Mythorealism as Method: Ideology and Form in Yan Lianke's Fiction

by

Haiyan Xie

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Abstract

This dissertation engages with novels by the contemporary Chinese writer Yan Lianke, to explore his formal experiment that he calls mythorealism (神实主义) and investigate how mythorealist form produces textual meanings that subvert the totalizing reality prescribed by literary realism and that reshape a diversity of realities. The term *mythorealism,* which Yan coined to describe his writing style, refers to a set of literary devices that combine elements from Chinese folklore and folk culture with literary techniques in Western modernism and postmodernism. In his use of mythorealism, which probably carries the burden of social critiques that would perhaps be straightforward politics in a different context, Yan transcends the temporality and provinciality of immediate social events and historical contingencies, and transforms his potential sociopolitical commentaries into more diversified concern for humanity, existential issues, and spiritual crisis. This dissertation identifies three different modes of mythorealist narratives exemplified in Yan's three novels: *Dingzhuang meng* 丁庄梦 (*Dream of Ding Village*), *Sishu* 四书 (*The Four Books*), and *Feng ya song* 风雅颂 (*The Odes of Songs*). Each of these three narrative modes emphasizes a different aspect of mythorealism, all bringing the marginal under closer scrutiny by weaving their voices into the literary depiction of sociopolitical problems. Culminating in different kinds of absurdities, these mythorealist narratives create a contradictory and paradoxical world in which a dichotomous worldview is completely subverted.

The significance of mythorealism in this study lies first in its deconstructive function of authorial voice by writing from outside the dominant culture and ideology, and in its reconstructive purpose of giving voice to the underrepresented. Second, mythorealism contributes to the genre of native soil literature by integrating the most original and local elements of Chinese rural society into a kind of postmodern writing and inscribing the idea of deconstruction into it, thus providing a cosmopolitan perspective on and horizon in writing rural China. Third, mythorealism places Yan in a self-contradictory position, implying an unresolved conflict between his desire to speak for the oppressed and marginal and his uncertainty about humanity and the capacity of literature to reshape the moral fabric of society.

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Introduction: Contemporariness and Contemporary Chinese Literature

In his essay "What Is the Contemporary?" Giorgio Agamben poses the question: "Of whom and of what are we contemporaries?" (39) By reflecting on Friedrich Nietzsche's claims in *The Birth of Tragedy* and echoing Roland Barthes's summary of Nietzsche, "The contemporary is the untimely" (40), Agamben comes up with a more comprehensive definition of "the contemporary" or "contemporariness," and interprets the adjective "untimely" as follows: contemporaries are not "those who coincide too well with the epoch, those who are perfectly tied to it in every respect," because these people do not manage to see their epoch, neither are they able to "firmly hold their gaze on it" (41). Thus, according to him, "contemporariness" encompasses two layers of meaning. First, it is "a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. More precisely, it is that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism" (43); second, "the contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness. . . The contemporary is. . . who is able to write by dipping his pen in the obscurity of the present" (44).

Obviously, "contemporariness" in Agamben's context is a notion that can only be perceived beyond the limitation of the temporal and spatial scopes. It is a philosophical term that is not necessarily closely related to the everyday word "contemporary." The latter, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, means

"belonging to the same time, age, or period; living, existing, or occurring together in time," or "modern; of or characteristic of the present period." Conversely, "contemporariness" indicates a state or a characteristic of both distancing and being close to the present. Therefore, the question is: who belongs to the contemporary, living in his time but at odds with his own time? One such exemplary figure may be Walter Benjamin's "flâneur," a notion derived from Baudelaire used to understand the modern urban experience of nineteenth-century Paris. A flâneur is a city stroller and observer of street life, disengaging himself from the crowd and taking up a new stance toward the present world. He demonstrates an attitude of both detachment from and involvement in modern life, and he is the one who is able to hold his gaze on his own time firmly and perceive the darkness of the world in which he lives. The nuances between Baudelaire and Benjamin's flâneur should be noted: the former enjoys the gaze and devotes himself to watching the crowd in the street, while the latter is an "other" who appears like an anachronic intruder into space and can hardly integrate himself into the seemingly harmonious surroundings.

Benjamin's flâneur can be a prototype of "the contemporary" as defined by Agamben. However, as Agamben argues, "contemporaries are rare" because "to be contemporary is, first and foremost, a question of courage" (46).

In his acceptance speech for the Franz Kafka Prize in 2014, Chinese writer Yan Lianke defined himself as a person who felt darkness, coincidentally resonating with Agamben's philosophical idea of "contemporariness":

I developed a keen appreciation for the somber side of our existence. I came to understand that darkness is not the mere absence of light, but rather it is life itself. . . . I know that darkness is not only the time, the place and the event, but also the water, the air, the people and the most daily existence and the breath. . . . The greatest darkness is people's adaptation to the darkness; the most terrible darkness is people's indifference to and oblivion of light living in the darkness. . . . I see the unbelievable ugliness of human souls, the humiliation the intellectuals are suffering and the great efforts they are making to live with dignity and think independently, and I see more Chinese people, who live for money and hedonism and whose inner lives are emptied and disintegrated by power.

（我成为一个最能感受黑暗的人。我也过早地懂得了黑暗，不仅是一种颜色，而且就是生活的本身……我知道，黑暗不仅是时间、地点和事件，而且还是水、空气、人、人心和人们最日常的存在和呼吸……最大的黑暗，是人们对黑暗的适应；最可怕的黑暗，是人们在黑暗中对光明的冷漠和淡忘……我看到了人的灵魂中有不可思议的丑恶；看到了知识分子为了挺直脊梁和独立思考

的屈辱与努力；看到了更多的中国人的精神生活，正在金钱和歌声中被权力掏空和瓦解。）[1]

This passage provides a general outline of Yan's perception of his own time. Darkness in this context constitutes two aspects of his commentary: the social reality replete with abuse of power and corruption on the one hand, and the degradation of human nature on the other. Instead of being a detached bystander who merely describes the darkness, Yan perceives the darkness of his time as something that concerns him and never stops engaging him.

Yan Lianke and Chinese Fiction in the 1980s and 1990s

Yan is among the most prolific, successful and outspoken contemporary Chinese writers. He has won many awards including the prestigious Lu Xun Literary Prize in 1998 and 2003, the Laoshe Literary Award in 2005, and the Franz Kafka Prize in 2014. He was also shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize in 2013 and 2016, and longlisted in 2017. Ever since his novel *Serve the People!,* a story satirizing Mao's famous slogan, was banned soon after its publication in mainland China in 2005, he gradually rose to fame both at home and abroad as a controversial author. Most of Yan's stories take place during or refer to politically charged moments in recent Chinese history. Yan is widely regarded, especially by Western readers, as an overtly political

[1] This speech was translated by Carlos Rojas, but he omitted a number of sentences in the original speech. Here, I have quoted his translation with my modifications. See Yan Lianke, "Find Light in China's Darkness."

writer who criticizes official corruption and state policies both during and after the Mao era, constantly testing the boundaries of state censorship. He has even been nicknamed "book-banned writer" in China because he is the most frequently banned or censored author in mainland China. In addition to his early novellas such as *Xia Riluo* 夏日落 (*Xia Riluo*, 1992) banned in the last century, his novels *Wei renmin fuwu* 为人民服务 (*Serve the People,* 2005) and *Dingzhuang meng* 丁庄梦 (*Dream of Ding Village*, 2006) were banned, and *Sishu* 四书 (*The Four Books,* 2011) was rejected by a dozen publishing houses in mainland China before being published in Taiwan. His 2015 novel *Rixi* 日熄 (*The Day the Sun Died*) was only released in Taiwan for unknown reasons, and his novel *Feng ya song* 风雅颂 (*The Odes of Songs*, 2008), on corruption in academia, was controversial even before its publication. Although it was eventually published in mainland China, it was immediately criticized for allegedly "casting aspersions on Peking University, slandering the humanist traditions of higher education, and wantonly demonizing intellectuals at institutes of higher education" （影射北京大学，诋毁高校人文传统，肆意将高校知识分子形象妖魔化） ("Yan Lianke fangtan").

Is Yan Lianke, grounded in the above solid facts, one of the rare contemporaries who "is able to write by dipping his pen in the obscurity of the present" as Agamben argues? If he is, then what exactly is his contemporariness? And most importantly, why should one be particularly interested in him since other contemporary writers in China demonstrate similar concerns about their own time? To answer these questions, first and

foremost, Yan cannot be treated as an individual writer that is isolated from his peers, nor can he be fully understood without references to the fluid social and political environment in which he lives.

Yan was born in Song County in Henan Province in the late 1950s, a turbulent period in Chinese history. The three-year Great Famine (1959-61), and political movements such as the Great Leap Forward (1958-60), the Anti-Rightist Movement (1957-59) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) took place during or shortly after this time. Yan was too young to be directly influenced by these movements in his teenage years; however, living in the impoverished countryside, he most directly experienced poverty, hunger, and the corruption of rural politics in his village, and dreamed of escaping from the countryside and living a better life in the city. In his youth, Yan became fascinated by the subjects of power, city, and health, all of which became central elements in his fiction. Yan has said of his early life that "survival means everything to me. The desire for survival leads to my worship of power, cities, health, and life. It can be said that survival occupies an important position in my memory" (生存就是一切，因为生存，导致我对权力的崇拜，对城市的崇拜，对健康的崇拜，对生命的崇拜。可以说，生存，在我的记忆中占有重要的位置。) (*Wode* 12).

Yan inscribes his personal experience as part of Chinese collective memory in the present in the form of literature. Agamben would label such experience embedded in a national history as "archaic" or "origin," which, according to him, "is not only situated in a chronological past" but also "contemporary with historical becoming and does not

cease to operate within it, just as. . . . the child in the psychic life of the adult" (50). Nevertheless, this particular characteristic of what Agamben calls "contemporariness" is not exclusive to Yan, but universal among Chinese writers who were born in the same period and had the same traumatic memories of their youth. There may, however, be significant differences in how this "archaic origin" is perceived, interpreted and represented by different writers, as well as how it is integrated into one's present. This is an important point to which I will return later in this chapter.

The late 1980s and early 1990s, as a transitional period from the so-called new era to the post-new era in Chinese literature, is essential to the discussion of contemporary Chinese literature or writers. Chinese writers were influenced by two forces from home and abroad that fundamentally changed the landscape of Chinese literature since May Fourth: China's market economy, and the importation of Western literature and Western modernist theories. There seems to be no connection between these two forces, but they both work towards the same goal, moving Chinese literature from one extreme of being heavily politically charged to the other of invariably singling out the political dimension and voluntarily avoiding sociopolitical commentary.

Since the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s, which brought the "revolutionary" manipulation of discourse to an end, Chinese writers gradually released themselves from "the greatest pressure in their handling of the relationship between literature and politics" (Hong 271). After the trends of "*shanghen wenxue*" 伤痕文学 (scar literature) and "*fansi wenxue*" 反思文学 (introspective

literature) in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which sought to expose and criticize the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, the mid- and late 1980s consecutively saw the appearances of "x*ungen wenxue"*寻根文学 (root-seeking literature), "*xianfeng xiaoshuo*" 先锋小说(avant-garde fiction) and "*xin xieshi zhuyi xiaoshuo*" 新写实主义小说 (new realist fiction). All of these forms and techniques have adopted Western modernism, to varying degrees, in order to resist the traditional dominant discourse of revolutionary realism. According to Han Shaogong 韩少功, the initiator of root-seeking movement, "the root of literature should be situated deep in the soil of national traditions and culture, and if the roots are not deep, it's difficult for the leaves to flourish" (251).[2] This literary movement can be regarded as a positive response to Chinese traditions that had been rejected or overlooked since May Fourth. It further develops into a deeper exploration of "the relationship between historical mistakes and the 'sediment' of the national culture and psychology" (Hong 368). However, root-seeking writers are generally ideologically ambiguous, and gradually shift their attention from sociopolitical subject matter to local customs and cultural traditions. One example of a root-seeking writer is Jia Pingwa 贾平凹, one of the best-known contemporary writers in China, who first became recognized in the early 1980s and is still productive today. Jia's works are characterized by his "truthfully representing Chinese people's lives and moods in

[2] The English translation was quoted from Hong Zicheng's *A History of Contemporary Chinese Literature*, trans. Michael M. Day, 2007, pp. 366. The original reads: "文学之 '根'应深植于民族文化的土壤里，根不深，则叶难茂。"

modern times employing the Chinese tradition of beautiful representation" （以中国传统的美的表现方法，真实地表达现代中国人的生活和情绪） (Jia 70). As an apolitical writer, Jia touches upon politics because there is no clear boundary between the political and the apolitical, just as one cannot completely distinguish the political aspect from others such as culture, ethics, belief, and tradition. As a result, Jia's novels often leave social problems unsolved and moral judgments suspended.

Like many other readers, Yan was obsessed with revolutionary literary works in his teenage years because, according to him, these were the only books he could get access to before the end of the Cultural Revolution. Yan has claimed he was indebted to Chinese writer Zhang Kangkang 张抗抗 for "guiding" him to the world of literature. Zhang wrote in the preface of her novel *Fenjiexian* 分界线 (*The Boundary Line*, 1975) that her fate was changed through writing from being exiled to the remote countryside during the Rustication Movement to being recruited as a full-time writer in Harbin. Similarly, Yan's literary career started with military novellas in the late 1970s while he was serving in the army in Henan. As his experience in the army provided him abundant sources for his military literature, Yan's writing primarily centered around soldiers during this period. But instead of such grand themes as nationalism, heroism, and war and peace, he is more concerned with the everyday lives of ordinary soldiers. The soldiers in his works mostly come from the poor countryside, and they join the army not for the sacred ideal of protecting the country but, like him, for the more personal ideal of changing their fate. Undoubtedly, Yan's subversion of traditional military literature bears

the testimony of the trend of Chinese literature in the 1980s, which tended to subvert the revolutionary narrative.

Although he was closely following the realist style at the time, Yan's writing has a flavor of existentialism, probably because he was, like many of his contemporaries, influenced by the Western modernist literature that was imported to China in the 1980s. This is demonstrated in a collection of his essays on Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, Sartre's *The Wall*, Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude,*[3] among other works. Many of his novellas, in particular, written in the 1990s are tinged with nihilism, such as *Xia Riluo*, *Heping yuyan* 和平寓言 (*Peace Fables*, 1993), *Heping zhan* 和平战 (*The War of Peace*, 1994). These novellas depict human feelings of impotence confronted with helplessness and hopelessness. But Yan did not go as far as other writers who came to prominence by devoting themselves to experimentation with new forms of literature by creatively imitating the Western modernist style. In 1985, for instance, Liu Suola's 刘索拉 novella *Ni biewu xuanze* 你别无选择 (*You Have No Other Choice*), integrating Western modernist techniques such as stream-of-consciousness and absurdism into a local story, marked the beginning of Chinese modernist fiction. This modernist trend was pushed to the peak by a group of

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[3] In his essay "Miandui gushi de taidu he miandui xiaoshuo de zhenshi" 面对故事的态度和面对小说的真实 (The Attitude towards Stories and the Fictional Truth), Yan states that the absurdity Kafka conveyed in *Metamorphosis* "has been constantly disturbing my mind for ten years and made me respect Kafka with a suspicious mind" (17). Not until about twenty years later when his second reading of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* suddenly enlightened him, like a ray of light in his mind illuminating Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and *The Castle* so that the messages of absurdity in Kafka's works finally get through to him. All these facts show that he started to read these Western modernist novels in the 1980s. This essay was written in 2006 and published in the collection of *Zhangliang shu yu bi de juli* 丈量书与笔的距离 (*Measuring the Distance between the Book and Pen*), 2012.

writers who became known as avant-garde, including Ma Yuan 马原, Hong Feng 洪峰, Ge Fei 格非, Su Tong 苏童, Yu Hua 余华, and Can Xue 残雪. Unlike traditional fiction which aims to present a realistic picture of life and provide a realist commentary on social reality, avant-garde writers are more concerned about the innovation of literary forms than the content of their works. Their application of the Western modernist technique makes their fiction obscure and often unintelligible. Although avant-garde fiction inevitably "touch(es) upon the discourse field of contemporary China and memories of the violence and spiritual scars of the 'Cultural Revolution'" (Hong 387), most of the stories are ahistorical, irrational and ideologically ambiguous, and primarily focus on the psychology and subjectivity of individuals. In general, these Chinese avant-garde writers are different from both their Western counterparts and their Chinese peers: they "do not have clear anti-social emotions, neither do they take a resolute stance of anti-tradition. . . . What they pursue is the helpless escapism resulting either from the unrepresentable reality or from their unwillingness to represent the reality" (没有鲜明的反社会情绪，也不摆出反传统的断然姿态……他们追求的实则是无法表现或者不愿表现现实的无奈的逃逸姿态。) ("Xianfeng" 40). Avant-garde fiction is unable to sustain itself because of its exhaustion of forms and of the obscurity of its contents; therefore, many avant-garde writers have gradually moved toward realistic styles. One such example is Yu Hua, about whom I will say more later.

Another trend, known as New Realism, emerged at approximately the same time as the appearance of avant-garde, and became especially prominent in the 1990s. In

general, the new era is a period of value reestablishment after Chinese literature broke away from the restraint of its political function. As Zhang Yiwu 张颐武 notes, "The 'new era' is a period in which all the literary speculation and discussions are 'man-centered'. . . It is a process during which value has been reestablished and then deconstructed from the linguistic perspective; a process of searching for 'modernity' and 'individuality'" ("'新时期'是一个始终以'人'" 为中心进行文学的思考和探讨的时期……一个由重建价值到从语言的角度对之加以消解的过程, 一个探索'现代性'以及'个人性'的过程"。) (9). The "man" in new-era literature has been transformed from the "revolutionary" man to the "individualized" man, a transformation that makes a new imagined space for post-new-era literature possible.

The post-new era was marked by a special social environment, although, strictly speaking, the periodization *per se* appears problematic since the boundary between the two eras is not so distinguished. During the 1990s, the success of the market economy resulted in a rising commercial culture among the Chinese public, which underlines human individuality but simultaneously caused the expansion of human desire and the prevalence of materialism. It was an era in which society as a whole was focused on a single activity: doing business. The tide of consumerism also swept across the intelligentsia. Overwhelmed by the idea that "getting rich is glorious," "*Xiahai*" (literally, jumping into the sea of commerce) became a fad among intellectuals, bearing the testimony of the elite's salute to the market economy. Along with the trading fever came greed, foul play, and pleasure-seeking. As Cai Xiang 蔡翔 lamented, "whereas prosaic if

not vulgar taste and value orientation are quietly being established, the spiritual (*jingshen*) is subject to repudiation and ridicule. An age of vulgarization has descended" (qtd. in Zhang Xudong 115).[4] Correspondingly, literature, subject to the selection of the market, tended to cater to the "vulgar" taste of its readers and gradually lost its critical edge as the guardian of humanistic values. "Pure literature" became marginalized and was gradually replaced by popular fiction and other forms of public culture.

The "Wang Shuo 王朔 phenomenon" is a typical case. Wang was arguably one of the best-known writers during the late 1980s and 1990s. His works seemed to function mainly as immediate sources of entertainment and consumption, with many of them adapted for film and television. Wang openly declared that "I'm most interested in the social stratum that [enjoys] a popular lifestyle. . . that contains violence and sex, mockery and shamelessness" (108).[5] Wang's label of "*pizi wenxue*" 痞子文学 (hooligan literature) became the darling of the literary market in the 1980s and 1990s. Replete with idleness and cynicism, vulgar language and unreasonable plots, Wang's frivolous style of writing attracted many Chinese readers and was applauded by some writers, but was also criticized by numerous scholars and writers who defended the elite culture. In the late 1990s, a group of intellectuals launched a discussion about the loss of the humanistic spirit in Chinese humanities, which gradually involved more and more established scholars within two years. Wang Shuo became the primary target of this

[4] For the original Chinese text, see Cai Xiang et al. (48).

[5] The English translation is quoted in Barme (23).

attack and was condemned as a "spiritual pollutant." However, the "Wang Shuo phenomenon" is a reflection of the irreversible era in which the force of "vulgar" culture seems "beyond the powers of any intellectual antipathy to rebuff" (Wang Jing 262).

The market economy, or Deng Xiaoping's Open-Door policy (these terms are often used interchangeably), has indirectly changed the situation of contemporary Chinese literature throughout the 1990s. Even so, to simply attribute the transformation of contemporary literature to the market economy would be too reductive. To some extent, I would argue rather that the economic reform has been largely, if not entirely, made a scapegoat. Chinese writers, having not yet been able to shake off the historical trauma directly or indirectly inflicted upon them in the past decades, are like the burnt child who dreads the fire, collectively becoming more silent in the 1990s. The public's reading preferences, channeled by the superheated economic reform, coincidentally provides a good reason, or excuse, for writers to unload the burden of being critical. The juxtaposition of the "Wang Shuo phenomenon" and avant-garde literature in the same era is an interesting phenomenon: they are diametrically opposed to each other, respectively representing "low" and "high" culture and sharing no commonality with regard to their literary forms and styles of narratives. However, who can definitely deny that the co-existence of these oppositional literary phenomena is not an actual manifestation of "the brand-new era that survived the dystopian mood of 1989" (Wang Jing 262)?

