantom is a legacy of transgenerational silence*. Hirsch, Marianne, "The Generation of Postmemory." *Poetics Today* 29(1)(Spring, 2008). 103-128. p.103.

Specifically, this chapter investigates three tropes in *The Daughter of Hunger* that are intimately linked with the question of the encrypted Great Famine: First, I examine how the novel reinvents the Chinese city Chong Qing into a *haunted river, a secretive landfill* to address the city's layered traumatic pasts and deal with the horror of mass deaths. Second, I focus on the representation of body and examine how the novel fantasizes historical trauma – hunger – through aesthetics of the somatic. Third, I reflect on transgenerational transmission of the difficult knowledge of the Great Famine. I examine how the institutionalized secret, the suppressed history of the Great Famine, insidiously reaches its tentacles into everyday life and manifests/transmits as *shameful familial secrets*. These three tropes – the spatial one, the bodily one and the psychological one –mutually implicate and are occupied with the mass deaths made by the Great Famine. Together they generate an aura of secrecy that permeates the entire novel. Such secrecy, I argue, exceeds personal character as it is indicative of the collective psychological economy of post-famine China.

*****

Chong Qing: a haunted river, a secretive landfill

Chong Qing, a historically and politically importantly city for both KMT and CCP, earned its image as quintessentially an urban slum in Hong Ying's *The Daughter of Hunger*. Following the publication of *The Daughter of Hunger*, the city government banned Hong Ying from selling and signing the book in Chong Qing for her alleged ruination of the city's image. Ironically, Hong Ying also earned the honorable title

"Chong Qing City Image Promotion Ambassador" in 2009. During her interview with China News, Hong Ying says:

> This title was given by the common civilians of Chong Qing through an equal opportunity to vote [elicited] in the newspapers. Chong Qing's common civilians love *The Daughter of Hunger* because this book is about them. Some said that I wrote what they wanted to say but dared not their entire lives.[113]

Here Hong Ying understands her narratives as giving voice to what remained unsaid and silent. With regard to the image of Chong Qing, Hong Ying constructs a city beyond the contours of historical writing and drags into light what remains unseen and unregistered historically. It angered the Chong Qing government because such an image uncomfortably disturbs the composed landscape of Chong Qing and transforms the city into a traumatic landfill of history. At the heart of the traumatic topography conjured up by Hong Ying – *the river, secrecy, and waste* – lies an ethical obligation to address the city's un-mourned and layered pasts. This section pays close attention to Hong Ying's Chong Qing from three angles: her pithy portrayal of the center of the city, her sensitivity to the Yangzi River, and her lengthy delineation of home, "the slum crowded on the hills of the southern bank."[114]

Hong Ying's Chong Qing is not Chong Qing (if one can assume a Chong Qing free from any mediation and forms of representation). It is a reversed discourse of

---

[113] Hong, Ying, Interview with China News (December 21, 2009), available online at <http://www.chinanews.com/cul/news/2009/12-21/2028954.shtml>. (last visited April 10, 2011).

[114] Hong, Ying, *infra note 1*, p.5.

Chong Qing from the dominant one. The center of Chong Qing is almost absent in Hong Ying's Chong Qing. It briefly appears to be "*another world* with red flags everywhere you look and rousing political songs filling the air."[115] It is where "people's lives are getting better every day, with youngsters reading revolutionary books to prepare themselves for the life of a revolutionary cadre."[116] Lacking any concrete typographical signs, the only passage describing the center of the city strikes one as a purposefully empty mimesis of propaganda languages. The elision of the center of the city in *The Daughter of the Hunger* forms a significant contrast with the prominence of the river and the slum. There is a palpable effect of decentralization in Hong Ying's representation of Chong Qing. Yet the center is neither dispersed nor empty in a post-structuralist sense. It is only *replaced* with the slum crowded on the south bank, or what Hong Ying terms as "the dark corner." [117] This unsettling, uncomfortable, usually concealed and censored image (one thinks of Freud's unconscious here) becomes the ruling image of Chong Qing in *The Daughter of Hunger*, and by extension, the nonverbal part of history.

Across the body of the city flows the famous Yangtze River, one of the cultural origins of China.[118] Hong Ying describes it as a curtain of mist that hides the South

---

[115] Ibid.

[116] Ibid.

[117] Ibid.

[118] The other one is of course the Yellow River, whose cultural importance will be discussed in the chapter on Han Shaogong.

bank, the city's dark corner.[119] Such delineation renders the Yangtze River to be a *threshold* that separates the center of the city from its dark corner, a *gateway* that leads down to the labyrinth of the slum – what has been starved of, what has remained unseen. A transition point par excellence, the Yangtze River in *The Daughter of Hunger* becomes an imagistic threshold of remembering and forgetting, a symbolic boundary between life and death, and a haunted site filled with unhappy souls. I wish to highlight three aspects of the Yangtze River in *The Daughter of Hunger* that link the river with implications of *death*: its mournful voice, a burial site and a gateway into the underworld. And these three aspects of the Yangtze River unveil a constant authorial desire: *to let the Yangtze River bear the historical burden of witnessing/remembering mass death made under Mao's regime*.

The Yangtze River is perpetually melancholic and enigmatic in Hong Ying's narration. She has imbued the river with a distinct voice – the sound of the river boat horns. The voice has the power to mesmerize the narrator as her senses "were always keen to those horns."[120] Throughout the novel, this voice is invariably sad and haunting: It "wail[s] like grieving widows;"[121] "To my ears, the sound of each horn was identifiably unique, as if invested with a soul crying out for its fate. I shivered;"[122] The

[119] Ibid.

[120] Ibid. p.80.

[121] Ibid. p.3.

[122] Ibid. p.80.

horn sounds "like a funeral dirge played by a cheap street band."[123] Most extraordinary here is a certain mechanism of repetition – wailing, crying, funeral dirge. From this audible repetition emerges the specter of the dead, for whom the Yangtze River mourns and laments. The disembodied eeriness of the grieving sound engenders an atmosphere of hauntedness and speaks the unfinished and unutterable stories of the dead.

Its mournful voice aside, the Yangtze River remains a source of deep fear and great anxiety for the narrator:

> a girl who grew up on the banks of a river, the daughter of a boatman, never learned how to swim. I can't think of another boy or girl who lived on the river who didn't swim like a fish…I was even afraid of taking a ferry across the river, although I couldn't say why.[124]

How do we solve the riddle that the daughter of the river is afraid of water? This inexplicable fear, at first glimpse, is related, perhaps too easily, to the fear of death. The Yangtze River is constantly evoked as an unmarked grave, an improper burial site to the dead bodies of *abnormal deaths* – those who committed suicide, those who were murdered and drowned. Yet I would argue that the fear of death found here relates to more than an individual concern with human mortality. I want to emphasize that there is a deepened, layered historical focus that addresses the city's traumatic pasts. *The Yangtze River is essentially a temporalized locale or spatialized time that holds history's many*

[123] Ibid. p.85.

[124] Ibid. p.115.

secrets. Hong Ying narrates that during the Great Famine years the Yangtze River engulfed too many hungry children who looked for food in the water. Third Brother was one of those who saw the river as a source of food:

> He was luckier than those kids who never returned from their search for food. Water from the snowy peaks of Qinghai kept the river temperature icy cold most of the year, and if you cramped up while you were swimming, getting back to shore was nearly impossible. Sooner or later you'd be swept into one of the swirling eddies. Youngsters weakened by hunger never had a chance.[125]

Hong Ying narrates:

> During my second year at school, people accused of joining the 'May 16th Conspiracy' were committing suicide all over the place, and 'Kuomingtang dregs' and 'reactionary literati' were ferreted out daily. So many bodies floated in the river during those years that people lost interest going down to see them.[126]

Hong Ying goes on to explain that the unprecedented fire that raged in the city on the 2nd of September 1949, possibly started by the Communist underground in order to turn the populace against the Kuomintang, produced "one shipload of bodies after another" which were "carried from the river or the riverbank to be buried in common graves on a sandbar downriver."[127] The sutured text with scattered references to traumatic events,

---

[125] Ibid. p.37.

[126] Ibid. p. 180.

[127] Ibid. p. 98.

sometimes accidently expressed, other times randomly disclosed, forms a web of historical profanity from which we can begin to grasp the enormity of abnormal deaths made by history. In this light, the narrator's fear of the Yangtze River is essentially linked to the inheritance of traumatic knowledge and the consequence of such inheritance – descending into the abyss of the river/history. For the river is filled with unhappy souls. Mother warns against bathing in the river and even playing on the riverbank: "The River can reach out and grab you, throw a noose around you."[128] Indeed, as Chinese ghostlore has it, the unhappy souls hold resentment against the living and constantly look for substitutes. Here I want to draw attention to a nightmare the narrator had when she "slept on a bench in the crowded steamship waiting room," finally scheming to escape the devastation of home.[129] The dream scene, I want to suggest, reveals the psychological burden that holds back *the narrative future*. In the dream, the Yangtze River unfailingly appeared – it was frozen solid. Once the dreamer started crossing and "reached mid-river, the ice began to melt and crack noisily."[130] Significantly, the Yangtze River is transformed into an imagistic threshold of remembering and forgetting. It presents as a solid route leading toward the future (symbolically forgetting). Paradoxically, it is at the same time a precarious route that hinders its traveler from proceeding (symbolically remembering; slippage into the past).

---

[128] Ibid. p. 115.

[129] Ibid. p.246.

[130] Ibid. p.247.

"The bodies of people drowned over the years" started to resurface from the cracks.[131] Although the narrator claims that she is more anxious about her family chasing after her, I read her evocation of the dead bodies accumulated over the years as a Freudian slippage that is illuminating to her deep fear of the water. Viewed in this light, the river is home to what she is truly anxious about – incalculable unhappy souls (the *guilt of history*) who constantly address her, haunt her and prevent her from escaping.

The unhappy souls obstruct others for they themselves are obstructed. Here the Freudian notion of melancholia uncannily coincides with Chinese ghostlore. Freud informs us that in contrast with the concept of mourning where the self directs its libido towards the future, the melancholic self dwells in emotional attachment with the lost object and thereof forecloses the possibility of future. In Chinese ghostlore, unhappy souls of abnormal deaths are melancholic par excellence. Longing and resenting, their extreme emotions are self-referential and debilitating. They are doomed souls outside the normal cycle of reincarnation. In this light, Freudian melancholic disorder and Chinese ghosts of abnormal death can indeed form a cross-cultural dialogue since both signify *intense emotional stasis*. The means to pass out of this impasse in both cultural contexts are strikingly similar. Whereas melancholic patients seek help through talking cure (forming a relationship in order to help the ego to function again), Chinese ghosts demand to be listened to and to have their emotions redressed. That is to say, an intersubjective context of utterances is crucial for both melancholic patients and Chinese

[131] Ibid.

ghosts. In this light, the daughter of the river plays a significant role as she is someone who listens to the grieving voice, assumes the position of the addressee, inherits the phantom knowledge and bears witness to what history has consigned to be unseen.

Such a reading – where the daughter of the river is the unwitting addressee, listener and inheritor of history's repressed memories – is further supported by Yang Ying's illicit love relationship with her history teacher, a man who is twenty years her senior. The history teacher "was morbidly pessimistic…that sort of morbidity appealed" to the eighteen-year-old Hong Ying.[132] Her attraction to the history teacher's melancholic temperament echoes her keen sensibility to the grieving sound of the boat horns. Melancholia is at the root of their romance. As such, their romance is essentially a transferential encounter. And their bond is characteristically a relationship of "talking cure." The history teacher does most of the talking, although the relationship is reversed at times. The sporadic, obscure and perplexing words spoken by the history teacher always magnetizes his listener, the narrator:

> I enjoyed hearing him talk like that. His words were so profound…He was entirely a different person than when he was in the classroom…he was treating me like a friend now, someone who could understand what he was saying.[133]

Within this transferential system of exchange, the history teacher's impoverished existence is articulated through talking to his student. His words are not only

---

[132] Ibid. p.242.

[133] Ibid. p.109.

indicative of a traumatized personality but *reveal fine strands of unspoken history* from a patient's mouth:

> One day I asked my history teacher about the famine that ended with my birth. His face paled and he looked away…Instead of answering me, he jumped to his feet and walked to the window, where he grabbed his hair with both hands and stood there trying to compose himself. 'Don't trust your own flesh,' he said, 'and don't trust your own bones. Toss stones into your belly, and when the hot cinders begin to sizzle, we'll ward off the menacing powers of Paradise.' I was dumbstruck, more rocked by his strange mutterings than by the staggering figure of the tens of millions who had died.[134]

The history teacher's body language followed by his strange mutterings bespeaks *the presence and the openness* of the wound of the Great Famine eighteen years later. Between his trembling lips, suffering finds its poetic voice which has been muffled in buried statistics. Here the traumatic residues of the Great Famine are witnessed by and accessible to the narrator who "was dumbstruck." From her history teacher's elliptical mutterings, the listener/reader senses hopelessness, despair and sadistic passion to annihilate the body in order to transcend extreme hunger/pain. In the midst of his uttering, one encounters the specter of death/hell/underworld condensed in the image of the sizzling cinders, the burning ashes. Indeed, the Great Famine remains one of the central riddles between the talker and the listener. Elsewhere, the narrator asked the history teacher: "how did you make it through the years of famine?" The history

[134] Ibid. p.34.

teacher's answer was light and heavy at once. The question elicited a smile: "Every family's story was more or less the same, I think. But…Everyone's experience was unique."[135] Veiled by the lightness of the answer is the heaviness of an unwritten book – "he said he'd like to write a book on the subject."[136] The therapeutic experience of the romance (being listened to) does not salvage the history teacher from descending into the underworld. The 'talking cure' terminates with the patient's suicide. The history teacher's untimely death becomes the very symptom of historical trauma. Behind the enigma of the history teacher's ill fate, I want to suggest, lies not an individual, but an entire history: The history teacher's father was a counterrevolutionary. He himself was labeled as a rightist-opportunist for spelling out to the Central Government the devastating famine in Chong Qing. Eventually a Rebel activist during the Cultural Revolution, he longed to "control his own destiny."[137] "And yet that led to disastrous consequences and even greater despair."[138] The history teacher and his younger brother joined opposing Mao factions in Chong Qing, the most notorious battle ground for armed factions. In one of the fiercest battles fought on the river, the ship of the younger brother's faction took twelve hits and sank. After a host of unidentifiable corpses were brought out of the water, the history teacher "found his brother's thick

[135] Ibid. p.173.

[136] Ibid. p.173.

[137] Ibid. p.242.

[138] Ibid.

glasses with transparent rims."[139] The history teacher carries within him an ineffable, burdensome history. His suicide indicates his failure at reconciliation with the past. It also dimly points to history's very horror and guilt. His injured accounts, that the narrator has listened to time after time but failed to understand, will return as ghosts. Indeed, there looms the ever more melancholic Yangtze River, a home to unhappy souls with unfilled destinies and a gateway into the underworld:

> That evening I went alone to the riverbank, where I tore up every diary entry that hinted at him, and tossed them into the river, to be swallowed up and swept away. Popular local belief has it that the souls of the hanged become evil ghosts, much like hungry ghosts, and are denied transmigration, reincarnation, and entry into Paradise; it is also believed that all waterways lead to the underworld. And so he was a sufferer in life and would remain a sufferer in the afterlife; but if the river indeed flowed to the underworld, carrying him these pages that he'd never read, would he say again 'You'll understand one day?'[140]

Significant to this passage is the discrepancy of understanding and addressing between the two lovers. What has been repeated by the history teacher when alive – "you will understand one day" – not only highlights the age gap and deficiency of the listener but points to the isolatedness of the traumatized who speaks in vain. At the same time, there remains promise of belated understanding at some uncertain future moment. Her thoughts, mediated by the river, pursue the doomed beyond the threshold of death,

---

[139] Ibid. p.179.

[140] Ibid. p.244.

offering consolation and the desire to inherit phantom knowledge and to address the ghost reversely.

The underworld and the slum are implicitly connected via the Yangtze River. A gateway into the underworld of unredeemable souls, the Yangtze River also leads to "the city's garbage dump, an unsalvageable slum."[141] It is a secretive path that *hides* "this rotting urban appendix from sight."[142] The hidden slum is a landscape of secrecy in itself:

> Rickety and darkened by weather, they have something sinister about them. When you enter the dark, misshapen courtyards off twisting little lanes, it is all but impossible to find your way back out; there is home to millions of people engaged in coolie labor.[143]

Hong Ying effectively engages secrecy at the level of the topography. Poor laborers' inconspicuous dwellings are portrayed as a menacing, narrow labyrinth that winds down to the unknown and burden its reader/pedestrian with a culture of secrecy where everyone you encounter "was imbued with damp furtiveness."[144] Onto the topology of the slum, I want to suggest, Hong Ying has in truth mapped out the city's unconscious. At times, the topology of the slum becomes exceedingly dreamlike:

> If you walk out the compound gate, hugging the damp wall and listening carefully, you can hear the echoes of former night watchmen in the

[141] Ibid. p.5.

[142] Ibid. p.5.

[143] Ibid. p.3.

[144] Ibid. p.85.

> darkness. That cobweb-covered doorway might reveal quite mysteriously old-style red velvet embroidered shoes; that man disappearing around the corner, with a felt hat pulled down over his forehead, might have a knife hidden in his trouserleg. On dark, rainy days, every person walking on the narrow slope, where filthy water flows, looks like a secret agent. And on any given sliver of land, by digging down a couple of feet, you can unearth an unexploded bomb or some hidden explosives, or a secret code book with all sorts of strange symbols, or 'restoration accounts' of items confiscated from landlords and recorded by them with writing brushes.[145]

This short passage strikes one as "*a secret code book*" in itself. It is crowded with "*all sorts of strange symbols*": condensed, displaced, and yet eager to flicker up in spite of their seeming reluctance. These are strange symbols one sees in a Freudian dream: the echoes of former night watchmen, the old-style red velvet embroidered shoes, the spy, the hidden explosives and etc. The topography of the labyrinth is endowed with an unconscious depth where the repressed and censored materialize. In conjunction with these enigmatic, archaic symbols, I want to draw attention to a different kind of sign, "posters proclaiming 'VD Treatment, Guaranteed Cure' on the filthy moss-covered walls" which significantly appears in a topographical form:

尖锐湿疣龟头烂痛

滴虫阴痒菜花肉芽

[145] Ibid. p.5.

尿口红肿阴道流脓

Genital Warts Leprous Glans

Yeast Infection Genital Herpes

Itching Vulva Suppurating Vagina[146]

The graphic appearance of "those confusing and frightening symbols" is set apart from the main text creating a visual performance. The narrator then stresses the unreadablility of these symbols – whether "up and down, left and right, backwards or forwards."[147] These jumbled, dreadful and yet enticing symbols thus posit as an open secret, an inviting topography that escapes censorship:

> even when the Red Sun shone most brightly, when Chinese society was at its revolutionary peak, boasting that it was the only place in the world where venereal disease had been eradicated, these ads never completely disappeared.[148]

The slum is thus the city's unconscious, the dark corner "with its unfathomable perplexities, hidden dangers and buried secrets,"[149] a deep labyrinth of incoherent mysteries not enslaved to the socialist image.

---

[146] Ibid. p.102.

[147] Ibid.

[148] Ibid.

[149] Ibid. p.85.

I also wish to draw attention to the trash that Hong Ying shores up in *The Daughter of Hunger*.

> The garbage piles up, with fresh layers covering their fetid predecessors to produce an astonishing mixture of strange odors. A ten-minute walk on any mountain path in South Bank treats you to hundreds of different smells, a universe of olfactory creations.[150]

Featuring the garbage piles, *The Daughter of Hunger* transforms Chong Qing into a landfill where the reader/pedestrian randomly encounters waste, decay, excrements and even rotting corpses which are "impossible to tell if they were pigs or dogs or humans."[151] The piles of trash have a mirror image in slum life's quotidian ugliness and decay. Who, among Hong Ying's characters, have neat lives? Their lives consist of nothing more than fighting, quarrelling, gossiping, scheming, eating, bathing, urinating and bowel movements. But to what end does Hong Ying to go to lengths to describe waste? I want to suggest that the significance of the waste does not lie in visible trash in a slum life imitated by the author but in some invisible emotions, psychological intricacies and philosophical insights. The landfill is intricately connected to the inner workings of history, the making of a state. Hegel is relevant here as his theory anticipates Marxism and Chinese-Marxist discourse. For Hegel, a ruinous site is a constitutive base for history's dialectical path towards absolute spirit. Chinese

---

[150] Ibid. p.4.

[151] Ibid. p.63.

Communism adopted this utopian vision of a teleological end. The struggle along the path proves to be sinisterly violent and enduring:

> Every adult in the city was a potential spy, and even after the grand suppression movements and the mass executions of the Communist purges of the early 1950s, plenty of spies could have slipped through the net. That could even have included people who joined the Party after Liberation.[152]

Hong Ying's writing significantly treasures the dead bodies and the waste made by history. She essentially transforms the historical attempt to fulfill its utopian dream into a petrified landfill that scars, corrupts and fissures the city Chong Qing.

*****

Reading body: ghostly frame, unhappy stomach

In the previous section, I look to Hong Ying's topographical configurations of Chong Qing to trace the reticent memories of the Great Famine in particular and layered memories of history in general. In the present section, I will focus on a different kind of topography, the somatic articulations in *The Daughter of Hunger*. David Wang has convincingly laid out a genealogy of hungry women in modern Chinese literary history: the narrative of hungry women was initially part of "the leftist discourse of the hunger revolution in the late 1930s." It then becomes more of a grey zone, "a corporeal symbolism through which the Communist Revolution was sanctioned or critiqued"[153].

---

[152] Ibid. p.4.

[153] Wang, David Der-wei, *Infra note 5*, p.11.

Highlighting the gendered representation of hunger, Wang sees "the mystification of hunger and femininity as an arguably male imaginary of the physical and metaphysical destitution that besets modern China."[154] Wang thus articulates a male discourse of hungry women of which his essay is a part. Indeed, while elegantly illustrating how the hungry women were written and rewritten within the grand narration of Communist Revolution, Wang unwittingly reproduces women as a privileged figurative material in a dominant, male structure. An important question thus emerges: does *The Daughter of Hunger* fall into the genealogy of hungry women articulated by Wang? On the one hand, it does. A *daughter* in a both literal and metaphorical sense, Hong Ying does not critique from outside the problematic that has begotten her and was handed down to her. Her novel belongs to what Wang terms as "corporeal symbolism" where she effectively challenges the value of Mao's hunger revolution. On the other hand, it does not neatly fit into this genealogy. An autobiography, Hong Ying's account of a hungry woman intrinsically differs from three fictional hungry women sampled by Wang. The three hungry women portrayed respectively by Lu Ling, Chen Yingzhen, and Eileen Chang function primarily on the level of the imaginary. There is an insurmountable gap between these three writers and the subject matter (hungry woman) they represent. While Lu Ling and Chen Yingzhen are male writers who use hungry women as a foil for their deliberations on the Chinese Marxist discourse, Eileen Chang comes from the privileged class that determinately separates

[154] Hong, Ying, *infra note 1*, p.119.

her from the hungry woman she portrayed. Hong Ying writes from within. A hungry woman literally and allegorically, Hong Ying's autobiography is pervaded with a constant desire to find a subject position, a speaking position which has been a given for Lu Ling, Chen Yingzhen and Eileen Chang. It functions not only on a figurative, performative level but perhaps more importantly, on a literal and testimonial level. Woman is not only an icon of starvation but also a commentator of subjective experience. More than an aesthetic impulse in an imaginative structure, Hong Ying's self narration of the hungry daughter has a humble objective to record the omitted history and its somatic and psychological legacies on an individual level. In what follows, I discuss how the figurative referents of the body functions as readable testimonies of the encrypted disaster of the Great Famine. I attempt a juxtaposed reading of the body: a ghostly frame and a medical delineation of an unhappy stomach. This juxtaposed reading will reveal that the altered aspects of the body may be engaged in understanding the same hidden kernel: the Great Famine.

The ghostliness of Hong Ying's body is immediately discernable in the following passage:

> By counting back from my birthday, I figured Mother got pregnant with me in the winter of 1961, the last dark winter of the three years of famine…I was always curious about this catastrophic famine, as if it were tied in some mysterious way to my life, and made me different from other people: my frail health and morose disposition seemed somehow to be linked to it, belonging neither to a past life nor to this one, but wedged on

> to the long narrow rope bridge between the two. As I set out on to that bridge, an evil wind turned me into something not quite human.[155]

There is a tangible sense of haunting, of being stranded in a non-place, an in-between-ness. Her ontology is predicated on a gap in history, a traumatic memory she does not own – the Great Famine. She finds herself continuously, enigmatically and irremediably caught in a surge of evil wind that once blew her in the womb where she was so malnourished that "she refused to budge."[156] Hunger is her existential origin. It is corporealized in her frail frame and melancholic temperament: "I approached my eighteenth birthday with a face as pale as wan as always; I was still skinny, and my lips were bloodless."[157] Hunger is her deep memory, to use the words of Charlotte Delbo. It reappears in dreams, unconscious wishes and unexplainable feelings:

> Night in and night out, sleep took me roughly from one bad dream to the next, until I woke up screaming, covered with sweat, as if I were deathly ill. In my dreams I was always hungry and could never find my ricebowl, though I could smell food. Quietly I began to sob. Hoping no one would hear me, I was driven by the desire to fall to my knees before anyone holding a ricebowl. For the sake of getting my hands on a fragrant piece of braised pork, I would gradly prostrate myself at the feet of someone who had insulted me or demeaned me. Then I'd wake up, and as I mulled over my dream, I'd berate myself, begin hating myself, as I *wondered where such a powerful bodily need had come from*…. You can't know what happened

[155] Ibid. p.34.

[156] Ibid. p.40.

[157] Ibid. p.23.

> to you in the womb; how can you carry scars from abuse you never received? But then how was I supposed to explain my behavior? I was, for instance, incredibly sensitive to the taste of food. I wasn't a child any longer, but I thought constantly about food and was always hungry. Yet no matter how much I ate, I remained thin as a rail… My persistent fantasy was to grow up independently enough to eat meat at every meal.[158]

Remarkable on many levels, this narration vividly illuminates a starving body and its intense physical sensations of hunger. It points to the physical and metaphysical aftereffects of hunger on mind, body and emotion. From the living body splits this starving body, a suspended ontological sphere outside temporality. The pre-existing experience of the Great Famine is mysteriously deposited in this starving body which eternally bears witness to the famine's devastation. With her starving body, the narrator displays an amazing affinity with hungry ghosts in Chinese ghostlore – a paradoxical combination of *a feeble frame and powerful passions engendered by want*. She is tormented by insatiable and inexplicable hunger that cannot be satisfied. Such metaphorical affinity with hungry ghosts dramatizes the narrator's existential crisis. As Mark Epstein describes in his influential book: *Thoughts Without A Thinker: Psychotherapy from a Buddhist Perspective*:

> The Hungry Ghosts are searching for gratification for old unfulfilled needs whose time has passed. They are beings who have uncovered a terrible emptiness within themselves, who cannot see the impossibility of

[158] Ibid. p.42 (emphasis added).