In other words, contemporary Chinese writers tend to voluntarily work towards a middlebrow literature: they center around ordinary people's everyday lives, entirely

giving up typicality in their writing and scrupulously hiding their ideology. This is particularly true with the new realism, which is the outcome of the incessant experimentation with and adjustment of traditional realism, and it is also, in some sense, a counterattack against avant-garde literature's estrangement from reality. The new realistic literature marks an era in which, after a carnivalesque festivity of various literary thoughts and trends, Chinese literature gradually "not only goes back to respect rules and ethics again. . . but also goes back to comply with the principle of narration as well as the rule of the reality. . . it is increasingly aligned with the realistic discourse and the cultural apparatus" (文学开始重新尊重法则和伦理……也尊重现实的法则……越来越多地与现实的话语与文化机器保持和谐和一致。) (Zhang Yiwu 10). Some of the most prominent realistic works include Chi Li's 池莉 *Fannao rensheng* 烦恼人生 (*Troublesome Life*, 1987), Liu Zhenyun's 刘震云 *Yidi jimao* 一地鸡毛 (*Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers*, 1993), Liu Hen's 刘恒 *Pinzui Zhang Daming de xingfu shenghuo* 贫嘴张大民的幸福生活 *(Whatever Zhang Damin's Happy Life*, 1998), and Fang Fang's 方方 *Heidong* 黑洞 *(Black Hole*, 1995), to name a few. In the name of restoring the real dimension of ordinary life, these new realistic literatures "have abruptly transformed from the traditional realism that radically criticizes everyday life and resists mass culture, to a moderate and tame identification and submission, a townspeople's literature exploring entertainment from the trivial and mediocre daily life" (它由一种对日常生活的激进性的批判与话语，一种对市民文化的反抗性的描述突然转变为温和而驯良的认同与屈从，一种从琐碎而平庸的日常生活中掘发趣味的市民文学。)

(Zhang Jiwu 9-10). This tendency of new realism pervades contemporary Chinese literature, with some of its "variants" appearing particularly contentious among literary critics, such as "*shenti xiezuo*" 身体写作 (body writing) and "*meinv xiezuo*" 美女写作 (beauty writing).[6]

Yan, however, acts in an opposite way from the mainstream of new realism. During the 1990s, he published more than sixty novellas and one novel, all centering around soldiers and peasants, exploring human nature, despair and resistance in the face of fatal disease, hunger, death, and abuse of power. Yan's style also gradually progresses from the realistic to one that integrates the techniques of modernism and postmodernism into realism. Among his works during this period, three that are characterized by magical realistic features became particularly prominent and immediately made him visible in the Chinese literary arena. These three works, the novellas *Nian yue ri* 年月日 (*Year Month Day*, 1997) and *Palou tiange* 耙耧天歌 (*Sky Songs of Palou*, 1999) and the novel *Riguang liunian* 日光流年 (*The Sunlit Years*, 1998), portrayed either individuals or groups struggling against the suffering and obstacles inflicted upon them either by the cruel natural environment or by predetermined destiny. Apart from the "suffering" motif that distinguished him from many new realist writers of the time, Yan's writing style also

[6] Body writing (also called beauty writing), a concept originally proposed by Ge Hongbing 葛红兵, stood out as a clearly-defined and independent concept around 2002. Generated from consumerism in the 1990s, body writing turns human bodies into commodities, publicizing slogans for happiness, fashion, freedom and body-oriented ideas. Some representatives of this movement include Wei Hui 卫慧, Mian Mian 棉棉, and Zhuying Qingtong 竹影青瞳, whose works are replete with erotic descriptions of sex and bodies. Many scholars have criticized the body writing phenomenon as a sign of decadence and vulgarity. See Tao Dongfeng et al. (94-98).

differs from both traditional realism and the new realism. He incorporates Chinese folk elements such as ghosts and the supernatural, and dialect, integrated with a variety of Western modernist and postmodernist techniques, into his realistic narrative, making it difficult for literary critics to define which literary school he should belong to. Nevertheless, Yan solved this "dilemma" by inventing the term "*shenshi zhuyi*" 神实主义 (mythorealism), and has claimed that most of his recent works are mythorealist. Although his early stories are not as ambitious and thoughtful as his more recent work, in an age of "vulgarization" his writing became a single spark that may serve as a beacon in the darkness. He is persistently concerned with the lower-level people's state of survival, endeavoring to dig deep into humanity and the tenacity for life. At the turn of the century, Yan completely abandoned realistic writing, favouring mythorealism as an alternative means to represent invisible reality because he believes that realism cannot represent the unrepresentable Chinese reality effectively.

Contemporary Chinese Writers of Fiction and *Minjian* Writing

Having situated Yan in the context of contemporary Chinese literature in the previous section, this section compares Yan to some of his fellow writers who share common ground with him, with the intent of investigating the possibility of contemporary Chinese writers' "contemporariness." Twenty-first-century literature, as a

continuity of the 1990s, is not different from that of the late twentieth century.[7] What is notable is that a great number of writers whose works centering on people at the bottom of society have become visible in the Chinese literary world in this century; some of them have remained prominent while others have been less notable in the past. These writers, in varying degrees, all made an effort to break away from the stereotype of the popular literature of the late twentieth century, demonstrating their capacity to rethink the idea of a writer's social responsibility. For space reasons, I am not able to list all those names but will only focus on three writers in addition to Yan: Liu Zhenyun, Mo Yan and Yu Hua. These writers rose to fame in the 1980s and share many common themes and traits with Yan Lianke. Both Mo Yan and Liu Zhenyun were born in the poor countryside in the 1950s and served in the army, while Yu Hua was born in 1960 in Hangzhou and did not experience rural poverty and hunger as much as the other two did. All three experienced similar historical trauma during their youth, which was all projected into their literary works.

Although they are categorized into different literary schools and they adopted various literary techniques for their writing, these four writers share a distinctive characteristic of Chinese literature since the 1990s: they all take a "*minjian*" 民间 (folk) position in their writing,[8] from which they adopt a counter-enlightenment narrative,

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[7] What I have not mentioned here is the upsurge of internet literature in the twentieth century, which inarguably occupies a large share of the literary market and has had a substantial impact on contemporary Chinese literature. However, because internet literature belongs to the domain of popular literature, which is not the focus of my dissertation, I will not include it in my discussion.

[8] There is no English equivalent for the Chinese concept "*minjian*," which has nuanced meanings such as "popular space," "folk space," or "non-governmental." Therefore, most discussions leave the word *minjian* untranslated in order

dispelling the "original sin" of *guominxing* 国民性 (Chinese national character) that was "convicted of" by Lu Xun. *Minjian* was first formulated as a critical concept in the early 1990s by Chen Sihe, a professor of modern Chinese literature based in Shanghai. According to Chen, *minjian* is "a concept in opposition to the central government; *minjian*'s cultural patterns refer to the cultural space existing on the margins beyond the power center of the governmental control mechanism" (与国家相对的一个概念。民间文化形态是指在国家权力中心控制范围的边缘区域形成的文化空间。) (75).[9] It contains two main ideas: first, it is a vision of literary creation in which life is observed, represented and described according to the model of village culture in the traditional countryside or secular culture in the modern economic society of China; second, although writers speak from the standpoint of the traditional intellectual, what they express are the free state of living and aesthetic taste among *minjian* (126). Unlike Jurgen Habermas's concept of civil society or the public sphere, *minjian* refers to a cultural phenomenon uniquely bred in the Chinese context and is treated as a metaphorical space of criticism, demonstrating the capacity to preserve and recreate the cultural traditions of an "authentic but residual, primitive but unrestricted" (Zheng 248) agrarian China.

to retain its rich meanings. In its simplest terms, *minjian* refers to the critical stance a writer takes against mainstream ideology by writing for the people in society's lowest ranks.

[9] The English translation was quoted in Li Dian's essay "Naming and Antinaming: Poetic Debate in Contemporary China" (188).

Minjian as a critical concept was further developed by Chinese poet Han Dong in his 1999 essay "Lun *minjian*" 论民间 (On *Minjian*), which defines the core of *minjian* as "being characterized by independent spirit and free creation" (独立精神和自由创造的品质) (465).[10] According to Han:

> the real *minjian* is, first of all, a place of giving up power and a place of being unclear and obscure; second, the matrix of the independent spirit and the whirlpool of free creation, celebrating genius, firm personality and sensitive mind; third, the necessary unyielding struggle for the survival of literature and art as well as for the right (rather than power) of expressing and writing. (真正的民间即是：①放弃权力的场所，未明与暗哑之地。②独立精神的子宫和自由创造的漩涡，崇尚的是天才、坚定的人格和敏感的心灵。③为维护文学和艺术的生存，为其表达和写作的权利（非权力）所做的必要的不屈的斗争。) (478)

This statement indicates both a spatial and conceptual expansion of *minjian* from Chen's agrarian China to a space of what Foucault calls heterotopia, a space of otherness. Rather than specifically referring to writing about peasants and rural life, *minjian* shares some essential characteristics with Agamben's notion of

[10] Han Dong's theorization of "*minjian*" as a poetic concept was made against the backdrop of the "popular-intellectual polemic" in the poetry field between 1999 and 2002. Although there is no evidence that Han Dong's idea of *minjian* was developed on the theoretical ground of Chen Sihe's *minjian*, both emphasize the critical power of *minjian* as heterogeneous with mainstream ideology, and Han Dong's *minjian* can be taken as an elevation and development of Chen Sihe's *minjian*. For more information, see Li Dian (185-200).

contemporariness, particularly that both are characterized by heterogeneity and resistance to mainstream ideology.

However, it must be noted that *minjian* is a fluid concept, constantly influenced by the political and cultural vicissitudes of times although, in theory, it is antithetical to the dominant discourse of the state apparatus. Thus, what is at stake is that *minjian* may be potentially transformed into an "official *minjian,*" not necessarily by the dominant ideological power – this is true, as there are numerous examples in the history of Chinese literature – but by the writers themselves. Therefore, it is hard to say that a writer is "contemporary" because he/she takes a *minjian* position in his/her writing.

Although sharing many common features in their works, Liu, Mo, Yu, and Yan respectively focus on different aspects of social criticism, using various literary techniques, demonstrating different degrees of courage when confronted with the dominant ideology, and taking distinctly different *minjian* positions.

Liu Zhenyun is an acclaimed writer of New Realism who, like Yan, came from a peasant-soldier background. Probably due to their similar experiences, most of Liu's works share with Yan's a concern for people at the bottom of society and an interest in questions of the abuse of power, of human nature, and of the meaning of life. However, Liu adopts a different voice from Yan; his narrative of everyday life makes him popular among readers and safe for the mainstream ideological system. Liu's early works, such as *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers*, invariably represent the helplessness of ordinary people under the pressure of modern life. This style of narrative continues in his

works about low-level officials, such as *Danwei* 单位 (*The Office*, 1989), *Guanchang* 官场 (*Officialdom*, 1989), and *Guanren* 官人 (*The Officials*, 1991). All of these novellas depict complication of interpersonal relationships and power differentials, with an implicit commentary on the corruption among officials overwhelmed by tedious routines.

Liu's Homeland Trilogy, published in the 1990s, is a continuation of his early writing style, combined with a deconstruction and absurd rewriting of history. By challenging the seriousness of the official history, Liu unveils the deep-rooted absurdity of humanity and the corruption of the power mechanism through his parody of historical "facts" and figures. For example, in *Guxiang xiangchu liuchuan* 故乡相处流传 (*Hometown Flows Everywhere*, 1993), a postmodernist piece, historical personages such as Cao Cao and Yuan Shao are placed in the same temporal and spatial locations as ordinary people in Yianjin, Henan, and assimilated into the modern banality of everyday life. Both Liu and Yan deconstruct mainstream historical narratives by interrupting the logic of history and disrupting its successivity. However, Liu's rewriting of history significantly differs from that of Yan in that whereas Liu takes a new historical perspective and flirts with history in a playful manner, Yan goes to the grotesque extreme to demonstrate how politics has dominated the lives of ordinary people, bringing tragedies and disasters to them, and producing alienation.

Overall, Liu's work "looks beyond (and below) the politics. . . or the state apparatus and its cultural instruments, it is not so much 'political' as 'social' historicism"

(Fumerton 4). Liu's extension of his work from fiction into film-script writing indicates to some extent his inclination to cater to the taste of mass media and the public. His works *Shouji* 手机 (*Cell Phone*, 2003), *Wo jiao Liu Yuejin* 我叫刘跃进 (*My Name is Liu Yuejin,* 2007), and *Wo bushi Pan Jinlian* 我不是潘金莲 (*I Am Not Madame Bovary*, 2012) have all been adapted into acclaimed films. All these works, on the one hand, demonstrate his keen insight into present-day Chinese social reality: deception and infidelity between couples; greed and violence; and conflicts between ordinary people and authority figures. On the other hand, they depict social problems in a detached manner and do not actually engage in serious social criticism. For example, in *I Am Not Madame Bovary,* Li Xuelian's petition for an absurd divorce ridiculously becomes a suit against government officials. Although the story satirizes the general phenomenon of the "*buzuowei*" 不作为 (inaction) of officials, Li is humorously portrayed as a countrywoman whose ignorance of law turns her from a victim into a troublemaker. Liu's attitude in this novel is ambiguous, and he does not take a stand on either side. In the face of allegations that "another writer who has been responsible and critical starts to degenerate" (又一个有责任感和批判精神的作家开始堕落了) (Zhang Ying 41), Liu explains that "I am not the type of person who sticks to something and never compromises" (我不是那种要坚持什么，不妥协的人), nor is he "the type of writer who wants to guide the others" (也不是那种帮别人指出道路的作家) (Zhang Ying 41). Although these remarks cannot be taken one-sidedly or understood out of context, Yao Xiaolei comments that "from *Nonsense Talk* to the recent *Cell Phone*, Liu seems to be

losing his inherent critical edge" (从刘震云的《一腔废话》到最近的《手机》，固有的精神锋芒似乎正在失去。) (138). In general, although Liu does write from a *minjian* perspective, he is obviously far from becoming "contemporary." He perceives the darkness of his time but detaches himself from it, convincing himself that he is just a bystander who appreciates the view on the street, like Baudelaire's flâneur.

Mo Yan, the 2012 Nobel Laureate in literature, who is often described as a magical realist and root-seeker, regards himself and his work as "writing from the standpoint of the ordinary people" (作为老百姓写作) instead of "writing for the ordinary people" (为老百姓写作) ("Hu shuo" 65). Mo's works, set largely in his hometown of Gaomi in Shangdong Province, cover a wide range of topics from Chinese history and the present day, including politically sensitive events such as the Cultural Revolution, Family Planning, and the social landscape of the socialist market economy in modern China. Although Mo Yan incorporates social commentary into his writing, he "has never been explicitly associated with the realist penchant for social analysis, moral critique, and political engagement" (Zhang, *Postsocialism* 241). Greatly influenced by magical realism and his fellow townsman Pu Songling's 蒲松龄 *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊斋志异 *(Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*),[11] Mo Yan's writing often seems to be a fusion of Western modernist modes and Chinese traditional story-telling style. It is

[11] *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* is a collection of classical Chinese stories by Pu Songling, consisting of almost five hundred "marvel tales" written in or around the 1700s. The main characters of this book are ghosts, foxes, immortals, and demons, but the stories focus on the everyday life of commoners. The stories use the supernatural and the unexplainable to illustrate Pu's ideas of society and government. Pu criticized the corruption and injustice in society and sympathized with the poor.

violent and barbaric, imbued with absurdity and hallucination that blur the boundary between fantasy and reality.

Mo Yan's writing shares many similarities with Yan Lianke's, but Mo treats novels more "playfully" than Yan, which, to some extent, explains why Mo's fiction appears less "political." Mo claims "history, in some sense, is a collection of legendary stories" (历史在某种意义上就是一堆传奇故事) ("Wode" 27), and holds that "the essential factor of a novel is to be intriguing" (小说的第一因素是好看) ("Nongcun" 87). These ideas are manifest in many of his novels, such as *Hong gaoliang* 红高粱 (*Red Sorghum,* 1986), in which he turns to his native story-telling tradition, narrating a subverted "revolutionary story." In this novel, Mo Yan "satirizes the standard Communist Party narrative of the Anti-Japanese War" (Kinkley 59) by portraying his main anti-Japanese hero as a flawed character, whose motivation for fighting the Japanese has nothing to do with patriotism. Nevertheless, when the history in *Red Sorghum* is retold anecdotally, it becomes more attractive and intriguing. But simultaneously, the force of Mo's critique is weakened by his "playfulness."

Mo Yan's criticism of social and political maladies and human weakness is always carried out with a postmodern playfulness. He appears "cleverer" than Yan Lianke in that he is better at dealing with "big issues" in reality. For him,

> those big issues just need to be touched upon, and it is fine to leave them as insignificant background music. If they are brought to the forefront, the criticism would not be forceful. Many critics do not

> really understand the relationship between politics and novels. They probably prefer to see the 'problem' novels. (重大问题点到为止，让它成为一个若有若无的背景音乐就行。如果它轰然而起，那反而没有力量。许多批评家其实并不明白政治和小说的关系，他们大概更希望看到那种"问题"小说) (*Mo Yan* 186).

As this statement demonstrates, Mo differs from Yan in that he takes a different attitude about how to write reality, although both use unrealist techniques in their writing. Mo Yan playfully vacillates between reality and the creative world, sometimes acting as a bystander but sometimes intervening, oscillating between Baudelaire's and Benjamin's flâneurs.

Unlike Mo Yan, Yu Hua is considered one of the most outspoken writers in China, and is known as an avant-garde writer who turned toward realistic writing in the 1990s. Yu's "realist turn" is primarily marked by his two best known novels, *Huozhe* 活着 (*To Live,* 1993) and *Xu Sanguan maixue ji* 许三观卖血记 (*Chronicle of a Blood Merchant,* 1995). These novels rework Yu's previous experimental style into a kind of tragicomic formula. Yu defines his later works as "noble" writing in contrast to the "hypocritical" writing of his earlier career,[12] as he seeks to comprehend decades of

[12] In the Foreword to the Chinese version of *To Live*, Yu Hua states that a writer's task is to demonstrate a kind of "*gaoshang*" 高尚 (nobility) in his/her work. This "nobility" is not necessarily something beautiful and pure, but an attitude of seeing the world with sympathy. Yu Hua believes that he has demonstrated this quality in *To Live*. By "hypocritical," Yu Hua refers to his experimental literary form that ostensibly breaks away from realism, but can better represent the internal truth of reality that cannot be expressed by realism. In this regard, Yu Hua's idea is very close to Yan's mythorealism in that both aim to resolve the tension between literature and reality. In his well-known essay "Xuwei de zuopin" 虚伪的作品 (Hypocritical Works) published in 1989, Yu claims that a matter-of-fact attitude toward writing can only lead to a superficial truth, and he strives to find a new means of expression to approach truth

Chinese history and describe suffering, and the tolerance of suffering, in the historical space. Within the framework of "noble writing," Yu Hua successfully deconstructs ideological narratives by "transforming suffering into spiritual (or psychological) resources" (将苦难转化为精神资源) (Xia and Fu 335):[13] violence is replaced by human suffering, apathy by warmth, and fantasy by reality. This transformation is best exemplified in *To Live*, in which Yu Hua portrays "an ordinary Chinese peasant. . . with 'transcendent' views and 'kindness' towards life's suffering and crisis" (Li Zeng 129). The protagonist Fugui is trapped in the tragic fate of losing his loved ones one by one, with the deaths mostly depicted as contingencies, deprived of historical context although they are living at the center of this turbulent era. Life's tragedy is replaced by a kind of black humor; the intensity of suffering and conflict between people and society is diluted by Yu's shift of attention from society to the family. This is also true for his two-volume novel *Xiongdi* 兄弟 (*Brothers,* 2005). *Brothers* has been criticized for the extreme crudeness and vulgarity of its language and plot,[14] which jeopardizes Yu's reputation as a serious writer. Yu attempts to create an epic of recent Chinese history from the Cultural Revolution to the Reform era by portraying the country's move from political unrest to

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freely, which he calls "a hypocritical form." Yu Hua's "Hypocritical Works" can be taken as a theoretical generalization of Yu's early avant-garde writing. See Yu Hua, 2006 [1989], p. 13; 2002, p. 222.

[13] In their essay "Kunan zhongde wenqing yu wenqing di shounan" 苦难中的温情与温情地受难 (Warmth in Suffering and Suffering in Warmth), Xia Zhongyi 夏中义 and Fu Hua 富华 criticize Yu Hua's turn from experimental to realist fiction, claiming that his writing has lost its critical edge and has forgotten about the individual spirit (个人精神) and national suffering (民族苦难). See Xia and Fu, 2006, pp. 303-335.

[14] See Du Shiwei，Xu Mingfang and He Aiying, 2006.

the worship of money. However, his narrative, dominated by “excessive descriptions of violence, toilet humour, bodily fluids and noisy sex” (Lovell 16), makes the novel more of a popular work intended for the consumer market rather than a serious work aiming for social commentary. Borrowing the British literary critic James Wood’s concept of “hysterical realism,” a phrase he uses to describe “books that know a thousand things but do not know a single human being” (17), Julia Lovell criticizes Yu Hua’s style of writing “piling (at great length) outrageous event upon outrageous event, picaresque character upon picaresque character, without deepening our knowledge of any one individual” (17).

Probably because of their similar concerns about China’s social and political reality, Yu Hua’s name is more easily associated with Yan Lianke than any other contemporary Chinese writers. The publication of Yu’s nonfiction work *Shige cihui li de zhongguo* 十个词汇里的中国 (*China in Ten Words*, 2011) and *Diqitian* 第七天 (*The Seventh Day*, 2013) seems to further connect him with Yan. These two books demonstrate Yu’s courage in confronting China’s social and political realities. The former, unable to be published in mainland China, is framed by ten ideologically charged phrases common in Chinese vocabulary, amplifying Yu’s critiques of contemporary Chinese society over the last thirty years. The latter is a relatively provocative and surrealistic telling of a dead man’s retracing the path of his life, exposing a society brimming with corruption, desire for material possessions and social disparities. Nevertheless, *The Seventh Day,* crammed with news taken from the internet throughout

the narrative, has not been as positively received by readers. Although Yu Hua is eager to express a certain tension between him as a writer and his social reality, this novel has been dismissed as lacking imagination and aesthetic appeal and has been called a pile of dry facts.

It is this close similarity between Yu and Yan's attitudes towards Chinese social reality that unexpectedly foregrounds the differences in their writing. As Julia Lovell points out, these differences are a matter of technical issues that Yu has trouble with. Yu portrays a reality either in a coarse style such as that in *Brothers,* or with many plain facts collected from media as it shows in *The Seventh Day.* However, as Lovell argues, Yan "avoids the facetious burlesque of Mo Yan and Yu Hua by framing. . . events within more carefully crafted structures and language" (18). The stories in *The Seventh Day* are so close to reality that they are more like journalistic reports, and they thus lose their "literariness." A work lacking "literariness" may still have an evocative function and possibly generate empathy in its readers at the moment, but rather than "contemporariness," it has only "*xianshixing*" 现时性 (presentness). As Walter Benjamin notes in his distinction of the difference between telling a story and giving a news report, "the value of information [in the news report] does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment" (366). Because of the lack of "literariness," the assumed antagonistic relationship between the writer and reality is also diluted in the immediacy of the social events happening at present. In this sense, Yu Hua can only be called an "incomplete contemporary."

Yan Lianke's "Contemporariness" and a Literature Review of His Works

Most of Yan's works remain ambiguous even despite their political subject matter. For example, although many of his works seem like political allegories, they are entirely different from novels such as George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), which explicitly target the political system of their time. Yan also criticizes state politics and official corruption, but instead of promoting any political ideal, his ultimate concern is not about politics or social reforms, but a kind of humanistic concern that constitutes the primary theme of my analysis of his three novels and will be elaborated on in the rest of this dissertation. This concern is often overshadowed by the prominence of his political subject matter, so that readers who are preoccupied with the political themes may assume his works are primarily political commentaries. Chen Xiaoming's 陈晓明 comment is representative of this reading of Yan:

> among all the writers in mainland China, no one has been simultaneously less and more difficult to understand than Yan Lianke. In the former case, due to his distinctive style. . . the richness of his novels can be easily comprehended. In the latter case, however, Yan's works are odd in that it is hard to tell what he really intends to reveal; he always seems to walk away from his deepest concern for something the moment he is about to touch its core, and turn to

something else. (阎连科或许是中国大陆最容易把握的作家，也是最难把握的作家。最容易在于他的创作风格手法十分鲜明……可以直接感受的东西就十分丰富；难把握之处在于，他的小说要揭示的东西又处于声东击西的诡异中，他自己也是触及到就转而顾左右而言其他。) (42).

Other commentators (Tsai 95, Shao 4-17) have expressed similar opinions to Chen's by questioning the "*chedixing*" 彻底性 (thoroughness) of Yan's social commentaries.

It is not difficult to understand Yan's situation, given the ideological pressure on contemporary Chinese writers. Yan holds an academic position at the Renmin University of China and serves as a member of the Chinese Writers' Association. These factors complicate his provocative social commentaries and become the obstacles to challenging the system within which he works. Yan openly expresses this dilemma in various situations; for example, he has said of his banned novel *Dream of Ding Village*: "I censored myself very rigorously. . . I thought that my self-censorship was perfect" ("Censor"). Yan later claimed to have given up self-censorship in his subsequent writing ("sunshi"), but it is possible that "this kind of long-term restriction [state censorship] results in a subconscious obedience and tameness" (Cheng 29). If so, Yan, like Liu Zhenyun or Mo Yan, can be said to take a *minjian* position, but Liu and Mo have blunted their critical edge by defusing the ideological tension in their works through either everydayness or playfulness. The ideological tension, however, is always present in Yan's writing and becomes even more prominent in his recent fiction. Yan's strong

sentiments about the absurdity of reality prevent him from making a compromise with reality. He is not willing to obscure the political element or the sensitive aspect of reality; however, partly for the reason noted above, he is paradoxically suppressing his impulse to challenge reality. This conflict creates tension in his works, leading to the ambiguity that often makes his works difficult to understand.

Therefore, instead of affirming that Yan is precisely "the contemporary" Agamben argues for, I would rather say that Yan represents an "alternative contemporary" who resists the dominant social ideology in his time and does not care to be other to the mainstream. To return to the questions asked in the first part of this chapter: what is exactly Yan's contemporariness, and why should one be particularly interested in him since other contemporary writers in China demonstrate similar concerns with their own time? The answer to the second question should be obvious so far; therefore, I will only focus on the first question. Yan's contemporariness, first of all, as Agamben states, does not reside in a seamless "intimacy" (42) with his time, but in an intense hostility to his reality; second, although he is certainly not the kind of writer who swears to "pay for his contemporariness with his life" (42), his "contemporariness" lies in his persistent occupation of a *minjian* position, daring to utter a voice that is considered provocative and in opposition to the dominant ideology of contemporary China. Most notably, when confronted with various external pressures, he seeks a way to permanently maintain his critical spirit. His writing, though mostly set against a political

background, has transcended politics by turning his depiction of the particulars of historical events into an interrogation of the universal question of human existence.

In bringing Yan and his contemporary writers into Agamben's theoretical framework of contemporariness, this section attempts to delineate an "alternative contemporariness" as a particular quality that distinguishes Yan from his contemporary writers as well as to demonstrate why "contemporariness" matters to this study. In an age that lacks contemporariness, this unique quality of Yan arouses my curiosity and inspired this project. The rest of this dissertation will discuss in detail how Yan's writing exemplifies this quality. Although the notion of "contemporariness" itself is not the primary focus of this dissertation, it is an investigation into Yan's contemporariness. In other words, the notion of contemporariness not only structurally frames this dissertation but also suggests a "contemporary" overtone throughout the project.

The goal of this dissertation is to explore, through the lens of Yan's concept of mythorealism, how the form of his literary work produces textual ideologies that transcend his political attitude, and transfers the particularity of social matters to the universal inquiry into the condition of human existence. I take Yan's mythorealism as a methodology that negotiates between the literary form and the content, and destabilizes the notion of political fiction. I hypothesize that by virtue of mythorealism, which probably carries the burden of social commentaries that would perhaps be straightforward politics in a different context, Yan transforms his politically-sensitive commentaries into more diversified concerns of humanity, existence, and spiritual crises.

This transformation is probably the result of both a strategic retreat from the dominant ideology and Yan's increasingly deepening realization that literature should not avoid politics, but should transcend politics and be responsive to the soul and repressed potentials of humanity.

Two strains of theoretical thought are incorporated into my interpretation of Yan's mythorealism as a literary theory and a strategy of writing: Chinese socialist realism as a counter-theoretical approach on the one hand, and Western criticism of realism by Auerbach, Lukács, and Fredric Jameson on the other. While the former delineates the social and literal background against which mythorealism was constructed, the latter situates mythorealism in Western theoretical discourse with the aim of providing an alternative reading of mythorealism from a combined perspective of Marxist literary criticism and postmodern deconstructionism. A detailed theoretical analysis of mythorealism based on the above theoretical thought is offered in Chapter 1.

By ideology, I move beyond the narrow sense of politics in Marxist interpretation and understand it in a more general sense on the textual level. By critically employing Marxist concepts of authorial ideology and textual ideology, and adapting the "authorial ideology" into "the author's political attitude," I examine how these two "ideologies" develop disproportionately in the texts, and how different textual ideologies are negotiated through and governed by formal choices.

Regarding form, I primarily refer to the aesthetic characteristics and rhetorical strategies of mythorealist texts. By examining the structure, language, rhetoric, and

meaning of the texts, I look into how Yan constructs the mythorealist narrative into a new form of articulation that erases the distinctive boundary between the political and the nonpolitical and works to simultaneously overshadow the author's political attitude and shape the textual ideology and meaning. In light of the two theoretical strains discussed above, I reshape and redefine mythorealism as a subversive potential of realism that transcends immediate reality, shatters the objectivity of the established social relations and opens new dimensions to scrutinize social realities and humanity.

Mythorealism refers to a variety of literary techniques used, or claimed, to represent the absurdity of Chinese social reality. Yan's ambiguous contrast of mythorealism with realism from his theoretical point of view does not necessarily justify his ambivalent anti-realism position. In fact, if taken only as a literary theory, mythorealism has yet to be improved. One problem with it as a theory is that the category of mythorealism seems too capacious; almost any literary technique regarded "antithetical" to conventional realism can be taken as mythorealist components. However, despite its defect as a literary theory, mythorealism is indispensable to this study not only because it is peculiar to Yan's writing style and literary form and distinguishes his work from those of other writers, but also because it solves the issue of "naming," since Yan's writing does not belong to any existing literary school; therefore, it is the most accurate way of describing his literary style.

In much of the scholarship on Yan and his works, the focal points of Chinese and the Western critics and scholars seem to diverge into two flows. Chinese scholarship

centers more on topics such as stylistic and aesthetic characteristics of Yan's fiction, his depictions of rural political power and of lower-class people, and the specific themes in his work, such as suffering, disease, death, body, or native soil. By contrast, scholarship on Yan in the Anglophone world is in its infancy, with no more than thirty papers published including book chapters and academic interviews. Western scholarship[15] on Yan differs from its Chinese counterpart in that most Western scholars focus more on the political aspects of Yan's writing, and are more interested in issues related to censorship, post-socialist politics, or dystopia, among other themes.

Overall, Chinese scholarship has established the term *mythorealism* as a description of Yan's work. Many scholars, such as Sun Yu 孙郁 (2013, 2017), Wang Yao 王尧 (2013), Ding Fan 丁帆 (2016), and Song Weijie (2016), champion mythorealism and focus on its anti-realist dimension by invoking Yan's literary works. Apart from the mainstream interpretation, Chen Xiaoming regards mythorealism as more than a literary device and tries to reveal the ideology hidden behind the motivation of Yan's formulation of mythorealism. Chen claims that by proposing mythorealism, Yan attempts to question the essence of reality, specifically, "the essence of the history of the 20th century" (二十

[15] The term "Western scholarship" is interchangeably used with "English scholarship" in this context. By "Western" scholarship, I primarily refer to academic papers and book chapters published in English. I do not include scholarship in other Western languages because these works represent an extremely small number compared to English scholarship. My inability to read "Western" languages other than English and French also makes it difficult for me to delve deep into works in other languages. Therefore, the Western critics and scholars in my content are those who study Chinese language and literature and are based in English-speaking countries, whether or not they hold Chinese citizenship. An exception to this is Professor Liu Jianmei, who is now teaching at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, and who has an educational and teaching background in universities in America. She has published papers on Yan Lianke in both English and Chinese, and she tends to be more interested in the political aspects of Yan's fiction. Therefore, I categorize her as a Western scholar for the purposes of this project.

世纪的历史的本质) ("Geiyu" 43). Meanwhile, Chen points out that the ideological implication Yan endeavors to convey through mythorealism is evasive: on the one hand, Yan seems to assume that his readers understand what he essentially indicates by condemning realism in Chinese literature; on the other, Yan attempts to but is not determined enough to make this "essence" known to the readers. Therefore, Chen concludes that, by means of mythorealism, Yan only foregrounds certain "fragments of essence" (本质化的碎片) ("Geiyu" 49). By arguing that what Yan interrogates is "how power worship becomes the essential part of Chinese national character" (权力崇拜何以成为中国民族性人格的一个本质部分) (49), Chen identifies the essence Yan reveals through mythorealism. Another scholar, Tao Dongfeng 陶东风, despite not specifically talking about mythorealism, underscores the political implication of mythorealism in his discussion of *Lenin's Kisses*. He concludes by pointing out that "by means of exaggeration, distortion, allegory, etc., Yan reveals the inherent logic of the Chinese-style power politics, which endows his mythorealist truth (or "internal truth") with public meaning and force of political critiques in a real sense" (通过夸张、变形、寓言等魔幻手段，深刻揭示了中国式权力政治的内在逻辑，这才使得他的这种"神实"意义上的真实(或"内真实") 获得了公共意义和政治批判力量。) ("*Shouhuo*" 45).

The ideological implication of Yan's works was brought to the fore in a real sense for the first time in Chinese scholarship by Zhang Shuoguo 张硕果 in his article "Wenxue, yishixingtai, zhengzhi: Yan Lianke zuopin jiqi guankui" 文学，意识形态，政治：阎连科作品及其管窥 (Literature, Ideology, Politics: A Limited View of Yan

Lianke's Works). However, rather than providing an intelligent and thoughtful reading of Yan's works, Zhang simply brings up his overview of Yan's fiction and some fragmental discussions quoted from other scholars. His argument is that "Yan Lianke's works are ideological and political, and the criticism of Yan Lianke's works is equally ideological and political" (阎连科的作品具有意识形态性和政治性，对阎连科作品的批评同样具有意识形态性和政治性) (98). By invoking David Der-wei Wang (2007), Tao Dongfeng (2016), Chen Xiaoming (2016), and Shao Yanjun 邵燕君 (2004, 2008), Zhang argues that these scholars, despite focusing on various aspects of Yan's works, either praise Yan's political commentaries or criticize his vacillating attitude in his social commentaries. Zhang also outlines a third attitude towards Yan's ideology in his works; for example, in his interview with Yan, Li Tuo 李陀 "politely criticizes Yan's simple negation of revolution and socialism" (委婉地批评了阎连科对革命、对社会主义的简单否定) (96). Zhang's paper provides a useful summary of Chinese scholarship on the political-ideological aspects of Yan's writing. The notion of ideology in his argument was exclusively identified with politics, which is understandable since his paper focuses on the political dimension of Yan's writing.

The stylistic features of Yan's fiction have seldom been focused on in English scholarship, but ideology as an inescapable concept has been brought forth in alternative expressions. For example, Liu Jianmei argues for a "nostalgic strain" in Yan's *Lenin's Kisses*, which functions "as a critical negation of both the communist utopia and global capitalist utopia" (14). Although Liu did not discuss Yan's literary form much, she holds

that "Yan Lianke's contributions to modern Chinese literature is his formal experimentation with surrealism, a literary form of lightness that can bear the heaviness of pain, suffering, death, and violence" (17). Chien-hsin Tsai, while centering on "a similar logic of autoimmunity" (78) of Yan's writing through the lens of censorship, discusses the manifestation of Yan's political ideology in his writing of "the reciprocal entanglement of bodies and politics" (86). In Cao Xuenan's essay "Mythorealism and Enchanted Time: Yan Lianke's *Explosion Chronicles*," mythorealism, to some extent, carries the burden of criticizing "the ideological function of linear time" (103) and interrogating "the logic of development" (105). Carlos Rojas briefly examines Yan's mythorealist style of writing and regards it as a representation of Yan speaking from the margin in his fiction.

As is evident in both Chinese and Western scholarship, the relationship between the ideology and form of Yan's fiction as a topic is referenced in only a few articles. Where some Chinese articles center on Yan's stylistic features, their Western counterparts simply touch upon this topic and take it as being connected to Yan's political ideology, but such discussion has never been at the center of an argument in Western studies of Yan. As for ideology *per se*, it has not been discussed sufficiently so far, but is invariably interpreted as political ideology in the existing scholarship, which does not exactly align with the same term discussed in this dissertation.

Although "ideology and form" have always been a pervasive study in the literary field, most scholars focus on either how form constructs ideology or how

ideology affects the author's formal choices. Following these premises but moving beyond them, this study aims to show how literary form imposes limits on the authorial ideology (the author's political attitude in the current context), but simultaneously opens up possibilities for various textual ideologies that do not necessarily overlap with the authorial. Specifically, this study investigates four questions: how Yan's perception of social reality forms a basis for his position in his fiction and informs his negotiation with the cultural and ideological issues he addresses; how the nature of mythorealism is articulated through different types of mythorealist narratives, seeking an alternative expression of suppressed political sentiments; how mythorealism constructs literary forms that enacts a transference of an overtly political writing to a broad range of humanistic concerns in different novels; and how Yan examines humanity and explores the philosophical meaning of existence by transcending the politics in his political settings.

Selection of Texts and Summary of Chapters

Yan has written both novellas and novels. His early novels published at the beginning of the twenty-first century demonstrate a turning point in his writing style, marking his "turn" from realism to mythorealism. As most of his novellas were written before this "turning point," and also due to the large number of his works, this study only focuses on Yan's novels and his use of mythorealism, and thus will not cover his novellas. Yan's novels all feature a diverse characteristic of mythorealism, with the

exceptions of two realist novels, *Qinggan yu* 情感狱 (*Emotional Hell*, 1991) and *Muqin shi tiao he* 母亲是条河 (*Mother is a River*, 2006). Mythorealism appears in a nascent form in his second novel *Zuihou yiming nvzhiqing* 最后一名女知青 (*The Last Female Rusticated Youth*, 1993), but it is largely unremarked upon by readers. *The Sunlit Years* (1998) solidifies Yan's reputation as a writer of "magical realism," "surrealism," or "modernism," which he later calls "mythorealism," among critics. Yan's other novels include *Jianying ru shui* 坚硬如水 *(As Hard as Water*, 2001), *Lenin's Kisses* (2004), *Dream of Ding Village* (2005), *The Odes of Songs* (2008), *The Four Books* (2011), *Zhalie zhi* 炸裂志 (*The Explosion Chronicles*, 2013), *The Death of the Sun* (2015), and *Suqiu gongmin* 速求共眠 (*Want to Sleep Together Quickly*, 2018).

This dissertation focuses on the reading of three selected novels, each of which demonstrates a different aspect of mythorealism. I have intentionally chosen *Dream of Ding Village, The Odes of Songs, and The Four Books* for at least three reasons. These three novels are more politically provocative than his other works, as I have noted earlier in this chapter.[16] For example, whereas both *Dream of Ding Village* and *The Day the Sun Died* are structured around mysterious dreams, and feature the protagonist as a moral defender, *Dream of Ding Village* is set during the historical period of the AIDS scandal in

[16] Yan's 2005 *Wei renmin fuwu* 为人民服务 (*Serve the People!*) is widely known as one of his most provocative pieces. However, I do not consider this work here because it is not long enough to be taken as a novel. According to Yan Lianke, it was a novella developed from one particular episode of his novel *As Hard as Water*. Yan has also expressed his dissatisfaction with this novella because he did not treat it seriously when writing it, and regards it as a repetition of *As Hard as Water*. Therefore, the length and originality of this story are the key factors in my decision to exclude it from the study. For more information, see Yan's interview "Yan Lianke: wo shunshi le zuojia zuihao de shinian" 阎连科：我损失了作家最好的十年 (Yan Lianke: I lost the best ten years a writer should have had), on "tengxun wenhua" 腾讯文化 (Tencent Culture), Oct. 19, 2014.

China, but *The Day the Sun Died* is obviously ahistorical. The latter does not generate a sociopolitical strain as intense as the former. I am aware that the prominence of the political elements in these novels may constitute obstacles for me to test my assumption about how the writer's political attitude was obscured and eventually transferred to something else in the texts. However, it is this challenge that will possibly make my argument more convincing and make this study more meaningful.

The distinctiveness of these three novels, first of all, lies in their extensive involvement in almost all the subject matters and themes that appear in the rest of Yan's novels, covering social issues, historical traumas, and the intersection of socialist consumerism and corruption of officialdom and academia. More notably, each of these novels outlines a nuanced and prominent nature of mythorealism and represents a distinctive feature of mythorealist narrative of their own.

Another factor that guides my selection of these works is my consideration of a balance between the availability of the novels to Western readers, particularly English readers, and the maximum contribution I could make to the existing scholarship on Yan Lianke. For instance, only a small number of copies of *Dream of Ding Village* were sold in mainland China before the book was banned. *The Four Books* has not been published in mainland China, with only a few copies sponsored by Yan himself published and circulating among his acquaintances. The inaccessibility of these novels to Chinese readers results in insufficient critical attention from both the Chinese and English academic worlds. Therefore, this study should enrich the existing scholarship of Yan

Lianke research by bringing in new sources and fresh ideas. However, I have chosen *The Odes of Songs* for this study for the opposite reason: like his two earlier mythorealist novels *The Sunlit Years* and *As Hard as Water, The Odes of Songs* has not been translated into English, and is thus unknown to most of Western readers and scholars. Unlike the other two untranslated works, *The Odes of Songs* has aroused controversy from established scholars due to its provocative subject matter of corruption in the academic world. In introducing this novel, which is unavailable to English-speaking readers, I hope that this study will shed a different light on readers' perception of Yan's mythorealism.