> correcting something that has already happened. Their ghostlike state represents their attachment to the past.[159]

In light of Epstein's account of hungry ghosts, the narrator unmistakably emulates a ghostlike aura. Her starving body is *a ghostly body made in the past, insatiable in the present and stranded in between*. At the heart of this ghostly body lies the narrator's belated desire to discover a key to access the absent ground of her birth, the Great Famine.

The ghostliness of her body is further reflected in the narrator's fear of mirrors which she expresses from time to time. I want to suggest that her fear of mirrors is comparable to her susceptibility to nightmares – both mirror images and dream scenes are essentially boundary crossers. In one particular mirror scene, the narrator transgresses the border between life and death. And this mirror scene significantly occurs following a mother-daughter fight which essentially boils down to the kernel of food, birth and gaze. Extracting her school tuition from Mother was always a painstaking process. In one instance, Mother blurted out when pressed about school tuition: "you are lucky *you get food to eat*."[160] At this Hong Ying confronts her mother with her deepest fear – "you should never have let me be born." Hong Ying reads Mother's silent stare to say "you are right, I shouldn't have!"[161] Mother's cold gaze, or non-gaze, further depleted the self that was born famished in the first place. An

---

[159] Epstein, Mark, *Thoughts Without a Thinker*. BasicBooks: New York,1995. p.28.

[160] Hong, Ying, *infra note 1*, p.125.

[161] Ibid. p.126.

uncanny mirror scene thereof ensues. Fleeing up to the attic in despair, the twelve-year-old Hong Ying took Fourth Sister's hand mirror but could not see her reflection. This seems to reflect her non-existence in Mother's eyes.

> I took another look at the mirror – it was still a mirror, but I wasn't in it. It fell to the floor and flopped over without shattering, showing a pair of chubby infants embracing plump ears of wheat and corn. I no longer belonged to myself, and I felt myself fall to floor, where my legs jerked out in front of me.[162]

Most extraordinary to this passage is its attentiveness to the mirror's reversed side: *well-nourished infants in a picture of harvest*. This mirror image – a propped-up fantasy, an idealized Other in a Lacanian sense – can no longer hail her famished existence: her body is nowhere to be reflected. In this uncanny episode where "her spirit has fled,"[163] her body becomes precisely a ghostly site of instability where the boundary between life and death, living and starving dissolves.

The legacies of the Great Famine not only manifest in the body's ghostlike frame and temperament but also in the narrator's almost fetishistic preoccupation with her stomach ailments. The metaphysical aspect of the body is grounded by Hong Ying's compulsive authorial attention to the medical problems of her stomach which needs:

---

[162] Ibid.

[163] Ibid.

> the wonder pills that Father kept in a little medicine cabinet, things like cinnamon-bark golden elixir, bezoar antitoxins, and essence of forsythia.[164]

The stomach ailment is significantly revealed as being tied to the crisis of her emotions: she feels intestinal pain when there is an emotional disturbance – "anger," "depths of sadness" and fantasies of "murder, arson…even suicide."[165] The narrating I is notably a reticent figure and her powerful emotions remain non-verbalized and secretive to her families. As a result, they complain via physical symptoms such as stomach pain: "the excruciating pain of my guts twisting up into knots that no doctor in the world could ever uncoil."[166] The stomach thus becomes a vigilant site for her disturbed emotions. She thinks and feels with her stomach and the world wounds her in the stomach. The foregrounding of the stomach as constantly in pain essentially begs the question regarding the connection between this precarious organ and the encrypted famine. Father's words significantly unveil this mysterious link as he understands the daughter's chronic stomach pain as an old, physical complaint of the trauma of the Great Famine. In the words of Father:

> It [painful stomach] is nothing to worry about…something that you were born with. You were lucky enough to come along at the tail end of the famine. But even that graze was hard enough. After going hungry in your mother's belly, your stomach is now trying to get even. You'll never

[164] Ibid. p.33.

[165] Ibid.

[166] Ibid. p.68.

> know what we had put to up with to keep your mother – that is to say, you – from starving.[167]

The stomach hurts because it is resentful and guilty (I will return to the subject of guilt and survival in the last section). This narration returns the question of physical pain to the problem of emotion – the stomach is trying to take revenge. Therefore, we start off with Hong Ying's crisis of emotions as the root of her stomach ailment and we end full circle with the strong emotion of the stomach itself as the cause. This cyclically links the narrator's propensity to melancholy and strong emotions with the pretext of the Great Famine. The daughter's extreme susceptibility to stomach pain also resonates with Mother's chronological pain – "high blood pressure, rheumatism, a damaged hip, and aches and pains all over."[168] Indeed, there seems to be a silent discourse of non-cathartic bodily pain embedded in *The Daughter of Hunger*. This discourse is in essence a chronically traumatic narrative of the encrypted great famine.

Entirely analogous with stomach pain, constipation – another category of stomach ailment delineated by the narrator – is likewise tied to her emotional state. It is "something that always happens when I was troubled, even in childhood."[169] For this reason, I want to suggest both stomach pain and constipation are external signs of emotional disorder such as melancholia. At the heart of the narrator's sensitivity to her gastrointestinal process hides her existential crisis which I have described previously – *a*

[167] Ibid. p.34.

[168] Ibid. p.11.

[169] Ibid. p.120.

ghostly state of stasis and suspension, a heightened sense of being stranded and stuck. In a passing referent, Hong Ying significantly maps the topography of the body onto the topography of the slum. South Bank women, "like the place itself, had persistent drainage problem."[170] In light of this metaphor, I want to argue that constipation is an ailment keenly associated with the repressed memories of the Great Famine. At once a personal and communal ailment, constipation is a historical condition of a fatal blockage. It denotes some internal, invisible, undigested, retained feces, secrets and powerful emotions. These retained feces, secrets, emotions presently cause bodily and community pollution and autointoxication. It is also important to note that constipation, comparable to Freudian hysteria, is a gendered malady of a particular class. The bodies of slum women are the very trash bins of history.

The narrator's almost obsessive preoccupation with stomach ailments is most vividly illustrated in her description of stomach worms. I argue that behind her startlingly repugnant, detailed and intimate engagement with these worms looms the specter of hunger and death.

> Women often discharged parasites in the toilet, and sometimes so many roundworms emerged that they'd form a writhing, glistening, pinkish clump on the floor.[171]

The appearance of clusters of roundworms is interestingly a violent revolt against the economy of hunger – the worms are also known as "slim pickings" since they dwell in

[170] Ibid. p.122.

[171] Ibid. p.121.

the ambiguous territory of the stomach where they were "denied of nutrition" and "would leave to try their luck in the next reincarnation."[172] The narrator goes on recounting what she has witnessed in the public toilet: a ten-year-old girl:

> was squatting over the left-hand pit, when her mouth snapped open, her eyes grew round, and her nostrils flared; her whole face underwent a terrifying change, as a roundworm emerged from her mouth. She screamed and collapsed amid the muck on the floor.[173]

The simultaneity of two bodily changes, the facial distortion and the expulsion of the worm from the mouth, demonstrates that the very horror lies in the *body's loss of control*, that is, when the body becomes its own other in a state of crisis (such as inhabited by an alien thing, possessed by an unknown desire or controlled by unrestrained hunger). The young girl's screaming horror is resonated in the narrator's delineation of her own bodily experience of spitting out a roundworm which "fell squirming to the ground…grey and about a foot in length."[174] It elicited silent terror within the narrator:

> Instead of screaming, I flung the bowl up in the air with such force that it struck an eave…I clamped my eyes shut, squeezing out the pooling tear, and stamped on the worm with all my might.[175]

---

[172] Ibid.

[173] Ibid.

[174] Ibid. p.123.

[175] Ibid.

Modern theory might help us to interpret the possible source of such resonating horror. The roundworm could be understood as an abject figure in a Kristeva's sense as it links and traverses freely within the tripartite structure of the body – stomach, anus and mouth. Through this abject figure, the psychic border between mouth and anus, food and feces, eating and defecating, craving and horror, self and other, inside and outside, that is – the neat dichotomy between life and death – has been subverted. The narrator's horrifying experience of evicting worms is arguably a psychological encounter with death itself. For the abject figure of a stomach worm carries with it a menacing threat of hunger and death. Hong Ying's narrative testifies repeatedly to the abject figure of stomach worms and eventually arrives at a scene that is worthy of our attention. This is a primal scene of death where the link between stomach worms and starvation is made evident:

> Grandmother was skin and bone, for her digestive tract was ravaged by worms, long, flat, colourful things that emerged with her stool…her arms wrapped around her middle, neither sleeping nor able to sit up…her last words were for Mother to bring her starving youngest brother to Chongqing from the countryside, to feed him…[176]

Grandmother's empty stomach hosts and is worn out by the alien creatures. These worms have a certain graphic power in representing the unimaginable ordeal that Grandmother was going through. They are the visual desperation of starvation and embodied manifestations of imminent death.

---

[176] Ibid. p.161.

This section has outlined a ghostly body and a medical body. My reading of the ghostly body attempts to emphasize *the time lag* at the heart of the narrator's existential crisis. She is forever bewitched, hungered and stranded by an old secret before her birth. I also highlighted the centrality of a stomach preoccupation in Hong Ying's sense of her body – a very charged and unhappy stomach indeed. Both bodies, one metaphysical and the other mundane, are coded and ambivalent somatic articulations concerning a central kernel, the enigma of the Great Famine.

*****

Deciphering the familial secret, mourning the mass deaths

A rare tender moment shared by the narrator and Mother occurs when Mother chose a guardian Bodhisattva for her five-year-old daughter in a temple, which was later destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. The narrator recalls kneeling on a straw mat "without so much as looking up, afraid that the arhat that controlled my fate might be pot-bellied or red faced."[177] When she finally looked up with courage, she beheld:

> a statue that seemed to touch the ceiling: benevolent features, merciful expression, generosity suffusing its pale face, silver sword in hand, standing on a golden-maned lion, different from all the others. It was gazing down at me, its eyes clear.[178]

[177] Ibid. p.186.

[178] Ibid. p.187.

Turning her head, her eyes met her mother's most tender gaze she could ever recollect. The guardian Bodhisattva was Manjusri – "Manjusri's sword is a sword of knowledge, the lion the source of intelligence."[179] One question that haunts the narrator concerns Mother's very choice of her protector: Why had the illiterate mother chosen Manjursri to "protect her eighth child – the sixth to survive?"[180] The narrator's attempted answers are of significance:

> Maybe she knew all along that I would spend my life suffering over my yearnings to know…and that a yearning to understand could only add to my troubles and take a heavy toll.[181]

The narrator returns to "the same old question" near the end of the novel:

> Could she have known that I would suffer not only over a need to know things, but by the inability to deliver myself from that which I learned?[182]

At the heart of the narrator's answers is her somber recognition of the root of her suffering: the will to inherit difficult knowledge from the past and the weighty consequences of inheriting such knowledge. This section focuses on this very enigma of knowledge that the narrator has painstakingly tried to decipher. On a personal level, this enigma is a familial secret which has been kept from the narrator. But we must not lose sight of the fact that the familial secret extends beyond the bounds of an

---

[179] Ibid. p.188.

[180] Ibid. p.187.

[181] Ibid. p.188.

[182] Ibid. p.246.

individual's fate. What has been disclosed is the difficult knowledge of an encrypted public history, namely, the mass deaths made by the Great Famine. Surrounding this dark kernel, a story of survival and guilt has been narrated.

The central plot of *The Daughter of Hunger* is a deferred familial secret that has rendered Hong Ying's life narrative fraught with suspicion and anxiety. Hong Ying grew up with a feeling that something was kept from her. She irredeemably identifies with this much guarded and yet heavily present crypt. Her whole narrative is propelled by an authorial desire to decipher this buried familial secret and understand her vulnerable place as a daughter. The youngest and most invisible daughter at home, the narrator is the very symptom of the encrypted secrets of her parents' generation. These undisclosed secrets leak out from the edges of the crypt in forms of phantoms. I wish to draw attention to three sources of gaze that converge in the shaping of the melancholic daughter of the hunger: there is silent, anxious gaze from Father; there is cold, dagger-like gaze from Mother – "I sensed that I was their great disappointment, something that should not have appeared in this world, a puzzle they couldn't solve."[183] And there is the third source of gaze, the phantom gaze. A pair of staring eyes has followed the narrator and brought chills to her spine since childhood:

> More than once I nearly spotted whoever was behind those eyes, but only for a fleeting moment. The man with nondescript features and messy hair never came close enough for me to get a good look at him.[184]

[183] Ibid. p.9.

[184] Ibid. p.2.

We see that reticence and secrecy are the very mode of transmission of knowledge. This mode of transmission has racked Hong Ying with deep feelings of absence (not loss), abandonment, guilt, depression and angst. Following a panting route of knowing, Hong Ying was finally able to decrypt the central familial secret on her eighteenth birthday. In what follows, I first consider the route itself. I understand this route as a most essential process where the narrator not only works through her feelings of guilt but mourns an entire generation of people who were engulfed by the Great Famine. I will then analyze the destination, this much delayed familial secret. I argue that this secret is in essence an encrypted tale of familial survival.

One central haunting question that the narrator recurrently attends to is what had enabled Mother and her to survive the Great Famine.

> The more deeply I probed, the greater the mystery of my ties to the famine. In the years just before my birth, Grandmother, Third Aunt and her husband, First Aunt, and my mother's first husband, all those relatives, were swept away by the famine. But not me. How had I survived?[185]

The crucial point of this narration is that it highlights a complex nexus of survival, luck and moral guilt. A survivor who barely escaped the catastrophe, the narrator is burdened by an inexplicable feeling of guilt. I want to suggest that at the heart of this enigmatic feeling rests the psychic tombs unconsciously built by the survivor for those who did not survive. For a survivor holds a paramount responsibility for the dead. For

[185] Ibid. p.167.

a survivor is indebted to the dead by the very means of living on. The narrator's process of working through her sense of guilt is simultaneously a course of mourning as she empathically discovered, witnessed, worked through and re-membered the dead. This point becomes illuminated in the account of Third Uncle's death. Third Uncle was imprisoned for "having said in a teashop one day that everything was great now that the Communists were in power, except that life had been better for him before Liberation."[186] He was released from the labor-reform camp in 1961 for there was no food to feed the prisoners. His house confiscated, Third Uncle came to Mother for shelter and food. Mother gave him two Yuan and chose not to let him stay. Third Uncle wandered for days before he died in South Bank's public toilet – "filthy, smelly, putrid, a place where, if you weren't careful, you could fall into a pit of excrement."[187] Third Uncle's death – terrible, abnormal and denied a rite of burial – returns to torment the living and elicit immense guilt in them:

> Why did I only give him two Yuan? I had five on me…I was pregnant with you then, I did it for you. So he died, cold and hungry"[188]

Having abandoned Third Uncle to starvation and death, Mother now handed down her paranoiac, unacknowledged and uncompensated guilt to the daughter. The narrator then asks: "Does this mean that I was born laden with guilt?"[189] Guilt here appears to

---

[186] Ibid. p.48.

[187] Ibid. p.51.

[188] Ibid.

[189] Ibid. p.52.

be entirely a different matter. It is not something she commits. It is her very being – *she is always already guilty*. Interestingly, Hong Ying evoked the Christian theology concept of original sin outside the context of *The Daughter of Hunger* when talking about her writing:

> As daughter and mother, I was born with original sin and will pass it on to my daughter. I carry a heavy cross on my back and cannot be saved. [190]

The evocation of 'original sin,' I want to suggest, has implicitly extended guilt beyond a personal level onto the collective and historical. More than a symbol of shameful familial secret, the cross represents the mass deaths brought on by the Great Famine, a burden shouldered by all.

Now let us turn to the much delayed familial secret: At her eighteenth birthday, Hong Ying finds out that she is an illegitimate child Mother had with someone who wasn't her husband during the Great Famine years. The phantom gaze comes from her biological father always attempting glimpses of his daughter in the shadows. This shameful secret is the very answer to the question that has haunted Hong Ying – how her family survived the Great Famine. Mother's adulterous affair stigmatizes her as a "most infamous woman"[191] and raises the very question moral dilemmas that were imposed on women by the Great Famine. Her affair with Sun, Hong Ying's biological father, has caused a familial breakdown – Father's homecoming and shame, the enmity

---

[190] See her blog: <http://blog.cqnews.net/?uid-24913-action-viewspace-itemid-370525>. (last visited April 7, 2011.).

[191] Hong, Ying, *infra note 1*, p.211.

between Mother and Big Sister, the birth of the illegitimate child. Yet beneath the surface of Mother's moral degradation and the consequential familial crisis is a powerful story of survival and hope. We must go outside patriarchal moral codes to understand Mother's choice to outlive the Great Famine. In the worst excesses of the Great Famine, Father was an absent figure who was away on his boat. Mother was the central figure of the household who attended the details of everyday life. Her gendered resourcefulness emerged as a redemptive force that transformed the world of despair into a home. Assertive female sexuality is Mother's currency to remake a home for her children to survive the consuming famine. When finally explaining this unutterable past to her daughter, Mother does not show a hint of regret:

> 'That was at the height of the famine' When she talked about this man, Mother was a different person, a stranger. No longer shrill and impatient, her tone was uncommonly gentle… 'Back in 1961, I didn't know how the family would survive. He supported us, like a messenger from heaven. Whether you want to admit it or not, we owe our survival to that good and decent man.'[192]

This passage shows that Mother sees her illicit affair with Sun as less a moral degradation than a wise choice she had made for the good of her family. With the presence of Sun, there came much needed food:

> [Sun] stole steamed buns from the factory canteen for the kids who had known little but hunger for over two years…Finally, they were given the

[192] Ibid. p.209.

> relief they needed to stave off the sort of maladies that would otherwise affect them for the rest of their lives.[193]

The making of a mundane home, that is, the economy of survival, involves more than a bare exchange between food and sex. There are also *emotional exchanges* in the midst of hunger and deprivation. In addition to foods, Sun also brought music and laughter to the household.[194] Mother's aptitude to transcend moral stricture, resort to her assertive sexuality and recreate a mundane home symbolizes female resilience to the Great Famine. Such female resilience is embodied in Mother's nickname, Henna[195], a type of flower which is not only used to color nails but known for its enduring survivability. Mother's pregnancy with her illegitimate child in the depth of mass starvation becomes a poignant symbol of hope, however guilty, shameful and immoral.

*****

Conclusion: September 21, 1962

I would like to conclude with a juxtaposed reading of the opening passage and ending passage of *The Daughter of Hunger*. The novel begins with the narrator's lament that

---

[193] Ibid. p.207.

[194] Ibid.

[195]小桃红, also known as 指甲花，好儿女花. Hong Ying's most recent autobiographical novel takes her mother's nickname as the book title: 好儿女花.

> No one remembered my birthday:" "I never bring up the subject of my birthday…At first an intentional omission, eventually I truly forgot.[196]

The entire novel could be read as the narrator's cyclical attempt to arrive at this center bereft from her – September 21, 1962. This is a deeply engraved date that marks her traumatic entry into the world – hungry, confused, kept in ignorance and burnt by an unfulfilled desire to know. *But more poignantly, I argue that her birthday is a subtle metaphor alluding to the very abyss of the Great Famine, deeply encrypted, silenced and forgotten.* So remembering and coming to terms with this engraved date entail much more than commemorating a singular date, a personal story. *The Daughter of Hunger* is thus an ambitious work. It has in truth taken on a most formidable and weighty task of commemorating wounds that are much deeper and vaster then personal when the majority of the living remain forgetful and silent.

Such ambition is made most evident in the ending pages of the novel. Let us now follow the narrator's "trembling fingers" that flip through a stack of old newspapers in search of the date of her birthday: September 21, 1962.

> It was a Friday, the Twenty-Third Day of the Eighth Lunar Month, the year of the tiger. The major headline of the day involved nationwide demonstrations in condemnations of the aggression by the American Imperialists, and a celebration over the shooting down of a US U-2 spy plane in the service of Chiang Kai-shek. Chairman Mao personally received the Air Force heroes. There were other panegyrics as well: an improved strain of tobacco had been developed in Yunnan; Jiangxi

[196] Hong, Ying, *infra note 1*, p.1.

> Province reported a bumper harvest in tobacco; my own Sichuan Province provided more than 25,000 draught oxen to areas where there were shortages; the mid-season crop of rice in Guangxi exceeded all predictions.[197]

Interesting to this passage is that her birthday is summoned to bear witness to the profanity of history. The narrator's small physical gesture of trembling is indicative of her intense psychological unsettlement. She is perhaps abhorred by the obscenity of these congratulatory words, or their very violence in consuming lives, or their continuing effect in shaping the public consciousness and enforcing collective amnesia. Yet somewhere in between her trembling fingers and the presence of the printed, congratulatory words, the deathly figures of the famished quietly take their ghostly shapes. And the trembling fingers are there to receive them and console them.

[197] Ibid. p.275.

4
Envisioning a Future by Other Means: Zhang Xiaogang's 'Bloodline: Big Family'

> Immersed in rapid development, Chinese people today lack a certain ability of self-reflection. They hold nihilistic and irresponsible attitudes towards history and future…Art for me today is merely an action of self-redemption.
>
> –Zhang Xiaogang[198]

> I don't like the word 'nostalgia.' I only repetitively return to the past to see. It is a place where I linger and reflect, a place that bears the most painful imprints but nevertheless determines the direction of my future.
>
> –Zhang Xiaogang[199]

> The genuine conception of historical time rests entirely on the image of redemption.
>
> –Water Benjamin[200]

The silence of the official historiography on China's recent catastrophe, the Cultural Revolution, dialectically speaks to the twisted nature of the future embraced by contemporary China. A mirage founded on amnesia, an enterprise haunted by its own ghosts, it is a future already gone stale.

The great sense of destruction and loss that attended the Cultural Revolution is diverted in a form of *transference* - the celebrated miracle of economic achievement, the newly found faith in development and the fervent gaze oriented towards the future. China time and again is sunken into a dangerous illusion of omnipotence: the icon of

---

[198] All quotations of Zhang Xiaogang are taken from their Chinese texts and have been translated by me. Zhang, Xiaogang. The Strength Within [内心的力量]. *Chinese Oil Painting [中国油画]*. Feb. 2008: 7-8.

[199]Ju, Baiyu and Yangang Li. "The Person Who Travels Against Time [时间的逆行者]." *MING(Attitude) [明日风尚(生活态度)]*. Jan. 2007: 20-21.

[200]Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*, quoting from Lotze, Mikrokosmos.

Mao is only swiftly substituted with that of the *Money/Market*. The content has been replaced; the form remains the same. Oblivious of his own constitutional grief,[201] the wounded ego maintains its function in this perverse repetition and thereby traverses the perceived danger of sinking into melancholia. Indeed, with the narcotic effect of transference, the great burden of facing the abyss of history has been temporarily lifted. Yet the trauma of Mao regime and the pain of its dramatic shattering still lurk in the deep memory of the Chinese psyche, waiting to be fully registered and worked through. The unhealed wound continues to fester and the unredeemed loss tenaciously haunts the present. The forced disappearance of the ruins of the Cultural Revolution return cryptically and cast a long shadow in this new shimmering world.

This chapter begins my meditation on the poetic afterlives of the Cultural Revolution with the Chinese artist Zhang Xiaogang's work 'Bloodlines: Big Family' series. Born in Kunming, China in 1958, Zhang Xiaogang moved with his parents and three older brothers to Chengdu where his parents both worked as government officials.[202] Zhang, a child during the Cultural Revolution, witnessed firsthand the impact of High Maoism on his family, his parents having been sent to a study camp. As

---

[201]Drawing on Schiller and Butler, David Lloyd addresses in his essay, "Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recovery? Mourning the Irish Famine," *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 2.2 (July 2000): 212-228, the aesthetic formation of the subject in the very loss of his potentiality. I want to emphasize here not only the grief of forgoing certain potentialities in the subject's very formation, but more importantly, the kind of grief stemming from the violence of non-registration, intentional disavowal, and purposeful forgetfulness of trauma in the *reconstitution* of the subject.

[202] Biographical information in this section, including quotations, comes from Zhang Xiaogang's artist profile and biography unless otherwise noted.
<http://www.artzinechina.com/display_vol_aid272_en.html>.

was common then, Zhang, himself, was sent to the countryside for reeducation in the mid 1970s.

Not long after the Cultural Revolution had ended, college entrance exams were reinstated and Zhang Xiaogang applied to study art. In 1978, he enrolled in the oil painting department at the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts in Chongqing, graduating in 1982. Of this time, Zhang has said: "By the time I graduated I had become a lot different from my classmates. I felt lonely during the studies because almost no one understood me." Upon graduation, Zhang failed to obtain a teaching post at his school and returned home to live with his parents.

Zhang continued to paint but with limited success. He decided to change his style radically in 1992, returning to realist painting and incorporating photographic qualities, after having traveled to Europe. He saw a powerful connection between European culture and art and wanted to incorporate Chinese culture in the style and themes of his art rather than copy foreign culture. It was at this same time that he was approached by Johnson Chang, a Hong Kong gallery owner, who purchased all of Zhang's available paintings and asked that he produce more. Zhang wrote to Chang, explaining that he had decided to alter his style to which Chang had no objections. "I was worried. So I wrote a long letter to him telling him I was going to change my style. Then he wrote back and said, 'I like you as a person. So I think it's ok.'"

Zhang started working on his series "Bloodlines: Big Family" in 1993 after having discovered some family photos from the Cultural Revolution era in his home. Chang took Zhang's paintings to the 1995 Venice Biennale with the work of other Chinese

artists that include Wang Guangyi, Fang Lijun, Liu Wei and Li Shan. From this year on, Zhang's paintings have grown exponentially in demand. At auction, his paintings, which sold for around $40,000 in the early 2000s, several paintings commanded over $500,000 by 2006, and one sold for $2.3 million in 2007. In April 2011, Zhang broke the record for auction price for a Chinese contemporary artist when his 1988 work, Forever Lasting Love, sold for over $10 million.[203]

Zhang's work presents itself as an enormous contribution to the understanding of the traumatic entanglement between past, present and future – a daunting task that China has yet to face. The artist is notably a melancholic figure[204] who persistently turns his face towards the past, roams mindfully across the ruins and shows his extraordinary 'gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past.'[205] According to Zhang Xiaogang, art is an event of self-redemption. The redemptive hope significantly lies in the overcoming of forgetfulness through the very medium of his aesthetic utterance. An alternative future is still possible on the horizon: a future that resists being equated with the Market and is intimately linked with working through the traumatic losses in history.

Before turning to Zhang Xiaogang's haunting images of the Bloodline series, it is necessary to account for a larger sociopolitical phenomenon – the conservative nostalgia

---

[203] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-12954871>. 79m Hong Kong dollars (£6.3m).