The chapters that follow begin with a theoretical reframing of mythorealism through the lens of both Chinese and Western theoretical critique of realism. The first chapter revisits the idea of mythorealism as a literary device used to represent unrepresentable social reality, and argues that, apart from its aesthetic consideration, mythorealism is also intentionally used to dilute the potency of Yan's critiques of various sociopolitical issues and reshape the alternative ideologies of the text. Critically drawing on Marxist interpretation of textual ideology, particularly Jameson's mode of interpretive horizons, I reconceptualize ideology in Yan's literary context as a broad term including but not limited to the political dimension, and discuss how literary forms constructed by mythorealism convey meanings that transcend Yan's political attitude and the political matters *per se* in question in each text.

Each of the following three chapters centers on a textual analysis of one of Yan's novels, examining how mythorealism intervenes in the narratives by constructing

literary forms that simultaneously disguise and convey different ideological meanings. Chapter Two focuses on the "*minjian*" nature of the mythorealist narrative: the use of dialect, the ghost narrator and the haunting dreams in *Dream of Ding Village.* These mythorealist features construct a literal form that simultaneously challenges the credibility of the story and subverts the conventional discourse of the national character by destabilizing its realistic and factual basis. Specifically, this chapter investigates how the mythorealist narrative treats AIDS as a double metaphor, interrogating the pain of contemporary Chinese peasants in their contribution to Chinese rural modernity, and renegotiating Lu Xun's canonical discourse of the national character. It argues that the theme of the national character serves as a compromise between Yan's pronounced political attitude outside of the text and the critique of the "weakness" of the national character incarnated in the sick peasants of the Ding Village. This compromise is demonstrated in Yan's intentional aloofness and evasiveness at the sociopolitical level that is matched only by his unconventionality and radicality at the formal and allegorical level.

Chapter Three focuses on a different narrative mode of mythorealism and examines how this narrative mode effectively reshapes forgotten history and reconstructs the subject of history in *The Four Books*. This chapter works on a different set of mythorealist components: the absurdist, the supernatural, the religious, the grotesque, and the mythological, which jointly generate themes and metaphors transcending a purely political interpretation of the historical trauma inflicted on Chinese intellectuals in

modern China. It argues the textual meaning, ostensibly remaining in the mythorealist recounting of historical suffering, gradually shifts from the "technology of disciplinary power" to a philosophical mediation on the enigma of human existence and inquiry into the possibility of constructing the ethic self as a practice of freedom. In appropriating Foucault's theory of "technology of the self," the main body of this chapter will focus on an analysis of how the novel's three main protagonists, the Child, the Author and the Scholar, respectively strive to pursue the answer to the question of man's (or an intellectual's) finality and how to constitute self as a subject of ethics, by making their docile bodies into thinking bodies, but in different ways.

Chapter Four examines a complex mixture of exaggeration, imagination, and irony embedded in a variety of recurring patterns in *The Odes of Song*, such as verbal, syntactic, thematic, and narrative patterns, that characterize the third mode of the mythorealist narrative, creating a cumulative effect of absurdity. My reading of this novel is concerned with both thematic interpretation and the relation of rhetorical forms to meaning. Based on a mythorealistic interpretation, I read this novel as set against a desymbolized world or a world that has lost symbols, and interpret it as a representation of the protagonist's schizophrenic response to the reality in the process of seeking spiritual origin. The desymbolized world is manifested in the allegory of the disenchantment of *Shijing,* which signifies the deconstruction of the existing representation of Chinese intellectuals and poses a threat of an increasing void of meaning to this group. By focusing on the motifs and narratives of sex and disgust, and

analyzing each from a different perspective, this chapter investigates how each narrative speaks from its own space to reveal a lost soul, whose self-disclosure reveals contemporary intellectuals' anxiety and spiritual crisis in a world that has lost symbols and is pervaded with instrumentalist ethos.

My concluding chapter brings together the findings in the previous chapters and concludes that mythorealism demonstrates Yan's strategy of humanistically addressing modern China's sociopolitical issues. These three novels respectively represent different mythorealist models of creating a subversive inquiry into national character from the "*minjian*" perspective, the construction of ethical self within the confines of a particular historical situation, and intellectuals' spiritual crisis against a desymbolized world. Rather than escapism or a kind of social accommodationism, Yan has never resigned himself to the power of the dominant ideology of contemporary China. Without defending himself, he seeks to balance his identity as an intellectual who shoulders the responsibility of fighting against unreasonable social phenomena and unjustified social practices, and as a man of letters who wants to write beyond political concerns and pursue the ultimate concerns of human existence. I interpret this quality as an alternative contemporariness that is rooted in the essence of Agamben's theory, albeit slightly different from Agamben's concept.

This dissertation is the first systematic study of Yan's mythorealism. From a theoretical point of view, I have thrown some light on the possibility of interpreting Yan's theory grounded on a comparative study of Chinese and Western realism. Instead

of either avoiding or excessively highlighting the political aspects of his work, I negotiate between the two and underscore an irreducible tension between the political thrust of the subject matter and Yan's broader humanistic concerns. In particular, I argue for both the aesthetic and strategic function of mythorealism in transferring Yan's political attitude to a more diversified textual meaning that has transcended politics and reached out to a more universal concern of human existence. Although mythorealism is well-known to scholars, Yan's works have been largely interpreted and read from a preoccupied realist perspective, which, as I will argue in my dissertation, generates many misinterpretations. In this dissertation, I identify three different narrative modes of mythorealism exemplified in Yan's three novels, and investigate how mythorealist form serves as content that subverts a totalizing reality prescribed by conventional realism and reshaping alternative realities in literature. In reading Yan in light of Agamben's philosophical concept contemporariness, and developing a nuanced mythorealist reading of each novel by critically employing or invoking Western theorists such as Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, and Korsmeyer, my Western-theoretically based reading of Yan's works is incorporated into my understanding of native concepts such as "*minjian*," the Chinese national character, and the native soil narrative.

Thus, the significance of this study lies not only in its enrichment of the existing scholarship on Yan Lianke in both Chinese and English, but also in its re-introduction of Yan Lianke to the Western academic world and negotiation with the political interpretation of Yan's works. It thus contributes to a rethinking of

contemporary Chinese literature in the context of world literature, whose richness has gone far beyond its politically-charged subject matter. Apart from the above, from an interdisciplinary perspective, my analysis of Yan's fiction will provide an alternative lens through which Western readers can catch a glimpse of contemporary Chinese society and the psychological or spiritual condition of the Chinese public, which are intricately interwoven into both socialist and capitalist modernities. The novels are local, but have simultaneously transcended any pure social ideology by sharing some common ground with their Western counterparts. In this regard, this project is also meaningful for intercultural communication. Finally, the comparative elements of this project make it a contribution to the comparative study of world literature.

Chapter One Mythorealism as Method

The title of this chapter was originally inspired by Taiwanese scholar Kuan-Hsing Chen's *Asia as Method*,[17] in which Asia is used as an "imaginary anchoring point" (212) from which the subjectivity of Asian countries is reimagined and the notion of "self" is reconstructed. Although my definition of "method" is somewhat different from Chen's, a sense of subversion or deconstruction connoted in Chen's theorization of "Asia as method" is the common ground shared by my proposition of "mythorealism as method" in the current study.[18] By interpreting "mythorealism as method," this study takes mythorealism as an analytical methodology in its own right. It explores mythorealism as a literary device and formal experiment that strategically conceals Yan's political attitude, which is contradictory to the dominant ideology, while simultaneously conveying his unique perception of the reality of contemporary China and his concern with *laoku ren* 劳苦人 (the working poor).[19] Meanwhile, "mythorealism as method" also refers to a mode of my analysis that takes mythorealism as a starting point to analyze how Yan demonstrates an alternative contemporariness that differentiates himself

[17] "Asia as method" was originally proposed by the Japanese scholar Yoshimi Takeuchi (1910-77) in his 1960 lecture, and was later borrowed by Kuan-Hsing Chen in his 2010 book *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*. In both contexts, "Asia as method" is a way of breaking from the dominant mode of thought trapped in the colonial structure of academic institutions.

[18] In this dissertation, the terms "deconstruction" and "deconstructive" are always used in a non-Derridean sense. They are interchangeably used with terms such as "subversion" and "subversive," with an implication of "undermining" and "destabilizing."

[19] Yan first uses this term in Li Tuo's interview with him, in which Yan says "I especially respect, even worship, the working poor. My writing has increasingly focused on this phrase, and going forward the phrase could even become the entire nucleus of my writing." This interview was translated by Adrian Thieret, and published in *Debating Socialist Legacy and Capitalist Globalization* in China. See Li Tuo and Yan Lianke (157).

from other contemporary Chinese writers, and to look into how the "objectivity" of "social reality" prescribed in conventional literary realism is possibly deconstructed and reconstructed in contemporary Chinese literature.

Yan Lianke proposed mythorealism or "*shenshi zhuyi*" 神实主义 as a literary device to cope with, in his words, the inadequacy of the realist representation of reality in literature. He developed mythorealism into a literary theory in his 2011 book *Faxian xiaoshuo* 发现小说 (*Discovering Fiction*), in which he elaborates on the theoretical basis of mythorealism by combining Chinese and Western perspectives, the internal logic of mythorealism, and its aesthetic characteristics. At the center of Yan's theorization of mythorealism are two main concerns: the representation of reality and the interrelation of mythorealism and realism. Essentially, mythorealism is not antithetical to realism, but it paradoxically features characteristics opposed to traditional notions of realism. These two concerns, the entanglements of reality and realism with mythorealism, will be reviewed in Yan's theoretical discourse in the first section of this chapter. The second section examines the evolution of reality and realism in Western theoretical discourse, potentially serving as another aspect of Yan's theoretical sources, with the aim of interpreting mythorealism in a broader sense of literary realism. By critically and selectively employing some notions from Marxist literary criticism, the third section will look into the relationship between formal choices and textual ideology in Yan's works; it asks, in particular, how the narrative form of mythorealism expresses various ideologies and meanings that obscure and dominate the author's political attitude.

"The Unfilial Son of Realism" and the Paradox of "*Shenshi zhuyi*"

In the postscript to *Shouhuo* 受活 (*Lenin's Kisses*), Yan expressed his dissatisfaction with realism and the "reality" endorsed by realism. He claims "it is felt more and more that the greatest enemy preventing the achievement and development of literature in a real sense is nothing else but the excessively strong. . . unshakable and deep-rooted tree of realism, which has long grown into a realist giant" (越来越感到，真正阻碍文学成就与发展的最大敌人，不是别的，而是过于粗壮……粗壮到不可动摇，根深叶茂到早已成为参天大树的现实主义。). Yan condemns realism as "the chief criminal that kills literature" (是谋杀文学的罪魁祸首). He appeals to readers "not to believe the high-flown talk such as 'reality', 'truth', 'art deriving from life' and 'life being the only source of creation'" (不要相信什么 '现实' '真实' '艺术来源于生活' '生活是创作的唯一来源'等等那样的高谈阔论). Instead, he argues that "realism has nothing to do with life and society, nor does it have much to do with its soul -- truth; it is only relevant to a writer's heart and soul" (现实主义，与生活无关，与社会无关，与它的灵魂——真实，也无多大的干系，它只与作家的内心和灵魂有关) ("Xunzhao" 255). Seven years later, in the postscript to another work of fiction, *Si shu* 四书 (*The Four Books*), Yan's attitude towards realism has amounted to a kind of complex abhorrence. He called himself "the unfilial son of realism" (现实主义的不孝之子) (*Faxian* 5), caught between the impulse of wanting to kill it and a helplessly emotional attachment to it.

In *Discovering Fiction*, Yan identifies four types of *zhenshi* 真实(truth) represented in literature: *shehui konggou zhenshi* 社会控购真实 (socially-manipulated-and-purchased truth), *shisu jingyan zhenshi* 世俗经验真实 (secular-experience-based truth) *shengming jingyan zhenshi* 生命经验真实 (life-experience-based truth), and *linghun shendu zhenshi* 灵魂深度真实 (in-depth-soul truth). Each in turn parallels one type of realist literary work: those produced within the hegemonic system and autocratic state and dominated by certain political and ideological powers; those created on the basis of people's shared secular experience, featuring themes such as love, pastoral life, and everyday city life; those transcending the second type and creating typicality in characters such as Lu Xun's Ah Q or Tolstoy's Anna Karenina; and those showcasing new progress and exploration of realist reality and representing the highest level of reality by reaching the soul of characters; in Yan's opinion, Dostoevsky's fiction demonstrates the apex of realism (*Faxian* 3-33).

The juxtaposition of Yan's strong emotional condemnation of realism with his rational analysis of realist reality or literary truth may foreground certain logical fallacies of his argument about the interrelation among literature, realism and reality. The obvious fallacy is the ambiguity of the referent of reality in his argument. It is very possible that in order to break the shackle of ideological manipulation of literary creation and emphasize the importance of a writer's subjectivity, Yan mercilessly dismisses the golden rule for literary creation endorsed by realism: all works of art originate from real life and therefore should reflect the objective reality of the world. Consequently, Yan declares

that there is no relevance between realism and life and society. However, as his subsequent arguments demonstrate, his clarification of various “literary truths” is inevitably grounded in different aspects of social and life experience, explicitly showing that real life not only participates in literary creation but also helps shape literary truth and reality. By pointing out this fallacy, I do not mean to argue against Yan’s logic of argument on realism and reality. As a writer, Yan is the only contemporary Chinese writer who has systematically published a relatively large number of works of literary criticism on realism, and formulated his own literary theory. Although he is not likely as systematic as a professional theorist might be, but the paradox in Yan’s arguments conversely reflects his conflicting sentiments with regard to realism as well as the linguistic limitation of adequately expressing this contradiction.

There are numerous debates and discussions on realism in early twentieth-century Chinese literature in both Chinese and English scholarship. According to Marston Anderson, the term *xieshi* 写实, or the synonymous *xianshi* 现实 (realism), was originally a Japanese invention, “one of many neologisms created by Meiji intellectuals as they translated works of Western literature and philosophy into Japanese” (28). In 1902, Liang Qichao introduced the phrase “*xieshi pai*” 写实派 (the realistic school) in his seminal essay “Xiaoshuo yu quanzhi zhi guanxi” 小说与群治之关系 (On the Relationship between Fiction and the Government of the People), with the aim of advocating literary reform. However, it was not until 1915 that Chen Duxiu, the leading figure of the New Cultural Movement, provided a detailed introduction of Western

European realism in his essay “Xiandai Ouzhou wenyi shitan” 现代欧洲文艺史谭 (Talks on the History of Modern European Literature) to the Chinese literary world. In another essay, “Wenxue geming lun” 文学革命论 (On Literary Revolution), published in 1917, Chen called for a realist literature that “marked a break with the superstition and entrenched classicism of traditional intellectual life” (Anderson 28), and a social literature that “signified the displacement of Confucian bureaucratic and familial relations that. . . would make possible the birth of a modern, democratic society” (28). Realism was initially embraced for its potential contribution to China’s national salvation and cultural rejuvenation, particularly during the May Fourth period, but was later subjected to reinterpretations to meet various political goals in different periods. Since the late 1920s, the realistic tradition inherited from nineteenth-century European realism that pervaded the Chinese literary world and was highly applauded by the May Fourth generation was gradually replaced by Marxist realism to meet the ideological requirements of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Marston Anderson traces this transformation by calling it a move from the “old realism” or “critical realism” to “socialist realism”:

> The old realism came finally to seem powerless to repair the cultural schisms that opened everywhere in China after the fall of the traditional world order. In calling for mass fiction and socialist realism, Chinese writers acknowledged a new imperative: they began erasing the distinction between “I” and “they”—between the self and

society—that had been an indispensable basis for the practice of critical realism, subsuming both in a collective "we." (202)[20]

Chinese literature has been greatly influenced and inspired by Russian literature and socialist realism due to the shared ideological background of these two socialist countries. Having been internalized into the Modern Chinese literary context, socialist realism, like its counterpart in Soviet Russia, is by no means a separate issue of literature but rather is intimately intertwined with the CCP's political activities and goals. The reception and adaptation of Russian socialist realism in Chinese literature, first of all, must be contextualized in the widespread Chinese Leftist Literary Movement, which constitutes "an important part of the global communist movement" (全球性共产主义运动的一个重要组成部分) (Jia 1). In the late 1920s, two extreme leftist literary groups, the Sun Society and the Creation Society, began to promote revolutionary literature. Greatly influenced by the leftist ideological trend of the international proletarian literary movement, the members of the groups regarded literary works created since the May

[20] More comprehensive analyses on the transformation or evolvement of realism against the backdrop of the leftist literary movement can be found in Tsi-an Hsia's *The Gate of Darkness*, a collection of essays posthumously edited by his brother C. T. Hsia. In his introduction to this collection, C. T. Hsia has singled out three main trends of the May Fourth tradition advanced by Tsi-an Hsia, which "postulated a new way of life, a quest for national and personal fulfillment." These three main trends are "realism (the realism of nineteenth-century Europe in as diversified styles as there could be from Tolstoy to Balzac), sentimentalism (humanitarian and romantic love), and the satiric style as exemplified by the essays of Lu Hsün." Hsia states that these traditions have been denounced and eventually replaced by Russian model of socialist realism during the Leftist Literary Movement since the late 1920s. See Tsi-an Hsia (xxv). In *The Russian Hero in Modern Chinese Fiction*, Mau-sang Ng offers a detailed account of why the literature of the May Fourth writers, although hero-centered, loses ground in the mid-1930s. It is the prevalent tendency of its subjectivism and individualism, as Jaroslav Průšek characterizes it, that makes May Fourth literature insufficient to deal with "the worsening conditions in China" which "are felt to require the invention of more heroic figures to inflame the national sensibility in the battle against the Japanese" (4). Thus, although "the transcultural May Fourth intellectual climate provided the ideal environment for the growth of Western literary influence in Chinese soil… the youthful nineteenth-century Russian literature outshone all others in modern Chinese fiction" (4-5), and "the proletarian positive hero who faithfully acts out current Party policy" (6) gradually monopolies the literary stage after the establishment of the People's Republic. See Mau-sang Ng.

Fourth Movement as bourgeois and petty-bourgeois literature; therefore, much of their effort went into fiercely attacking realist writers such as Lu Xun, Mao Dun, and Ye Shengtao, because their writings were believed to describe the lives of or cater to the taste of the urban petty bourgeoisie. It was not until 1930 that the Sun Society and the Creation Society, at the behest of the CCP, united with their former rival Lu Xun to form the League of Left-wing Writers, with the goal of expanding the united front to promote proletarian literature.[21] Although polemics about the nature of realism, such as what reality was and how reality should be represented objectively, still pertained within the League, the members unanimously agreed that literature must reflect reality truthfully and objectively.

The League of Left-wing Writers was dismissed in 1936 due to complicated political factors, but its literary tradition continued and "revolutionary literature" was updated to "worker-peasant-soldier literature" after Mao Zedong's Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art in 1942, which "are significant for setting the draconian national cultural policy after the establishment of the PRC in 1949" (Denton, "Historical" 13). Mao's declaration of advocating socialist realism was hailed by the left-wing writers, who believed that the cause Russia had accomplished should be taken as a

[21] There have been discussions and suggestions about whether the attack launched against Lu Xun during the debate of 1928-1929 on revolutionary literature was directed by the CCP. In his book *Politics and Literature in Shanghai: The Chinese League of Left-Wing Writers, 1930-1936*, Wang-chi Wong provided a comprehensive analysis of how the road to the united literary front was established in that particular historical and political context. See Wang-chi Wong (39-58). There is also much Chinese scholarship with regard to this part of entangled political and literary history. For further reference, see Cui Zhiyuan, and Jia Zhenyong.

realistic choice for the Chinese people.[22] For instance, Zhou Yang 周扬, one of the core leaders of the leftist group, advocated "'taking the Russian road,' politically and literarily as well" ("走俄国人的路" ，政治上如此，文学艺术上也是如此) (47).[23] Chinese leftists enthusiastically supported the Russian model of combining proletarian literature with realism. The following passage from the left-wing writer Chen Yong 陈涌 represents the majority's attitude towards socialist realism and proletarian literature at the time:

> In the new era, the nature of the proletarian literature and its tasks are precisely represented in the classic definition of socialist realism. This definition says, "Socialist realism is the fundamental method of Soviet literature and literary criticism. It demands of the artist a true and historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development. The true and the historically concrete in the artistic representation of reality must be combined with the task of reforming

[22] In the early 1930s, Soviet Russia, under the leadership of Stalin, became increasingly concerned with the political propaganda function of literature, promoted socialist realism and identified it as the basic approach for Russian literary creation and criticism. However, it should be noted that, according to Mao Dun's talk at the Fourth Congress of Writers and Artists in 1979, Mao Zedong actually proposed the literary style after the Soviet Union had abandoned the slogan of socialist realism. His proposal, although generally called socialist realism, is an adaptation of its Russian counterpart, and consists of a combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism. For more references, see Mao Dun (42-43); Liu Jianmei (1-3); Denton (14).

[23] "Take the Russian road" was a phrase taken from "Lun Renmin Mingzhu Zhuanzheng" 论人民民主专政 (On People's Democratic Dictatorship), an article written by Mao Zedong on 30 June 1949 to mark the twenty-eighth anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party. In *The Problematic of Self in Modern Chinese Literature*, Kirk A. Denton provides a detailed discussion of Zhou Yang's dogmatic interpretation of the notion of "typicality" in fictional characterization as fundamental to realism. Denton also presents a general picture of the cultural politics of the 1930s and 1940s by delineating another important leftist writer, Hu Feng's, literary and political view on realism, which opposes that of Zhou Yang. See Denton (73-116).

the ideas of the workers and of educating them in the spirit of socialism."[24] According to this definition, the descriptive characteristics and the educational function of realism are the two requirements for literary works, which demonstrate the change and development of literary thought in the new era.

(在新时代里，无产阶级的文学的性质和它的任务，被精确地表现在关于社会主义的现实主义的一个经典的定义里。这个定义说到："社会主义的现实主义，作为苏维埃文学和苏维埃文学批评的基本方法，要求作家对于现实从革命的发展中真实地、历史地具体地去描写。同时，艺术描写之真实性与历史的具体性必须与用社会主义精神从思想上去改造和教育劳动人民的任务结合起来。" 这里，现实主义的描写和教育性这两个要求，是同时被提到文学作品的面前来的。这表现了文艺思想在新时代里的变化和发展。) ("Lun wenyi")

As these remarks demonstrate, the educational (political) function of literature was elevated to a prominent position, and the representation of "truth" or "reality" had to be subject to the ideological purpose of "truthfully" representing the reality of the "revolutionary development." In other words, "socialism" was prior to, and prioritized

[24] This definition of socialist realism was written into the charter of the Union of Soviet Writers, first introduced to China by Zhou Yang in "Guanyu 'shehui zhuyi de xianshi zhuyi yu geming de langman zhuyi '" 关于"社会主义的现实主义与革命的浪漫主义" (About "Socialist Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism") in 1933. The English translation was quoted in Meyer (158).

over, "realism" and literature was much more valued for its "utility." Socialist realism dominated left-wing literary trends since the 1930s, and continued through the so-called *shiqinian wenxue* 十七年文学 (Seventeen-Year Literature) from 1949 to 1966, and then the Cultural Revolutionary Literature until 1976. The specific content of socialist realism in Chinese literature under the theoretical guidance of Russian Marxism was adapted to meet requirements of different political movements during the process. Chinese writers closely followed the Marxist promotion of literature as a portrayal of "the totality of a society in its immediacy" and a revelation of "its pattern of development" (Lukács, *Writer* 99). However, as René Wellek points out, "Marxism usually did not mean an actual grasp of the Marxist doctrine but merely a generalized anti-capitalism, sympathy for the working classes, and admiration for the Russian Revolution" (qtd. in Cain 535).[25] In short, Chinese socialist realism, characterized by an emphasis on the representation of the "truth" of "socialist essence" instead of artistic truth, was, in fact, a dogmatic application of Marxism. According to this model, literary "truth" or "reality" must be consistent with social class; accordingly, in the proletarian society, the worldview of the proletarian class was identified with "truth" in Chinese literature. Thus, in order to reveal

[25] In *Marxist Literary Thought and China*, Paul Pickowicz presents a systematic study of Marxist literary theory introduced to China between 1923 and 1935. Instead of taking it as a monolithic body of doctrine, Pickowicz examines three successive groups of Marxist literary theory: "Marx and Engels themselves, the Russian populists such as Chernyshevsky, and the Russian Marxists, especially Plekhanov and Lunacharsky. Pickowicz also carefully contrasts and analyzes the idealist and realist aspects of Marxist tradition represented by different groups in Chinese literary world during this period. Overall, Pickowicz's study shows that "Western Marxists stood on a certain amount of common ground with regard to questions about the phenomena of cultural alienation and deprivation in capitalist society, the manner in which the bourgeois literary should be perceived, the nature of 'proletarian' art, and the means by which the cultural liberation of the masses might be achieved." See Pickowicz (55-61).

the "essential truth" of socialism and discard the non-essential, literary representation should, as Lukács claims, focus on "the typical"; roughly speaking, the portrayal of heroic characters in the socialist society equaled the "truthful" representation of "socialist essence." Conversely, anti-heroic writing was condemned because such literature could not reflect the reality of socialist society and merely represented the corruption of capitalism.

Although socialist realism had been challenged since the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution, and was superseded by a variety of literary trends introduced from the West during the 1980s, its impact was strongly felt even in post-Mao Chinese literature. By invoking contemporary Russian writer Viktor Yerofeyev's seminal essay "Mourning Russian Literature," Yan comments that Yerofeyev has revealed two secrets of Russian literature. One is that power is the root of the manipulated reality in literature; the other is that manipulated Russian literature has influenced the culture of other socialist countries (*Faxian* 10). Neither Yerofeyev nor Yan has explicitly expressed what this power was or where it came from. However, following Yerofeyev's argument, Yan makes an oblique comment on Chinese literary realism in saying "to our Chinese writers and readers, this is a shared secret: we all know where our literature heritage originates and what it is" (但我们中国的作家与读者，都对此不言而喻，心知肚明，明白我们饮用河流的一隅源头在哪儿，是什么。) (10). Apparently, what Yan is criticizing here is the realism manipulated by the socialist political ideology inherited from its Russian counterpart. In the realist dogma of both literatures, as Wellek remonstrates, "the writer

ought to describe society as it is but he must also describe it as it should or will be" (11). In other words, what is at work within the mechanism of manipulated realism is power, which is irresistible in the sense of being both unsurmountable and tempting. Yan laments that in the face of the power that controls money and reputation in today's China, Chinese writers either are discouraged from writing creatively and critically or benefit from writing inertly and self-censoring their own works, both increasingly contributing to the stagnation of realism in Chinese literature. In a nutshell, "it is [today's writers'] incapability and even unwillingness that caused the mediocrity of contemporary realist literature, preventing it from exploring profound reality" (是无能力，更是不愿意。这才是今天现实主义写作向深层真实掘进停滞的根由之所在) (*Faxian* 59).

Yan is one writer who has felt "incapable" of expressing a reality that has not been manipulated. He attempts to keep a distance from realist reality to avoid falling into the trap of the manipulated realism. Meanwhile, he cannot break away from realism because his writing has to be grounded in reality. This dilemma makes him an "unfilial son" of realism. The phrase "unfilial son" can be literally understood in two ways. First, it refers to a son who is not filial, or loyal, to his parents. Second, when one calls oneself an "unfilial son," it sometimes merely signifies his humble attitude towards his parents. That is, he criticizes himself for not having done his best to take care of his parents although the opposite may be true. Yan's characterization of himself as an unfilial son of realism involves both senses of the term. By using this metaphor, Yan attaches importance to realism, indicating his writing is rooted in realism and is undetachable

from it in the same way that a son is inseparable from his parents genetically. Yan takes his unrealistic writing of reality as a betrayal of conventional realism; thus, he is an unfilial son. However, simultaneously, this metaphor can be also taken as Yan's humble attitude towards realism, from which he treats his formal "deviation" as unfilial while, essentially, he remains faithful to realism. Against this backdrop, Yan seeks an alternative way to express social reality and unveil the core of life in his writing, and thus developed "*shenshi zhuyi*," a literary device that "never rejects realism, but strives to create reality and transcend realism" (绝不排斥现实主义，但它努力创造现实和超越现实主义) (*Faxian* 182).[26]

Where "*zhuyi*" corresponds with "ism" and "*shi*" with "reality," the Chinese character "*shen*" seems much complicated. According to Yan, "*shen*" indicates the mysterious, magical, and marvelous. Various scholars have translated "*shenshi zhuyi*" into English with different phrases such as spiritual-realism (Liu, "Vacillation" 27), mythorealism (Rojas 432), divine realism (F. Li 79), or deity-realism (Li and Liu 52).

[26] Many contemporary Chinese writers publish essays about creative writing and elaborate on their own ideas and notions of literary creation. Like Yan Lianke, they write according to their own convictions. For example, Mo Yan 莫言 sticks with the thought of "writing as one of the ordinary people"; Yu Hua 余华 holds the idea of "simplicity" and "noble writing"; and Han Shaogong 韩少功 proposes the notion of "root-seeking" and puts it into practice in his works. Ge Fei 格非 and Wang Anyi 王安忆 stand out among their contemporaries with their many academic essays and studies of the art of fiction. Although both are professors in China's prestigious universities, Ge Fei distinguishes himself from other Chinese writers as well as from Wang Anyi in that, holding a doctoral degree and having worked within the academic world for a long time, Ge Fei enjoys equal identities as a literary critic and writer. His essays, particularly his studies of narratology and the art of fiction, apparently appear more academic and systematic than Wang's. Ge Fei's "skepticism of orthodox history," questioning of "the instability and indeterminacy of meaning in language," and "effort to unite his experimental technique with the classical Chinese tradition" are all manifested in his theoretical writings. Even so, compared to Yan Lianke, none of these writers have simultaneously proposed their own literary theory, systematically elaborated on it, and made it a self-contained theoretical system. For more information, see Leung Laifong (93-95).

Each of these terms literally focuses on a varying aspect of "*shen,*" but which one is the most appropriate is uncertain. Although it is difficult to find an exact equivalent for "*shenshi zhuyi*" in English, for the purposes of this dissertation, I prefer to use "mythorealism" as the equivalent of "*shenshi zhuyi*" for the following reasons: words such as "spiritual," "divine," and "deity" all have obvious religious connotations and therefore do not fit well in Yan's "*shenshi zhuyi*" context because they represent only one component of the entire concept. Yan has incorporated both Chinese and Western literary elements. "S*henshi zhuyi*" as a literary theory is primarily grounded in Chinese indigenous cultural and literary tradition, on the premise that Western literary theory is not always compatible with native Chinese literary experience (*Faxian* 189). Yan points out that a tradition of "*shenshi zhuyi*" has long existed in classical Chinese literature, exemplified in works such as *Xiyou ji* 西游记 (*Journey to the West*), *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊斋志异 (*Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*), *Fengshen Yanyi* 封神演义 (*Investiture of the Gods*), and even in Lu Xun's *Gushi xinbian* 故事新编 (*Old Tales Retold*). All these stories feature characteristics of myth and folklore in Chinese culture and lay a cultural foundation for Yan's "*shen*." Meanwhile, "*shenshi zhuyi*" also benefits from many Western literary movements such as magical realism, absurdist fiction, and postmodernist literature. Thus, "*shen*" also indicates "the magical" in magical realism, "the absurd" in absurdist fiction, and "the unreliable" in postmodernist literature. Yan has offered a general definition of mythorealism in *Discovering Fiction*:

> Mythorealism. . . abandons the seemingly logical relations of real life, and explores a "nonexistent" truth, an invisible truth, and a truth concealed by truth. Mythorealism keeps a distance from any prevailing realism. The mythorealist connection with reality does not lie in straightforward cause-and-effect links, but rather relies on human souls, minds. . . and the authors' extraordinary fabrications based on reality. . . . Imaginations, metaphors, myths, legends, dreams, fantasy, demonization, and transplantation born from everyday life and social reality can all serve as mythorealist methods and channels. (Song 645)
>
> (在创作中摒弃固有真实生活的表面逻辑关系，去探求一种"不存在"的真实、看不见的真实、被真实掩盖的真实。神实主义疏远于通行的现实主义，它与现实主义的联系不是生活的直接因果，而更多地是仰仗于人的灵魂、精神……和创作者在现实基础上的特殊臆思……在日常生活与社会现实土壤上的想象、寓言、神话、传说、梦境、幻想、魔变、移植等等，都是神实主义通向真实和现实的手法与渠道。）(*Faxian* 154)

This abstract definition of mythorealism can be better perceived in light of Yan's more elaborate analysis of its internal mechanisms. Yan has differentiated three types of cause-and-effect relations in literary works: *quan yinguo* 全因果 (complete cause-and-effect), represented by most realist works in the nineteenth century; *ling*

yinguo 零因果 (zero cause-and-effect), represented by Kafka's fiction; and *ban yinguo* 半因果 (partial cause-and-effect), exemplified by Márquez's magical realist works. Grounded on his analysis of both the advantages and disadvantages of the aforementioned cause-and-effect relations, Yan proposes a new type of causality called *nei yinguo* 内因果 (internal cause-and-effect), which indicates an illogical logic or irrational rationality that lies beyond these three types of cause-and-effect relations. To achieve the "internal cause-and-effect" in the writing process, four requirements must be met. First, the core of "internal cause-and-effect" must be *nei zhenshi* 内真实 (internal truth), which exists in the heart and soul of human beings rather than in the ostensible real life; second, "internal cause-and-effect" does not mean that the story should be a fable (*yuyan*), but it must be mysterious and allegorical; third, it does not refer to one particular literary style but a new way of getting to know the world as well as representing a writer's literary view and worldview; and fourth, it must be complementary with the other three aforementioned types of cause-and-effect relations (*Faxian* 172-74).

A few examples demonstrate the concept of mythorealism. As Yan argues, mythorealist elements exist in numerous contemporary Chinese literary works, such as Chen Rong's 谌容 satirical short story *Jianqu shisui* 减去十岁 (*Minus Ten Years*, 1985).[27] The story revolves around an absurd proposal drafted by the government to

[27] Yan's discussion of the use of mythorealist elements in contemporary Chinese literature compares Chen Rong's *Minus Ten Years* to Wu Ruozeng's 吴若增 *Feicui yanzui* 翡翠烟嘴 (*Jade Cigarette Holder*). Yan regards both as

deduct ten years from everyone's age because the Cultural Revolution figuratively took ten years from people's lives. In the story, the impossibility of deducting ten years from one's age fosters the "*shen*" aspect, whereas the absurdity of the Cultural Revolution forms the basis for the "*shi*" aspect of the story. These two aspects are connected by an internal cause-and-effect, thus reflecting the internal truth of the whole story. In addition, according to Yan, the notion of "*shenshi zhuyi*" can be usefully applied to the works of Mo Yan 莫言 as well. *Jiuguo* 酒国 (*The Republic of Wine*, 1993) serves as a prime example: it is a story with multiple narrative threads, centering on the protagonist Ding Gou'er's investigation of a case of cannibalism in the Liquorland. Tinged with playfulness, the story is "bizarre, absurd, and yet singularly logical; maddeningly incoherent and yet astonishingly, shamelessly articulate" (X. Zhang 242). Nevertheless, these works, in Yan's view, cannot be taken as "mythorealist" works in a complete sense because the "*shen*" or unrealistic elements in both stories largely outweigh the "*shi*" part so that the stories completely depart from reality. Counterexamples, on the other hand, include Wang Anyi's 王安忆 "Xiaobao Zhuang" 小鲍庄 ("Baotown," 1985), Han Shaogong's 韩少功 "Ba ba ba" 爸爸爸 ("Ba Ba Ba," 1985), and Yu Hua's 余华 *Xiongdi* 兄弟 (*Brothers,* 2008). According to Yan, the logic of some of these stories' plots transcends that of real life and is tinged with mythorealistic tones. However, the mythorealist elements are overwhelmed by the realistic plots and settings, so that they

representative works of the early 1980s that contain mythorealist elements by following a logic of "internal truth." See Yan Lianke, *Discovering Fiction* (189-91).

are usually taken for granted. These two groups of examples show that "*shenshi zhuyi*" is a mixture of mysterious or ostensibly illogical elements with realism. If the story strays too far from reality, it cannot be "*shenshi zhuyi*," and vice versa. Thus, to write "mythorealistically," one must create an internal cause-and-effect by establishing a balanced connection between "*shen*" and "*shi*."

In Yan's own works, mythorealism creates a deformed literary world pervaded with satire, exaggeration, and imagination. These works are mysterious, absurd, and irrational, yet real, logical, and persuasive. Yan tentatively integrates mythorealist elements into his realist novella *Liangcheng guli* 两程故里 (*The Hometown of Double Cheng*), for the first time early in 1988. In his 1992 novella *Xunzhao tudi* 寻找土地 (*Looking for the Land*), a story about a dead soldier who struggles to find a place to bury his cremains, Yan interrogates human nature from the perspective of a ghost narrator. The 2001 novel *Riguang liunian* 日光流年 (*The Sunlit Years*) is his first work characterized by mythorealism in a real sense, although the concept *per se* was established much later. *The Sunlit Years* mixes realist portrayals of real-life experiences and traceable historical events and settings with various mythorealist components such as fantasy, myth, and the supernatural, and mysterious things occur throughout the story; for instance, all the people of the Three-surname Village suffer from a mysterious throat swelling that kills them before they reach the age of forty. Almost all of Yan's novels of the past twenty years were written in the mythorealist style, each with peculiar characteristics that distinguish his writing style from those of others. Notably, mythorealism seems to

increasingly intervene with politically-sensitive subjects in Yan's more recent works, bringing the seriousness of politics and the playfulness of mythorealism together. What this combination of elements ultimately means is a question I seek to answer in this study.

Chinese readers and critics have regarded Yan's concept of mythorealism as an innovative, if controversial, approach to the possibility of rewriting realism in contemporary Chinese literature. However, even as scholars such as Sun Yu, David Der-wei Wang, and Liu Jianmei have praised Yan's use of mythorealism, others have criticized it. For instance, Xiao Ying points out that Yan "mistakenly takes the possibility that literature may be able to create truth as unbridled rhapsody and fabrication" (错误在于他将文学创作真实的可能误解为恣意的狂想和虚构) (373). Wang Hongtu 王宏图 claims that the weakness of mythorealism is that it "makes the writer's thought frivolous, turns imagination into a thicket of cheap ideas, and is eventually reduced to the writer's own carnival" （使作家的文思变得轻飘虚渺，想象变成了廉价的胡涂乱抹，沦为一个人的狂欢） (48). These criticisms are representative of most negative attitudes towards mythorealism, showcasing these critics' strong preference for realism. It is obvious that for some readers, the idea of integrating mythorealist and realist elements within the same realist text is too radical to be accepted. Nevertheless, despite these misgivings, mythorealism has not drawn much attention from the academic field. It has mostly been discussed in passing, with the majority of critics and scholars not taking it as seriously as Yan's creative writing.

Indeed, some of the weaknesses and inadequacies of the theoretical construction of mythorealism probably contribute to the lack of adequate attention to this theory. The biggest problem with mythorealism, as noted in the introductory section, is that Yan runs the risk of interpreting any ostensibly illogical or irrational reasoning as an "internal cause-and-effect," and attempts to build it into his mythorealist framework. But as Terry Eagleton states, "any word which covers everything loses its cutting edge and dwindles to an empty sound" (*Ideology* 7). Similarly, a "versatile" theory is vulnerable to being empty and losing its significance. Based on the criterion that literary writing that is ostensibly absurd or illogical but abides by an internal cause-and-effect logic can be treated as mythorealism, most works would qualify for categorization as such. Yan himself may also have been aware of this problem, and attempts to dismiss it by declaring that works that demonstrate either too many or too few mythorealist elements cannot be strictly called mythorealist works. This elusive and ambiguous standard cannot be effectively apprehended and applied to identifying a mythorealist work. Yan admits that "among the published modern literary works, we may not be able to find a classic sample of mythorealist work" (在已经出版的当代文学作品中，我们也许还拿不出神实主义写作的经典范本) (*Faxian* 209). In addition to this problem, the alleged "internal truth" is no less elusive and ambiguous than the aforementioned standard. Yan has endeavored to explain what internal truth is in great detail, but it is still only dimly discernible. In his view, internal truth is the essence of mythorealism that differentiates mythorealism from those literary devices used in absurdist, surrealist, postmodernist, and

magical realist works. The contradiction lies in that, according to Yan's definition, mythorealism in fact encompasses most prominent features of those literary trends or schools, such as absurdity, fantasy, exaggeration, parody, and black humor.

However, the logical flaws in the theorization of mythorealism do not prevent it from being used as a proper method of differentiating Yan's writing style from those of others, since, whereas his literary works can hardly be categorized into any specific trend or school, we need an appropriate term to identify with his writing so as to discuss his works. The significance of mythorealism does not necessarily reside in its theoretical contribution to the literary field, but in its significance of bridging reality and literary imagination in a way that is different from, but not necessarily incompatible with, realism.

One basic point that must be emphasized here is that mythorealism is allegedly intended to represent the reality that cannot be adequately represented by realism. This immediately raises a variety of questions: what is the reality that cannot be represented by realism? How does mythorealism, proposing something seemingly illogical and irrational, convey an internal truth that is able to represent reality? How is mythorealism relevant to realism if, as Yan usually states, the former is compatible with the latter? All these questions are closely related to how realism and reality are interpreted in different literary and social contexts. Because mythorealism is not exclusively based on the Chinese literary tradition, not investigating these questions in the relevant Western theoretical discourse would be inadequate. Another important reason why our

understanding of mythorealism must be situated in the Western context is that, as noted in the introduction to this dissertation, Yan has been greatly influenced by Western literature and literary trends in his literary career. Due to the two critical historical periods of Chinese "enlightenment,"[28] characterized by a massive importation of Western literature and theoretical schools into the Chinese literary field, Yan, like many other Chinese writers, has been equipped with knowledge of Western literature and literary theories. Western realism, Marxist aesthetics, and modernist literary trends have, to some extent, shaped the new tradition of Chinese literature, particularly for the contemporary generation of Chinese writers. These influences also constitute the theoretical and literary sources of Yan's mythorealism.

The next section briefly delineates the notion of "reality" alongside the theoretical development of realism in Western literary scholarship, with the intent of examining Yan's mythorealism in a wider theoretical scope and finding answers to the above questions. Particularly, in light of Jameson's insight on "modes of production,"[29] this study explores how Chinese social reality inspired Yan's development of

[28] These two "enlightenment" refers to two historical periods in China, one during the May Fourth period and the other in the 1980s, shortly after the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution. During this time, much Western literature and humanistic thought were introduced to China with "the belief in progress, the promise of modernization, the historical mission of nationalism, and the prospect of the Great Harmony of freedom, equality, especially the modern attitude to associate the meaning of self-struggle and existence with the transition to the future, and so forth." Wang Hui has elaborated on the respective characteristics of "enlightenment" in the Western historical context and its Chinese counterpart "*qimeng*" in the Chinese context. See Wang Hui.