[204] Connected with the extreme disillusionment with History, melancholia bears within it a revelatory significance.

[205] Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History" *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Schocken Books: New York, 2007. 253-64, 255.

towards Mao time that China has witnessed since the early 1990s. From the late 1970s to the early and mid 1980s, the iconic imagery from the Cultural Revolution disappeared for ethical reasons: its complicity with the great damage done during the Cultural Revolution. Since the late 1980s, however, China has witnessed an emergence of a new discourse on the Cultural Revolution: indulging in icons, themes, music, style of dances from the Cultural Revolution, this new trend of popular memory is charged fully with nostalgia and indicates a continued fascination with high Maoism.[206] A powerful 'Mao Zedong Re' (Mao Zedong Fever) swept through China in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The cult of Mao was all at once revived: Mao badges re-emerged on the chests of some people; Mao posters, portraits and the Little Red Book became exceedingly popular; Karaoke bars witnessed a renewed popularity of songs from the Cultural Revolution in Praise of Mao, such as "the Red Sun." After almost a decade since his empire has been shattered, the cult-like relation that people maintained with Mao – the crucial source of the historical violence – has not been fully severed. And the invocation of Mao is still tinged with a religious aura and a psychological hold. For instance, taxi drivers across China at the time would hang a portrait of Mao from their rear view mirror as a good luck charm. In the late 1990s, the Mao fever – which is in truth not only a massive denial of the historical violence but a sustained fantasy that led

[206] This phenomenon has generated a plethora of scholarly works, the majority of which, however, have attempted to map out an alternative cartography of the Cultural Revolution – one more diverse and even vibrant. I find this scholarly trend deeply troubling. Ma Yue's dissertation, for example, claims to "detraumatize the Cultural Revolution" as if it is ethically responsible, as if the traumatic impact of the Cultural Revolution has been fully worked through and as if the wounds in time have been healed. See Ma, Yue. *Dissertation: The catastrophe remembered by the non-traumatic: Counternarratives on the Cultural Revolution in Chinese literature of the 1990s*. AAT 3150688. The University of Texas at Austin, 2004.

to the historical violence initially – took a new and curious turn: various relics from the Cultural Revolution, including a large number of Mao badges and copies of Mao's Little Red Book, entered into markets and became highly profitable. Mao seems to have been integrated into the economy of commodity sign. Bearing this complex social phenomenon of Mao Fever in mind, I now wish to turn to Zhang Xiaogang's series of paintings which emits a different aura regarding the past.

*****

Discovering an alternative icon from the past: family photos stranded in time

Casting his eyes fixedly onto the ruins of the past, Zhang Xiaogang's art is melancholic par excellence. His art is a powerful moral critique of the cultural and political landscape of contemporary China today, which is beset by a curious symbiosis of forgetfulness and lingering nostalgia for a lost Mao empire. His most renowned work- 'Bloodlines: Big Family'- invokes a different kind of icon from the Cultural Revolution - black and white family photos. The question emerges: What is the significance of the invocation of family photos as an alternative icon – as opposed to the icons of revolutionary soldiers, workers and peasants? I maintain that this alternative icon offers an aesthetic space for the artist to delve into a private sphere obliterated during the Cultural Revolution. But more importantly, familial narrative as an alternative icon ultimately links the personal trauma with the collective trauma and possibly a public commemoration of a dark history.

On a personal level, the artist is a haunted man hampered by an unresolved past. During an interview with CNN, Zhang was asked what his art says about the world in

which we live. Zhang claimed that his work mainly reflects his childhood and teenage memories.[207] Growing up during of the political hysteria of the Cultural Revolution[208], his childhood was nightmarish and confused. As he recalls: "Almost every night during the Cultural Revolution, people came to our house and asked my mother and father what they did wrong. They would be questioned. So I knew something was wrong."[209] Zhang's childhood memory thus essentially revolves around *a crumbling family*: the displacement of his parents to the 'study camp' in the countryside, the aggravation of his beloved mother's schizophrenia,[210] as well as a devastating sense of alienation between the father and son that has lasted long after the Cultural Revolution.[211] The alternative icon – the family photos – thus became a critical tool with which the artist works through his own traumatic childhood. Indeed, Zhang's inspiration of his 'Bloodlines: Big family' series began with no more than a handful of family photographs. During a trip to his parents' home in 1993, Zhang Xiaogang accidentally found something illuminating to his own unresolved past – a collection of

---

[207] "Interview with Zhang Xiaogang." Talk Asia. 2007. CNN.com. May 2010 <http://edition.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/asiapcf/07/19/talkasia.zhang.script/index.html>.

[208] He was eight years old when the Cultural Revolution took place.

[209] Barboza, DavIbid. "The Rise of Zhang Xiaogang." 2008. Artzinechina, Inc. May 2010 <http://www.artzinechina.com/display_vol_aid272_en.html>.

[210] For a brief discussion of the significance of his mother's illness to Zhang's art, see Barboza, DavIbid. "The Rise of Zhang Xiaogang." 2008. Artzinechina, Inc. May 2010 <http://www.artzinechina.com/display_vol_aid272_en.html>.

[211] My knowledge of Zhang's alienation from his father is based on the following sources:

Yang, Lan. "Zhang Xiaogang: Why Do I Paint [张晓刚: 我为什么画画]." *Digest [书摘]*. 8 (2008): 30-33; He, He. "Zhang Xiaogang: Hidden Man in the Painting World [张晓刚: 画坛套中人]." *Beatles [甲壳虫]*. 1(2009): 98-99.

old family photos from the Cultural Revolution. These familial images have transfixed him and haunted his canvases ever since. Zhang's discovery of the family photos is significantly an unexpected/traumatic encounter in time. These photos had been sealed up in deep memories, obscured in dust and laid quietly in the dark corner of the family desk drawer. They rested in *a state of latency* until Zhang *recognized* them and later on *reenacted* them in his painterly vocabulary. It is reasonable to infer that at some point in his childhood, Zhang must have seen them and therefore was not unfamiliar with their codes and moods, with the young faces of his parents. Yet in his encounter with them as an adult, these familial images still held an uncanny power to shock him, pierce him through, call upon him and whisper something mysterious and incomprehensible as if being seen for the very first time. In this light, these old family photos become a significant metaphor of Freudian notion of trauma - stranded in time in latency until being reenacted, worked through, and integrated.

The discovery of the family photos as an alternative icon is more than a private engagement aiding personal memories. It is also a critical key with which the artist opens the heavy door into the abyss of history, a chip of a microcosm that nevertheless illuminates and leads to a macrocosm. In contrast with the iconography invested by Mao propaganda, family photos enable the artist to bring into light a different face of Mao's empire: a deeply scarred kingdom with ruins upon ruins. What has Zhang seen in these old family photos, one wonders? His parents as an amorous young couple freed from the cruelty of time? He himself as a child resting safely in his mother's arms? An intimate family gathering? What he sees is a physical illusion of familial intimacy

which cannot conceal the damage that has gnawed into the bones of the family structure. What he sees in truth is a violent historical time when family structure was torn apart, family ties severed and familial relations alienated. What he sees is a shadowy presence of living ghosts stranded in time, a family erased and made by violence, a catastrophe of history indeed. Rather than signifying a sense of personal continuity or rupture through space and time, the family photos from the Cultural Revolution raise the specter of the collective crime, the recurrence of violence. That is why in Zhang's aesthetic utterance a cold light often pierces through the heart of these family icons and a gloomy aura envelopes them tightly. Revolutionary colors in vibrant yellow and red are completely worn out in his familial narrative as they appear in disturbing traces, off-toned and phantomlike. His haunted/haunting images of family portraits delineate new realities of the past and create new viewing habits that are not only affectively responsive but ethically responsible. Indeed, invoking family photos as an alternative icon from the past, Zhang exposes them as a stranded site of historical trauma, a conflictive psychological state, a tangled image of history where one works through confusion, loss and trauma.

Figure 4.1 – A typical Cultural Revolution era family photograph.

*****

From photo to painting: a tripartite structure

Zhang Xiaogang's 'Bloodlines: Big Family' is by no means a pale copy of the old family photos from the Cultural Revolution. In this section, I will illustrate that, from photo to painting, 'Bloodlines: Big Family' is a unique work of creation with a tripartite structure – simultaneously aesthetic, philosophical and ethical. And these three dimensions are intricately interconnected and inseparable as one entity. First and foremost, Zhang's art is an aesthetic of arresting traumatic traces submerged beneath the appearance. A replica of the old family portraits at first glance, 'Bloodlines: Big Family', however, goes beyond the immediacy of its referent, detaches itself as art and attains its aesthetic criticality by exposing traumatic traces from within. Second, primarily philosophical – it posits as an epistemological vantage in revealing new realities and thereby challenging the original. Last, the ethical dimension, namely, the introduction of the traumatic images that have survived the Cultural Revolution into public consciousness and the cultivation in the viewer of a sense of solidarity and empathy in a post-traumatic context.

From photo to painting, 'Bloodlines: Big Family' is not a passive mimesis of the old family photos. It is a dynamic one as it transcends its model, arrests traces as yet hidden beneath the surface of these photos and brings forth an unseen world of trauma. The aesthetic unique to Zhang's art thus brings our attention to the central kernel within the theories of mimesis since the time of Plato, i.e., whether mimesis sheds light on the mere appearance or essence of reality, whether mimesis brings us closer to truth.

Plato famously holds a negative understanding of mimesis – our world of becoming is but a *shadowy imitation* (mimesis) of the world of being. The work of art, such as poetry, is identified by him as an unreliable source of truth – an imitation of an imitation that diverges further away from truth. The question emerges: in the logic of Plato, is 'Bloodlines: Big Family' then a shadow of a shadow, twice removed from the essence of history? I argue just the opposite. Following the tradition of a more dynamic understanding of mimesis,[212] I maintain that Zhang's painting is not a surface imitation of a shadowy and static picture of history. A work of art created by a thinking consciousness, 'Bloodlines: Big Family' is essentially a mediated cognition of history – it actively and critically appropriates its model and expresses a hidden reality, i.e., the traumatic forces of history that undergirds all its surface manifestations.[213] If Zhang has

---

[212] Indeed, history has hitherto seen more dynamic notions on mimetic approach to reality since Plato. His student Aristotle converted Plato's negative understanding of mimesis into a powerful approach in creating tragic poetry that in fact grasps the essence of reality and brings us closer to truth/the world of being. Drawing on Marxist theory on superstructure and base-structure, Lukács, for instance, develops a dialectical notion of realism, one that goes beyond the surface picture/appearance of reality (superstructure) and delves into its material condition/essence (base-structure). Lothar Ledderose, for example, distinguishes two kinds of mimesis defining the difference between Western and Chinese tradition – that imitates the appearance/look of nature vs. that imitates the essence/principle of nature. See Ledderose, Lothar. *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art*. Princeton University Press: New Jersey, 2000.

[213] Hegel has also reworked Plato's negative understanding of mimesis in the work of art. He elevates the work of art above the external phenomena of nature and unites it with ultimate truth. According to Hegel, only through the mind and hands of man, through human acts of art, does nature divulge its secrets (within a similar line of thought, one could argue that only through Zhang's active appropriation do these old photos divulge their secrets). For although a finite creature, man is a thinking consciousness endowed with an aura of divinity. Notably, Hegel is still very much bound to the specter of Plato's Form (the divine realm) as man's work is seen by him as an effective medium through which the divine Ideal materializes. In other words, for Hegel, the ultimate source of art comes from on high. For the purpose of my dissertation, I follow Hegel's view on the close relation between the work of art and revelation of a hidden truth. Yet I see that the ultimate source of creative process comes from internal unconsciousness/consciousness, specifically trauma in Zhang's case, rather than from the external realm of the divine. That is to say, 'Bloodlines: Big Family' not only imitates something external – a segment of traumatic history – but also encapsulates the inner workings of psyche.

indeed recognized in these old family photos an ineffable reality, *a stranded world of trauma*, as I have suggested in the previous section, it is through the aesthetic process of dynamic mimesis by which he translates, expresses, illuminates, mourns and thereby rescues the unseen world from the stranded state of immobility, from the forgetfulness of time described by Benjamin as homogeneous and empty.[214] The dynamic process of mimesis affirms at once resemblance and difference. It lifted the familiar traces of the familial images from the still realm of photograph toward a poetic edge, a strange threshold, an unfamiliar abyss. The banal tonality of an old family photo from the era of the Cultural Revolution easily found in any Chinese family albums is replaced by majestic melancholia. These haunting images posit as a dangerous and yet seductive invitation, calling its viewer away from the narcotic and everyday rhythm of life into an abyss where trauma splits open. Meanwhile it is crucial to emphasize that the prevailing sense of melancholia in Zhang's paintings, however, does not delineate a world of trauma that is trans-historical – timeless or spaceless. In other words, the particularity of the historical catastrophe – the Cultural Revolution – is not dispersed or displaced into a non-referential abyss of mystification. The two modes of trauma, historical trauma and structural trauma, were first theorized by Dominick LaCapra in his important essay, "Trauma, Absence and Loss." While situating structural trauma on a transhistorical level in regard to a constitutive absence of subjectivity, LaCapra emphasizes the specificity of historical trauma and its *real* loss. In turn, LaCapra has

[214] Benjamin, Walter, *infra* note 6, p. 261.

warned against the prevalent academic tendencies of conflating the two. One of the practices, says LaCapra, is to avoid addressing historical traumas in favor of "a generalized discourse of absence."[215] Zhang's art, in this light, does not collapse particular historical losses into structural trauma commonly seen in a post-traumatic cultural context. The referent of 'Bloodlines: Big Family' is by no means cryptic. And the signifier is by no means freed from its referent – the historically lived and conditioned social realities.[216] Mao uniforms, Little Red Books, the Red Guards' school bags – all these details allude to the temporal space of Mao-era China. Thus the old family photos from the Cultural Revolution remain simultaneously a stable historical referent (the conscious and historical aspect of Zhang's art) as well as an eruptive traumatic memory (the unconscious and psychological aspect of Zhang's art). In other words, the aesthetics of 'Bloodlines: Big Family' is characterized by a unique integration between an unambiguous historical reference on the one hand and surrealistic repetitions of haunted images of dismay on the other. There is an eerie balance/conflict between familiarity and estrangement. On one hand, Zhang's paintings are utterly familiar. Drawn from the old family photos, the images convey a familial look that invites personal identification – faces that are characteristically Chinese in their impeccable and identical Mao suits indicating unambiguously the specificity of the time: these faces are recognizable as any of us. On the other hand, it is uncannily unfamiliar.

---

[215] LaCapra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

[216] Referring back to footnote 18 on Hegel, 'Bloodlines: Big family' shows that aesthetics is not a self-closed metaphysical field. Rather, it is a field inseparable from the materialistic and historical reality and socially formed and conditioned human psyche.

The look affiliated with affective family routine and embedded in familiar icons from Mao's time has been provocatively estranged, hollowed out, articulating a different look, a traumatic visual domain. Thus, the familiar traces of the faces from the old photos only half survived in their referential meaning – father, mother…Mao's time.

The aesthetic dimension of 'Bloodlines: Big Family' – the dynamic mimesis that mediates and transforms its model, arrests traumatic traces beneath the surface of its referent – leads to the second aspect, the philosophical arena, which I wish to stress in Zhang's paintings. The aesthetic dimension simultaneously posits as an *epistemological* vantage point of bringing forth traumatic knowledge/other visions that challenge its immediate referent. As I have argued earlier, when seen in the old family photos, the figures of family members are passive materials that engender too easily an identification still enmeshed in a familial/familiar look. The eye is veiled by habits, obscured by automatism and old knowledge. We recognize instantly the *appearances* of these old family photos from Mao time as we have seen them during all our lives. Unsurprisingly objects of identification, the tenderness and familiarity we found in these images blind us from a certain tension which is powerfully present in Zhang's paintings. However, when seen on Zhang's canvases, the familiar figures of family members morph into unknown, uncanny and unfamiliar faces, as if being witnessed for the first time. They have a presence that is able to unsettle the viewer's mental disposition. In this aesthetic process of estrangement and collision, the curtain over the eyes quietly lifts, a traumatic image of history rushes in, the *perception* of reality has been changed and old knowledge has been transformed. Significantly, the old family

photos, an intimate and affective visual field of familial ties that supposedly articulate continuity through space and time, are converted into a traumatic landscape of ruins, a commemorative plaque for the innumerable victims of the Cultural Revolution. Reincarnated in Zhang's canvases, the figures of the family members lost their former qualities in the old photos – flat, fixed, stable and static. They acquire instead a ghostly existence beneath their calm and composed surfaces – animated, elusive and eruptive in time and space. They haunt presently and bequeath bits and pieces of knowledge of an ineffable history. Indeed, epistemologically speaking, 'Bloodlines: Big Family' does not bequeath knowledge in a transparent or direct manner. It leaks only *traces* of an unseen world of trauma. The object of knowledge here is thus analogous to that of unconscious – mysterious and yet accessible via symptomatic traces.[217]

I have so far focused on the work of art itself from two perspectives – one purely aesthetic and the other, primarily philosophical. I explored the creative process, the nature of mimesis, and viewed Zhang's work as a mirror of not a surface reality but of something profound which brings us closer to the traumatic core of history. I have also

---

[217]Cultural theory of trauma becomes increasingly suspicious when it comes to the knowledge of trauma. Claude Lanzmann, for instance, famously said that "there is an absolute obscenity in the very project of understanding." His film *Shoah* can be read as an attempt to show that the Holocaust is a radical rupture in the continuum of history that precludes the possibility of knowledge. And culture's attempt to integrate the traumatic residues through cognition is not only epistemologically unfeasible but ethically appalling. It is doomed to be a ruthless distortion of the original event and distills the horror of it. I find his flat out refusal to understand the extraordinary entailed in shoah is problematic. First, in doing so, Lanzmann has unwittingly assigned a sacred significance to shoah and defined it as unique in the repertoire of extreme violence in human history. Secondly, although post traumatic response is never complete - something leftover is incompatible with knowledge – it is nevertheless important and indeed ethically responsible to seek knowledge of trauma and work through its ruins, as many trauma theorists have suggested so. See Lanzmann, Claude. "The Obscenity of Understanding: And Evening with Claude Lanzmann." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. 200-20.

argued that in unveiling a different face of history, 'Bloodlines: Big Family' ultimately challenges our established knowledge of history and produces new forms of knowledge that are incomplete, elliptical and discontinuous. In the remaining space of this section, I wish to divert my attention from the work of art itself as it is by no means a self-enclosed artifact. I will look at the implied ethical dimension of the 'Bloodlines: Big Family,' i.e., the *impact* of the work on its viewer. The ethical dimension of 'Bloodlines: Big Family' lies in that the new forms of knowledge bestowed calls upon its viewer to take action on moral convictions, to answer an ethical duty and to work through the disavowed ruins of the historical trauma. In her useful and important introduction for *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Post-Freudian trauma theorist Cathy Caruth writes about a desired departure within trauma –

> [T]he history of a trauma, in its inherent belatedness, can only take place through the listening of another. The meaning of the trauma's address beyond itself concerns, indeed, not only individual isolation but a wider historical isolation that, in our time, is communicated on the level of our cultures.[218]

In this vein, if we take 'Bloodlines: Big Family' as "the history of a trauma" – the Cultural Revolution – in its belatedness, we may conclude that this aesthetic site of crisis nevertheless articulates a vague hope of redemption dimly oriented toward the future as it looks for an addressee beyond its confinement. Indeed, the traumatic

---

[218] Caruth, Cathy. "Trauma and Experience: Introduction." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. p.11.

content of 'Bloodlines: Big Family' is not just some passive, insulated or lifeless material. It is animated by an inherent desire for an unveiled, untruncated, full human gaze. It traverses beyond its site of isolation and entertains an *intersubjective* intimacy with its entailed viewer who now takes on a difficult and weighty historical task of witnessing, of listening. The enigma of trauma imports in: it shocks, confuses, unsettles, brings upon moral distress, generates new perceptions and programs the viewer to new sociopolitical horizons. The lost, disavowed, or suppressed image of historical violence/trauma is in turn reclaimed. Consequently, the viewer awakes from the comforting illusion of a linear distance from the dead and regains her power to empathize in solidarity with victims stranded in time. As the melancholic aspects of the family figures fuse their existential crisis to hers, she realizes she is one of them. She feels a sympathetic vibration between herself and them. She remembers her responsibility to history, reaffirms the idea of justice and further takes meaningful actions of working through the mountain-high ruins which have been hitherto neglected. It should be made clear that the viewer I have in mind here is primarily limited to the Chinese viewer who experienced the Cultural Revolution first handedly as well as her children and grandchildren born after the Cultural Revolution who are nevertheless unable to escape this shadowy period of Chinese history. Zhang's aesthetics has the potential power to speak to the collective unconscious of Chinese with regard to the repressed, disavowed or unregistered memories of the Cultural Revolution. Empathy, in this light, is oriented internally rather than externally. That is to say, the viewing process is by no means an ambiguous process of transference of

trauma, or consumption of trauma as, say, in the case of a western viewer. Rather, it is essentially an ongoing process of self-awakening, of seeing and knowing a living history extending from the past.

*****

Featuring ghost: the seer and his vision

In his dialogue with the Chinese poet, Ouyang Jianghe, Zhang Xiaogang affectively portraits himself as a ghost. He says,

> I have to separate…I have to disintegrate the Zhang Xiaogang in life and the Zhang Xiaogang as a ghost. When I paint, I am a ghost…. If my ghostly air has not invaded me, I do not paint.[219]

Here one easily detects key words indicative of trauma such as 'separation,' 'invasion,' 'disintegration,' and 'ghost.' For Zhang, the work of art is a traumatic matter and its process of becoming follows a ghostly trail. It is significant that Zhang does not portray himself as a full ghost. As if at a crossroad, he is a semi-ghost, half living and half dead. The crossroad that this semi-ghost lingers around is a threshold between an alluring future into which China hastily marches and a submerged, shadowy, mysterious past. The necessity for Zhang to separate and distinguish himself becomes clear – one can infer that the disintegration of the body comes from the disintegration of the vision. The artist is torn between two fields of visions: the eye that is continuously subjected to the tyranny of a linear time and interpellated to look forward vis-à-vis that other eye,

[219] "Zhang Xiaogang's Dialogue with Ouyang Jianghe [张晓刚与欧阳江河对谈]." 2009. ArtsBj.com [北京文艺网]. May 2010 < http://www.artsbj.com/Html/interview/wyft/msj/95118_6.html>. (my translation).

which follows ghosts, directs its gaze backward, bears witness to the unattended ruins, mourns and weeps. At the heart of 'Bloodlines: Big Family' series is the elucidation of that other vision of history, laid in ruins, accessible only through that other eye – the ghostly eye. Hence the artist waits for the ghost air to invade him, that is to say, to fully possess him, to inspire him and grant him a pair of ghostly eyes. Consequently, it is not surprising that the work of art by a ghost painter accordingly assumes an uncanny glimmer.

Indeed, 'Bloodlines: Big Family' series is enveloped in an enigma. The series neither seems to arise from conventional memories nor is it willing to fade into a bound state. With each painting, disconcerting images of a family flash up via cycles of repetition onto which one can throw no immediate or transparent light. The artist Zhang Xiaogang has tellingly described this series as dreamlike, a dream image, and a dream scene on numerous occasions.[220] 'Bloodlines: Big Family' series calls to mind the Freudian notion of trauma. It is unmistakably symptomatic of an ineffable trauma. For Freud, the notion of trauma begins with his confusion and investigation into the returning traumatic dream of the neurotic soldiers who are possessed by an image from the past. Significantly, 'Bloodlines: Big Family' is essentially a haunting repetition of the same intrusive, dreamlike image: a gravely perturbed family unmistakably from Mao's time. Solemn looking family members – father, mother, son and daughter – in different combinations, sit uneasily together, alienated, yet all the same connected by a

[220] See for example, "Interview," *infra* note 14.

faint, almost invisible thread-like red line (a monumentally important theme which I will attend to in a later section). Immersed in a vast expanse of grey hues, the recurrent images of the same family unfailingly convey a compelling sense of *trauma* as if the family has either been swallowed alive by a suffocating nightmare or gripped tightly by death itself. It is no longer a family per se but an unresolved *history* to which the family falls prey. It is no longer a series of old family portraits per se but an unkempt pile of unfathomable problems which have spilled beyond the threshold of the past and down to Zhang's canvases. In light of the Freudian notion of trauma, 'Bloodlines: Big Family' series is above all a traumatic return of a shattered family, a totalitarian regime laid in ruins. Such a return is made possible not so much by owned knowledge of history, but by an enigmatic and intrusive image out of the continuum of history.

An urgent question to ask at this juncture is whether such dark images enabled by a ghostly vision are a regressive pause, a passive immersion in an unredeemable past. Trauma theory informs us the recurrent and intrusive image from the past is more than a passive repetition. I shall turn to Freud to highlight the *functionality* of the repetition in trauma. When addressing war neurosis in his seminal essay, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," Freud makes it clear that repetition is a *necessary stage* to develop preparedness of the mental apparatus retrospectively in an attempt to master the trauma. In other words, repetition is a process of working through the damage, of recuperating the appropriate affect of anxiety, the lack of which is the cause of trauma in the first place. That is to say, repetition is not a passive or naïve experience. It is essentially a creative act in itself. This becomes clearer when Freud implicitly draws a

parallel between the traumatic dreams of the neurotic soldiers to the fort/da game *played* by his one and half year old grandson. The trauma – the absence of the mother – brings forth an artistic endeavor from the child. His creative response to trauma empowers him to survive the loss of the mother. Significantly, mourning assumes a form of play. Zhang Xiaogang's 'Bloodlines: Big Family' series – the repetition of the same haunting/haunted image – serves as a fine example of the creative response trauma requires. As I have argued in a previous section, from photo to painting, Zhang shuns away from the immediate image from the Cultural Revolution, fearing too easy an identification, habitual blindness and psychic numbing. He resorts to dynamic mimesis, transforms the original materials and creates an aesthetic of aporia which is at once familiar and strange. Indeed, more than being simply possessed by a dark past, the artist awaits the manifestation of the ghost in him and addresses it. His ghostly existence – the obsessive play with the traumatic image from the past – enables him to confront the horror and thereof develop the appropriate affect. It is essentially a process of working through the unbidden/traumatic contents of the overwhelming events of the Cultural Revolution. In this light, turning one's head toward the past and living with ghosts are a critical act rather than a passive and regressive suspension. For an attentive, dedicated look towards a violent past simultaneously means a genuine look into the future – a more dynamic, livable future. Now it would be naïve, even perverse, to say this future is thoroughly free from the guilt of history and the burdens from the past. Yet at least one can say that, with the necessary process of working through the untended ruins from the past, there will be fewer nameless ghosts and the

future will be less haunted. Trauma then is charged with a dialectical force. Its symptom – the seemingly passive repetition of an intrusive image from the past functions as dim light to guide the stranded and nameless ghost into daylight and possibly a redeemed future.

*****

Traumatic illumination

Zhang Xiaogang's total absorption in the traumatic image from the past brings to mind a similar fascination delineated famously by Benjamin, to which I have already alluded in the introduction: the angle of history is magically preoccupied and appalled by a specific image of history – "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage."[221] The haunting image in Zhang's canvases and Benjamin's image-laden delineation of the angle of history are mutually illuminating. The juxtaposition of the two images will form an imaginative space to contemplate the impact of violence traversing time and space. A combined reading of these two images will illustrate not only what the angel of history can say about the image of the traumatized family, but also what the image of the perturbed family from the Cultural Revolution can say about the angel of history. On one hand, I maintain that Zhang's image of trauma helps to reveal an intimate link between Benjamin's reflections on history and the Freudian notion of trauma. On the other hand, a combined reading will hopefully bring into light an affinity between Benjamin's notion of profane illumination and what I call

[221] Benjamin, infra note 6, p. 257.

traumatic illumination. That is to say, the angel and his vision help to shed light on the repetitive image of a haunted/haunting family by way of linking it to a weak messianic power in a state of emergency – a counter-striving force in defiance of history's perverse progress.

My initial task here is to demonstrate that Benjamin's often-quoted passage on the angel of history is in truth immersed in a landscape of trauma. I wish to accomplish this task through two avenues: first by looking closely at the famous seer of a single catastrophe – the angel of history, and second, by focusing on the meaning of image through which both trauma theory and Benjamin's key reflections on history have been conceived. The angel is in a difficult position analogous to that of the artist Zhang Xiaogang; he is similarly distracted at a crossroad where a ghostly vision has suddenly appeared. Standing at the threshold between a past and a future, the angel is likewise torn between two selves. While his spread wings speak to an existence oriented toward future, his lingering eyes address a contradictory form of existence oriented toward past – a ghost life. Similar to Zhang Xiaogang who is haunted by an intrusive image from the past, Benjamin's angel is equally a traumatized figure possessed by a dark vision of history. Even a precursory glance will divulge that the angel of history is paralyzed in a state of great shock, which has been explicitly associated with trauma by Freud in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." What the angle beholds is a ghostly vision, a powerful stimulus, a deeply traumatic image that has apparently flooded his peace of mind. The angel is transfixed in a standstill. His staring eyes, his wide-open mouth and his half spread wings caught in the storm of progress are visual signs of trauma's affecting,

disorienting and lingering presence. Having discerned resemblance between the two seers, I will now turn to the significance of *image* to further elucidate the link between trauma and Benjamin's thinking. Interestingly, Benjamin's key reflections on history – its perverse progress, its state of emergency, its messianic hope of redemption – are most vividly and lucidly encapsulated in the very *image of the catastrophe* accessible through the horrified gaze of a seer – the angle of history. An interesting parallel can be detected in the Freudian notion of trauma which, as I have mentioned earlier, begins with Freud's puzzlement and investigation into the *intrusive and recurrent image* seen by neurotic soldiers. In both visual contexts, a tension of a similar nature is compellingly present. In the case of the Freudian notion of trauma, it is a devastating disconnection between conventional memory and the literal returns of traumatic images/perceptions that cannot be made meaningful or coherent by conventional memory. Indicative of that between the realms of consciousness and unconscious, the tension between conventional memory and traumatic memory seems to be irresolvable. While the conventional memory strives to integrate traumatic memory traces into its bound state, the memory traces constantly flash up in traumatic images to disrupt this bound state and to further reveal its oppressive structure. A successful integration of traumatic content into consciousness often times suggests the psychic manipulation of forgetting or a deceitful makeover of a traumatic truth. Take a case history of treatment for trauma for example.[222] A patient named Mme. D was afflicted by the traumatic event of

[222]Roth, Michael S. "Trauma, Representation, and Historical Consciousness." Common Knowledge 7.2 (1998): 99-111.

a stranger's uncanny visit and delivery of the horrifying news of her husband's death. Severely traumatized, she is incapable of transforming it into a narrative memory. In the process of hypnosis, Pierre Janet, a contemporary of Freud and a well-known French psychotherapist in the field of traumatic memory, assumes the role of the stranger and changes the content of the memory trace to rob it of its horrifying affect. The traumatic memory is replaced by an implanted false memory which functions as an effective screen. The patient is thus 'cured' in a state of disavowal while the underlying horror fails to be confronted directly and thus continues to live on in dormant forms. If the tension within the visual context of trauma revolves around two versions of memories – the conventional memory and traumatic memory, then the tension within Benjamin's visual narrative marks a similar disjunction between two forms of perceptions of history: "Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe…"[223] Indeed, these two perceptions of history in Benjamin's language are deeply connected with the two versions of memories in Freudian language. While 'the chain of events' perceived by us is analogous to conventional memory, 'the single catastrophe' perceived by the angel is comparable to the intrusive image of traumatic memory. There is an underlying temporal dimension to all four entities. The image of catastrophe is symptomatic of trauma precisely because it poses as a *temporal rupture*, a *shocking and sudden interruption* within the continuum of 'the chain of events'. Following a linear structure, 'the chain of events' is locatable in conventional memory.

[223] Benjamin, infra note 6.

'The single catastrophe,' on the other hand, belongs to the landscape of trauma and thus knows no time. Consequently, such an image flares up randomly and intrusively, strangely at odds with the unremitting flow of the linear history. That is to say, 'the chain of events' has failed to integrate this one image which is determinately nomadic, catastrophic and indeed traumatic.

Drawing on both Zhang Xiaogang and trauma theory, I have hopefully illustrated an intimate link between trauma and Benjamin's famous imagery of the angel of history – the angel is in truth a traumatized figure with broken wings; the single catastrophe is the return of an unbidden image, the unregistered or repressed traumatic content of history. Now, one is obliged to ask a question from a reversed perspective, i.e., What can Benjamin's angel elucidate about the landscape of trauma, specifically, Zhang Xiaogang and his art?

Throughout his "Theses in the Philosophy of History," Benjamin has tied the image of catastrophe to a messianic power, i.e. a profane illumination that is almost metaphysical. For instance, he intimates that "The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of Antichrist. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious."[224] There is a tripartite relationship here: the gifted historian, the dead and that third party from whom the dead must be saved – the Antichrist/ enemy who has

[224] *Ibid.* p. 255.

caused the trauma of the dead in the first place. In other words, the gifted historian can revive and redeem the dead through subduing the enemy. Who then is this enemy that 'has not ceased to be victorious'? Referring back to the passage on the angel of history, this enemy is indisputably the storm of progress – the seemingly irresistible continuum of history. Two important factors can be noted of this passage. First, Benjamin has envisioned a gifted historian, an agent of history who is capable of battling with the all-consuming force of history from within. Second, the messianic hope lies dialectically in the realm of the dead, the 'enslaved ancestors' from the past, rather than their 'liberated grandchildren' from the future.[225] I will address these two factors respectively and see what kind of light they can shed on Zhang Xiaogang and his art.

In the passage quoted above, Benjamin does not describe explicitly the attributes of the gifted historian he has envisioned. Yet the passage on the angel of history divulges a vivid description of him – the historian with a gift is the angel of history. And I maintain that his 'gift of fanning the spark of hope' comes from none other than his magical fascination with the past. That is to say, he is necessarily a haunted figure stalled by a vision of trauma. Significantly, Zhang Xiaogang belongs to this camp of the historian envisioned by Benjamin. Following Benjamin's line of thinking, one can conclude that Zhang's seemingly repulsive desire to visit the landscape of trauma takes on *a messianic grace*. And trauma – the crisis of man as half ghost, not fully present in the present – is not necessarily a final sentence to hopelessness. For trauma dialectically

[225] *Ibid.* p. 260.

opens other dimension of history, possibly an alternative unfolding of humanity. Meanwhile, one still has to ask if it is appropriate to speak of the usefulness of trauma, its dialectical force, and the enlightenment in a messianic spirit. If the historical hope does not remain in the hands of those happy and liberated ones who are caught in the storm of progress, does it indeed lie in the hands of those who suffer from a violent condition – trauma? The answer is no. The hope does not remain in the hands of those who are paralyzed in trauma or drowned in its endless melancholia. History needs someone standing between those who haste forward without turning back and those who look back without imagining a future. That is to say, history needs a curious being who is half ghost and half man, an artist like Zhang who looks into the mysterious abyss of trauma, and yet is capable of raising his head above its suffocating tides and grasping life.[226] He recognizes trauma's mysterious guidance. Through his creative response to trauma, he attains a moment of vision, a traumatic illumination which necessarily begins with deep sorrows, mournfulness and despair.

What kind of illumination is traumatic illumination? Drawing on insights from profane illumination, I see it as an illumination keenly associated with the profane realms of the dead, the doomed, the catastrophe, the trauma. According to Benjamin,

---

[226] Earlier in his career, Zhang Xiaogang saw no possibility of growth or future in his painting or personal life due to sociopolitical atmosphere. Feeling hopeless and suffering from depression, the artist resorted to habitual and heavy drinking, which almost took his young life. He stayed in a hospital for two months during which he became fascinated the theme of death. He stayed next to the mortuary and had many opportunities to observe the dead. His fascination with death was vividly reflected in his earlier, surrealistic paintings. The same aura that reminds one of death is detectable in his Bloodlines series. The purpose of mentioning this personal episode of Zhang's life is to show that the artist's near encounter with death and his eventual survival of it. See, Kuai, Lehao, "Zhang Xiaogang: an artist of Kafka style [张晓刚: 卡夫卡式的艺术家]." *Southern People Weekly [南方人物周刊]*. 2007: 67-69.

the realm of the dead is neither an "eternal image from the past" nor a "Once upon a time."[227] It is pregnant with energies. With an intense strike of lightening, it could bring forth a sudden illumination and "blast open the continuum of history." [228] In trauma theories, the realm of the dead similarly marks a world of uncanny – unfinished, animated. And a traumatic image from the past is accordingly charged with immense energies – it springs from the discursive hold of linear time and dialectically harbors within it a vague historical hope. Caruth has argued that trauma is above all marked with two characteristics, latency and literacy – thus "the traumatized carry an impossible history within them."[229] With its temporal indeterminacy and un-subdued energies, trauma seems to have become the last refuge of an ineffable history. Through the mechanism of haunting, it encapsulates such a history in animated forms safe from the erosion of time. Within this peculiar temporal space of trauma, the unresolved and erased historical violence waits to be reckoned with. 'Bloodlines: Big Family' series opens precisely such a refuge – an animated temporal space of trauma for the experiences, struggles, sufferings and damages of the Cultural Revolution to come to light and possibly inform the future. And it is from this temporal space of trauma a critical revelation springs forth, a *traumatic illumination*. The traumatic illumination consists of two interrelated layers of meaning: first, it is a crystallization of a tormented image of history that has been hitherto obscured by, but nevertheless remains part and

[227] Benjamin, *infra* note 6, p. 262.

[228] Ibid.

[229] Caruth, *infra* note 23, p. 5.

parcel to history itself; second, the crystallization of such an image simultaneously means a potential awakening from an enclosed circle of recurring violence: totalitarianism, high Maoism, the fetishization of money, the hedonism prevalent in post-Mao China and all the false consolations that have masked something appalling in history and imprisoned it in dormancy. 'Bloodlines: Big Family' thus not only finds the enslaved ancestors a venerable home in his canvases but also carves a hopeful opening in modern historiography of China for their grandchildren.

*****

Into the abyss of the image world: 'Bloodline: Big Family' on focus

Having argued that Zhang's 'Bloodlines: Big Family' series invokes a world of trauma and that this traumatic world grants an unexpected gift of the illumination of history, I now wish to delve into the image world itself. First, I would like to draw attention to the very naming of this image world – 'Bloodlines: Big Family" – as it significantly highlights a constellation of problematics of the Cultural Revolution. One is compelled to ask: What is the nature of 'family' referenced here? Is it a biological family or a socially and politically constructed family? Can it be both at once? Is the invocation of the seemingly natural terminology, 'family,' a masqueraded interest to address the issue of trauma? In a similar vein, what is the nature of 'bloodline' embedded in the title? Does it refer to kinship ties or is it in truth a metaphor for the red terror which has tainted and engulfed each individual during the Cultural Revolution? When juxtaposed together, bloodline and family, do they tell a story of continuity or discontinuity? Bearing these formidable questions in mind, in this section,

I will approach Zhang Xiaogang's image world through exploring aesthetic details – respectively *the face, eyes, and traces*. These details, I contend, are not only distinct thematic arenas but more importantly, they synthesize into an aesthetic unity of trauma referring back to the significance of the title – 'Bloodlines: Big Family.'

In 'Bloodline: Big Family,' history takes on a human countenance. Everything about the Cultural Revolution – its violence, its horror, its pathos, its haunting presence – is allegorized into a face. And this face, I maintain, is a major source of the affective power of 'Bloodline: Big Family." History is no longer a faceless abstract. It communicates, divulges its secrets and intensifies emotions most affectively by way of its expressions. This face manifests two salient characteristics. First, there are certain purposeful ambiguities with regard to whether this face belongs to an individual or is emblematic of a collective whole, namely Chinese. Secondly, I maintain it is quintessentially *a face of dis-ease/disease*.

Various family members, from children to adults, from women to men, have strikingly *the same* facial features – the oblong shape of the face, like a pumpkin seed, the prominent horizontal eyebrows that hook off at the ends and the eyes, black in the center with the whites easily visible, are both deadpan and animated. And the long, straight nose forms a vertical shadow leading down to full lips that droop slightly on each side. Having nearly identical features, the faces of different generations and genders of the family become immediately interchangeable. Notably, the sameness of the faces often forms a parallel with the uniform Mao suits, which are held up by almost immaterial bodies and conspicuously lean shoulders. What Zhang has created is an

archetype Chinese face from a dark era, or rather, a non-face signifying the faceless masses during the Cultural Revolution, a time when all signs of individuality were diagnosed as treacherous deviation from party lines, stigmatized as bourgeois decadence and accordingly suppressed. But should we conclusively limit the faces on Zhang's canvases to representations of a collective face, a non-face that reinforces the standardization of a totalitarian regime? To answer this question fully, I wish to complicate this collective face and to bring out its other possible dimension.

A careful scrutiny of Zhang's paintings shows that this collective face is suspiciously a mask of some burdensome secrecy. The pale and grayish complexion of each face – which uncannily reminds one of death's face – has inescapably the thickness and stuffiness of a painted mask. That is to say, this collective face contains a deeper and contradictory layer. Although veiled by its mask, a repressed truth – the essence of the individual existence – is nevertheless present. This brings us to the second characteristic of the face: a face of dis-ease/disease. And I wish to explore this second characteristic from two perspectives: the intangible aura emanated from the face which betrays *dis-ease* as well as the concrete evidences of *disease* manifested on the face. Looking through and beyond the gate of the homogeneity of the mask, the face all of a sudden becomes an abyss. A mysterious aura from this deep abyss has seeped through the superficially standardized mask, silently violating the calmness of the face and rendering it fragmented, alienated, solitary and ghostlike. Indeed, enveloped in this aura, the faceless mass is severed from the context of the Cultural Revolution no longer appears to be a unified, happy family taking pride in their sameness, the tradition of

which, as I have argued in the opening section, has nostalgically lived on in 'Political Pop'. Instead, with this aura piecing through their masks of sameness, the faceless mass appears to be fatally ill and gravely dis-eased with their existence which is defined by their veneer – the collective non-face. This gives rise to the enigmatic question on the nature and power of this aura. And I maintain that this mysterious aura in Zhang's paintings is characteristically and irreducibly *elegiac*. That is to say, such an aura is keenly associated with loss and mournfulness. Its power lies in its revelation of the traumatic secrecy that accompanies the constitution of the collective non-face, i.e., the violent erasure of differences and deprivation of humanity. With this critical power, the elegiac aura illuminates the bereft existential condition of the seemingly calm faces that

Figure 4.2 – From "Big Family" series by artist Zhang Xiaogang.

Figure 4.3 – From "Big Family" series by artist Zhang Xiaogang.

the artist has transplanted from the context of the Cultural Revolution. The monumental sadness of the face from the past also haunts and underlies the happy endings of his liberated children and grandchildren who live in a comfortable and economically successful future. The questions linger on: Are we indeed liberated from the primal catastrophe as expressed in that solemn and solitary face drenched in the pathos of his loss? Have we really recovered from the historical disease that has made his face and left him perpetually dis-eased?

To further elaborate this face of dis-ease, let us return to the concrete contour of the face and explore the physical evidences of disease aside from the elegiac aura. Although subtle and not easily seen, there are discernible differences among each face on Zhang's canvases. In spite of their striking sameness, the faces are in fact individualized. And this individualization of the face significantly comes from the manifestations of genetic disease. Indeed, a careful look elucidates that almost each face in 'Bloodline: Big Family' is inflected with and thus uniquely demarcated by certain hints of *physical defects*. Take 'Bloodline: Big Family' no. 3 for instance, at a cursory glance, the three faces – that of the father's, mother's and son's – appear to be identical and interchangeable regardless of gender or generational differences. The careful viewer, however, will notice that the mother has a lazy eye, with one pupil looking off to the side and the other straightforward. And the son is touched with an overbite and buckteeth. Only the father is left uneasily intact in his mask. Running parallel with the elegiac aura, the physical contour of the face betrays tangible signs of dis-ease. Invoking Freud here, the subtle physical defects can firstly be seen as the localized

embodiments of the unregistered (or repressed) traumatic traces of individuals' psychological processes. In other words, they are the corporeal memories of individuals' pathos, losses and sufferings that have discreetly imprinted the collective face of Mao's totalitarianism. They secretively tear at the mask of uniformity and suggest that it has been a ripped mask with holes all along.

The question we still need to ask is why Zhang Xiaogang has characterized *physical defects* above all to articulate an ineffable memory. To answer this question, one needs to return to the historical context of the Cultural Revolution. The physical defects that have tainted almost every family member in 'Bloodline: Big Family' form a significant contrast with the healthy, vibrant youth culture from the Cultural Revolution which has found its reincarnations in 'Political Pop.' Propaganda from Mao's time has laid great emphasis on the biological and mental health of revolutionary heroes. The less than perfect individuals, bodily or spiritually – the physically deficient, the prostitutes, the traitors, the old authorities, the class enemies, the capitalist roaders, etc – were all stigmatized as non-people. An umbrella term, *ox-ghost and snake-demon* (*niu gui she shen*), was used to distinguish this 'dangerous' camp of non-people from the people – the unified, concordant, physically and mentally healthy and handsome revolutionary family. During the course of the Cultural Revolution, innumerous *ox-ghosts and snake-demons* were dislocated from their homes and imprisoned in *cowshed* (*niu peng*) to receive re-education. These less-than-whole-beings were seen as materialized ghosts who wait in the dark and seek opportunity to sabotage the enduring work of the revolution and therefore must be slain mercilessly. Indeed, they

were not only linguistically persecuted, but physically tortured and even beaten to death. In this light, the physical defects of the family members in Zhang's paintings can be read as a potent metaphor for the historical disease, the violence and horror of the Cultural Revolution, which has not only linguistically persecuted innumerous beings and labeled them as less-than-human but also injured their bodily wholeness through extreme physical violence. Returning to the question I have raised early on with regard to the *nature of family* in the title, 'Bloodline: Big Family,' the term family in one way can be understood as a socially and politically made family, and yet not in its usual sense of a monolithic society, a big socialist family. Indeed, as the artist Zhang Xiaogang has explicitly pointed out when addressing his art: "The point of penetration that I look for is alienation, the psychological state of a person with mental aberration." [230] A family created with such a philosophy distinguishes itself stridently from the Mao revolutionary family united in their mental and physical health, their class love and their utopian vision oriented toward future. It is a socially and politically made family linked through trauma – a family consisting of *ox-ghosts and snake-demons*. In their ghostliness, their corporeal and psychological wounds, the historically dispossessed emerge as a melancholic big family in solidarity and silently screams out demand for justice. Indeed, marked by physical defects – the opposite of what Mao propaganda has invested in – this family signifies a meditative gathering of the victims from the

[230] Zhang, *infra* note 1.

Cultural Revolution eternally in mourning for lost homes, for dispersed relatives, for wasted childhoods and youths, for deprived humanity.

Having traced the first aesthetic detail, the face, at once a mask of conformity and a hidden abyss of dis-ease, I wish to highlight the second aesthetic detail, the dazed stare from the family members. In the midst of the paleness of the face, the staring eyes arrest attention like two deep wounds, sorrowful and yet inquisitive, reserved and yet animated. These eyes convey not only a distinct mood, palpably gloomy and mournful, but disclose the world as none other than an abyss of trauma. The significance of the staring eyes can thus be formulated as the question: what is it that the eyes see? These eyes first and foremost see the catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution and its traumatic legacies. The attentiveness of the eyes suggests an apprehensive meditation on the catastrophe and the bereft condition of its victims. Without recoiling or blinking, these eyes demonstrate certain calmness and vigilance as they look into an unfathomable abyss and *see* something traumatic. On a different level, other than seeing an abyss and thereby seizing some sort of traumatic knowledge, these eyes also appear to be directed at the viewer. They look into us. Whether or not she has intended it, the viewer finds herself situated in a relationship which is determinately transferential – those eyes have bridged the temporal distance between an abyss of the enigmatic past and safely grounded present; those eyes have breached the boundary between the being-looked-at object and the viewing subject. In an uncanny way, the aesthetic object that we are observing has acquired a pair of pondering and penetrating eyes that return the questioning gaze to us. The intense eye contact, the curious exchange of dual glances,

enacts a confrontation of some kind of struggle which the viewer on the other side of the paintings is bound to lose. In the end, these eyes themselves become an overwhelmingly melancholic vision of the world, an unfathomable abyss into which the viewer leaves her body and plunges as if returning to a familiar home. What, however, is the significance of this aesthetic experience, of failing to guard the boundary between the other and the self other than defining it as a sublime condition? In what Hegel terms the "pure notion of recognition,"[231] coming out of one's body and residing in its other are crucial for the realization of true self-consciousness. In other words, losing one's self is intimately linked with finding and affirming one's essential being. Drawing on Hegel's pure notion of recognition, I wish to stress that the viewer does not lose herself when plunging into the abyss of those haunting eyes. What she loses is the isolated, alienated and modernized subject who is blind to her shared oneness with her enslaved ancestors. To put it differently, the abyss of those eyes in truth takes the place of a mirror through which the viewer sees none other than a face of her own; and the presentment of those eyes in truth evokes none other than the unconscious memories of the viewer – her own past, her own self, her own traumatic experience of loss and death. The essential self, in its wholeness, in mutual recognition and interconnection, in infinity, is born, in its other's eyes.

The third aesthetic detail that demands our attention in 'Bloodline: Big Family' is the traces. By traces, I mean both *the thin red line* connecting the ghostly looking family

---

[231] Hegel, Geoge Wilhelm Friedrich. "Phenomenology of Spirit." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. Norton: New York, 2001. 630-35, 631.

members as well as *the patches of light* that arbitrarily overshadow their gloomy faces. Several characteristics can be observed of these traces: they are as tangible as they are transient; they are as weighty as they are light; they are as present as they are absent; they reveal as they conceal. Indeed, opaquely visible and highly elliptical, the traces conjure up an incomplete picture of an enigma. In other words, these irregular and strange traces are the cryptic hiding places of something ineffable and possibly traumatic. They cut into the surface of the canvases like wounds, disrupting the unity of the visual field. Significantly, they highlight an alternative field, although invisible, in the midst of the visibility. And this invisible field imposes on the viewer an unbearable burden to see more and more down the road. I want to suggest that the appearance as well as the receding nature of these traces from frame to frame needs to be read in light of trauma. I will first address the meaning of traces on a theoretical level and then give my interpretation (both theoretically and historically informed) of *the red line* and *the patches of light* in 'Bloodline: Big Family.'

In his discussion on memory traces and consciousness, Freud intimates that "consciousness arises instead of a memory trace."[232] This statement shows that consciousness and memory traces erase each other and are fundamentally at odds with each other. Hence traces are the vestiges of something beyond our conscious grasp, that is, traces are the indicators of a past that still dwells in the realm of the unconscious. The cryptic quality of this past – its permanent residence in the system of the

[232] Freud, Sigmund. "Beyond Pleasure Principle," *The Freud Reader.* Ed. Gay, Peter. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989. 594-625, 607.

unconscious as well as its enigmatic appearance as material traces – can be understood in the Freudian notion of trauma. As Freud contends, the traumatic neurosis is a consequence of the mental apparatus's failure in integrating and mastering the stimuli. In other words, the traumatic quality of a past can render it outside the circuit of consciousness[233]. Although not in a bound state, this unseen past is nevertheless very present. It spills out of the unconscious realm as distorted, dream-like, enigmatic, unreadable and yet visible traces, all prevailing, enduring and haunting.[234] Under this light, traces can be seen as *trauma's symptomatic effects*. As such, traces are charged with socio-political significance: although not entirely readable, they enact our imagination and remain as our only clue to see the unseen, to access the unregistered history, to uncover the repressed knowledge and to map out the hidden truth.

The family members in 'Bloodline: Big Family' are all stained and connected by a trace in time – a thin red line. What should we make of this red line? Should we associate it readily with bloodline, i.e., the kinship tie which conveys a sense of continuity or discontinuity through time? Many scholars seem to agree so. The red line has been largely interpreted as fateful lineage that ties, not without problematics, the family members together.[235] Yet one wonders if there is an alternative way to read the

---

[233] The other possibility is that this past has been repressed by the conscious reality.

[234] In Freud's own words: "they (referring to memory-traces) are often most powerful and most enduring when the process which left them behind was one which never entered consciousness." Infra, note 37, p. 606.

[235] For instance, Smith argues that "genetics remains a fundamental element of the paintings beyond the characteristic Chinese-ness they reflect in the features, dress and sense of the historic era out of which they are shaped." Smith, Karen. *Nine Lives: The Birth of Avant-Garde Art in New China, The Updated Edition*. AW Asia: New York, 2008.

red line. Is it possible that the red line in truth enact a kind of violence rather than representing family lineage? If there is indeed a connection between the red line and family lineage, I suggest that it must be read as a wasted labyrinth of a family tree that has no entrance. For during the Cultural Revolution, the memorial tablets of our ancestors were burned; their temples and graves were destroyed; the memories of them were emptied out and filled with revolutionary fermentation; we were children with no parents – we were children of Mao. In this vein, the red line is an aesthetic indicator of not continuity but discontinuity, of not lineage but holes in lineage. And such holes until today stand gaping: Whose tombs can we go visit? To which family tree can we resort? And how many of us liberated grandchildren inherit, remember or value the knowledge coming from our ancestors?