[29] I will return to this term in the second section of this chapter, and discuss how Jameson differentiates his idea of "modes of production" from the traditional Marxist understanding of this concept. For the time being, suffice it to say, Jameson's emphasis on a multiple form of co-existing "modes of production" essentially makes it possible for him to see the necessity of portraying reality in literature beyond the monolithic form of conventional realism.

mythorealism but has been not fully discussed in Yan's context, for without a common ground of apprehension of how "mythorealist" Chinese reality is, mythorealism is simply rootless.

"Reality" in Western Theoretical Discourse and in the Chinese Social Context

What is reality, and what is the literary treatment of reality? Within the scope of realism, these are historical, ideological and aesthetic questions, to which the answers are always highly contentious. For example, René Wellek believes reality, "like 'truth,' 'nature' or 'life,' is, in art, in philosophy, and in everyday usage a value-charged word"; he holds that "all art in the past aimed at reality even if it spoke of a higher reality: a reality of essences or a reality of dreams and symbols" (2). Contemporary scholar Harry E. Shaw argues negatively in his book *Narrating Reality* that "no realist novel with which I am familiar claims. . . to offer us unmediated and 'transparent' access to reality" (4). Nevertheless, Shaw holds that "realist novels do, however, claims that certain ways of capturing reality are better (for their purposes) than others, and this latter claim deserves our scrutiny and our skepticism" (4). In fact, in the Western context, problems of defining reality and realism are more difficult than their Chinese counterparts. Therefore, even providing a general summary of the polemic of realism in the Western theoretical context is beyond the scope of my current discussion.

In order to enter into a theoretical dialogue with "Chinese realism" and to consider the relevance of "reality" represented by Yan's mythorealism to the discussion

of "reality" in Western theoretical discourse, this section primarily covers three important critics - Auerbach, Lukács, and Jameson - and their views on realism and reality. First of all, Auerbach's *Mimesis* is of pivotal importance to any discussion related to realism because "no single work on realism since has achieved its critical 'weight' and historical importance" (Shaw 91). In the case of Lukács, besides his inextricable link with Auerbach,[30] he is particularly important for this discussion because his view on realism bridges the political and theoretical connections between Chinese socialist realism and the Western tradition of Marxist literary criticism. Nevertheless, while Auerbach and Lukács supply a thread of theoretical continuity in our understanding of realism, this discussion gives the central place to Fredric Jameson, with the intent of reconfiguring the "realistic reality" in literature in the postmodern era. While Jameson's popularity and dominance in the Chinese theoretical realm associated with Marxist literary criticism makes it impossible to ignore him, the main reason for drawing on Jameson's discussion

[30] In his essay "Reality and the Two Realisms: Mimesis in Auerbach, Lukács, and Handke," David H. Miles provides an insightful comparison between Auerbach and Lukács with regard to their views on realism based on their similar biographical experiences and shared German idealist traditions. By recognizing Hegel's model of analyzing the representation of reality in Auerbach's analyses, Miles relates Auerbach's works to those of Lukács, whose Hegelian interpretation of realism is universally known. According to him, "despite the blatant differences--Lukacs' Marxist determinism obviously contradicts Auerbach's radical historicism--the approaches of both men actually constitute two examples of the same kind of realism, both of them being anchored in Hegelian aesthetics." Overall, Miles identifies three concepts "at the heart of Lukács' theory of realism that are identical with those of Auerbach: the Hegelian insistence on the elevated portrayal of everyday events in the Homeric sense; the belief in the centrality of the Goethean symbol for such narration; and the historical grounding of the entire scheme in nineteenth-century French realism, in particular with Balzac." See Miles (373-74). In my discussion, however, I do not focus on the comparison between Auerbach and Lukács, although, admittedly, these similarities make it possible for me to parallel them in the current context. Instead, my intent of briefly discussing Auerbach and Lukács, apart from the consideration of a theoretical coherence and transition from them to Fredric Jameson, on whom this discussion focuses, is largely based on the theoretical relevance of their view on realism to the Chinese theoretical context.

of realism and partly build my argument on his theory is that his view on literary reality is closely relevant to Yan's theorization of mythorealism.

Realism came to the fore in opposition to Romanticism in France during the mid-nineteenth century, and from there it spread throughout Europe. The terms "realism" and "realist," according to Wellek, appeared in an article on Balzac early in 1853. The concept was fully crystallized in 1858 when the French critic Hippolyte Taine wrote an essay on Balzac's realist writing. Balzac won retrospective recognition as a realist and was first associated in modern French literature with realism. His realist writing not only distinguished his works from those of Romanticism, but also provided a model for the representation of reality in realist works. In general, "the most apparent characteristic of his work is precisely its objectivity. His novels are not confessions of his life: and the choice of his subjects is never dictated to him by particular or in a way, for private reasons. He neither speaks in them of himself, nor does he reveal his way of looking at things" (Brunetière 69). Balzac's realist writing fully demonstrated and expressed the literary creed of realism at the time among established artists and scholars such as Champfleury and Duranty, who fervently championed realism in their writing and in the journal *Le Réalisme*. According to these works, "Art should give a truthful representation of the real world: it should therefore study contemporary life and manners by observing meticulously and analyzing carefully. It should do so dispassionately, impersonally, objectively" (Wellek 4).

The above discussion demonstrates that objectivity is an important criterion of realism, although it is hardly achieved in practice. This criterion is paradoxically challenged within the discourse of realism *per se* with regard to what is meant by reality or truth in literary representation. There are in fact binary poles of realism: on the one hand, reality is understood as the objective reflection of the physical world, and thus realism is the mimetic representation of the objective world; on the other hand, reality is primarily taken as a set of ideas and private mental constructs connected to the outer world, and thus realism is the subjective representation of an intuitive reality of which the material world is merely superficial. To reconcile the two poles of an empirical reality and a subjective reality, Hiram M. Stanley concludes, "reality is but an idea and ideal to which the Realist seeks to be true, and Realism is only a mode of Idealism subject to the laws and limitations of all idealism. The ideal is always unattainable, and the ideal of perfect conformity to the real is no exception" (240).

In his seminal work *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach provides an elaborate description and analysis of a pluralistic representation of reality in his exploration of "the mixed style" in the figural tradition of the Bible and works by great European writers from Homer to Virginia Woolf. He identifies a variety of realities by bringing together two opposing tendencies in Western narrative and synthesizing idea and mimesis in his work. In the former case, he interprets the Bible's narrative as a figural depiction of reality, which makes broad symbolic connections between the literal and the figural. In the latter case, he elaborates on the Greek tradition of realist writing in which vivid and physical

description of nature and humans is dominant. Auerbach grounds his discussion in separate literary passages, each of which, according to his detailed analyses, enacts a particular attitude toward reality and represents the real from different perspectives.

Auerbach's interpretation of reality through literary representation is primarily guided by three crystallized ideas: the classical doctrine of levels of style, in which high style is always assigned to tragedy depicting nobles and gods, whereas "everyday practical reality could find a place in literature only within the frame of a low or intermediate kind of style" (554); and two breaks with the doctrine of stylistic levels that yield different results for the expression of reality: one takes place in the Old Testament, which Auerbach calls "figural realism," further exemplified by Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Built on the notion of "figura," Auerbach describes "figural realism" as follows:

> In this conception, an occurrence on earth signifies not only itself but at the same time another, which it predicts or confirms, without prejudice to the power of its concrete reality here and now. The connection between occurrences is not regarded as primarily a chronological or causal development but as a oneness within the divine plan, of which all occurrences are parts and reflections. Their direct earthly connection is of secondary importance, and often their interpretation can altogether dispense with any knowledge of it. (555)

The figural interpretation of realism "posits a mechanism that links certain aspects of the mundane world to a transcendent structure that renders them real" (Shaw

98), indicating that reality is not necessarily the immediate occurrence of real life. However, Auerbach also sees the limited scope and reach of figural interpretation, which leads to a "rigid, narrow, and unproblematic schematization" (119) of reality that dissolves the content of reality *per se* and reduces it to a dogmatic meaning.

Another break from the classical doctrine, according to Auerbach, happens in "modern realism," particularly in nineteenth-century French realism. In "keeping with the constantly changing and expanding reality of modem life" (554), the representation of reality in modern realism has become completely historical. Noting that the figural tradition in Dante's work has been overtaken and transformed "by the disruptive and dislocating currents of historical modernity" (Said xxi), Auerbach identifies a different kind of reality in works such as those of Stendhal, Flaubert, and Proust, who "sought to unify the fragmented modern world with its unfolding class struggle, its industrialization, and its economic expansion combined with moral discomfort –in the eccentric structures of the modernist novel" (xxi). In other words, what Auerbach painstakingly traces in modern realism is "the growth of historicism, a multiperspectival, dynamic, and holistic way of representing history and reality" (xix).

Nevertheless, Auerbach has no intention to offer a general definition of the heavily contested term "realism," which, to him, is a "hopeless discussion[s]" (548). Thus, in incorporating modern writers of fiction such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, "who re-create a whole world out of random" and "unimportant moments," into his critical narrative of modern realism, Auerbach "explicitly rejects a rigid scheme, a

relentless sequential movement, or fixed concepts as instruments of study" (Said xxiii). However, whether figural realism or modern realism, or mundane or transcendent reality, there is always a sense of historical depth in his interpretation of reality in those literary works,[31] which, to some extent, brings the two realisms together. For instance, in his comment on "Dante's figural realism and Balzac's atmospheric realism" (94) in *Mimesis*, Hayden White characterizes the relationship between the two as built on a kind of historicity, which reveals Auerbach's understanding of reality as a representation of historical continuity.[32]

However, Auerbach did not attract attention from Chinese scholars, most likely because "traditional Chinese literary thought lacked the well-developed conception of mimesis that has dominated Western literary values" (Denton, "General" 31).[33] This "absence" partly explains why Auerbach's *Mimesis* was not introduced to China until the

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[31] Historical consciousness is embedded not only in Auerbach's narrative of modern realism, but also in that of figural realism. For example, in his reading of Auerbach's "Figura" and *Mimesis*, James I. Porter discusses Auerbach's insistence on "historical real,' and states "the current consensus around 'Figura' " is that "it roots the validity of literal meaning in historical reality, in particular that of the Hebrew Bible," which "asserts its own historical reality in a way that rivals that of its spiritual counterpart." Porter also reads from Auerbach's *Mimesis* that the antagonism of both historical reality and its transcendence in Christian view of reality has been directly written into the notion incarnation. See Porter (80-113). In his introduction to *Mimesis*, Edward W. Said has expressed the similar idea on Auerbach's interpretation of the relationship between the Old and New Testament, which demonstrates "how history does not only move forward but also backward, in each oscillation between eras managing to accomplish a greater realism, a more substantial 'thickness'. . . a higher degree of truth" (xiii).

[32] Hayden White holds that "the two terms [Dante's figural realism and Balzac's atmospheric realism] linked by similarity or resemblance must be subjected to a double articulation: the earlier terms must themselves be shown to be fulfillments of even earlier figures and the later terms shown to be prefigurations of even later styles" (94). This interpretation takes a perspective of historicism, which also pervades Auerbach's own narrative.

[33] This statement, though contentious to some extent, has been accepted by the majority of Chinese scholars. In his general introduction to *Modern Chinese Literary Thought*, Kirk A. Denton, in generalizing the heterogenous literary traditions of China and the West, provides a comprehensive literary review of the "absence" of mimesis in Chinese literary tradition (Denton 31-36). However, in his article "Zhongguo meixue sixiang zhong de mofang lun" 中国美学思想中的摹仿论 (Mimesis in Chinese Aesthetic Thought), Gu Mingdong disputes this view by arguing it is a matter of different ways of defining "mimesis" in Chinese and Western thought rather than whether "mimesis" exists or not in Chinese traditional thought (Gu 203-10).

beginning of the twenty-first century, even though it has now been increasingly referred to and studied by contemporary Chinese scholars.

Auerbach's contemporary and fellow Marxist critic Georg Lukács was much more extensively read in China. Lukács's view of realism has had a significant effect on Chinese literature, as much of his literary criticism was translated and introduced to China during the 1930s and 1940s. Although the reception of Lukács in China was complicated due to constantly changing political environments, his arguments on classical notions such as totality, typicality, objectivity, and reification have exerted a long-lasting influence on Chinese literary realism.[34]

Strongly endorsing objectivity and championing the didactic function of realism, Lukács, unlike Auerbach, excludes the subjectivity of idealism from his imagined reality by condemning it as modernist decadence which emerged from capitalism.[35] Lukács endorses an objective sociohistorical reality existing in class society and believes objective reality can be achieved in literature by "a deeper probing of the real world" ("Balance" 37). Strongly criticizing expressionism and surrealism for

[34] It has to be noted that realism, particularly socialist realism in China, originally derived from Russian realism and has been influenced greatly by early Russian Marxist theorists. Therefore, it is incorrect to say that Lukács's ideas about these notions are first introduced to China, although he did discuss some of them, such as typicality and reification, at length, and they thus became widely known to Chinese scholars.

[35] In his edited book *Aesthetics and Politics*, Ronald Taylor provides a detailed analysis of the conflict between Ernst Bloch and Lukács on expressionism, and thinks that "the arguments between Bloch and Lukács and their respective allies over its fate were. . . essentially a contest over the historical meaning of modernism in general" (20). In the essay "Discussing Expressionism" that follows Taylor's analysis, Bloch denounces Lukács and his allies for their condemnation of artistic experiments such as expressionism as "aspects of the decay of capitalism," and comments that "Lukács's thought takes for granted a closed and integrate reality that does. . . exclude the subjectivity of idealism" (20).

their failure to pierce "the surface to discover the underlying essence" (36-37), Lukács discredits their fragmented narratives and denounces modernist schools for their incapacity to progress "beyond the level of immediate experience" (37) and thus their "growing distance from, and progressive dissolution of, realism" (29). Lukács insists that a writer should strive to represent reality as it truly is. For example, he champions the realist works of Thomas Mann, who, in Lukács's view, tries to show "how thoughts and feelings grow out of the life of society and how experiences and emotions are parts of the total complex of reality" (36). This belief corresponds to his emphasis on the importance of objectivity, about which he states that "lack of objectivity in the description of the outer world finds its complement in the reduction of reality to a nightmare" (*Meaning* 31).

Among the Marxists, Lukács has formulated the most coherent theory of realism grounded on the Marxist dogma that literature is a reflection of objective reality. Nevertheless, Lukács's tenacious hold on "objectivity" has incurred suspicion because it has been viewed as reductionist. This is particularly exemplified in the well-known "Brecht-Lukács literary debate," in which Bertolt Brecht questions how one should perceive "objective" reality and who should be responsible for deciding the standard of the objective. While such questioning and inquiry from his Chinese counterparts have been undoubtedly repressed, Brecht holds there is "no simple equation between literary forms and the ideal of realism" (Selden 162). Brecht does not believe the "objectivity" of reality because he feels that this so-called objectivity merely conforms to a particular

reality and norm that serves the interest of the existing ruling class. As a result, he argues that to avoid such reductionism, the reality depicted in the arts (literature) must adapt to the transformation of society so that it can keep true to the society that has evolved to its present point. Brecht champions the idea that the experimental forms in the modernist arts are more suited to contemporary society.

Lukács's "objectivistic" conception of reality is closely associated with his two other core concepts of totality and typicality, which have, to some extent, become the legacy of Chinese socialist realism that have greatly influenced Chinese literature roughly before the 1980s. These notions have been, as noted in the previous section, mishandled, deliberately or not, by "reduc[ing] characters to mere allegories of social forces," and "turning 'typical' characters into mere symbols of class" (Jameson, *Marxism and Form* 193) in the Chinese historical context.[36] The notion of "totality" is formulated as a norm for Lukács to measure the anomie of the modern society. It is a vision of a complex society and also a theoretical guideline for the realist narrative. As Jameson summarizes in *Marxism and Form*, by totality Lukács means that literary works should permit

> life and experience to be felt as a totality: all its events, all its partial facts and elements are immediately grasped as part of a total process. . . . For the most important aspect of this feeling of totality

[36] The reason why Lukács's theorization of these notions are now in disfavor is beyond the reach of this discussion. Discussions of this subject include "The Case for Georg Lukács" (160-205) in Fredric Jameson's *Marxism and Form*, and Martin Jay's *Marxism and Totality* (536-537).

> for us is not at the moment the ideological explanation given it but rather its immediate presence or absence in that particular social life from which the writer draws his raw material. (169)

Lukács perceives reality as a historical process that must be represented in totality in realist literature. Totality is then realized through the typical character or typicality, which, to borrow Jameson's statement again, "is not. . . a one-to-one correlation between individual characters in the work. . . and fixed, stable components of the external world itself. . . but rather an analogy between the entire plot, as a conflict of forces, and the total moment of history itself considered as process" (*Marxism and Form* 195). In other words, typicality works to serve the ultimate aim of offering a totalistic representation of reality by piercing the surface of reality and making its essentials visible.

Like Lukács, Jameson also holds to the Marxist notion of "totality," but he understands it differently and does not think "totality" is always historically achievable. In *Marxism and Form*, Jameson does not explicitly reveal his own attitude towards Lukács's "totality," but in his later *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, his "rectification" or "update" of "totality" signifies his different view of reality from that of Lukács. By reinvestigating one of Marxism's core concepts, the "mode of production," Jameson proposes to consider "totality" in terms of not its validity but its historical conditions of possibility:

> I am here, however, essentially concerned with the conditions of possibility of the concept of a "mode of production," that is to say, the characteristics of the historical and social situation which make it possible to articulate and formulate the concept of "totality" in the first place. I will suggest, in a general way, that thinking this particular new thought (or combining older thoughts in this new way) presupposes a particular kind of "uneven" development, such that distinct and coexisting modes of production are registered together in the life world of the thinker in question. (404)

This statement demonstrates that, in replacing Lukács's monolithic capitalist mode of production with multiple modes of production, Jameson has depicted a different picture of social totality, which comes into view when a variety of modes of production are entangled with each other. Accordingly, the mode of narrative in literature can hardly be monolithic, either. This point is particularly important in this discussion because it is closely relevant not only to my analysis of Jameson's view of reality in realist literature but also to Yan Lianke's view of Chinese reality. Here, I simply touch upon it for the purpose of transition from Lukács to Jameson. I will first of all turn to Jameson's literary theory before returning to his argument on "mode of production" in more detail later in this study.

Unlike postmodernist critics such as Lyotard, Baudrillard, and Linda Hutcheon, who are virtually hostile to realism for its incapacity to depict the reality of real life,[37] Jameson recuperates realism by negotiating with alternative forms of representation of new realities of a social totality within the framework of neo-Marxist theory. Instead of rejecting textual interpretations of the non-Marxist tradition, Jameson regards them as possessing some local, limited, or finite significance that can be integrated into the totality of Marxist method of literary and cultural interpretation. Jameson tries to restrain himself from entering debates that polarize those positing a notion of realism and opposing literary schools that deny it. Instead, he regards all texts, whether realistic or modernist, as playing a role "as a socially symbolic act, as the ideological—but formal and immanent—response to a historical dilemma" (*Antinomies* 129). Building on this view, Jameson regards realism as a historical and evolutionary process, during which its

[37] It is far beyond the scope and aim of this project to discuss these postmodernist scholars' views of reality and representations of reality in Literature; however, I would like to offer a brief summary of these scholars' main ideas in this footnote in order to provide some support for my contrasting them with Jameson. Jean-François Lyotard argues there is only a reality of "lack of reality" because our presumed reality has been "derealized" and reduced to products of capitalist corruption and power. In demystifying reality as a set of "'correct' images," "'correct' narratives" and "'correct' forms" manifested in various forms of contemporary arts, Lyotard views realism as merely "the art of making reality, of knowing reality and of knowing how to make reality." Similarly, Jean Baudrillard questions the validity and legitimacy of reality by coining the term "hyperreality" to indicate that the "real" that is represented in all forms of texts is completely self-referential and does not correspond to any existing referent. According to him, the difference between the true and the false, or the real and the imaginary, has been dissolved into a process of simulation, which is defined as "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal." Baudrillard interprets realism as something, in Lyotard's words, akin to what Nietzsche calls nihilism, based on which realism is merely the fiction of a fiction, so that the real sense of reality is permanently unattainable to both writers and readers. In her questioning of Baudrillard's assumption of simulacrum in that "it is (or was) ever possible to have unmediated access to reality," Linda Hutcheon reveals the politics of literary representation of reality and holds "there is nothing natural about the 'real' and there never was—even before the existence of mass media." Championing the idea that postmodern, particularly the postmodernist parody in arts and literature, "is a questioning of what reality can mean and how we can come to know it," Hutcheon challenges the realist notion of representation by calling into question the "transparency" of realist representations of reality. See Lyotard (2010, 261-63; 1993, 242); Baudrillard (1); Hutcheon (31-33).

emergence and development "at one and the same time constitute its own inevitable undoing, its own decay and dissolution" (6). Thus, realism, in his view, is undefinable and a hybrid literary mode.[38] As in all Marxist literary-critical discourses, "reality" is the core concern of the debate and contention about realism. This is true for Jameson. Although he similarly regards reality as elusive and unattainable, Jameson argues that reality can be transformed into textual reality, which is obviously a historical notion and can only be apprehended in its historicity. However, instead of discussing the notion of reality *per se*, Jameson uses the term "history" to indicate reality, giving rise to his well-known slogan, "Always historicize!" Jameson contextualizes "reality" in its historicized site in the form of text, and therefore his theorization of "history" is, in fact, a manifestation of his thought about reality.