Therefore, I seek an alternative path away from family lineage to explore the meaning of the red line. I read it precisely as a trace – a detail that entertains the unconscious, a symptomatic effect of an ineffable trauma. In other words, I read it as a clue which aids us to see an invisible field, to confront the violence disavowed, and to uncover a repressed totalitarianism. Specially, I read the red line as the aesthetic phantom of a violent political discourse/campaign on race, class and nation that has resulted in bloodshed catastrophe and the literal dissolution of family ties: namely, Bloodline Theory (*xue tong long*) which first appeared as a Red Guard tabloid before being authorized and employed by the regime. The Bloodline Theory not only created strict hierarchy within the society but entitled 'people' to exert their rightful dictatorship over those perceived as 'non-people,' that is, to legitimately persecute

millions of innocent citizens. The theory can be largely summarized into a resounding couplet: if the father is a revolutionary, the son's a hero; if the father is a reactionary, the son is a bastard (*laozi geming, er haohan; laozi fandong, er hundan*). At the heart of Bloodline Theory is the complete eradication of inborn equality of all people. Significantly, one's class origin acquires a biological, racial and almost mystical quality. In other words, the class origin becomes keenly associated with a certain type of blood identified between polarities of superiority vs. inferiority, revolutionary vs. antirevolutionary, people vs. ox-ghosts and snake-demons. A new symbolic lineage is created: a biosocial family characterized with 'redness'. *A big family* indeed, this family is united by the identical red line, the pure blood, the ultimate determinant of moral behavior (or should we say revolutionary enthusiasm). The constitution of this glorious big family supported by Bloodline Theory at the same time entails the all-consuming red terror – the endless campaigns of purging and outing the hidden *ox-ghosts and snake-demons* lurking amidst the revolutionary family. In the face of the big family, the traditional Chinese family system crumbled into pieces. No longer a site blessed by the ancient promise of harmony and happiness, the family during the Cultural Revolution raised none other than the specter of violence. The private spheres of families were blasted open and the everydayness flooded with constant expectations of violence – linguistic abuse, physical torture, displacement, exiles and death. Worse still, the dissolution of the individual families did not only result from external perils – it also occurred from within. In order to be accepted into *the big family*, innumerous daughters and sons during the Cultural Revolution severed their 'shameful' blood ties and even

maliciously prosecuted their own parents perceived as 'demons'; following the red line wholeheartedly, countless wives and husbands had turned their backs on each other. Having traced the vicissitudes of Bloodline Theory in its historical context, I maintain that the figure of the red line that recurs in frame after frame of Zhang's paintings is by no means an untwisted representation of kinship tie. Rather, it is a literary phantom of Bloodline Theory – a violent history which was once openly glorified and then has since been largely silenced and submerged. Although not fully present in consciousness, the violent history nevertheless dwells in the collective unconscious of the Chinese people and is thus readable in symptomatic traces and aesthetic reincarnations. When reading the aesthetic detail of the face, I defined the 'big family' as a disease-ridden family of *ox-ghosts and snake-demons*. And here I must bring forth a different face of the 'big family' while calling attention to Zhang's aesthetic politics of visibility and invisibility. The presence of the big family (of victims) uncannily evokes the ghostly traces of the other 'big family,' now saliently absent. Significantly, although in different ways, the two big families are both made and connected by the red line – they were constituted in a symbiosis. The dual meaning of the family resonates with the dual meaning of the red line: for the absent big family, the red line signifies purity and power – the fetishism of redness; for the present big family, the aesthetically reincarnated ghosts, the red line signifies none other than contamination and victimization – the trauma of redness. Indeed, the red line takes on increasingly explicit traumatic connotations in some of the paintings from 'Bloodline: Big Family.' Take 'A Big Family, 1995' for instance, the thin red line resonates alarmingly with the ghastly redness that has engulfed and soaked the

entire face of the son. There are no ambiguities with regard to this redness – no longer a sign of blood purity and revolutionary enthusiasm, it is explicitly a sight of horror.

In addition to being punctuated by a thin red line, each family member in Bloodline series is also stigmatized by a different trace, a patch of light – sometimes transparent, sometimes opaque, other times yellowish like tea specks and still other times red like blood stains. I suggest we can understand these patches of light on two different levels. First, I read the patches of light as disturbing traces, inklings of a traumatic origin that could be located in the past. Specifically, I read them as signs of stain, impurity and pollution. In so doing, I see its intimate connection with the other trace – the red line, the aesthetic phantom of Bloodline Theory. The gathered big family in its ghostliness was historically seen as the non-people, the dangerous source of contamination hidden within the people. And such labeling had resulted in great historical catastrophe – during the endless political campaigns, they were purged as 'bad elements,' persecuted and often time murdered. After all the dust seems to have settled in time, they return and haunt the joyful picture of the now precisely as an old, traumatic *stain* from the past that cannot be appeased, forgotten or made good. On the second level, the patches of light are reminiscent of the patches on the photographs from deterioration and over exposure. In this light, the patches of light signify the pressing risk of losing not only the physical artifacts, but more importantly, what such artifacts entail and preserve – the traumatic memory of the Cultural Revolution. Art is indeed an act of redemption for Zhang Xiaogang. He created 'Bloodline: Big Family' to confront the fundamental problematic of remembrance and forgetting when it comes to

the unbearable burden of history and the cruelty of linear time. And 'Bloodline: Big Family' is essentially an aesthetic afterlife of the Cultural Revolution, a kind of new artifact and new record that at once communicates the importance of overcoming forgetfulness and conveys the very hope of redemption.

*****

Conclusion: trauma and redemption

'Bloodline: Big Family' series represents Zhang Xiaogang's profound preoccupation with the work of mourning so lacking and hence urgently needed in Chinese society today. The official ideology of looking forward, availed by the whims of linear time, has rendered the great catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution opaque, obscure, ambiguous and at risk of fading before being adequately registered, remembered and worked through. And the artist, not the historian, seems to be most aware of and sensitive about such a disastrous situation. The work of his hands, the 'Bloodline: Big Family' series, evokes our unconscious guilt of disavowing the catastrophic past and urges us to remember our responsibility to history.

The artist has said that art for him is an act of redemption. And the hope of redemption, as the artist conveys through his series, begins in deep sorrow, in the melancholic return to the past and in wakening the ghosts stranded in time. That is to say, the hope of redemption begins in facing and addressing the unresolved trauma emanating from the past. And one wonders, where does this glimpse of hope lie in such bleak, ghostly, and sorrowful visual history that the artist has rescued from time? Is an envisioning of the future indeed still possible? It should be stressed that the

artist's aesthetic endeavor is more than a psychoanalytical preoccupation with trauma. It is simultaneously a critical response to the logic of developmental historicism, which is a form of fetishism, a state of disavowal of the historical violence of the Cultural Revolution, as I have hoped to convey throughout the chapter. Hence the double place of melancholy: its deep and intense immersion in the past ruins as well as the possible opening to an alternative future circumventing the fetishism of progress.

Indeed, the melancholic, repetitious and mindful fixation with a troubled past in 'Bloodline: Big Family' makes it into an affective memorial space for the victims of the Cultural Revolution. And the creation of this aesthetic memorial space functions as a cultural remedy that starts to fill the hole of the state's failure in building a physical memorial space for the historical catastrophe. In addition, 'Bloodline: Big Family' does more than offer an empathetic home for the silenced victims. It lays bare knowledge of a structure that has produced these victims in the first place: it *reveals* the structural depth of history which has been hidden beneath its triumphant veneer; it *exposes* a traumatic face of history which has remained unclear and unseen; it *brings forth* a world of unconscious via symptomatic and aesthetic traces. Last of all, the troubling images from the past essentially pierce through the very heart of the present, the state of amnesia and fetishism, and resist the mechanical progress of history. Quintessentially figures of history's disavowed ruins, these sorrowful images register the spark of hope in enabling memory, the work of mourning and altering collective consciousness for a somewhat encumbered and yet more dynamic and just future.

5
A Protean Self:
Redemptive Poetics of Youth in Jiang Wen's *In the Heat of Sun* and Ann Hui's *The Postmodern Life of My Aunt*

> The protean self represents an alternative to violence. Violence always has an absolute quality: behavior is reduced to a single, narrow focus; and in that sense, violence is a dead end. Proteanism, in contrast, provides a capacity to avoid dead ends.
>
> – Robert J. Lifton[236]

> [A]s children during the Cultural Revolution, were your feelings really that important?
>
> – Jiang Wen[237]

> Go to hell! Die in your beautiful Dream!
>
> – Ma Dafan,
> *The Postmodern Life of My Aunt*

Double image of the youth and beyond

Can we still narrate or imagine a poetics of youth during the Chinese Cultural Revolution without centering our attention upon the specter of Mao or reinforcing the logic of high Maoism? The youths from the era of the Chinese Cultural Revolution present themselves as a historical aporia, a contradiction, a *double image*. On the one hand, the very image of youths during this period immediately conjures up the Red

---

[236] Lifton, Robert Jay. *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation*. BasicBooks: New York, 1993. p.11.

[237] CNNWorld. "Interview with Jiang Wen." July 31, 2007. Available online at: <http://articles.cnn.com/2007-07-31/world/talkasia.jiangwen_1_venice-film-festival-zhang-yimou-s-red-sorghum-jiang-wen/4?_s=PM:WORLD>. (last visited April 7, 2011). Here, Jiang Wen is recalling (quoting) a question Chinese censors had asked him after viewing *In the Heat of the Sun*.

Guards. The name of the youth has been defiled by these young militants, their campaigns and crimes against 'the old world.' There is a symbiosis between Mao's beautiful children and horrific violence. Mao's inspection of one million youths in Tian'anmen Square in August of 1966 unveils a poetic delirium that characterizes the Cultural Revolution. Carrying giant portraits of Mao and wavering feverishly his Little Red Book, the youths were fused as one in a sublime vision as they trembled, screamed and wept in ecstasies. Such a beautiful scene paradoxically speaks to the psychic root of red terrorism during the Cultural Revolution. Mao's beautiful young followers also reenacted the most horrible violence: endless book-burning, smashing, breaking, public chastising and torturing, killing, the cruelty of it all.

In addition to the youth-violence symbiosis, another image of youths has come out of this same era. This is of the youths who have been largely seen as the victims utilized and in turn disposed of by Mao. Over fourteen millions of youths were sent down to the countryside to receive reeducation during the course of the Cultural Revolution. They are known as the lost generation (*shiluo de yidai*). The double faces of the youth – from Mao's flower children to his forsaken children – significantly speak to the slippery boundary between the perpetrators and the victims which characterizes the absurdity and confusion of the Cultural Revolution. The youths thus fall into a 'grey zone,' to invoke Primo Levi's term, that entails ambiguity and moral complexity.

This chapter seeks to go beyond the muddy stream of this double bind and imagine a poetics of youths in redemptive narratives. For the double images of the youth briefly discussed above do not escape Mao's hand. The two *petrified fates*,

perpetrator or victim, presuppose and are shaped by that invisible hand. At the heart of this chapter is then a desire to resist, to salvage, to imagine and to reconstruct young lives lived otherwise, amidst the fissures of Mao's omnipotent power. These lives carry immense potential to redirect the path of violence coming towards us from history.[238]

Toward the end of his pioneering study on the Chinese Cultural Revolution, *Revolutionary Immortality*, historian Robert J. Lifton made a brief and yet important observation. Written during a critical period of modern Chinese history –in 1968, when China was shrouded in the depth of the revolutionary ambiguity and when much of the world was awed and even allured by Maoism[239] –Lifton suggestively identifies groups of alienated Chinese youths latent, if not present, amidst the revolutionary fervor. He named them "the wanderers."[240] Invoking hippies as their western counterparts, Lifton suggests that the wanderers are "the very *antithesis* of the official version of the

[238] Harman's inspirational essay, "Venus in Two Acts," emphasizes the importance of art of imagination in the narrativization of trauma. She is concerned with the blasphemy of the archival traces of Atlantic slavery. She postulates that the archive is "a death sentence, a tomb, a display of violated body," and "a dishonored life." Her statements suggest that the archive perpetually rejoices the triumph of the slave traders; it is a traumatic site for the still rampant circuits of violence. Even terror is tainted with pleasure and mingled with voyeuristic sadomasochism. There is not even a space for grief or pathos - tied to the profanity of history, the slave girls are censored as whores and disposable commodities for consumption. Then should cultural narrativization reply on the material evidence of the archive, the scandalous handbook that bears the illicit desire and blood-drenched values of the slave traders? Hartman proposes beauty and love as the antidotes for the historical sickness. In this light, cultural narrativization holds a capacity for metamorphosis. Blessed by the marriage between the aesthetics and ethics, the names of those who lay prostrate can be rectified belatedly. Hartman, Saidiya V.. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, 2008 June; 26: 1-14.

[239] See, for instance, Unwin, Tim. "The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s." *Times Higher Education*, Aug. 12, 2010, (1960). p.44-45.

[240] Lifton, Robert Jay. *Revolutionary Immortality: Mao Tse-Tung and the Chinese Cultural Revolution*. Random House: New York, 1968. p.131.

ideal youth, totally and unquestioningly committed to Maoist views and policies."[241] The attributes that are used to describe this antithetical entity are quite elusive: blissful, passive, withdrawal, mysterious, self-interested. The wanderers "search for alternatives to existing social identities" and "seek either their own pleasure or a bit of quietude."[242] In a later work, Lifton develops more fully the processes behind which individuals who witness and must live through traumatic societal shifts and upheavals are able to adapt and to resist through a process he terms proteanism.[243] "If the self is a symbol of one's organism, the protean self-process is the continuous psychic re-creation of that symbol…. [I]t allows for an opening out of individual life, for a self of many possibilities."[244] And, as quoted above, this has the powerful effect of offering an "alternative to violence."[245]

With reference to Lifton's writings coming to us from 1968 dialectically, the imagination of a redemptive poetics of youth from the Cultural Revolution beyond the dual bindings of Maoism becomes entirely feasible. This chapter thus attempts to explore narratives revealing an alternative poetics of youth characterized by pluralism, malleability, self-interest and indeterminacy. I accomplish this through a close reading

---

[241] Ibid. p.132, emphasis is mine.

[242] Ibid. p.133. The idea of the wanderer can find its incarnation in traditional Chinese literature such as *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. Jia Baoyu, in light of Lifton's observation of the alienated youth during the CR, is quintessentially a wanderer who withdraws himself from the conventional social order. Baoyu's focus on the experience, his seeming childishness, passivity, aloofness and gender ambiguity form a subculture that cannot be integrated into the symbolic order, in this context, the Confucian social order.

[243] Lifton, *The Protean Self*.

[244] Ibid. p.5.

[245] Ibid. p.11.

of two films: *In the Heat of the Sun* (directed by Jiang Wen, 1998) and *The Postmodern Life of My Aunt* (directed by Ann Hui, 2006). The protagonist in *In the Heat of the Sun*, Xiaojun, embodies an uncanny match for the type of youth imagined by Lifton. Living mostly unsupervised in the privileged space of a military compound in Beijing, Xiaojun spends his summer aloof, spying into the lives of ordinary people for his own amusement and daydreaming about a girl he may never have known. In *The Postmodern Life of My Aunt*, the image of youth presented through the life of a woman in her sixties living in present day Shanghai is not as easily discernable. The events of her youth during the Cultural Revolution –she had been a sent down youth who married a local man and felt suffocated in a life she never wanted –are not revealed until the end of the film and are neither shown on film nor dealt with directly. *In place of this story* – that is to say, in place of a story of a victim –the narrative follows Auntie Ye's reclaimed life in Shanghai and it is in this way that the film presents an alternative poetics of youth.

My purpose in highlighting these alternative narratives of youth is to deconstruct the dominant double image with a pluralist understanding of the youth during the Cultural Revolution. Though these two stories differ substantially in many aspects, each allows for a story to emerge from the lives of youth who lived through the Cultural Revolution; in their seeming passivity and marginality, these youthful images are forms of resistance against being called upon as the symbolic center for the social transformation/construction. Ultimately, their varied styles expose the limits of the coherence and the prevailing monistic ideal of Maoism.

*****

A synopsis of In the Heat of the Sun*: between creation and memory*

In the Heat of the Sun begins with a monologue by the narrator, Ma Xiaojun as an adult in present-day Beijing played by director Jiang Wen, who retrospectively recalls his teenage years during the tail end of the Cultural Revolution:

> Beijing has changed so much that it has become a modern city within these two decades. I can hardly find any trace of my past. These changes have undermined my memory to the point that I can no longer distinguish facts from fantasy. All my story happened only in summer. In the heat of the sun, people were forced to reveal more their bodies and it was more difficult to conceal their desires. In my memory, the sun always shone brightly during this period, as if there were only one season, summer. In fact, it was too bright, so that my vision has occasionally been obscured.

The aura within which youth is invoked is markedly dreamlike. Ma Xiaojun's entire teenage years are condensed into a trance-like dream scene – *one long, hot summer* where the blinding light of the sun eternally shines. Significantly, the narrator is not stingy with language in mystifying the real and the imagined. He warns the audience not to trust what they are about to be told and confesses that he "cannot tell what is real from what is imagined." Extraordinary to this opening monologue is that the narrator clearly shows that his quest into the past does not limit itself to claims of truth. The renunciation of claims to truths, of what actually happened is of significance. Memory becomes intermingled with acts of creation in reconstructing the narrator's youth story,

an imagined reality where polarities instantly melt away. Marked with his poetic ability to imagine and recreate, I want to suggest that the narrator is essentially a gifted historian who is 'fanning the spark of hope in the past,' to evoke the words of Benjamin. The sparks of hope, which have been submerged in an overwhelming historical culture, surface glisteningly in *the Heat of the Sun*, in the very youth image of a protean self – Ma Xiaojun. The sense of narrative malleability and unreliability prove to be constant throughout the entire film. There is not even a promise of any sort of stories as the narrator keeps unraveling them while telling them.[246] This purposeful shifting in the narration and its intended indeterminacy, I suggest, effectively deconstruct truth claims. It is within this very economy of indeterminacy and malleability, a protean self along with his poetic sobriety (from dominant ideology) is constituted. In other words, I see indeterminacy and malleability as a way of philosophizing dreams of freedom. In what follows, I will sketch a synopsis of *In the Heat of the Sun* which materializes somewhere between creation and memory.

Enclosed in this limited and yet expensive horizon of an eternal summer, Xiaojun's entire teenage years are spent unsupervised as his father is perpetually sent far away on military business. The opening sequence of the film takes place during a send-off parade for soldiers, including Xiaojun's father who has been given the task of resolving fighting factions in Guizhou. About age ten here, Xiaojun runs wildly

---

[246] For an in-depth analysis on realism and Chinese Sixth Generation directors, see Gary G. Xu's book chapter: " 'My Camera Does Not Lie:' Cinematic Realism and Chinese Cityscape in *Beijing Bicycle* And *Suzhu River*," in *Sinascape: Transnational Chinese Cinema at the Turn of the Millennium.* pp.67-89. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007.

through the crowd. The narrator tells us, "After dad left, I was freer than I'd ever been. I'd always envied those kids whose parents worked out of town. Now I was one of them." As a teenager, Xiaojun's family moves to the military compound –an experience shared by both Jiang Wen and the novelist, Wang Shuo, on whose book the film is based. A significant portion of Xiaojun's time, and thus the story, is spent with his gang of friends: stepbrothers Liu Yiku and Liu Sitian, Yang Gao, and Big Ant. Liu Yiku, who is older, has spent time in the army, and "always brought home girls," introduces Yu Beipei to the group; she both flirts with Xiaojun and the boys and helps them pick up other girls.

It is the time Xiaojun spends away from his friends, however, that is most intriguing and that sets this story apart. Xiaojun learns to make keys that he uses to first break into his father's desk drawer and then into the apartments of others while they are at work. Acting alone –we never see him use this skill with his friends – Xiaojun lives out his fantasy of being a war hero, spying into the secret lives of others when they are not at home. "When I tired myself out I'd take a nap, imagining what might have happened there." Thus, for much of the film Xiaojun is aloof and daydreaming. It is in this way that Xiaojun happens upon Mi Lan's apartment. Xiaojun becomes obsessed with a photograph of Mi Lan he mysteriously discoveres over her bed. He returns to her apartment repeatedly to bask in his imagination. He wanders along the rooftops of her building and of the building across from hers.

> I was always hanging out there, like a cat on a hot tin roof, frantic for the girl in the picture to appear. Like a ghost she came and went without a

> trace. Only my intuition and a lingering fragrance could verify her existence. I'd wait 'till the stars were high in the sky and still nothing.

When Xiaojun finally meets Mi Lan, he spends a lot of time with her alone, seeing her almost every day; he confides in her all his secrets, such as being able to pick locks and even having picked her lock, and boasts about himself, exaggerating stories and taking credit for what others had done.

When Xiaojun eventually introduces Mi Lan to his friends, Mi Lan's interactions with Liu Yiku cause Xiaojun to become jealous. He reacts irrationally, insulting Mi Lan on two occasions, during the second of which –a joint birthday celebration for Xiaojun and Liu Yiku –he attacks Liu Yiku with a broken bottle, stabbing him repeatedly in the stomach. It is here that the narrator stops the story, reminding the viewer yet again that he is unsure of the reality of much of the story thus far and stating directly that what we are seeing here never really happened. The frozen image of Xiaojun stabbing Liu Yiku rewinds and the story continues with the understanding that "true honesty is impossible" and that he will finish the story "never mind whether it's the truth."

What follows can be seen as two alternate and malleable endings. First, Xiaojun, after injuring his groin by falling into a ditch while riding his bicycle in the pouring rain, goes to find Mi Lan at her home. She comes out to him in the rain, he confesses to her his true feelings, and Mi Lan holds him in a lovers embrace. Second, when Mi Lan continues what has grown into a relationship with Liu Yiku, as if nothing had happened between her and Xiaojun, Xiaojun storms her apartment and attempts to rape

her. Mi Lan fights him off. Xiaojun has forever lost Mi Lan and is also ostracized by his friends.

*****

A Literature Review

Scholarly readings of *In the Heat of the Sun* have generally fallen into two categories: those that see the film as ultimately a nostalgic narrative,[247] and those that read the film as a cautious but striking critique of the Cultural Revolution.

In her fine book chapter "Extracting Revolutionary Spirit," Wendy Larson argues that the film ultimately revives something 'good' from the Cultural Revolution despite its failure in real life – a revolutionary spirit that "will lay dormant and spring to life in the future."[248] In my reading, Xiaojun's alienation, however, does not result from revolution's "material and social inadequacy"[249] but from its very spirit. What is the revolution spirit? It is an empty yet all powerful signifier; it is tinged with utopian and dystopian aura. To borrow Lifton's words, it "has an absolute quality." The protagonist Xiaojun in *In the Heat of the Sun* is anything but absolute. His childlike quality enables him to navigate freely between yea and nay.

---

[247] See for instance, Song, Weijie. "Transgression, Submission, and the Fantasy of Youth Subculture: The Nostalgic Symptoms of *In the Heat of the Sun*." In Haili Kong and John A. Lent, eds., *100 Years of Chinese Cinema: A Generational Dialogue*. pp.171-182. Norwalk, CT.: EastBridge, 2006.

[248] Larson, Wendy. "Extracting the Revolutionary Spirit: Jiang Wen's In the Heat of the Sun and Anchee Min's Red Azalea." In Larson, *From Ah Q to Lei Feng: Freud and Revolutionary Spirit in 20th Century China*. Pp.155-96Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009.p.156.

[249] Ibid.

In a book length study of just two films by Jiang Wen, *Body in Question*, Jerome Silbergeld takes up the latter position, arguing that the film takes away faith in the Communist Party by showing us that people were never equal under Mao and, taken together, *In the Heat of the Sun* and *Devils on the Door Steps* attack the two mountains of CCP legitimacy: equality and ridding China of the Japanese.[250] In a similar vein, Gary G. Xu distinguishes the way by which Jiang Wen calls attention to violence in *Devils on the Doorsteps*, from communist revolutionary films of the 1950s and 1960s in China:

> The revolutionary films also draw attention to violence, but they safely contain the violence in the antagonism between imperialist atrocity and revolutionary heroism. The psychological pressure of violence is annihilated by the logic of revolutionary struggle dwelling on the notion of physical battles and sublime goals.

In light of Xu's argument that "Jiang Wen's parody [of the violence] in *Devils on the Doorsteps* turns the sublime into the mundane, the physical into the psychological, and the heroic into the quotidian,"[251] I want to suggest Jiang Wen's use of idleness, boredom, indeterminacy in *In the Heat of the Sun* accomplishes the same task. I argue that the protagonist Ma Xiaojun is the very embodiment of a protean self. He resonates powerfully with Robert Jay Lifton's description of China's wandering youth and heralds the possibility of resisting the suffocating ideology of Maoism. The attributes of

---

[250] Silbergeld, Jerome. *Body in Question: Image and Illusion in Two Chinese Films by Director Jiang Wen*. Princeton University Press: New Jerseay, 2008. p.138.

[251] Xu, Gary Gang. *Sinascape: Transnational Chinese Cinema at the Turn of the Millennium*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007.p.59.

a protean life –pluralism, malleability, estrangement, and indeterminacy[252] –are all present in this film, defining this youth image. Xiaojun is both the hero and the coward, the soldier and hooligan; he draws from bits and pieces of his surroundings, of the lives of others, and reconstructs them to meet his creative self perception; always aloof, in the end he is fully estranged from his closest friends but then reveals a future in which he reunited with them once again. I devote two sections – *The Youth and His Spaces* and *The Child and His Games* – to illuminate this protean self. In the first section, a close examination of myriad spaces reveals how Xiaojun actively seeks out the intimate spaces within public spaces to foster his imaginative space. These intimate/imaginative spaces within public spaces allow Xiaojun to escape from ideological interpellation and metamorphosize into a protean self. The second section elucidates the critical power of boredom, idleness and childish play. I argue that these seemingly ordinary qualities of a protean self in truth enable the artist/child to detach from and resist from within the power configuration of ideology.

*****

The wanderer and his spaces

Where might we find these wanders Lifton speaks of? For there to be an alternative narrative of youth, there must also be spaces in which these wanders have roamed about. I want to suggest that Xiaojun's freedom to develop his protean self comes from a combination of two factors: (1). The *absence of authoritative adults*. In this

[252] Lifton, *The Protein Self*, p.5.

light, the extent and scale of destruction brought on by the Cultural Revolution objectively create a psychic space within which such wandering becomes possible – it is a world without parents. It needs to be stressed that the wanderers are distinguishable from the Red Guards who wandered through the city space in search of evils of impurities. The Red Guards remain prisoners to the historical process; they launched murderous assaults on the old authorities only to enshrine a new spiritual Father – Mao. By contrast, for wanders like Ma Xiaojun, the historical process is a force of estrangement rather than that of interpellation. It nevertheless created psychic space where an exit from the historical process is made possible. If the absence of authoritative adults creates a psychic space for wandering, equally important is the physical space where Xiaojun wanders. This brings me to my second point. (2) The *discrete locations* that Xiaojun seeks out and inhabits. Xiaojun's Beijing is shown to be a hodgepodge of discrete, tucked away locations. From the narrow alleyways of the *hutongs* (Beijing's historic neighborhoods surrounding the Forbidden City) to the city park's footpaths and stone bridges, Xiaojun is able to navigate Beijing mostly unseen. Thus, his freedom comes from more than the sudden population loss, the exile of millions of youth. Although the narrator claims that "the older kids were in the villages or army and the town belonged to us," it becomes discernable that certain sections of the town are more "theirs" than others. Repeatedly, Xiaojun seeks out and inhabits these intimate and private spaces which offer a varying degree of separation from larger society. I read them as fissures, a safe haven for the development of a protean self.

Such spaces of intimacy, found throughout the city of Beijing, are in stark contrast to the few, more open public spaces in *In the Heat of the Sun*. To highlight the effect of such open, public space has on Xiaojun, I will do a comparative reading of several scenes where Xiaojun is seen picking up on girls, respectively at the park with Yu Beipei, in front of a government building, and along a footpath where Xiaojun first meets Mi Lan. The difference in location is significant: only in the open, public space does Xiaojun find himself in trouble.

When Xiaojun first encounters Mi Lan, he has been waiting somewhere outside the gate to her housing. While this chance meeting takes place on a public walkway, the location is actually quite private. The scene opens with Xiaojun emerging from behind a stone wall, perhaps coming from the city park or his nearby school grounds. Climbing on to the wall, walking along top of it, and settling on a location to sit and light a cigarette, Xiaojun is able to keep an eye out for Mi Lan from a privileged location, peering down from above. In order for there to be a chance encounter, it is necessary for Xiaojun to come down from the wall and onto the footpath; this is accomplished when he drops his match while lighting his cigarette. Looking down at the ground, Xiaojun catches sight of Mi Lan's foot –and ankle adorned with a shining key –as she magically appears, stepping right where he dropped his matchbox. The effect of their meeting in such a location, at a spot the size of a footprint, makes it all the more intimate and meaningful. As Xiaojun follows Mi Lan hurrying to catch up and then lingering behind until she stops having sensed his presence, we see that the path is enclosed on each side. Not only is there the concrete wall where Xiaojun had been

perched, there is a small grove of trees on the other side of the path separating the route from the rest of the city. The path is empty, giving Xiaojun and Mi Lan an opportunity to flirt and speak freely. In fact, they are overheard by a street vendor sitting along the path but partially hidden behind a tree. The vendor –an older woman –laughs at Xiaojun's young romantic attempts, alerting him to her presence. Xiaojun is visibly surprised by the fact that he has been seen but not concerned. The attributes of this footpath, blocked-in, narrow footpath, hidden, are typical of many of the physical spaces Xiaojun occupies. A corresponding scene occurs when Xiaojun escorts Mi Lan back to her other home, the farm on which she works with Yu Beipei. As with the footpath at their first meeting, the scenic street leading to the farm is closed off from the outside world by a series of large trees on one side and a grove of small trees on the

Figure 5.1

Figure 5.2

Figure 5.3

Figure 5.4

other. They are alone, hidden. Even upon reaching their destination, Mi Lan must go on foot through an ever denser grove of trees to get from the road to her farm.

In another, earlier scene, Yu Beipei has her arm around Xiaojun as they sit with the rest of the gang smoking cigarettes in the city park. The city park is a perfect location for anonymity, with its hidden corners, narrow paths and stone bridges tucked behind dense foliage. When a woman interrupts them suddenly by walking down the same path, they freeze. The woman glances disapprovingly at Xiaojun and Yu Beipei, who still have their arms around each other. When the woman has passed, the group empties their cigarette smoke filled lungs in unison.

The result is different when Xiaojun is loitering outside a government building, watching international delegates enter the building. In this scene, Yu Beipei, the only girl in the gang at the time, is sent to talk to a girl seen entering the meeting and ask her to come over to meet the guys. Yu Beipei is successful and the girl, who ends up being one of the dancers Xiaojun spied on, comes over and talks with Xiaojun. As Xiaojun is talking with the new girl, the police are seen dealing with a couple that had snuck into the meeting pretending to be an ambassador and ambassador's wife from Korea. This unexpected spectacle, at first a curiosity to the gang, connects the police with Xiaojun and the gang as there is no buffer to shield them in this open space. "I've had my eye on you," the police officer says as he arrests the youth. Here, it is not the behavior of the boys that has changed –they are willing to hit on girls in public just as they are in more discrete places –but the space. This is one of the few open air scenes in the film and differs significantly from the seclusion of the intimate locations of the film.

Extraordinary to this space is that it is in *plain view in front of a governmental building*, that is, this open space is very much nurtured by the presence of the sacred. The police officer's hailing, *"I've had my eyes on you,"* indicates that within this open exposed space, the subject proper is "always already interpellated," to borrow words of Althusser. When the police officer threatens to lock him up for the night, Xiaojun cries and pleas for mercy. He is made to take the wrong belt string and exits the station in tears with his pants falling down. This, however, is not the end of the 'confrontation' between Xiaojun and the police officer.

Indeed, Xiaojun's malleability and his ability to constantly recreate himself become most evident in a subsequent scene in a private space, Xiaojun's bedroom. Here Xiaojun is seen talking to himself in the reflection of a small mirror sitting on his desk. This mirror scene is essentially a reenactment of the other mirror scene – the police officer's interpellation of Xiaojun in the exposed open space in front of the government building. The conversation with the police officers picks up with Xiaojun acting tough and intimidating:

> Smack, smack! Go fetch my belt! My Belt! Go get it. Don't you think you are Mr. Tough? Lost your nerve, have you? Get up off your knees and stop crying. I don't buy that crap. When I cry it's just to confuse you wimps. What business is it of yours if I pick up chicks? I'm not after your mother. I am coming back to do it again tomorrow. I will be alone. If you don't arrest me, you can kiss my ass. I am the king of half of Beijing and your station as well. Okay, get out of here. If you don't move it, you are welcome to stay the night.

In his seminal article "The Mirror Stage,"[253] Lacan narrates a drama of subject formation. Within this drama, the reflected image of a baby – powerful, unified, total and full – signifies an ego ideal, a domain of the symbolic. The real baby outside the mirror – powerless, incoherent and fractured – forever chases after this reflected Other. The scene in front the government building becomes readable within Lacanian logic. The police officer who precedes and hails Xiaojun is a mirror reflection par excellence – he is the Law, Father, Nation, Culture. However, the reenactment of the confrontation between the subject and law giver in a private space is instantaneously a reversed analogy of Lacan's mirror scene. The power relationship is turned inside out. During this confrontation, the side that holds authority and hails is the youth outside the mirror whereas his mirror image/Other is rendered impotent and powerless. This scene is indicative of a protean self's resistance to identify with Other and his refusal to be hailed into a subject proper. It also should be stressed that this confrontation occurs only within an interior space, within an inner self. Rather than directly confronting Other, Xiaojun opts to internalize encounters with authority for his own personal satisfaction. Indeed, drawing from his surroundings, his own encounters and experiences as well as those of people around him, Xiaojun constantly invents and reinvents his life story as he lives it introspectively. The very malleability of Xiaojun annuls the magic spell of Other.

---

[253] Lacan, Jacques. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience." In *Ecrits: A Selection*. Trans. Bruce Fink, et al. pp.4-9. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2002.p.8.

Perhaps the most significance space that Xiaojun and his gang inhabit is the military compound. The most visible marker of the military compound is the front gate. From the outside, we see that the military compound is surrounded by a high concrete wall. This silent, formidable barrier obstructs the view of anyone outside the grounds. While metal doors to the gate are generally open, the view from the street penetrates only a short distance. The wall turns at a 45 degree angle inward to the front gate, creating a threshold large enough for Xiaojun and his friends to congregate.

Significant to this threshold is a local idiot, Gulunmu, who always occupies a space alongside an armed guard. Gulunmu greets all who come and go through the gate blissfully. I will discuss this important figure from two perspectives: what Gulunmu stands for as well as the peculiar space that he occupies, the threshold. Psychoanalytically speaking, Gulunmu is an unromanticized, disillusioned and lucid embodiment of Other/Mao/Nation/Father. Almost unsubtly, Gulunmu perpetually carries with him a phallus, a giant stick, which he holds between his legs. Lacanian theory informs us that Other/phallus is fundamentally paradoxical and fraudulent. It functions through a mechanism of misrecognition. Other's shimmering veil deflects the lack behind and asserts the subject's alienating self. Yet, there always exists the specter of an intrinsic lack, a sense of inadequacy to hold up the locus of the Other in spite of its fascinating façade. That is to say, the Other is a lack covered up by the deceptive

Figure 5.5

Figure 5.6

presence of an alluring veil. In Seminar IX, Lacan repeats this concept saying that there is no Other of the Other. In the same logic, he writes that "I ask you to refuse what I am offering you because that's not it."[254] In light of Lacanian psychoanalysis, Gulumnu as the embodiment of Other is indeed of significance. Other's shimmering façade is here ripped off. What is revealed is an inscription of absence, lack and madness. Gulunmu's presence thus shows that Xiaojun has traversed the fantasy of the deceptive veil (Mao, the secular God has hailed the entire country). That is, he perceives the salient lack in the Other/Mao and lives with such lack. Indeed it has become a matter of routine and mundaneness that Xiaojun and the other boys call out to Gulunmu and great him as they pass by.

I have offered a psychoanalytical reading of the image of Gulunmu and indicated that through this very image, the film implicitly shows Xiaojun's recognition of and detachment from the Phallus/Other/Mao. Here I wish to supplement such reading with a socio-political reading. Gulunmu is a deep and mythical embodiment of the Cultural Revolution itself. Ten years of madness is condensed and petrified into this very figure. This image bespeaks to the root of horror of the Cultural Revolution – the societal, political, educational and economical breakdown and disestablishment. The space that Gulunmu inhabits is of interest: he always standing *outside* the compound gate. That is to say, Gulunmu is situated outside Xiaojun's imaginative space. The film thus keeps the Cultural Revolution at bay by placing Gulunmu at the threshold, muted,

[254] Lacan, Jacques. "Four Fundamental Concepts." In *I: On Jouissance*. Encore, Seminar XX. Trans Fink, Bruce. W.W. Norton, 1999. 1-13.

superfluous. In this light, *In the Heat of the Sun* is a dream of sovereignty propelled by a desire to resist and emancipate from the overwhelming history.

Inside the military compound and beyond the threshold of Gulunmu, it is a dream space. By dream space, I mean that it is a counter site to the real space of society outside the compound. The history is suspended here as the gang turns this privileged space into a frivolous playground, a site of temporary relaxation, quietude and pleasure. Xiaojun and his gang enjoy the use of a large supply room that doubles as their hideout. The supply room has all the amenities of a home with cots for sleeping, tables and chairs for meals, and large armchairs in which to lounge. The first time we are introduced to this private space, Xiaojun enters with food for his friends and is ambushed by Yu Beipei who peppers him kisses, much to the amusement of everyone else. Yu Beipei chases him and Xiaojun is pinned down by his friends. When Xiaojun pushes Yu Beipei to the floor, she feigns tears only to jump up screaming with laughter and chase the boys again. The second time the supply room is shown is when Xiaojun has been summoned from his bedroom by Big Ant to discuss Yan Gao's assault and eye injury. Like a military headquarters, the boys use the privacy of this room to plan out their retaliation. During the last scene in the supply room, the entire space is illuminated by light from a hundred or more candles. The gang dresses up in military uniforms and dances to music from a record player. In this space the gang acts loudly and free from fear of being overheard. Uninhibited, they drink, smoke, and play their

games. I want to suggest that fun and games, idleness and play, are the protean life force itself. It enables the youths to resist and suspend history performatively.[255]

Indeed, the physical space becomes exceedingly surreal and dreamlike. At times, the external and internal spaces become indistinguishable. This is best exemplified by the housing complex in which Xiaojun happens upon Mi Lan's apartment. He first seeks out the building in order to use his key making skills to peer into the lives of others. As he first approaches the building, he stops to stare at the façade. The fenestration includes large arches with recessed windows and there are covered walkways along the ground floor. The stairwell can be accessed from two sides and leads up the open airway of the building. The rooftops are a wonderland, with iron dragons and merlons. Xiaojun imagines himself a great spy:

> The 'click' of a lock popping open propelled me into a realm of sheer bliss. This feeling, only the Soviet army attacking Berlin in World War II could have felt what I feel.

While picking a lock to an apartment, Xiaojun is interrupted when a small boy comes home with his grandmother. He hides until they are gone but immediately moves on to another apartment, deciding to pick a built-in lock for the first time –up until then he had only picked padlocks. As he works open the door, his face is illuminated by golden light from within. It is with a mystical aura that Xiaojun enters Milan's home for the first time. Every object within this space emits a soft glow. Resonating the space itself,

[255] I will return to the theme of childish play at a latter section.

the girl who inhabits it – Mi Lan – remains evermore elusive. At times, the narrator freezes the flow of narration to question if Mi Lan ever existed:

> But wait…My memory plays tricks. I've confused reality and dreams. Maybe she never fell asleep in front of me. She may never have stared at me like that. Heavens! If not, why is her gaze and her sleeping figure so deeply etched in my brain?

Repetitively erasing and revising his previous narration, the narrator purposefully elicits suspension of belief from the viewer. Parallel to rendering Other into a naked, unveiled image of madness, the narrator makes clear that his heroine is but a mere flight of fancy, an unruly dream he had in his youthful years. Indeed, as the narrator goes on to say:

> I even suspect I didn't meet Mi Lan for the first time on the street but when she visited. That afternoon, Liu Yiku asked her over, and Big Ant and I waited at the gate for her... that's the first time we met and that's why Big Ant and I played *Vasily* and didn't talk a lot to her. I hardly knew her. In fact, I never really knew her. Heavens! Is Mi Lan the girl in the photograph? And whatever happened to Yu Beipei? Maybe she and Mi Lan were the same person? I really don't dare think about it.

Throughout the entire film, Xiaojun is a solitary, an aloof figure in the sense that he does not privilege any other person (be them his friends or parents) over his own self interest. In other words, Xiaojun is very much detached and alienated. His feeling toward Mi Lan, however, threatens to unravel his aloofness and detachment. Extraordinary to this passage then is his renunciation of and estrangement from Mi Lan,

the only object of desire. Here, the narration demonstrates a keen awareness that there is no intrinsic love rapport between him and Mi Lan. Significantly, the narrator renders Mi Lan, the sublimated beauty, interchangeable with Yu Beipei, the young woman who is perpetually available but undesired. The crucial point of this narration is then the narrator's perception that Mi Lan and Yu Beipei are indistinguishable material signifiers fulfilling his dream fantasy.

*****

The Child and his games

It would almost be infeasible to imagine a time or space in human history when the overwhelming historical culture could be more difficult to escape from than China's Cultural Revolution. Even in a privileged space, such as the military compound I have discussed above, the signs and banners, the songs and crowds, would be overpowering. Perhaps the greatest form of resistance under such circumstance involves passive withdrawal, the discrete avoidance of that which is in nature avoidable. This is the very power of boredom. Boredom comes off as a form of resistance that is anything other than mere *reactive*, to invoke Nietzsche here. There is no resentment in the affect of boredom. Neither is there morality generated by saying NO to the overwhelming external environment. I argue that boredom is quintessentially an attribute of a protean self, one that should be added to the four attributes outlined by Lifton – pluralism, malleability, estrangement, and indeterminacy. In the words of Lifton, "the protean self

represents an alternative to violence."[256] I read boredom as precisely a non-reactive, non-defensive and non-violent performance. A bored youth may very well delve into the overwhelming historical culture but devoid of purposes or interests. He goes beyond the power configurations of Maoism. In other words, a bored youth transcends the suffocating historical context in his very *aimlessness, idleness and disinterestedness.*

The blinding light that the narrator highlights in his opening monologue represents none other than Mao who is the sun. Mao becomes a long, hot summer. This trance-like summer, however, is filled by the narrator with *insignificant* and *boring* daydreams and fantasies by an ordinary youth. There are neither inspiring stories of great historical events nor gloomy stories of victimhood. There is only an ordinary story of a teenage boy propped up by all-too-familiar themes such as friendships, love relations, betrayal, sexual fantasy, boredom and idleness. Yet this 'boring' story harbors immense *emancipatory* power. The dominant historical culture is greatly obscured and decentralized with this *ordinary* teenage story. Through the very act of detaching himself and his story from the extraordinary historical context, Xiaojun escapes its hegemony and renders it irrelevant and thus powerless. Indeed, an ordinary story of boredom, idleness and disinterestedness empowers Ma Xiaojun to roam listlessly and blissfully on the very brink of the Cultural Revolution without being engulfed by it. To analyze its emancipatory power, one has to ask the simple question: from what is one emancipated? The answer is the excesses of the Cultural Revolution – its excitedness

[256] Lifton, *The Protean Self.* p.11.

and ecstasy, mass meetings, powerful crowds moving in ritualistic madness, the prevailing sense of defenselessness. Such scenes are deafeningly absent from *In the Heat of the Sun*. In what follows, I seek to delineate the emancipatory power of boredom by giving a nuanced reading of one particular scene where boredom is intrinsically connected to childish play.

When he learns to make keys, Xiaojun first makes a key to open his father's desk drawer in which he finds army knives, Mao badges, military shoulder tabs, and condoms tucked inside of a diary. He makes believe he is a soldier, radioing for ammunitions to be fired in his direction as if in a war hero movie. The sequence of shots here is well crafted. Xiaojun blows up one of the condoms like a balloon. We only see him from behind at first, hearing the sounds of each breath before he turns to reveal his profile with the, now giant, condom fully inflated. As he bats it around the room we hear only crickets chirping outside the room and Xiaojun's battle reenactment sounds. But when the condom collides with a figurine, puncturing it and causing it to deflate, Xiaojun hurriedly puts away his newfound treasures, locks them back up, turns out the lights, and nervously lies on the bed.

Critic Lu Tonglin's reading of this scene, and the entire film by extension, is largely informed by Zizekian theory on ideology. She is sensitive to the parallel between the Cultural Revolution and youthful

Figure 5.7

Figure 5.8

Figure 5.9

sexual desire. In her own words: "One can say that in Jiang's film erotic desire is shaped by the dominant ideology, while the dominant ideology is expressed in the form of erotic desire."[257] Lu Tonglin further evokes this parallel in her interpretation of this specific scene:

> As a matter of fact, the close relationship between ideology and eroticism becomes a recurrent pattern. For example, when Ma Xiaojun uses his selfmade master keys to open his parents' locks, at first he wears all his father's medals and badges with Chairman Mao's likeness on them in order to play the role of a Communist war hero in front of a mirror. Nevertheless, his next toy is no longer an ideological icon, but his parents' tool for sexual pleasure, a condom, which he mistakes for a balloon.[258]

Lu's perception of the complicity between the youth image of Xiaojun and the dominant ideology is made most evident in the following passage:

> This partially heroic image is part of the protagonist's fantasy at a personal level, and part of the Chinese people's fantasy at a collective level. After all, many more zealous participants than dissidents emerged during the Cultural Revolution. At one moment or another, for one reason or another, almost all participants showed certain zeal, while very few or none openly and persistently resisted the pressure of the collective frenzy.[259]

---

[257] Lu, Tonglin. "Fantasy and Ideology in a Chinese Film: A Ziz;ekian Reading of the Cultural Revolution." *positions: east asia cultures critique.* 12:2 (Fall 2004) pp. 539-564 ,553.

[258] Ibid. p.551.

[259] Ibid. p.547.

Although a fine and informative reading of *In the Heat of the Sun*, Lu's essay annihilates the very possibility of resistance within the power configuration as self is perpetuated into misrecognition, a delusion, and a paranoid knowledge. As a result, the nuanced youth image, Ma Xiaojun, is reduced into a mirror image of the overwhelming historical process.

In his important article "A Letter on Art," Althusser endows art with a critical power: "what art makes us see…is the ideology from which it is born, in which it baths from which *it detaches itself as art*, and to which it alludes."[260] Jiang Wen's art, *In the Heat of the Sun*, precisely resists from within the power configuration of Maoism. It makes the viewer perceive the lack in Other, as I have discussed in sections on Gulunmu and Mi Lan. The question remains, how does art detaches itself from ideology? As a way of addressing this question, I offer a drastically different reading of the scene from Lu Tonglin's interpretation. The questions I want to raise regarding this scene are: do we see lucid playfulness or narcissistic intoxication? Do we discern detachment and boredom or do we see an oblivious immersion in the power configuration? Instead of reading the correspondence between Mao Badges and condom as the eroticization of ideology, I read it as purposeful displacing, transforming, playing and deliberate blaspheming. Xiaojun succeeds in transforming the objects of Mao propaganda – army knives, Mao badges, military shoulder tabs – into his toys. The sacred position of Mao images, for which countless were persecuted and even killed due to mistreatment of

[260] Althusser, Louis. "Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre." *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. London: New Left Books, 1971. 221-228, 1480, emphasis is mine.

such items, are defiled not only by Xiaojun, who exhibits detachment from the objects but by his father who lumps the images of Mao into a drawer with his condoms. What we see is a bored child who wanders among objects of profane history, of objects of ideological fetishism with a detached, playful aura. What we see is a child who navigates through the realm of his collected toys indifferently and uncaringly. To answer the question I raised earlier, it is through this dialect of childlike play and boredom art's critical power of detachment is realized.

Other images of Maoist propaganda are subtly displayed throughout the film. Far from investing these objects with sacred meaning, these images and items become mere props used to fill up the background and are impotent as to the story told. Inside Xiaojun's home, there are propaganda posters on the walls, a bust of Mao in the room, and even a few "Little Red Books" on the bookshelf. These items are moved around in different scenes; sometime on the bookshelf, other times in the bedroom or over a table. Significantly, they are often seen as being cluttered together with *ordinary items* such as portraits of Xiaojun's parents hung *over* the images of Mao. These new spaces for the objects of Mao propaganda essentially signify a violent *displacement* of these objects. From this displacement ensues a complete erasure: objects of Mao propaganda are completely absent from Mi Lan's apartment. Instead, Mi Lan's picture is hung over her bed; an accordion sits on the table; a telescope hangs on the wall. These items replace the icons meant to be central in the lives of youths during the Cultural Revolution and each carries an immense potential of a different story.

Last, I want to look at Xiaojun's miraculous gift, or game, of making keys to sneak into other peoples' private spaces and transform them into his own private space. His gift/game plays an essential role for the structure of the narrative itself. While supporting the fictional structure, I argue that such gift/game ultimately functions to resist social structure from within. To repeat Althusser's insight on art: authentic art emerges from within the ideological material, alludes to it and detaches itself from it. As I argued briefly before, the detachment is achieved by way of playing. There is an unmistaken correspondence between Xiaojun's gift/game and Red Guards' invasion of home during the Cultural Revolution. Homes were invaded and purged at the whim of Red Guards. I argue that the ultimate horror lies in that home, the most private space was blasted *open* and transformed into open public spaces where policeman hails at will. Xiaojun's game/gift, while alluding to such ideological raw material, detaches itself from the violence of symbolic intent by the very means of playing. His game undoes the horror for his 'invasion' is non-violent: the private space remains a private space as he comes and goes without a trace.

I want to end my analysis on *In the Heat of the Sun* with a reference to director Jiang Wen's own words. In a 2007 interview with CNN, Jiang Wen spoke of his choice in representing the events during the Cultural Revolution in his film, *In the Heat of the Sun*:

> When this film was made, it had to be reviewed before it was released, and people asked me … as children during the Cultural Revolution, were your feelings really that important? Shouldn't you focus on the more

> official or general feeling instead to tell the story? I don't doubt that during that period, a lot of bad things happened in society and there were a lot of deaths, and I know it was a rather big political activity. But if I wanted to portray that time through the eyes of children who lived through that time, then I would have to film it in that way. Of course, I think the solution is that different people should make films according to their own perspectives. Different people should make films according to their own lifestyles. Then, that would give a complete story of what went on during the decade-long Cultural Revolution.

The words of Chinese censors rephrased by director Jiang Wen here bespeaks a hierarchy of feelings: "official feeling" and "general feeling" are the privileged modes of cultural articulation of a past. Children's feelings which are diagnosed to be irrelevant and undisciplined are in need to be subordinated. Such hierarchical structure of feelings articulates the official desire to normalize and homogenize the memory of the Cultural Revolution. What is significance about *In the Heat of the Sun* is that it is a *self-interested, independent youth story* that falls outside of homogenization of memory. My reading has not been interested in deciphering director Jiang Wen's intent, to know what the director may or may not be trying to tell us about the Cultural Revolution. Rather, I have been interested in the immense *possibilities* inherent in an ordinary story of a teenage boy during the Cultural Revolution that allow for a *redemptive poetics of youth,* that transcends the binary logic of victim/perpetrator.

*****

The Postmodern Life of My Aunt: a synopsis

In reading Ann Hui's film, *The Postmodern Life of My Aunt,* alongside with *In the Heat of the Sun,* I explore how Ann Hui's film differs from and resonates with Jiang Wen's film. I argue that a redemptive poetics of youth plays a crucial role in both films' re-representations of the Cultural Revolution. In comparison with Ma Xiaojun who appears to be a free wanderer roaming in both physical and psychic spaces, Auntie Ye is a former sent-down youth. Yet the film is by no means limited to a narration of victimhood, pathos and loss. There is a constant filmic desire to protect the protean life force from the great damage inflicted upon by the Cultural Revolution. Greatly limited, the protean life force nevertheless emerges dimly and temporarily as a redemptive hope that brackets, suspends and exits from the suffocating foul air of history.

The Postmodern Life of My Aunt tells the story of Ye Rutang's (Auntie Ye) life in Shanghai. The film can be broken into three segments. The first segment of the story begins with Kuan Kuan, Auntie Ye's nephew, coming to stay with his aunt. With a comical mood, we are introduced to Auntie Ye's lifestyle as Kuan Kuan settles in. The neighbor, Ms. Shui who is about Auntie Ye's age, is nosey and pops in unannounced with her cat who she dresses in a tutu. Ms. Shui's questioning of Kuan Kuan reveals the friendly rivalry she has with Auntie Ye. One of the biggest laughs comes after Kuan Kuan's request to turn on the AC is denied. Sweaty from the hot and humid climate, he awakens in the middle of the night to discover his aunt, covered head to toe in blankets, has sealed off her room with the AC on high. The second segment of the story comes

when Auntie Ye begins dating a younger man, Pan Zhichang. Pan's exaggerated poetic lifestyle and sensitivity –he will spontaneously sing Beijing Opera and recite poetry and proclaims to love everything beautiful –bring out the soft side of Aunti Ye providing added comic relief.

Yet a muted pathos constantly competes and threatens to unravel the comical mood. Auntie Ye is subjugated to a series of scams that foreshadow the limitations of her own self-created freedom and her youthful life in Shanghai. The first such scam involves her own nephew who tries to extort money from his aunt to help a girl whose face is severely scared. Auntie Ye then allows herself to be scammed by Pan on two different occasions, indicating that it is by conscious choice that she fails to see through his lies.