Following Althusser's idea that history is an absent cause,[39] Jameson interprets history in *The Political Unconscious* as "fundamentally non-narrative and nonrepresentational" and only accessible "in textual form" (82). Therefore, how to understand history depends on how to interpret a literary text. Defending Marxist critical insights as "the ultimate *semantic* precondition for the intelligibility of literary and

[38] In *The Antinomies of Realism*, Jameson describes realism as "a hybrid concept, in which an epistemological claim (for knowledge or truth) masquerades as an aesthetic ideal, with fatal consequences for both of these incommensurable dimensions" (5). This interpretation has illustrated the predicament or the inherent ambiguity of realism.

[39] Althusser takes the notion of "absent cause" from Spinoza, which indicates a presence with definite materiality but is inaccessible to us except in textual form. Jameson uses this notion to refer to history as an absent cause that can be understood neither as text nor narrative, but can be only intuited from texts. In his *Essays in Self-Criticism*, Althusser offers some examples to illustrate the notion of "absent cause" in three senses: political, scientific, and philosophical (see Althusser 126).

cultural text" (75),[40] Jameson identifies three distinct hermeneutic horizons or progressive stages in the process of reinterpreting the literary text. Within these horizons, the meaning of the literary text is enriched and enlarged based on the social ground through

> the notions, first, of political history, in the narrow sense of punctual event and a chronicle like sequence of happenings in time; then of society, in the now already less diachronic and time-bound sense of a constitutive tension and struggle between social classes; and, ultimately, of history now conceived in its vastest sense of the sequence of modes of production and the succession and destiny of the various human social formations, from prehistoric life to whatever far future history has in store for us. (75)

In other words, Jameson's interpretation of "history" or "reality" via text is processed at the three levels of the political, the social, and the historical, corresponding respectively to three horizons. In the first horizon, the literary text is regarded as a record of successive happenings in certain contexts constructed as a plot by some individual voice, and a symbolic act manifesting the authorial ideology of resolving the social contradiction through imaginary resolutions. In the second horizon, the literary text is no longer taken as an individual text but an expression of class conflict in the social

[40] The word is italicized in the original text.

discourse, which Jameson calls an "*ideologeme*" (*Political* 76), signifying ways of thinking about the world as expressed by disparate and conflicting classes. In the third horizon, Jameson grasps history in the totality of a succession of social formations and modes of production. He interprets both the individual text and its *ideologemes* into the *ideology of form*, referring to the symbolic messages conveyed by various sign systems.

However, as we advance through the three stages or horizons, none of the three levels are left behind; the political is always contained within the social and the social within the historical. In this regard, these three levels, constituting the essential aspects of reality, are intended to be rethought and reconsidered in the third horizon of Jameson's literary interpretation. Jameson's theoretical framework of the three horizons ideally solves the contradiction between different literary forms and -*ism*s, such as realism, modernism, and postmodernism. Within his horizons, other literary forms such as the romantic, the magical, the absurdist, simply serve as variants of realism, subversively expressing a utopian resolution of contradictions.[41]

In short, whether early French realism, Auerbach's mimesis, Marxist-endorsed realism, or postmodernist skepticism toward realism, the representation of reality in literature is a dynamic but contentious topic. The meaning of "reality" has been

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[41] In his review of Marston Anderson's *The Limits of Realism*, David Der-wei Wang offers a similar insight into realism by posing the possibility of treating critical realism as a multiple kind of modern Chinese literature. Wang holds that "modern Chinese realism has to be understood as a polyphonic discourse," for example; "Beyond the 'limits of (critical) realism,' there are other modes yet to be explored, such as the lyrical and native-soil realism initiated by Fei Ming and Shen Congwen, the urban exotic realism represented by Shi Zhicun, Mu Shiying and Liu Naou, the farcical, grotesque realism of the early Lao She and Qian Zhongshu, and the feminine/feminist realism demonstrated in Ling Shuhua, Ding Ling, and Eileen Zhang. All these modes touch on issues raised by critical realists, but they approach them in such different ways as to engender a heterogeneity of tensions on the discursive level" (341).

repeatedly recodified, expanded, or deconstructed in various theoretical contexts against specific social and historical backgrounds. Simultaneously, in response to the changing social and historical conditions, literary realism, as outlined above, is also continuously endowed with new meanings, constantly exploring enriched forms of expression to represent the unrepresentable, which is social reality.

The question arises: from where does Yan's mythorealism fit in the general landscape of the Western critical discourse? Following Yan's denunciation of Chinese literary realism and his claim that "mythorealism never rejects realism, but strives to create reality and transcend realism" (*Faxian* 182), we can easily find that Yan's idea is tinged with a strong sense of postmodernism. His sincerity and loyalty to realism are not at all nullified by his "hatred" for the ideological manipulation of reality and realism. On the contrary, the articulation of the "unfilial son of realism" aligns him with Jameson's "dissolution of realism." Both, regardless of their ultimately different purposes and foci, destabilize the notions of realism and reality in the traditional Marxist theoretical context, seeking alternative ways of reformulating realism in light of postmodernist thought. In this regard, mythorealism tries to interrogate "reality" by reconstructing a textual reality that is contextualized in the real world. Since "the representation of the unrepresentable reality" is the core of mythorealism, but Yan has not provided a systematic insight into it, two questions must be addressed here: what is contemporary Chinese reality like, and why is it significant to portray this reality through mythorealism? For Yan, Chinese social reality is an entangled issue that confuses him

and makes his arguments elusive and sometimes unintelligible. Yan's confusion about reality lies in the absurdity and unbelievability of everyday occurrences in contemporary Chinese society, such that no literary imagination within the scope of conventional realism can compete with the manifest and ostensible reality of Chinese society. Thus, he diagnoses realist representation of reality as a dead end for Chinese writers.

To unfold the picture of contemporary Chinese reality, we must return to Jameson's concept of "modes of production." Jameson subverted the traditional Marxist schema of "mode of production," which only reflects a monolithic model of "the cultural unity of a given historical period" (*Political* 78) and, in his view, tends to encourage a simple typological or classificatory operation in its interpretation of the literary work. By rejecting the traditional Marxist idea of a clear boundary between various modes of production, Jameson argues that several modes of production always coexist in the same historically existing society and jointly construct the social formation.[42] These modes of production include, according to him,

> vestiges and survivals of older modes of production, now relegated to structurally dependent positions within the new, as well as anticipatory tendencies which are potentially inconsistent with the

[42] The complicated relationship and the interplay of different modes of production expressed by Jameson is akin to Raymond Williams' cultural notions "dominant," "residual," and "emergent." That is, Jameson's "vestiges and survivals of older modes of production" parallel with Williams' "residual," "the existing system but have not yet generated an autonomous space of their own" corresponds to Williams' "emergent." The "dominant" is so self-evident in both contexts that it does not need any explanation (see Williams 121-27).

> existing system but have not yet generated an autonomous space of their own. (95)

The dynamic in these various modes of production shows that there is no single ideological dominant in any period of human society. Jameson's emphasis on the blurry border of various modes of production provides a good perspective from which to comprehend China's social reality, although I will make a slight revision by arguing that, even within the same social class or the same mode of production, a secondary level of modes of production is also at work, which exemplifies Jameson's idea of "cultural revolution."[43]

Contemporary China is now at an economic, political, and social transition period, with different kinds of social forces emerging and participating in the construction of what is officially called socialism but actually rendering the latter into an undefinable social mode and a confusing era. Various modes of production representing their own social interests intermingle with each other. In the meantime, however, each of them is pushed by external sociopolitical factors into a constant evolution from one to another. For example, the coexistence of socialist and capitalist elements in many aspects of society, such as economy, culture, and even politics, makes it almost impossible to distinguish which group of people belongs to which social class. Such a "cultural

[43] Jameson uses this phrase to specify the specific object of study, the literary text, constructed by the third horizon in his literary interpretation theory. Cultural revolution in Jameson's context refers to "that moment in which the coexistence of various modes of production becomes visibly antagonistic, their contradictions moving to the very center of political, social, and historical life" (95). It is an eternal process in every society and accompanies all modes of production. It is also the reconstruction of the materials of cultural and literary history.

revolution" is also exemplified by many extreme changes; for instance, the transformation between different modes of production can be momentary: a poor man becoming a millionaire overnight is no longer fictional, or a small town may become a prosperous city over a shockingly short period, as Yan describes in *Zhalie zhi* 炸裂志 (*The Explosion Chronicles*). In short, the ostensible causality becomes inadequate to explain the logic of irrational reality. Consequently, in literature, the "typicality" and "totality" strongly proposed by traditional Marxists can no longer represent the reality. Similarly, the "flatness" and "fragmentation" promoted by postmodernists is no longer adequate to represent post-socialist Chinese reality, in which the interaction of various modes of production is even more complicated and rapid than that in a solely capitalist society.

A close-up view of such a social reality makes sense in light of Jameson's cultural revolution. Even within the seemingly same level of social class, such as within the "working class" whom Yan calls the working poor, components of different modes of production are also intertwined with each other and make the reality more complicated and unintelligible. Conversely, people who obviously belong to varying levels of social classes, such as intellectuals, peasants, and government officials, may share the fundamental characteristics of the same mode of production with respect to the conditions of their existence and their perception of the ontological world. For instance, Yang Ke, the protagonist of Yan's story *Feng ya song* 风雅颂 (*The Odes of Songs*), is actually a professor at a prestigious university. But in reality, he is no more than the

humblest peasant at the bottom of the society, whose existence has been totally marginalized and ignored.

This is the contemporary Chinese reality that Yan attempts to depict but feels incapable of grasping through realist writing, as the old generic categories of literature have become inadequate for addressing contemporary issues. As a result, mythorealism intervenes and forms a tension with realism. It disrupts both spatial and temporal conventions in traditional realism, and endeavors to escape the dilemma of our limited vocabulary by enriching the textual meaning through its peculiar narrative form, yet still refuses to break away from realism. Although mythorealism represents a form of the subversive, the unconventional, and the unrealistic, it cannot be divorced from realist matter-of-fact narrative. In this sense, mythorealism finds its place in Jameson's reformulated "hybrid" realism,[44] according to which its dynamic of deconstruction and recreation does not avow antagonism to realism, but only constitutes an alternative expression of realism. By incorporating absurd, magical, exaggerated elements into realistic motivations, mythorealism alternatively represents an irrational reality, although this reality, as Jameson argues, is textually reconstructed and therefore needs rereading and reinterpretation.

[44] Jameson offers a similar example in his elaboration on the dialectical use of magical narratives and interpretation of its realistic perspective (103-50).

Mythorealist Narratives: Ideology, Form, and the Representation of Reality

As the previous two sections imply, many theorists generally agree that social change requires formal change in literature and vice versa, as a new literary form must be able to represent the characteristics of the changed or changing social reality. From this point of view, what a literary form conveys is far more than its aesthetic significance; it is conditioned by ideological assumptions and possesses its own ideological implications as well. This section critically employs Marxist notions of textual ideology and replaces its "authorial ideology" with the author's "political attitude" in order to examine the ideological function of mythorealist narratives, in particular how the author's political attitude expressed by "the symbolic of act" is overwhelmed by the textual ideology in mythorealist narratives.

Before proceeding, I will briefly clarify what ideology means in this study and differentiate it from the reductive interpretation of Marxist ideology as always politically mediated by social contradictions among various modes of production. Since my analysis in this section partly relies on Jameson's theoretical thought, albeit critically and adaptively, it is very possible that I may mislead readers to believe that this study will center on the relationship between literary form and Marxist ideology. Indeed, Marxist aesthetics (specifically, Jameson's theory of literary interpretation discussed in the previous section) is an important theoretical source for this study for two reasons. First, mythorealism must be understood in the context of literary realism, which has a long tradition in Marxist study, particularly in socialist countries. Thus, it is almost impossible

to conduct any Chinese literary study associated with realism without referring to Marxist literary criticism. Second, although I argue against this interpretation in my dissertation, Western scholars have largely read Yan's works as political, as discussed in my introduction. While this excessively political interpretation may have hampered other interpretive possibilities, it is undeniable that much of the subject matter in Yan's works is politically charged. As a result, political ideology is one aspect that cannot be ignored as long as ideology is involved in the discussion.

Nevertheless, the meaning of ideology in this study will move beyond the narrow sense of "the political" in Marxist interpretation and be understood in a more general sense on the textual level. That is, the ideology decoded in the literary form is by no means exclusively read as something like Jameson's "political unconscious" even though his notion of "the political" is more expansive than the dogmatic and literal senses of the political. The reason for my decision can be supported by Herbert Marcuse's commentary on Marxist aesthetics:

> Fiction creates its own reality which remains valid even when it is denied by the established reality. The right and wrong of individuals confront social right and wrong. Even in the most political works, this confrontation is not solely a political one; or rather the particular social confrontations are built into the play of metasocial forces between individual and individual, male and female, humanity and

> nature. The change in the mode of production would not cancel this dynamic. (27)

What Marcuse indicates here is that the political should not be the only interpretation of the aesthetic work, nor is it necessarily the dominant ideology of a literary text. The same is true for this study. Although this section is not meant to arrive at any definitive and specific interpretation of ideology given that each text expresses different ideological meanings, the following statement by James H. Kavanagh at least sheds some light on what I mean by ideology in this study:

> "Ideology" is not the opposite of "common sense" or "realism," and there is no such thing as a social discourse that is nonideological. Indeed, "realism" (whether in politics or literature) can now be understood as the paradigmatic form of ideology, and one's insistence that s/he (or a given text) is "nonideological" because s/he (or it) disavows any coherent political theory is as silly as would be one's insistence that s/he is "nonbiological" because s/he has no coherent theory of cell formation. Ideology is a social process that works on and through every social subject, that, like any other social process, everyone is "in," whether or not they "know" or understand it. It has the function of producing an *obvious* "reality" that social subjects can assume and accept, precisely as if it had not been socially produced

and did not need to be "known" at all.[45] (Lentricchia and McLaughlin 311)

In the first of Jameson's three horizons or stages of interpreting a literary work, the creation of the literary text is taken as a symbolic act that "is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions" (*Political* 79). This statement indicates how the writer chooses to write a literary text, for instance, in one genre or form rather than in another, showcasing the writer's ideology. Lukács calls this a writer's ideology, while Eagleton calls it an authorial ideology. For the former, it is "a synthesis of the totality of his experience on a certain level of abstraction" (Lukács, *Writer* 143); for the latter, it is similarly "a mode of insertion overdetermined by a series of distinct factors: social class, sex, nationality, religion, geographical region and so on" (Eagleton 54). I would like to add that the writer's ideology can be shown either positively or negatively. That is to say, an aesthetic act may straightforwardly demonstrate a writer's ideology, but may also, conversely, be intended to conceal a writer's ideology deliberately, even though this act of "concealment" *per se* reflects the writer's ideology as well. Yan belongs to the latter category.

[45] The word "obvious" is italicized in the original text.

Since Yan does not really advance a definite set of social and political theories, but merely exhibits a system of habitual reactions and responses to certain social phenomena that are, in some sense, politically sensitive in contemporary China, the Marxist use of authorial ideology might be misleading if employed in Yan's context. Thus, to avoid potential confusion in this study, I will use the term "political attitude," rather than "authorial ideology," to indicate Yan's less systematic or programmatic thoughts on social politics and his endeavor to renew the May Fourth intellectuals' sympathetic relations with the working poor.

Yan's life experience has not only brought him rich sources for his writing, but also shaped his sociopolitical attitude toward Chinese social reality. He resents social inequality, official corruption, and other unjust oppression, all of which are explicitly depicted in his autobiographical essays and in his speeches and interviews during different periods. His critiques of the Chinese modernity project in the post-socialist era and of the socialist revolution during and after the Maoist Era all demonstrate his oppositional position against dominant Chinese ideologies that excessively promote political harmony and economic progress. I would argue that Yan's political attitude plays a role in the construction of the content of his works, but does not constitute the dominant ideology of his texts. However, distracted by the politically sensitive subject matter of his works, government authorities have paid too much attention to those works so that some of them have not been successfully published in mainland China due to censorship. After the publication of *Lenin's Kisses*, for instance, Yan was euphemistically

advised to "resign" from the army. Since then, he has said that his writing has changed dramatically, and he has explicitly declared his suspicion of realism. It must be noted that while writing *Lenin's Kisses*, Yan was at the early stage of forming the idea of mythorealism. There are mythorealist elements in *Lenin's Kisses*, but not as prominent as those in his subsequent fiction. Thus, Yan's "suspicion of realism" conveys at least two meanings: on the one hand, it indicates his suspicion of the incapability of realism to represent social reality due to the latter's complexity. On the other hand, it signifies Yan's concern about writing in a realist style without causing trouble in his real life. In the current context, Yan apparently refers to the latter.

Mythorealism is more than a purely formal resolution in the aesthetic realm. At the level of "political attitude," Yan uses it to seek a formal "solution" to the unresolvable contradictions between his political attitude and the dominant ideology. From this point of view, mythorealism is by no means intended as merely a method to solve the dilemma of the "unrepresentablility" of realism, which tends to be an aesthetic issue, but also a strategic solution of contradictions, that is, to obscure his political attitude in its narrative form. The strategic function of mythorealism demonstrates one important aspect of the "alternativeness" of Yan's contemporariness, and its concealing function is evident in his work. As my subsequent reading of Yan's three novels will show, Yan deals with sensitive politically-related subjects, such as the AIDS epidemic in China in *Dream of Ding Village*, corruption of academia and the university education system in *The Odes of Songs*, and revolution and political persecution in *The Four*

Books. These themes are invariably narrated in the mythorealist form and are not fully developed into political allegories. Rather, these texts gradually step back from solely political commentary and move towards a deep concern for the survival, betterment, and self-salvation of humanity. These themes dominate the purely political theme and become the dominant ideologies of the texts, primarily due to Yan's use of mythorealism. For example, the narrator of *Dream of Ding Village* is a ghost and the whole story is connected by the protagonist's mysterious dreams; the protagonist of *The Odes of Songs* magically discovers the relics of an ancient site with rocks inscribed with lines of poetry from the *Book of the Songs* and turns the site into a utopian community; and supernatural, grotesque, absurdist, and mythological elements form the entire landscape of *The Four Books*. Mythorealism makes the realistic style into an unreal, supernatural, exaggerated, and absurd style, so that the surface of the "reality" or the recognizable "reality" is disturbed and destabilized.

Textual ideology in Marxist literary critical discourse is invariably analyzed from the perspective of the ideology of form. In other words, the two phrases are usually referred to interchangeably in the Marxist context. My exploration of textual ideology follows this practice, although I do not interpret textual ideology as political ideas that reflect the social contradictions of various modes of production. Following the tradition of Marxist literary criticism, Jameson does not think the writer's ideology "informs or invests symbolic production" (*Political* 79). Rather, he avers that "an already constituted 'narrative paradigm' emits an ideological message in its own right without the mediation

of authorial intervention" (88). His argument resonates with Lukács's claim that "characters and plots show the same independence of the artist's consciousness" (*Writer* 55). In speaking of Balzac's works, Lukács echoes Engels's idea that "the world depicted by Balzac led the author to conclusions in opposition to his own conscious ideology" (*Writer* 55). In short, the authorial ideology is almost ignored or usually marginalized in Marxist interpretation of literary texts, which, in my opinion, can hardly escape the suspicion that such an argument is intended to comply with the consistent aims and purposes of Marxist theoretical tradition, which champions objectivity rather than the subjectivity of literary representations of reality.

Nevertheless, while agreeing with the idea that authorial ideology remains "superficial in the development" (Lukács, *Writer* 55) of a literary work, I argue that it is not always the case that the writer's ideology is "unrelated" and "do[es] not provide the broad, varied complex necessary for the construction of a novel" (55), and this is the case for Yan's political attitude. Yan's sociopolitical attitude is always manifested in the subject matter and the setting of the stories in a high-profile manner, but it is then immediately suppressed and gradually recedes in the mythorealist narrative. It sometimes may appear to compete with the textual ideology, but the latter is always able to dominate the former. In other words, while the text gradually shies away from the writer's political attitude and turns to express its own ideological meaning, which is not necessarily political, the writer's political attitude does not completely dissipate from the text; instead, it wanders through the text always forming a tension between the two.

Though the author's political attitude may not necessarily help build up the plot or develop characters, its intervention with the text inevitably causes distraction for readers in their reading, and causes them to become lost in the labyrinth of the textual morass.

Although Yan's political attitude associated with each novel will be discussed in the introduction of each chapter, it is not the focus of this dissertation. As Jameson implies, "the social contradiction addressed and 'resolved' by the formal prestidigitation of narrative must, however reconstructed, remain an absent cause, which cannot be directly or immediately conceptualized by the text" (*Political* 82). Regardless of whether it is Marxian social contradiction or anything else, Jameson's comment is a reminder of the idea that reality is an absent cause that is only accessible in the textual form. But given that the text is a reconstruction and reinterpretation of reality instead of reality *per se*, it is insufficient to comprehend the text by simply contextualizing it in its sociohistorical subtext.[46] Therefore, the literary text must be reinterpreted in terms of "the ideology of form," which refers to "the specific messages emitted by the varied sign systems" (*Political* 98).