The last segment of the film carries a strikingly different tone, turning from comedy and light drama to heavy handed tragedy. When she loses her life savings to Pan and, injuring herself, finds herself in the hospital and in need of help, her poetical life in Shanghai is abruptly cut short and her own traumatic past revealed. Originally from Shanghai, Auntie Ye was one of the sent down youths made to live in the cold and dreary city of Anshan during the Cultural Revolution. There, she married an uncouth local worker and had a daughter, both of whom she left behind to reclaim her life in Shanghai as well as her lost youth. The story ends with Auntie Ye consigned to her life back in Anshan, as her nephew prepares to go abroad and her daughter dreams of similarly escaping.

*****

Absent Presence: the intergenerational trauma

An interesting twist regarding the Cultural Revolution is immediately discernable in a comparative reading of *In the Heat of the Sun* and *The Postmodern Life of My Aunt*. Whereas the former filmic text is allegedly situated in the historical time of the Cultural Revolution, the latter film focuses on the present. Whereas the Cultural Revolution is *presently absent* in *In the Heat of the Sun*, as I have suggested via images such as Gulunmu and Mao propaganda objects, the trauma of the Cultural Revolution is *absently present* in *The Postmodern Life of My Aunt*.

Trauma theory informs us that trauma does not inhabit a particular time or space. Although Auntie Ye displaces herself from it by living in a different time (present) and space (Shanghai), trauma holds an absent presence. It is worth speculating the web of relationship in which Auntie Ye is immersed in Shanghai. She coexists with these people whose presence enables the absence of Auntie Ye's own trauma to be articulated. *It is a traumatic mother-daughter narrative depending on irredeemable loss and cruel separation.*

In Shanghai Auntie Ye is caught in a web of deeply injured individuals, some crippled, and others who literally wear their scars on their faces. Each perceptible bodily injury, either the crippled leg or the wounded face, significantly hides an intergenerational trauma. They are metaphors of the Auntie Ye's trauma, and by extension, the deep wound of the Cultural Revolution (psychological and linking multiple temporalities and spaces). On a larger level, the heavy theme of familial breakdown is indicative of one of the most irresolvable legacies of the Cultural

Revolution, the forsaken/abandoned children of the sent down youth who returned in large numbers to the cities.[261]

Fei Fei, the girl who stages a fake kidnapping with Auntie Ye's nephew Kuan Kuan, has a severe scar covering the entire right half of her face. She creatively cuts her hair to conceal this graphic spectacle with her bangs. Though she explains that it is her grandmother who caused her to become disfigured, carelessly dropping her on the hot stove when she was a small child, the ultimate perpetrators are her parents who moved to far away Xinjiang. Both parents remarried, had other children, and abandoned their daughter to live with her grandmother.

Jin Yonghua –who is bleeding from a deep knife wound across her left cheek when Auntie Ye first encounters her – has a sick daughter, frail, bedridden in a hospital with mounting bills Jin cannot afford. Jin confesses to Auntie Ye that she wishes her daughter would die so that she might be free to start her life over. Jin eventually acts on her wish, killing her daughter and landing herself in jail.

Kuan Kuan, Auntie Ye's nephew, arrives in Shanghai with a full leg cast and becomes permanently crippled in the end of the film. His traumatic relationship with his mother is incidentally disclosed in one scene: When Auntie Ye frantically and nervous calls Kuan Kuan's mother and reports that he is missing, Kuan Kuan's mother dismissively labels this as another one of his 'vanishing acts,' revealing the mother's

[261] This phenomenon has been addressed in the popular TV miniseries, Nei Zhai (Sinful Debt), which earned exceptionally high ratings in China (42.62% viewership) when it first came out in the 1980s. See <http://baike.baidu.com/view/900834.htm#sub900834> (last visited April 14, 2011).

general neglect of Kuan Kuan at home. One other example includes Pan, who tells Auntie Ye that his mother ignored him and that only his aunt treated him well.

The relationship between Auntie Ye and these motherless individuals is one of sympathy and nurturing. Often times assuming a maternal role to them, I argue that Auntie Ye in truth is working through her own traumatic relationship with her abandoned daughter, Ma Dafan. Through each of these mediated figures, Auntie Ye gains access to her daughter, the abandoned child in a different temporal space. The link between these injured individuals and Auntie Ye's own guilt is made most evident in a scene toward the end of the film. After visiting Jin in jail and learning that Jin has killed her own daughter in an effort to free herself, Auntie Ye walks home numbly, loses her balance, takes a nasty spill down concrete stairs and breaks her leg. Auntie Ye's absent daughter then appears in the hospital when Auntie Ye becomes bedridden. The daughter eventually confronts the mother eruptively:

> I still remember clearly how you looked when you left my dad and me, not so much as a flicker of regret. You left as if you were going on a date. You didn't even look back. I could always imagine what you looked like when you got back to Shanghai, cocky as hell about your new life, right? No more troubles, right? Go to hell, you old bitch!

I want to de-translate the English translation, taken from the subtitles, of the daughter' curse and lay out the original Chinese words here: "*si qu ba, mei si ni*" literally translates as "*die go, beautiful death you*." My own translation would be "Go to hell, die in your

beautiful (dream)!" In the next section, I will look closely at Auntie Ye's beautiful dream.

*****

A Redemptive Narrative of Youth: disjointed time and space

In what way is *the Postmodern Life of My Aunt* a narrative of youth? Or better still, a redemptive narrative of youth? To answer this question, I would like to translate the title of the film into *The Pre-modern Life of My Aunt*, or *The Post-trauma Life of My Aunt*. That is, Auntie Ye returns to a pre-modern Shanghai with a will to leave the trauma brought on by the Cultural Revolution behind her. In this disjointed coming together of the 'pre' and 'post' as well as a rearrangement of temporality through space (vice versa), I argue that Auntie Ye metamorphasizes into an *old young maid* (老少女) who undoes the sequential time and reclaims the lost youth with a protean grace.

Shanghai is not the Shanghai we know. Auntie Ye navigates through Shanghai according to her own memories of the city. She refuse to buy a cell phone, her English accent is British, not American as is now preferred. She paints traditional landscape, sings opera and recites classical poetry. She roams through the narrow, mundane, dirty, petty, zigzag alleys of Shanghai while the de-familiarized pearl of the Orient is relegated to the far background, to a different time that she does not yet recognize. Only one time, the modern façade of Shanghai is finally shown: it is mediated through the car window behind which sits the dramatically aged and numbed Auntie Ye leaving Shanghai to go to Anshan.

The time duration of Auntie Ye's stay in Shanghai, although rendered very subtle, is significantly and precisely ten years. I suggest that this ten-year period is Auntie Ye's dream space where she lives out her youth murdered in historical time. She eventually awakes from this temporal-space matrix and returns to the historical time as an aged woman. In spite of the fact that the film ends with a tragic tone, I argue that Auntie Ye nevertheless succeeded in resisting and temporarily exiting from the horror of history.

Resistance can be disconcerting for it violates the morality imposed on women by history (I think of Hong Ying's mother's betrayal of her husband here). I shall take a much closer look at Auntie Ye's refusal to maternity. I argue that it is not that Auntie Ye refuses the motherhood. It is that motherhood has come too early for the *old young maid* (老少女). As my translation of the film title – *The Pre-Modern Life of My Aunt* – indicates, it is predetermined that Auntie Ye cannot bring her daughter into a youthful past. After all, Auntie Ye is only a young maid there. Unlike most sent down youths who returned to the cities, remarried and had children (a journey to the future), Auntie Ye remains eternally a young maid in her dream space of Shanghai. The daughter's curse – go die in your beautiful dream – is indicative of the dilemma that Auntie Ye faces. The abandoned daughter who lives in the future nevertheless appears in her dream space in mediated forms and addresses the mother via a network of deeply injured individuals. But the sacrifice of the daughter, although disconcerting, is all

necessary in Auntie Ye's refusal to consent to the horror of history, in her will to reclaim her youth.

In her dream space, Auntie Ye redeems her lost youth via *creating a poetical life* which is strangled in historical time, a life that can rejoice, laugh and delight. She fills her apartment with life – she keeps potted plants, harvests caviar from her many fish in large aquariums, and cherishes her "fourteen birds" most of all. She routinely lets her birds fly free in her apartment and her love for them is shown in disapproving glances she give the neighbor's cat. She is artistic, well-versed in poetry and highly cultured. She also demonstrates the art of cooking – her dishes are always exquisitely prepared, perfect in color, aroma and taste.

And most of all, she appears to be a gullible young maid who involves herself in an ephemeral romance. The first encounter between Auntie Ye and Pan during her morning exercise routine is a poetic encounter in the sense that it greatly resonates with classical popular romance between a gifted scholar and a pretty young maid (*cai zi jia ren*). With grace and skill, Auntie Ye is outside next to a pine tree in one of the beautiful city parks wearing a light-pink *taichi* uniform complete with

sword and practicing *taichi quan*. In the middle of her routine, Auntie Ye pauses when the music of Beijing Opera wafts to her ears and mesmerizes her. Reminiscent of a sexually aroused young maiden from a classical popular romance, Auntie Ye acts on her curiosity. She follows the music, a song about a newly-wed bride, to the group of musicians sitting atop a platform nestled in a hilly grove of trees. There, she discovers her 'gifted scholar.' Auntie Ye listens from a respectful distance, watching Pan (a man

ten years her junior) with admiring eyes as he sings the love song from an opera she knows well. Hearing Auntie Ye applaud when the song is over, one of the musicians invites her join them and sing a song. Auntie Ye, with perceptible shyness, accepts their request and in no time is giving directions to the musicians and performing for the kindred lover, Pan. Pan, a Chinese and comical version of Peter Pan who never grows old, deeply understands Auntie Ye. They share in their love of Beijing Opera, reciting lines together spontaneously and dressing up in Pan's collection of Beijing Opera costumes.

Coupled with poetic aura within which a youthful romance unfolds, the film is also charged with a comic aura. Like young lovers sneaking home from a date, Auntie Ye makes Pan climb the stairs to her apartment, rather than take the elevator, so that her neighbors will not see him. Several flights up, Pan drops the watermelon he had bought and it breaks open. Fed up, Pan is going to leave the fruit behind but Auntie Ye climbs down to fetch and begins to eat the watermelon on the spot. "Let's eat it right here. It doesn't matter where we eat it." The same can be said of her youthful escapades. In one particular scene, Auntie Ye goes swimming with Pan donning a deep red full-body swimsuit she has knitted for herself. Complete with long-sleeves, booties and a hood, Pan is unsure what to say as she blushingly models this ridiculous article of

Figure 5.10

Figure 5.11

clothing for him. In these and other comical scenes, Auntie Ye shines as an *old young maid*.

*****

The birdcage and the surreal moon

Whereas *In the Heat of the Sun* portrays a protean self able to transcend the overbearing historical time, the protean self in the *Postmodern Life of My Aunt* is more limited. This protean self is comparable to Auntie Ye's much cherished fourteen birds that are able to fly out of their cage momentarily before having to return. The birdcage, a metaphor for historical time, testifies to the limits of a protean self. In this section, I do a creative reading by suggesting that the ten-year life Auntie Ye had in Shanghai is the sovereign time that the incarcerated bird had before returning to her cage – An Shan. At the threshold between the dream space and the birdcage hangs a surreal moon. I further suggest that this moon not only marks the exit from historical time to dream time, it also helps to create such dream. The absolute beauty of the moon portrayed through filmic language signifies the omnipotence of this dream.

Twice, the moon makes a surrealistic appearance in *The Postmodern Life of My Aunt*. In the first instance, it marks a drastic shift in tone, from playful dramatic-comedy to heavy-hearted tragedy. It is while in the hospital, shortly after the nurse tells Auntie Ye that she will need to have family come to care for her, that she witnesses the moon. Asleep in her hospital bed, the light from the window suddenly goes dark and then a bright glowing light fills the entire room, waking her up. The giant moon moves in on her, stopping just as it fills her window. Its glowing light softly touches her

dramatically aged face and white hair. Significantly, Auntie Ye shows no hint of surprise, not even curiosity. She looks at the moon, smiles knowingly and then calmly closes her eyes. *I argue that this is a moment of recognition*. The bright moonlight must have witnessed her strangled youth, her quiet desperation many years ago. It comforted her and put in her mind the determination to escape the cage. Presently Auntie Ye recognizes the threshold and understands that it is time for her to return to her birdcage.

In the second instance, the moon appears on the other side of threshold – An Shan. Instead being seen by a suddenly aged Auntie Ye, it is being witnessed by two youths this time – Kuan Kuan and Dafan –who are dreaming of escaping from their suffocating cages. Quan Quan comes to visit his aunt in An Shan before leaving for Australia. The moonlight travels across Kuan Kuan's sleeping bag, illuminating his face and waking him up. It is *with awe and wonder* that Kuan Kuan crawls out of his sleeping bag, steps outside to gaze at the giant moon. He is soon joined by Auntie Ye's daughter, Dafan who has had a long-held desire to escape An Shan. Under the soft moonlight, the two youths connect and converse intimately. Kuan Kuan confides in Dafan both his *dream and fear* – his feelings for a girl and his belief that his status of a cripple will forever limit him.

Figure 5.12

Figure 5.13

Figure 5.14

Figure 5.15

I will end my analysis of *The Postmodern Life of My Aunt* with a return to the opening monologue of *In the Heat of the Sun*: "The sun always shone brightly during this period… *it was too bright*." As in the film's title, the sun is an obvious and recognizable reference to Mao Zedong: absolute, eternal and unfailing. While the opening monologue has consistently caught many scholars' critical attention, the only reference to the moon in *In the Heat of the Sun* has been overlooked. This reference to the moon, although brief, is of great significance. This reference is made immediately after the narrator pauses the camera, stops the story, struck by his own failure at recounting the past events of his life truthfully. The ensuing moment –as the camera slowly pans over a propaganda painting, filling the screen with the image of Mao enshrined in the sun – the narrator voices his determination to continue, "*My head is as clear as the moon.* So I will continue our story. Never mind whether it is the truth." Overlapping the moon's power to continue a flexible story with Mao's image as the eternal sun, I argue, is of no coincidence. In light of Ann Hui's surreal moon, I suggest that Jiang Wen's clear moon has a similar function: to ridge the sun's blinding absolutism. While the sun "was too bright," the moon is illuminating in both films. The moon's illuminating power lies in its creativity and poetic sobriety which suggest an infinite openness and possibilities.

*****

Conclusion:

In his influential book, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Mircea Eliade has affectively described the dilemma of modern man and his/her silent desperation:

> In our day, when historical pressure no longer allows any escape, how can man tolerate the catastrophes and horrors of history—from collective deportations and massacres to atomic bombings—if beyond them he can glimpse no sign, no transhistorical meaning; if they are only the blind play of economic, social, or political forces, or, even worse, only the result of the 'liberties' that a minority takes and exercises directly on the stage of universal history?[262]

Invoking the terrors of history out of which there appear no hope of escape, Eliade attempts to highlight the redemptive power of the mythical age. The two films that I have read in this chapter, *In the Heat of the Sun* and *The Postmodern Life of My Aunt* concern themselves with similar questions: how does one survive the triumph of Maoism and the great damage inflicted on the self? How does one navigate past Maoism? The answer given by these two films does not lie in a metaphysical time indicated by Eliade but in the life force itself - a protean self. This protean life force, as embodied in the very image of youth, *offers an exit* from the horror of historical time and *holds off the threat* of its overwhelming power.

[262] Eliade, Mircea. *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History*, Trans. Willard R. Trask. Princeton University Press: New Jersey, 2005. p. 151.

6
Coda:
Ba Jin: Toward an Ethical Relation to History

> I have had too many dreams in my life. But it was during the Cultural Revolution that I had most of my nightmares. Now I should include (in this time) the post–Cultural Revolution. It is not that I clutch on to the Cultural Revolution. On the contrary, the Cultural Revolution clutches on to me.
>
> –Ba Jin[263]

> I clearly remember that I once transformed from human to beast. Some people told me it was but a ten-year dream. Will I dream the same dream again? Why not?..Only when there is no God, there is no beast. We are all humans."
>
> –Ba Jin[264]

> Building a Cultural Revolution museum is not a personal matter. We are responsible for letting our future generations remember the horror and lessons of these ten years.
>
> –Ba Jin[265]

This coda of my dissertation aims to include the voice of a different generation, Chinese senior writers. Ba Jin (1904-2005) certainly has a most unique, persistent, repetitive and unyielding voice. My individual chapters have largely examined texts by Chinese artists who spent their childhood or teenage years during the Cultural Revolution. Although selecting texts can be a subjective and somewhat arbitrary matter,

---

[263] "My nightmare," from Ba Jin's anthology: Words Recounted While Ill available online at <http://www.eywedu.com/sxl/bz24.htm>. (last visited April 7, 2011). The translation is mine.

[264] "There Is No God" from Ba Jin's anthology: Words Recounted While Ill available online at <http://www.eywedu.com/sxl/bz24.htm>. (last visited April 7, 2011). The translation is mine.. http://www.eywedu.com/sxl/xu01.htm

[265] "Cultural Revolution Museum" from Ba Jin's anthology: *Words without a title*. available online at < http://www.eywedu.com/sxl/wt25.htm >. (last visited April 7, 2011). The translation is mine.

I did not intentionally choose to feature the younger generation. Ba Jin's mini essays reflecting on the Cultural Revolution, in fact, are a rare voice. In the words of Geremie Barme, the translator of Ba Jin's *Random Thoughts*, Ba Jin's "short and rambling articles make up to some extent the deafening silence" from senior writers and the "disheartening paucity of similar material."[266] To highlight his voice and pair it the young then seems to be a good ending point for my dissertation.

*****

A Short Biography

Born into a big feudal family in 1904, Ba Jin belongs to the May Fourth generation of Chinese intellectuals and is one of China's most outstanding contemporary writers. His novels have become China's modern classics: the trilogy of *Fog, Rain* and *Lightening*, and the trilogy *The Family, Spring, and Autumn*. Along with Mao Tun, another father figure of Chinese modern literature, Ba Jin was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1975. During the abhorring political nightmare of the Cultural Revolution, Ba Jin was relentlessly persecuted. His novels were labeled as "*giant poisonous weeds*" and were ritualistically burned. There was even a 'Struggling-Ba Jin Team' (*Pi Ba Zu*)." In the words of Ba Jin,

> In the war of Resistance I often claimed that I had 'survived a hundred bombings', now I can congratulate myself on 'surviving a hundred struggle meetings' without being killed or killing myself.[267]

---

[266], Ba, Jin. *Random Thoughts*. Trans. Geremie Barme. Joint Publishing Co. Hongkong, 1984.p.200.

[267] Ibid.

He experienced the sudden death of his beloved wife Xiao Shan and innumerous cruel and un-mourned deaths of his friends. Having survived the Cultural Revolution, Ba Jin continued to be tortured by his endless and relentless nightmares.

*****

Artistic conscience: an ethical relation to history

From 1978 into the 1990s, Ba Jin, who was bed-ridden from 1982 on, produced a series of anthologies consisting of short essays reflecting on the Cultural Revolution. These volumes, *Random Thoughts*, *Seeking*, *Truthful Words*, *Words Recounted While Ill*, *Words without a Title*[268], however, have received great criticism. These criticisms mostly concern themselves with the quality and depth of Ba Jin's writing. For example, *Random Thoughts* was criticized for being wordy, flaccid and repetitious.[269] Such criticism has immediately failed to recognize the most basic value of Ba Jin's writing on the Cultural Revolution – *the human value*. And there is much more: the ethical value. Later, Ba Jin responded to such criticism:

> Some time ago this book was criticized for lacking literary value, I am not going to defend myself here, let me just say that I 'broke into writing unintentionally, I did not start off completely empty-handed, I begin with the most important thing that any writer can possess: an artistic

[268] Only the first volume is translated into English

[269] See Kai juan, *Reading*, September Issue 1980, pp. 54-6,

> conscience. I am confident that if nothing else *Random Thoughts* is proof of this.[270]

Extraordinary to Ba Jin's response is his concept of *artistic conscience*. In light of the artistic conscience, I want to suggest that the significance of Ba Jin's writing on the Cultural Revolution lies in *its ethical relationship to history*. And this ethical relationship to history, as evident in Ba Jin's volumes, consists of three parts: 1) Its affect: Ba Jin's writing has repetitively, emotionally and powerfully voiced out the subjective experience of trauma. 2) Its somber reflection on history: Ba Jin significantly does not portray a binary understanding of the Cultural Revolution. His writing brings out a more complex picture of the Cultural Revolution. He raises the important question of responsibility and sees himself as complicit in his own tragedy. 3) Its plea: Ba Jin does not just gaze into the past and dwells in his personal trauma. He makes a plea on behalf the future generation: China needs to build a Cultural Revolution Museum for her children.

*****

Affect: dream, poisonous weed allergy

Ba Jin's several volumes, as the criticism has it, are indeed "wordy, flaccid and repetitious." The power of his writing, however, resides precisely in its wordiness, sagginess and repetition. Ba Jin's writing is the very symptom of the wound which is deep, open, festering and present. Indeed, one repetitive theme that Ba Jin is obsessed

---

[270] Ba Jin, Trans. Geremie Barme, 1984.

with in his volumes is his repetitive nightmares. In his essay devoted to his nightmares, Ba Jin describes:

> I cry out in vain in the dead of the night: I dreamed that red guards crawled over the wall, broke the window, and hit people with their leather belts. I had the same nightmare for days: what happened in the past reoccurred in my dream. Other people's tragedies are all embodied in me."[271]

Ba Jin's dreams are significantly characterized by their repetitiveness and literacy, two salient characters that Freud recognized in the traumatic dreams that the neurotic soldiers had. Ba Jin's dreams are not screened. Unprotected, he is still vulnerable to the whims of the red guards.

They come to claim Ba Jin through time effortless– not coded, not displaced, not condensed. What Ba Jin dreams, in fact, is not a dream, but a literal intrusion of the original traumatic events in historical time. Ba Jin's dream scene, in light of trauma theory, testifies to and acknowledges the literacy and latency of historical horror.

In addition to his repetitive nightmares, Ba Jin also suffers from a peculiar complex that he has recorded in his essay:

> Many of my friends died in the violence and turmoil…and those who have survived suffer from a variety of strange complexes, illnesses and post purge after-effects. I have personally quite often been worried that I might be subject to that strange and debilitating malaise known as

[271] The translation is mine. "My nightmare," from Ba Jin's anthology: Words Recounted While Ill http://www.eywedu.com/sxl/bz24.htm

> poisonous weed allergy. Its symptoms are easily recognized: the victim experiences a violent shaking of the body the moment his or her writing hand comes into contact with a pen, thus making creative writing of all kinds impossible.[272]

In the light of Ba Jin's 'poisonous weed allergy', the "disheartening paucity" of senior intellectuals' reflection on the Cultural Revolution that Geremie Barme lamented on can be explained. Their words were stuck at the threshold of pain, fear and trauma. They were subjugated by their writings during the Cultural Revolution. They had created 'big poisonous weeds,' a hostile entity that confronted them, ridiculed them and even devoured them.

*****

Ethical responsibility: the Peach Stone Farce

Although Ba Jin's writing can be emotionally overwhelming, it is by no means an uncomplicated venting voice. It pains a much more complex picture of the Cultural Revolution by lucidly reflecting on the important issue of ethical responsibility. Significantly, it does not tell a black and white story of the perpetrators and victimized us.

In an essay titled "The Peach Stone Farce," Ba Jin quotes Alexander Herzen's story that he translated into Chinese:

> A reception was held for the crown prince of the Tsar's family in a small city, during which the prince designed only to eat one peach, leaving the

[272] Ibid. p.46.

> peach stone on a windowsill. As he did so one of the local officials, a tall slender juror and well-known wastrel, walked drunkenly over to the window and pocketed the stone. 'After the reception the juror presented a peach stone to a famous local lady with the explanation that the stone had been personally spat out by his majesty the crown prince. The lady was, naturally enough, delighted with the gift. He then went straight over to another lady and presented her with a second peach stone with the very same words, and then on to a third. All of them were very pleased with his present. 'What had happened was that the juror had purchased five peaches, enabling him to please six ladies with peach stones from the prince? Which one of them got the real peach stone? Well, anyway, each of them thought that she alone had been honored with a stone spat out by the crown prince.[273]

As the title of Ba Jin's essay indicates, the key of the story lies in *the farce* that the peach stone has engendered. What Ba Jin aims to critique here is not the crown prince, nor the wastrel but *"the obsequious attentions"* that people gave to the crown prince. In words of Ba Jin:

> We were plagued with a curious set of quasi-religious ceremonies. The cult of "asking for morning forgiveness and making evening confessions,' the dance of loyalty, and the painstaking shaping of paper flowers of allegiance, interdispersed with cymbal-clashing , drumbeating theatricals… it is high time that we all faced the truth of our own complicity.[274]

---

[273] Ibid. p.74.

[274] Ibid. p.75-76.

What is being highlighted by Ba Jin is the inner complexity of the Cultural Revolution. Just as in the story of the Peach Stone, it is more than simply the crown prince and the wastrel exerting power from top down. There is a reciprocal role played by the general population during the Cultural Revolution – *cooperation and participation.*

Indeed, as evident through his writings, Ba Jin is ridden with guilt for consenting to and cooperating with the perpetrators:

> Let all of the rubbish I churned out during the Cultural Revolution go to the devil! I have caused myself enough anguish by melancholically repeating other people's opinions about things and I know that I have no one to blame but myself for not being more independent.275

Perhaps the most agonizing matter that unsettles Ba Jin is the effect of the essays he wrote by decree[276] during the Cultural Revolution on others. In producing them, Ba Jin assumes the role of a perpetrator. His review of *City without Night*, for instance, was directly responsible for the government labeling of the film as "a big poisonous weed."[277] In his memoir on Hu Feng, the 82-year old Ba Jing writes:

> I am shamed and disgusted by my own performance (even if it was a forced performance). Looking at my words written thirty years ago, I still

---

[275] Ibid. p.192.

[276] The ox-demons and snake spirits imprisoned to a cowshed, in addition to their physical torture, would spend their time writing confessions, histories of their relationships with other political suspects and reading Chairman Mao's Red Book. They were often forced to write essays that 'show their positions (表态)' on certain matter, person or other artists' work.

[277] Ba Jin, *Random Thoughts*, p.200.

> cannot forgive myself and I do not want to be forgiven by the future generations.[278]

In the same article, Ba Jin also openly apologizes to Lu Ling. Self-reflexive in nature, Ba Jin's writing has shed important light on the moral ambiguity of the Cultural Revolution where the boundary between the perpetrators and the victims can be quite slippery.

*****

Ba Jin's Plea: "We Must Never Forget"

In his essay titled, "We Must Never Forget," Ba Jin writes passionately against the idea of forgetting and moving forward:

> I am left in a daze, are they the ones who are dreaming, or is it me? Am I supposed to pretend that everything I went through for those eleven years was but a figment of my imagination? Was the disaster that befell the arts a fantasy? How can they be so forgetful? The mountain of rubbish behind us is still exuding foul odours that are polluting the air and we are supposed to ignore it and scream out 'eyes front, look to the future!' What about all of the people who are covered with wounds, can't we at least let them clean their injuries and put on bandages? 'Forget, forget everything!' Shout as loud as you will. No one can forget those harrowing years. Let the next generation decide what it was all about, let them write the histories.[279]

---

[278] Ba Jin, "Missing Hu Feng" *Words without a Title* , available online at: <http://www.eywedu.com/sxl/wt30.htm>. (last visited April 7, 2011).

[279] Ba, Jin. *Random Thoughts*. p.176.

When severely ill and bed-ridden in his 90s, Ba Jin continues to make his plea on behalf youths: "Building a Cultural Revolution Museum is a very necessary matter. Only those who do not forget past can be the master for the future." [280] Sadly, Ba Jin took his dream of building a Cultural Revolution Museum to his grave.

Cultural battles against Museums have become an animated topic in academia in recent years, particularly regarding the museums for the commemoration of historical atrocities such as the Holocaust. The general concerns for building museums include the danger of cultural ossification, commercialization, replacement of mourning work and etc.[281]

However, there is a much more menacing form of cultural appropriation of past atrocities, namely, the complete exclusion of them from public spaces. The failure of establishment of the Cultural Revolution Museum within China speaks to this latter form of cultural appropriation.

Worse still, a different type of museum has thrived through China: the Cultural Revolution theme restaurants tinged with conservative nostalgia. In this light, the future understanding of the Cultural Revolution has indeed become a grave, pressing, and urgent matter.

---

[280] Ba Jin. "Cultural Revolution Museum" from Ba Jin's Anthology: *Words without a title. Available online at:* <http://www.eywedu.com/sxl/wt25.htm>.(last visited April 7, 2011). The translation is mine.

[281] See relevant books such Young, James E. *The Texture of Meaning: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*. Yale University Press, 1994; Williams, Paul. *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*. Berg Publishers, 2008; Dickinson, Dr. Greg, et al. Eds.. *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials (Albma Rhetoric Cult & Soc Crit)*. University Alabama Press, 2010.

*****

Conclusion: a memorial space in time

My dissertation has been in some way a response to the failure of building a Cultural Revolution Museum in China. If commemoration cannot occur in the modality of space and becomes embodied in physical forms, it can certainly occur in the modality of time. For the wound is still open. Therefore my dissertation represents an effort to transfigure the absent physical museum into time. And literature helps me to integrate this museum into narrative time. Each art piece that I have gathered in this museum is a memorial space for the Cultural Revolution in its own right. Zhang Xiaogang's "Bloodline: Big Family" paints a visual space where viewers are able to commemorate a ghost family, a metaphor for the traumatic disintegration of family system during the Cultural Revolution. Han Shaogong's theoretical writing and literary performance create a narrative space where the roots can be nurtured and the damaged child can reemerge. Hong Ying's *the Daughter of Hunger* uses time as her monument. She commemorates tens of millions of hungry ghosts made by the great famine under Mao in her birthday. The coexistence of death and birth in the matrix of Hong Ying's birthday signifies the immense guilt Chinese people have on their shoulders. Both Jiang Wen and Ann Hui have carved a filmic space where a protean self is able to grow, shine and resist the horror of history.

My dissertation has allowed their voices to be heard communally. Thus the wound of the Cultural Revolution can be socialized.

Bibliography

Abraham, Nicholas and Maria Torok. *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis, Volume 1*. University of Chicago Press, 1994.

---. "Notes on Phantom: A Complement to Freud's Metapsychology," *Critical Inquiry* 13(2) (Winter 1987)

Adorno, Theodor W. "After Auschwitz." In *Negative Dialectics*, Translated by E. B. Ashton. New York: Continuum, 1973.

---. *Aesthetic Theory*. Edited and translated by G. Adorno and R. Tiedemann. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

Adorno, Theodor, et al. *Aesthetics and Politics*. Edited by Fredric Jameson. London: Verso, 1977.

Alexander, Jeffrey C. *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. University of California Press, 2004.

Anderson, Marston. *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Literature in the Revolutionary Period*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1990.

Arendt, Hannah. *On Violence*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972.

Aristotle. "Poetics." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. Norton: New York, 2001. 90-116.

Armstrong, Nancy and Leonard Tennenhouse, eds. *The Violence of Representation: Literature and the History of Violence*. London: Routledge, 1989.

Arnold, David. *Famine: Social Crisis and Historical Change*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988.

Auerbach, Erich. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature.* Translated by Willard R. Trask. Princeton, N.Y.: Princeton University Press, 1953.

Baker, Nancy Nicholas. "Teaching the French Revolution." *Perspectives* 28.4 (Apr. 1990): 17-18.

Bakhtin, Mikhail M. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Helene Iswolsky. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968.

Barboza, David. "The Rise of Zhang Xiaogang." 2008. Artzinechina, Inc. May 2010 <http://www.artzinechina.com/display_vol_aid272_en.html>.

Bataille, Georges. *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*. Translated by Mary Dalwood. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986.

Becker, Jasper. *Hungry Ghosts: Mao's Secret Famine*. New York: Free Press, 1996.

"Behind Mao's Red Rule: The 100 Violent Years." *Life*, Sept. 23, Sept. 30, and Oct. 7, 1966.

Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1969.

---. *The Arcades Project*. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999.

---. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Translated by John Osborne. London: Verso, 1977.

---. *Reflections*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. New York: Schocken Books, 1986.

Bennett, Jill. *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*. Stanford University Press, 2005.

Bernard, Viola W., Perry Ottenberg, and Fritz Redl. "Dehumanization." In Nevitt Sanford, Craig Comstock et al., eds., *Sanctions for Evil: Sources of Social Destructiveness*, 102-24. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1973.

Braester, Yomi. *Witness against History: Literature, Film, and Public Discourse in Twentieth-Century China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003.
Brooks, Peter. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.

Brown, Laura S. . "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma," *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.

Brown, Wendy. "Wounded Attachments," *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*. Princeton University Press, 1995. 52-76.

Browne, Nick, et al., eds, *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Burgin, Victor. *In/Different Spaces: Place and Memory in Visual Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

Cai, Rong. *The Subject in Crisis in Contemporary Chinese Literature*. University of Hawaii Press: Hawaii, 2004.

Carr, David. *Time, Narrative, and History*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.

Carrère d'Encausse, Hélène and Stuart R. Schram. *Marxism and Asia: An Introduction with Readings*. London: Allen Lane, 1969.

Caruth, Cathy. "Trauma and Experience: Introduction" and "Recapturing the Past: Introduction." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.

---. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History***.** Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

---. Ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.

Chinese Cultural Revolution as History, The. Joseph W. Esherick, Paul G. Pickowicz and Andrew G. Walder. Eds. Stanford University Press, 2006.

Chinese Literature Magazine, ed. *Best Chinese short Stories: 1949-1989*. Beijing: Panda Books, 1989.

Cheah, Pheng. "Crisis of Money." *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 16.1 (Spring 2008): 189-219.

Chow, Rey. *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*. Columbia UP,1995.

---. *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory, and Comparative Work.* Durham, NC and London: Duke UP, 2006**.**

---. *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films: Attachment in the Age of Global Visibility.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.

---. *Ethics After Idealism: Theory-Culture-Ethnicity-Reading.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998.

Ci, Jiwei. *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution: From Utopianism to Hedonism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994.

CNNWorld. "Interview with Jiang Wen." July 31, 2007. Available online at: <http://articles.cnn.com/2007-07-31/world/talkasia.jiangwen_1_venice-film-festival-zhang-yimou-s-red-sorghum-jiang-wen/4?_s=PM:WORLD>. (last visited April 20, 2011).

Cohen, G.A. *Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Cohen, Margaret. *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

Cohen, Norman. *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*. Rev. and expanded ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1970.

Confucius. *Confucius: Analects (full translation with running traditional commentary, glossary, and extensive introduction).* Trans. Edward Gilman Slingerland. Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003.

Dai Jinhua. *Dianyin lilun yu piping shouce* (Handbook to film theory and criticism). Beijing: Science and Technology Document Press, 1993.

De Man, Paul. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979.

Deng Xiaoping, "Congratulatory Message to the Fourth Congress of Chinese Writers and Artists," In *Chinese Literature for the 1980s: The Fourth Congress of Writers and Artists*, ed. Howard Goldblatt. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1982.

Denton, Kirk A. "Lu Ling's Literary Art: Myth and Symbol in Hungary Guo Su'e." *Modern Chinese literature 2.* No.2 (1986): 197-209.

---. *The Problematic of Self in Modern Chinese Literature: Hu Feng and Lu Ling.* Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998.

Dikötter, Frank. *The Discourse of Race in Modern China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992.

Dittmer, Lowell and Chen Ruoxi. *Ethics and Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*. Berkeley: Center for Chinese Studies, Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1981.

Dolezelova – Velingerova, Milena. "Lu Xun's 'Medicine.'" In Goldman, ed., *Modern Chinese Literature in the May Fourth Era*, 221-31.

Duke, Michael S. "Chinese Literature in the Post-Mao Era: The Return of 'Critical Realism.'" In Michael S. Duke, ed., *Contemporary Chinese Literature in the Post-Mao Era*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.

Epstein, Mark, *Thoughts Without a Thinker*. BasicBooks: New York,1995.

Eberhard, Wolfram. *A Dictionary of Chinese Symbols: Hidden Symbols in Chinese Life and Thought*. Translated by G. L. Campbell. London Routledge, 1986.

---. *Guilt and Sin in Traditional China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967.

Eliade, Mircea. *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History*, Trans. Willard R. Trask. Princeton University Press: New Jersey, 2005. Hartman, Saidiya V.. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, 2008 June; 26: 1-14.

Erickson, Kai. "Notes on Trauma and Community," *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.

Fanon, Frantz. "The Negro and Psychopathology." *Black Skin, White Masks.* Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove Press, 1991. 141-209.

Farrell, Kirby, *Post-traumatic Culture: Injury and Interpretation in the Nineties.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.

Feigon, Lee. Book Review: Hungry Ghosts: Mao's Secret Famine. *The Journal of Asian Studies* 57(1) (Feb., 1998), 181-183. p.182.

Felman, Shoshana. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History.* Taylor & Francis, 1992.

Feuerwerker, Yi-tsi Mei, "Ideology, Power, Text: Self-Representation and the Peasant 'Other'." *Modern Chinese Literature*. Stanford University Press: Stanford, CA, 1998.

Freud, Sigmund. "Beyond Pleasure Principle," *The Freud Reader.* Ed. Gay, Peter. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989. 594-625.

---. "Mourning and Melancholia," *The Freud Reader*. Ed. Gay, Peter. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989. 584-588.

Friedrich, Geoge Wilhelm. "Phenomenology of Spirit." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism.* Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. Norton: New York, 2001.

Furth, Charlotte. "Blood, Body, and Gender: Medical Images of the Female Condition in China, 1600-1850." *Chinese Science* 7 (1986): 43-66.

---. *May Fourth in History*. In Benjamin I. Schwartz, ed., *Reflections on the May Fourth Movement: A Symposium*, 59-68. Cambridge: East Asian Research center, Harvard University, 1972.

Geremie Barme and Bennett Lee, Trans., *The Wounded: New Stories of the Cultural Revolution* 77-78 (Hong Kong: Joint, 1979).

Geertz, Clifford. "Thick Description: Toward and Interpretive Theory of Culture". In Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 3-30. New York: Basic Books, 1973.

Goldman, Merle. *China's Intellectuals: Advise and Dissent*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981.

Goodman, David G., Ed. *After Apocalypse: Four Japanese Plays of Hiroshima and Nagasaki*. Columbia University Press, 1986.

Gray, Jack and Patrick Cavendish. *Chinese Communism in Crisis: Maoism and the Cultural Revolution*. New York: Praeger, 1968.

Halbwachs, Maurice. *On Collective Memory.* Trans. and ed. Lewis A. Coser. University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Han, Shaogong. "Can ren [残忍]." *An shi [暗示]*. Ed. Yang Liu. The People's Literature Publishing House: Beijing, May 2008.

---. *A Dictionary of Maqiao*. Columbia University Press (1995).

---. "Hu si luan xiang – da bei mei huaqiaoribao ji zhe Xia Yu [胡思乱想 – 答北美华侨日报记者夏瑜]." *Da Ti Xiao Zuo [大题小作]*. Ed. Yang Liu. The People's Literature Publishing House: Beijing, May 2008.

---. “Jin bu de hui tui [进步的回退].” *Da Ti Xiao Zuo [大题小作]*. Ed. Yang Liu. The People's Literature Publishing House: Beijing, May 2008.

---. “Pa Pa Pa.” *Homecoming? and Other Stories.* Trans. Martha Cheung. Cheng & Tsui: Boston, MA, October 1995.

---. “Qian yi shi [潜意识].” *An shi [暗示]*. Ed. Yang Liu. The People's Literature Publishing House: Beijing, May 2008.

---. “Translator’s Preface.” *A Dictionary of Maqiao.* Trans. Julia Lovell. Columbia University Press: New York, 2003.

---. “Wen Xue De Gen,” in *Zuo Jia*, Vol. 5 (Peking, 1985).

---. “Wen xue: mengyou yu suxing [文学： 梦游与苏醒].” *Da Ti Xiao Zuo [大题小作]*. Ed. Yang Liu. The People's Literature Publishing House: Beijing, May 2008.

---. “Zheng Ju [证据].” *An shi [暗示]*. Ed. Yang Liu. The People's Literature Publishing House: Beijing, May 2008.

Hanan, Patrick. “The Technique of Lu Xun’s Fiction.” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 34 (1981): 53-96.

Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 26.12.2 (June 2008): 1-14.

He, He. “Zhang Xiaogang: Hidden Man in the Painting World [张晓刚: 画坛套中人].” Beatles [甲壳虫]. 1(2009): 98-99.

Hegel, Geoge Wilhelm Friedrich. “Lectures on Fine Art.” *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. Norton: New York, 2001. 636-44.

---. “Phenomenology of Spirit.” *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. Norton: New York, 2001. 630-35.

Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York: Basic, 1992.

Hicks, George, ed. *The Broken Mirror: China After Tiananmen*. Chicago: St. James Press, 1990.

Hirsch, Marianne, "The Generation of Postmemory." *Poetics Today* 29(1)(Spring, 2008). 103-128

Hong, Ying, Interview with China News (December 21, 2009), available online at <http://www.chinanews.com/cul/news/2009/12-21/2028954.shtml>. (last visited April 10, 2011).

Hong, Ying. *Daughter of the River: An Autobiography*. Trans. Howard Goldblatt. Grove Press: New York, 1998.
Hsia, C. T. "Aspects of the Power of Darkness in Lu Hsun," In *The Gate of Darkness: Studies on the Leftist Literary Movement in China*, edited by Hsia Tsi-an. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968.

---. "Obsession with China: The Moral Burden of Modern Chinese Literature." Appendix 1 of *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1971.

Huyssen, Andreas. "Anselm Kiefer: the Terror of History, the Temptation of Myth." *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings*. Eds. Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg. Rutgers University Press: New Jersey, 2003. 383-88.

"Interview with Zhang Xiaogang." Talk Asia. 2007. CNN.com. May 2010 <http://edition.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/asiapcf/07/19/talkasia.zhang.script/index.html>.

Ivy, Marilyn. "Trauma's Two Times: Japanese Wars and Postwars," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 16.1 (Spring 2008): 165-188.

Ju, Baiyu and Yangang Li. "The Person Who Travels Against Time [时间的逆行者]." *MING(Attitude) [明日风尚(生活态度)]*. 2007: 20-21.

Kamuf, Peggy. "Violence, Identity, Self-Determination and the Question of Justice: On *Specters of Marx*." In *Violence, Identity, and Self-Determination,* edited by Hent deVries and Samuel Weber. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997.

Kane, Penny. *Famine in China, 1959–61*. St. Martin's Press: London, 1988.

Kaplan, E. Ann. *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2005.

Kaplan, E. Ann and Wang, Ban., Ed. *Trauma and Cinema: Cross- Cultural Explorations.* Hong Kong University Press, 2004.

Khanna, Ranjana. "Indignity," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 16.1 (Spring 2008): 39-77.

Kleinman, Arthur and Joan Kleinman "The Appeal of Experience; The Dismay of Images: Cultural Appropriations of Suffering in Our Times." *Daedalus* 125:1 (Winter, 1996), pp. 1-23, 2.
Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection.* Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

Kuai, Lehao, "Zhang Xiaogang: an artist of Kafka style [张晓刚: 卡夫卡式的艺术家]." *Southern People Weekly [南方人物周刊]*. 2007: 67-69.

LaCapra, Dominick. *History and Memory after Auschwitz*. Cornell University Press, 1998.

---. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

Lacan, Jacques. "Four Fundamental Concepts." In *I: On Jouissance*. Encore, Seminar XX. Trans Fink, Bruce. W.W. Norton, 1999. 1-13.

---. *Ecrits: A Selection*. Trans. Bruce Fink, et al.. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2002.

Lanzmann, Claude. "The Obscenity of Understanding: And Evening with Claude Lanzmann." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. 200-20.

Larson, Wendy. "Extracting the Revolutionary Spirit: Jiang Wen's In the Heat of the Sun and Anchee Min's Red Azalea." In Larson, *From Ah Q to Lei Feng: Freud and Revolutionary Spirit in 20th Century China*. Pp.155-96Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009.p.156.

Lau, Joseph S. M., "Visitation of the Past in Han Shaogong's Post-1985 Fiction." *From May Fourth to June Fourth: Fiction and Film in 20th-century China.* Eds. Ellen Widmer and David Der-wei Wang. Harvard University Press: Boston, MA, January 1993.

Ledderose, Lothar. *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art*. Princeton University Press: New Jersey, 2000.

Lee, Leo Ou-fan. *Lu Xun and His Legacy*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

---. *Voices fiom the Iron House: A Study of Lu Xun*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.

Leenhouts, Mark. *Leaving the World to Enter the World: Han Shaogong and Chinese Root-Seeking Literature*. Leiden: CNWS Publications, 2005.

Levi, Primo. *The Drowned and the Saved*. 1986. Trans. Raymond Rosenthal. London: Abacus, 1989.

Lévinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and infinity: an essay on exteriority.* Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Duquesne University Press: Pittsburg, PA, August 1969.

Leys, Ruth. *Trauma: A Genealogy.* University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Liu, Yang. Ed., *Da Ti Xiao Zuo [大题小作]*. The People's Literature Publishing House: Beijing, May 2008.

Lifton, Robert Jay. *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of Brainwashing in China.* M.D. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1961.

---. *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation*. BasicBooks: New York, 1993.

---. *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima*. New York: Random House, 1967

---. *Revolutionary Immortality: Mao Tse-tung and the Chinese Cultural Revolution* New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1976.

Liu, Kang. "The Language of Desire, Class, and Subjectivity in Liu Ling's Fiction". In *Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Chinese Literature and Society,* edited by Tong-ling Lu. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993.

Liu, Kang and Xiaobing Tang, eds. *Politics, Ideology, and Literary Discourse in Modern China.* Duke University Press, 1993.

Lloyd, David. "Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recovery?" *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 2.2 (July 2000): 212-228.

Lloyd, David. "Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recovery?" *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 2.2 (July 2000): 212-228.

Lu, Peng, "Artists in Art History." The Sanya Collection: Wang Guangyi. May 2010 <http://www.art2feedbrains.com/wangguangyisanya.html>.

Lu, Tonglin. "Fantasy and Ideology in a Chinese Film: A Ziz;ekian Reading of the Cultural Revolution." *positions: east asia cultures critique.* 12:2 (Fall 2004) pp. 539-564

Lu, Xiaopeng. "Art, Culture, and Cultural Criticism in Post-New China." *New Literary History* 28.1 (1997) 111-133.

Lubell, Pamela. *The Chinese Communist Party During the Cultural Revolution: The Case of the Sixty-One* Renegades. Palgrave: New York, 2002.

Lukács, Gyorgy. "Realism in the Balance." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. Norton: New York, 2001. 1033-57.

Ma, Yue. *Dissertation: The catastrophe remembered by the non-traumatic: Counternarratives on the Cultural Revolution in Chinese literature of the 1990s*. AAT 3150688. The University of Texas at Austin, 2004.

MacFarquhar, Roderick and Michael Schoenhals. *Mao's Last Revolution*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 2008.

Mapp, Nigel. "Spectre and Impurity: History and the Transcendental in Derrida and Adorno." In *Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History*, edited by Peter Buse and Andrew Stott. New York: St. Martin, 1999.

Miller, Joseph Hillis. *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982.

Monleón, José B. *A Specter Is Haunting Europe: A Sociohistorical Approach to the Fantastic.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990.

Newman, Robert D. *Transgressions of Reading: Narrative Engagement and Exile and Return.* Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993.

Nora, Pierre. "General Introduction: Between Memory and History." In *Realms of Memory*, edited by Pierre Nora et al., I:I-20. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

Peng, Hsiao-yen. *Antithesis Overcome: Shen Tsung-wen's Avant-gardism and Primitivism*. Taipei: Academia Sinica, 1994.

Plato. "Republic." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. Norton: New York, 2001. 49-80.

Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party Since the Founding of the People's Republic of China (关于建国以来党的若干历史问题的决议), available online at <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/shizheng/252/5089/5103/20010428/454968.html> (last visited April 18, 2011).

Roth, Michael S. . "Trauma, Representation, and Historical Consciousness." *Common Knowledge* 7.2 (1998): 99-111.

Rothberg, Michael. "Decolonizing Trauma Studies: a Response," *Studies in the Novel* 40.1.2 (Spring and Summer 2008): 224-234.

---. "There Is No Poetry in This: Writing, Trauma, and Home," *Trauma at Home*. Ed. Judith Greenberg. University of Nebraska Press, 2003.

---. *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*. University of Minnesota, 2000.

---. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization (Cultural Memory in the Present)*. Stanford University Press, 2009.

Rummel, Rudolph J. *China's Bloody Century: Genocide and Mass Murder Since 1900* New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1991

Santner, Eric L. *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory and Film in Postwar Germany*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell university Press, 1990.

Schwarcz, Vera. *Bridges Across Broken Time: Chinese and Jewish Cultural Memory*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

Silbergeld, Jerome. *Body in Question: Image and Illusion in Two Chinese Films by Director Jiang Wen*. Princeton University Press: New Jerseay, 2008.

Silverman, Kaja. *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

Smith, Karen. *Nine Lives: The Birth of Avant-Garde Art in New China, The Updated Edition*. AW Asia: New York, 2008.

Smil, Vaclav. "China's great famine: 40 years later." *British Medical Journal (BMJ).* 319(7225), 1619-1621 (18 December 1999).

Song, Weijie. "Transgression, Submission, and the Fantasy of Youth Subculture: The Nostalgic Symptoms of *In the Heat of the Sun*." In Haili Kong and John A. Lent, eds., *100 Years of Chinese Cinema: A Generational Dialogue*. Norwalk, CT.: EastBridge, 2006, 171-182

Source List and Detailed Death Tolls for the Twentieth Century Hemoclysm: <http://necrometrics.com/20c5m.htm>. (Last accessed April 18, 2011).

Sprinker, Michael, ed. *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's* Specters of Marx. London: Verso, 1999.

Surin, Kenneth. "Conceptualizing Trauma, But What About Asia?" *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 16.1 (Spring 2008): 15-37.

Unwin, Tim. "The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s." *Times Higher Education*, Aug. 12, 2010, (1960).

Wang, Ban. *Illuminations from the Past: Trauma, Memory and History*. Stanford UP, 2004.

Wang, David Der-wei. *The Monster That is History: History, Violence, and Fictional Writing in Twentieth-Century China*. University of California Press: Berkeley, 2004.

---. *The Sublime Figure of History: Aesthetics and Politics in 20th Century China,* Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997.

---. *Fictional Realism in 20th-Century China: Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen*. Columbia University Press, 1997.
---. *Running Wild: New Chinese Writers, edited with the assistance of Jeanne Tai* New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

---. "Three Hungry Women". *boundary 2*. 25(3), Modern Chinese Literary and Cultural Studies in the Age of Theory: Reimaging a Field (Autumn, 1998), 47-76. p.75.

Whitehead, Anne. *Trauma Fiction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2004.

Xu, Gary. *Sinascape: Transnational Chinese Cinema at the Turn of the Millennium*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007.

---. "My Writing, Your Pain, and Her Trauma: Pronouns and (Gendered) Subjectivity in Gao Xingjian's Soul Mountain and One Man's Bible," *Journal of Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 14:2 (December 2002), 99-129.

Xu, Jian. "Subjectivity and Class Consciousness in Hong Ying's Autobiographical Novel The Hungry Daughter." Journal of Contemporary China 56 (Aug. 2008): 529-42.

Yaeger, Patricia. "Consuming Trauma: Or the Pleasures of Merely Circulating." *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community.* Miller, Nancy K. and Jason Tougaw, eds. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002.

Young, James E. . *The Texture of Meaning: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*. Yale University Press, 1994.

Yan, Wenjin [严文井]. "Wo shi bu shi shang le nian ji de Bing Zai? [我是不是个上了年纪的丙崽?]." *Wen Yi Newspaper [文艺报]*. August 24, 1985.

Yang, Lan. "Zhang Xiaogang: Why Do I Paint [张晓刚: 我为什么画画]." Digest [书摘]. 8 (2008): 30-33.

Yang, Xiaobin. *The Postmodern/Post-Mao-Deng History and Rhetoric in Chinese Avant-garde Fiction.* Ph. D. Diss. Yale University, 1996

Young, James E. *The Texture of Meaning: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning.* Yale University Press, 1994.

Yu, Xia. "Hu si luan xiang – da bei mei huaqiaoribao [胡思乱想 – 答北美华侨日报记者夏瑜]." *Da Ti Xiao Zuo [大题小作]*. Ed. Yang Liu. The People's Literature Publishing House: Beijing, May 2008.

Yue, Gang. *The Mouth That Begs: Hunger, Cannibalism, and the Politics of Eating in Modern* China. Duke University Press, 1999.

Zhang, Fa. "Xun Gen Wen Xue de Duo Chong Fang Xiang [寻根文学的多重方向]." *Jianghan Tribune* (June 2000): 83-88.

Zhang, Peiyao. "Cong Zi Yan Zi Yu Dao Zhong Sheng Ding Fei: Han Shaogong de Wen Hua Fan Si Jing Shen de Cheng Xian [从自言自语到众声沸腾:韩少功小说的文化反思精神的呈现]." *Contemporary Writers Review* (June 1994): 12-18.

Zhang, Xiaogang. The Strength Within [内心的力量]. *Chinese Oil Painting [中国油画]*. Feb. 2008: 7-8.

"Zhang Xiaogang's Dialogue with Ouyang Jianghe [张晓刚与欧阳江河对谈]." 2009. ArtsBj.com [北京文艺网]. May 2010 < http://www.artsbj.com/Html/interview/wyft/msj/95118_6.html>.

Zheng, Shiping. *Party vs. State in Post-1949 China: The Institutional Dilemma*. Cambridge University Press, 1997.