What, then, does form refer to? In this study, form specifically refers to the mythorealist narrative, including various formal components that construct characters, narration, plot, point of view, tone, and dialogue, and constitute the writer's peculiar style of writing. These formal components are primarily manifested in the rhetorical strategies

[46] The notion of "sociohistorical subtext" should be distinguished from "sociohistorical context." While the latter refers to reality in real life, which is regarded as an absent cause, like the notion of "history," only accessible from the text, the former was proposed by Jameson to refer to the textual sociohistorical context (81-82).

and aesthetic characteristics of the mythorealist narrative that help build up and develop the thematic formation of the text. Yan takes mythorealism as a literary device by means of which he constructs his mythorealist narratives. For the convenience of this study, the term "mythorealism" is also used to refer to the literary form of Yan's writing. As I will be closely examining a variety of aesthetic characteristics and the rhetorical strategies of mythorealist narratives in the subsequent three chapters, this section features a brief account of how mythorealist narratives represent reality and what textual ideology they transmit.

Hayden White regards narrative as "a solution to. . . the problem of how to translate knowing into telling" (*Content* 1). It would follow, therefore, that the mythorealist narrative, as a non-mainstream and deconstructive literary form, subversively transforms the conventional way of telling a story by negotiating between traditional realism and post-socialist social reality or post-socialist ideology. Its combination of realist, modernist, and postmodernist literary techniques creates a dialogical space that allows Yan to rewrite the established reality and the marginalized to voice. The textual reality of the mythorealist narrative is expressed through but is not restricted to the juxtaposition of folklore, myth, and religion on the one hand, and parody, black humor, and exaggeration on the other. Mythorealism undermines the foundation of traditional realism and tends to represent a "*minjian*" reality that is ignored or erased in mainstream narratives.

However, what mythorealist narrative expresses is not the banal ideology of Marxian class struggle or resistance against hegemonic power. Rather, it represents a carnivalesque and chaotic "*minjian*" world full of noisy masses that are not necessarily revolutionary or destructive. In Bakhtin's theory, the notion of the carnivalesque invokes the characteristics of the heterogeneous pluralism of the carnival festival, metaphorically providing a space for the disempowered to express their opposition to the system under which they live. The allegorical meaning of "the carnivalesque" is partially applicable to Yan's mythorealist narrative in that Yan also relies upon a reversal of categories in which the unreal becomes real and the real becomes unreal, so that the invisible is made visible. However, the subversive effect of mythorealism resides somewhere else rather than in the immediate political implication, which, in Marcuse's words again, "reduces the power of estrangement and the radical, transcendent goals of change" (xii). It rests in the fact that mythorealism negotiates with politics, transcends politics, and eventually reaches to the human soul and "the psychological pain of human existence" (人在生存中精神上的疼痛) (Yan, *Yipai* 63). Each of the three novels discussed in this thesis emanates from its own specific position and expresses its own ideology, but they all converge at the concern for human existence.

How does the mythorealist narrative negotiate with and transcend politics? We can get some glimpses from the subversive representations of the masses in the light of mythorealist apprehension of "*minjian*" reality. Yan claims that the working public have become the entire nucleus of his writing, but "in the face of the masses of working poor,

all of the traditional methods of literature appear elementary, conceptual, dogmatic, and even vulgar" (Li and Yan 156). The concept of "masses," meaning all the ordinary people in society who do not have power or influence, does not necessarily refer to a group of people in Yan's context, and it sometimes also refers to an individual who belongs to this category. The world of the masses, or the "*minjian*" world, which is mostly depicted in Yan's mythorealist narratives as the rural space, is "a place where the process of survival generates various kinds of bizarre phenomena" (Wang, "Geming" 179). In comparing Yan's writing to Mo Yan's, David Der-wei Wang states: "If Mo Yan's land is vegetarian, a place where plants spring forth and thrive, then Yan Lianke's land is mineral - devoid of growth and marked by silence and death" (Wang, "Geming" 179).[47] The "silence and death" indicate an absence or lack of the dynamic of resistance. In a literary form that aims to subvert the mainstream hegemonic narrative and reconfigure discursive power, readers unexpectedly see a perverse confrontation between the empowered and the disempowered. The latter's ardent desire for power not only reflects a distorted social reality but also interrogates human nature, morality, and the individual's social responsibility.

Whether in *Dream of Ding Village*, *The Odes of Songs*, *The Four Books*, or Yan's other novels that are not included in this study, the masses are invariably depicted in complicity with the powerful, subverting their stereotyped images in Chinese

[47] The English translation is quoted from Liu Jianmei (21).

literature. In his discussion of the masses in Modern Chinese literature in works such as those of Lu Xun, Ye Shaojun, and Mao Dun, Marston Anderson offers a summary of the stereotyped masses by saying "in all these works the crowd remains an intimidating other, at best to be envied and respected, at worst to be feared" (183).[48] Nevertheless, through mythorealist narrative, Yan attempts to return discursive power to the masses by creating a dialogical space for them to utter their own voices. His endeavor to remove the label of "other" from the masses and send them back to "self" does not seem very effective because, unfortunately, most of them "reject" this good intention and tend to voluntarily "other" themselves. The textual thickness is precisely captured in this contradiction: why would the masses prefer to other themselves, making it harder for them to be treated with justice or respect? Does the answer to this question merely reside on the sociopolitical level, or in the "original sin" of Chinese national character, or in something else? Nevertheless, the text shows less interest in digging deep into the political reasons behind this "othering" than in pursuing the questions of human desire, sin, psychological pain, solitude, and self-salvation that are overwhelmed by the novels' exuberant depictions of suffering, disease, and death. Yan claims that "what is the closest to the nature of human existence is 'destruction,' and only the most invincible is the most

[48] Marston Anderson indicates that the crowd in Modern Chinese literary works was always examined as "other," although ostensibly the representation of this "other" has been changing in different works. However, Anderson's notion of "the crowd" is not necessarily equivalent to "the masses" in the current context. Anderson contrasts the crowd with the individual protagonist, even though the latter, such as Lu Xun's Ah Q, may also come from the crowd. Ah Q was ridiculed by the crowd that was brutally ignorant and cruel, but if he was thrown into the crowd, he would not make a difference from the rest of the crowd.

essential of human" (最接近人存在的本质就是‘毁灭’，只有毁灭中最不可战胜的，才是人类最为本质的。) (Liang 32). Thus, the core questions of mythorealist narratives are how the essential quality of human beings is manifested in the "othering," and how human beings simultaneously crave salvation from the cruelty of reality and from the evil of human nature, not necessarily in the religious sense. Yan believes that a great novel should successfully "wade through the river of the secular world and reach the spiritual side of the river" （跨越世俗的河，到达精神的彼岸） (IAS Program),[49] and "human nature and its change should be the foundation that literature sticks to and explores" (人性的存在和变化，这是文学在坚守中探求的根本) (Yan, *Yipai* 63). Mythorealism is used as a defensive method against a threatening world, so that the text stands independently as an aesthetically dynamic expressing its own ideology and as a time-transcendent rehearsal of Yan's literary ideal, which, of course, should not be confused with his political attitude.

To return to Yan's political attitude and textual ideology, mythorealism can therefore be regarded as "both productive and disabling for the ideological ends" (Eagleton 107) it serves. In the former case, by presenting mysterious or absurd happenings in a realist matter-of-fact narrative, mythorealism fuses two opposing aspects, the imagined and the real, to construct a new literary form that displays the reconstructed textual reality that expresses its own ideology. In the latter case, however,

[49] "Spiritual" in this context is not a religious concept, but refers to something psychological and mental. For a more detailed explanation of this concept, please see the first footnote in Chapter 4.

the allegorical meaning that is conveyed by the formal power of the concrete works through the representation of supernatural, magical and absurd events has overshadowed the realist aspects of the novel, and thus, to some extent, conceals Yan’s attempts at social criticism and thereby undermines his political ideology or, more precisely, his political attitude.

Chapter Two The Haunted *Minjian*: AIDS, Pain, and Renegotiation of the National Character in *Dream of Ding Village*

Introduction

In 1996, Yan Lianke conceived the idea of writing a novel about the AIDS epidemic in Henan province when he met with Gao Yaojie, a prominent anti-AIDS activist in China, and had several talks with her. The Henan AIDS epidemic broke out during the 1990s and was eventually exposed by the media in spite of the local government's attempt to conceal the scandal for its own sake. Yan's final decision to write the novel was due to a detail of a scene described by Gao of the peasants' selling blood in a village: when the peasants were farming in the fields, the "*xuetou*" 血头 (blood head) —a local term for the person who leads the business of selling blood in the village— came to collect blood from them. After the blood was drawn, the farmers felt dizzy and weak. The blood head then grabbed their feet and turned their bodies upside down to let the blood flow back to the head. When the farmers felt better, they staggered back to their field and went on working (Liu Fang). Shocked upon hearing this, Yan could not resist the impulse of writing something about it. Also probably due to his emotional connection to the land where he was raised, as well as his curiosity about and desire to learn the truth behind the AIDS village, Yan started visiting AIDS patients in a Henan village beginning in 2003, donating money himself and seeking financial support from other institutions for the villagers. For three consecutive years, he visited the village off and on, sometimes

staying there for more than week, talking with the local people, observing their everyday life, and engaging in their daily activities.

Drawing on these experiences, Yan wrote *Dingzhuang meng* 丁庄梦 (*Dream of Ding Village*),[50] which tells the story of a fictional village in Henan province whose population is wiped out by an AIDS epidemic that is caused by the blood-selling business jointly established by government officials and the village "blood head." Rather than a realist retelling of the actual events, Yan narrates his story in a mythorealist style, using the omniscient point of view of a child-ghost narrator in combination with the mysterious dreams informing the whole story. The book was published in 2005 but was banned in mainland China by the third day of its publication on account of its "overly exaggerating the social impact and the degree of severity of AIDS in Chinese rural areas" (过分的夸大了艾滋病的社会影响和在中国农村中的严重程度).[51] Nevertheless, literary critics do not necessarily take the novel in this way. *Dream of Ding Village* was expected by many critics to be a straightforward social critique against the backdrop of the actual AIDS scandal in Henan, but the nature of Yan's mythorealist writing of such a serious social issue seems to have failed to live up to these

[50] In reality, there are several villages named Ding Village in different districts in Henan province. Yan Lianke did not clarify why he chose "Ding Village" specifically as the title of his novel, but apparently it serves both ends of making the story sound real and deliberately obscuring the real place where AIDS actually occurred. Another possibility lies in that the Chinese character "Ding" (丁) means both "population" and "adult male" —in particular, "healthy adult males." Thus, "Ding" in *Dream of Ding Village* may be read as ironically indicating the death of healthy adult males or the sick bodies of the community's population.

[51] I could not find the academic source of this statement, but it has been frequently mentioned on the internet. For example, Fenghuang dongfang caijing 凤凰东方财经 (moneymedia) posted an article in November, 2018, featuring the anti-AIDS activist Gao Yaojie. This article discussed the film "Zuiai" 最爱 (Best Love) adapted from *Dream of Ding Village*, and included this statement.

expectations. For example, David Der-wei Wang has even implicitly criticized Yan's ambiguous attitude toward the issue of AIDS in saying that "Yan Lianke transformed the disaster of AIDS into a morality play among three generations within a family" (阎连科将艾滋肆虐化为父子三辈间的道德剧) ("Geming" 182). Similarly, Chien-hsin Tsai states that "*Dream of Ding Village* reduces the scale of a provincial or even national scandal to a single rural community. The description of the collusion between government officials and private blood collectors. . . is minimized within the overall plot" (95).

Echoing these critiques, Yan has also expressed his own dissatisfaction with the novel, admitting that "I don't think *Dream of Ding Village* is my best novel. I have been thinking that in the life of a writer, he/she has very few chances of encountering the best subject matter for writing a novel. I came across one but wasted it" (我并不认为《丁庄梦》是我最好的小说。我始终认为在作家一生中，遇不了几次最好的小说题材。我遇到了，但我把它浪费掉了。) (Yan and Xia). Yan has elsewhere stated that, "in the novel, I have purposely avoided many extremely real and terrible situations, because the village, the people and the thing that you saw in real life cannot be brought into the novel" (在小说里，我也有意回避了很多极其真实、可怕的情况，因为你真正看到的村庄，你看到的人和事，是无法走入小说的。) (*Nanfang zhoumo*). This "inability" of bringing the actual happenings into the novel aligns with Yan's idea about the "unrepresentability" of literary realism, which I have discussed in the first chapter. Briefly speaking, unrepresentability can be understood in two ways: the unrepresentable

nature of contemporary Chinese society on the one hand, and Chinese writers' collective inability, due to ideological concerns, to represent this social reality on the other. As is the case with the AIDS villages in Henan, these "extremely real and terrible situations" are obviously far more "forbidden" than they are "unrepresentable" to Chinese writers, because any realist depiction of them would expose an oppositional attitude towards the dominant ideology of the society.

Yan's remarks here regarding the novel are quite revealing in terms of his own implicit attitudes towards the AIDS disaster. He is condemning the bureaucratic corruption that accompanied the local government's blind pursuit of economic development as well as showing his sympathy for the peasants who are at the bottom of the social strata. His choosing of this highly politically-sensitive subject matter —one that other writers generally tend to avoid— is, as Jameson has claimed, "a socially symbolic act" that "is itself ideological" (*Political Unconscious* 79). But at the same time, Yan's various statements reveal a sense of frustration in his inability to write as he would have truly wished precisely because of the political sensitivity of the AIDS topic.

This tension between Yan's attempts and his ultimate inability to reveal the truth behind the AIDS scandal culminates in the mythorealist narrative. His initial attempts to expose official corruption and make visible a suffering community are, to some extent, undermined as he gradually retreats from direct political engagement in his avoiding a realistic representation of the political causes of AIDS —only briefly touching on the problem of official corruption directly— and his subtle interweaving these hidden

truths into the protagonist's mysterious dreams. As the overall narrative is gradually transformed into a haunting dream-sequence told from the perspective of a ghost, the text is gradually distanced from a blunt political critique and begins to take on its own ideology. That is, it revisits and renegotiates the issue of Chinese national character by inquiring into the issue of humanity confronting great sufferings. These sufferings reside not only in the many bodies of the AIDS patients but also the individual soul of the protagonist, in the masses' numbness to pain as well as the diseased village that has been metaphorically exiled in China's pursuit of rural modernity.

This chapter investigates how *Dream of Ding Village*, as a mythorealist narrative, treats AIDS as a double-metaphor, in making known the pain of contemporary Chinese peasants in their contribution to Chinese rural modernity, and in renegotiating Lu Xun's canonical discourse of the national character. It argues that the theme of Chinese national character serves as a compromise between the pronounced political attitudes Yan frequently reveals outside the text and the critique of the "weakness" of the national character incarnated in the sick peasants of his novel. This compromise is demonstrated in an intentional aloofness and evasiveness at the level of sociopolitical content that is only matched by an unconventionality and radicality at the level of form and allegory. In contrast to Lu Xun's position as an intellectual, Yan's own critique signifies a continuity of the "*minjian*" stance of the late 1980s' "*xiangtu*" 乡土 (native soil) literature in that he is writing from the position of the margin. "*Minjian*" is a methodological concept as well as a geographical term. Yan's "*minjian*" writing refers

not only to the locale where the story takes place, but also to the extensive use of "*minjian*" elements throughout the main body of the story, such as Henan dialect, as well as supernatural representations including, but not limited to, ghosts and mysterious dreams often appearing in folklore. In this chapter, I regard Yan's idiosyncratic narrative features of "*minjian*" as one aspect of his mythorealist writing style, which, as I will discuss further in the subsequent chapters, is multifaceted and takes on different forms in each of his novels.

Before moving on to the next section's discussion of the metaphorical meaning of AIDS in the novel, I would like briefly to offer some background information regarding the critique of the so-called national character in modern Chinese literary tradition, in order to shed some light on how Yan's mythorealist narrative simultaneously carries on and digresses from conventional critiques, particularly those of Lu Xun's generation, representing instead a *minjian*-oriented critique of the national character.

Ever Since Lu Xun began an inquiry into the national character of modern China, the supposed weakness of this national character has become the target of Chinese writers in their writing of Chinese peasants. Chinese national character has always been understood as a historicized term arising from Chinese intellectuals' discourse of enlightenment since the May Fourth period. Given that the majority of the Chinese population is comprised of peasants or people from rural areas, Chinese national character is believed to be roughly equivalent to Chinese peasant character. Famously stereotyped in a number of characters from Lu Xun's short stories —such as Ah Q, Kong

Yiji, and Xianglin's wife, who are negatively characterized by their complacent ignorance, backwardness, laziness, slavishness, and selfishness— the national character has become a term that is almost synonymous with "*liegenxing*" 劣根性 (the weakness of the national character). Armed with the belief that reforming the national character was a precondition for the rejuvenation of the nation, the elite Chinese intellectuals of the time, headed by Lu Xun, took up the critique of the weakness of the national character as the chief task of their national salvation project. In some sense, they were all more or less obsessed with the following questions that preoccupied Lu Xun throughout his career: 1) What is the ideal human character? 2) What is lacking in the Chinese national character? and 3) What is the root of China's illness? (Xu 59).[52] Against this backdrop, the critique of the weakness of Chinese national character has become something of a tradition in modern Chinese literature, which "takes all people living at the bottom of the society as Other like Ah Q and Xianglin's wife" (把民间生存的人们都理解成了阿 Q、祥林嫂那样的另类。) (Yan and Yao 68).

However, as it has become increasingly realized that the national character is a historically-specific notion whose nature changes in different historical contexts, Chinese

[52] These questions were recollected by Lu Xun's good friend Xu Shoushang 许寿裳 in his memorializing of the writer following his death and have been frequently quoted by Lu Xun scholars. Lu Xun's deep concern with the issue of Chinese national character as revealed in these questions have been further discussed in another two of Xu's essays of the same collection. According to these essays, Lu Xun believed sincerity and love to be most lacking in Chinese national and believed that "the most important and deepest root of the sickness was due to being enslaved twice by foreign races" (Foster, 71). Another contributing factor not discussed in this context but well known to Lu Xun's readers is the "renowned" "cannibalistic culture" of traditional Chinese Confucianism. However, neither of the causes listed here are what concerned Yan in his own "critique" of the national character in this novel. For further reference, see Xu Shoushang, 1952, pp. 59-63; Paul B. Foster, 2006, pp.69-71.

national character has been treated quite differently by later writers. Contemporary writers have more or less abandoned the May Fourth intellectuals' elitist position of enlightenment and have turned to understand the national character by taking a "*minjian*" stance. This newer mode of reflection on the national character culminated the 1980s, with the rise of *shanghen wenxue* 伤痕文学 (scar literature), which focused on the political causes of the supposed weakness of Chinese national character, and *xungen wenxue* 寻根文学 (root-seeking literature), which reflected upon and critiqued the traditional national —as opposed to provincial— culture. However, this trend gradually declined in the 1990s, primarily due to the impact of market economy and the prevalence of public culture that has changed the direction of literature.[53] In today's Chinese literature, the national character is rarely a dominant theme, reemerging only as a marginal voice in some native soil fiction, such as that of Mo Yan 莫言, Li'Er 李洱, and Han Shaogong 韩少功.

Yan's inquiry into the root causes of the "weakness" of the peasants' characters on the particular, local level of the single-surname village, is notable in that it is conducted within the context of the national character, signifying, albeit only implicitly, an inquiry into the health of the higher-level social units, such as the nation, in which the village is situated. In taking a "*minjian*" stance, Yan subverts the conventional enlightenment discourse, but he continues to pursue answers to the three questions raised

[53] See my discussion on Yu Hua and Liu Zhenyun in the introductory chapter.

by Lu Xun and his generation. He treats the inquiry into the national character as an ongoing project, as is exemplified by his rewriting of Lu Xun's *kanke wenhua* 看客文化 (bystander culture) and the portrayal of his tainted hero. At the same time, however, Yan destabilizes the binary oppositional framework of the conventional realist discourse on the national character, and is, to some extent, skeptical of both the *minjian* and bureaucratic points of view. In vacillating between division and unity of the dialectal and public world, and in reducing both the internal and external realms to a haunting *minjian* narrative, Yan's "ghostly" revisiting of the national character debate as contextualized in the AIDS village has given shape to an otherwise unrepresentable reality of a rural Chinese society entangled in the many upheavals of the 1990s commodity economy. Consequently, the text registers both Yan's concern with the breakdown of social morality and his reflection on the impact of modernity on rural China.

"The Fever" as a Double Metaphor

Illness as a metaphor has been used throughout human literary history. In the specific discourse of enlightenment within modern Chinese intellectual history, physical illness frequently is an allegory for the seeming weakness of Chinese national character, with Yan Fu 严复 and Liang Qichao's 梁启超 "*bingfu*" 病夫 (sick man),[54] Lu Xun's "Yao" 药 (Medicine) and "Kuangren riji" 狂人日记 (A Madman's Diary), providing

[54] Yan Fu initially used the term "sick man" to refer to Chinese society in the late 1800s. Almost during the same period, Liang Qichao took up the term "sick man of Asia," a label first given by the West to a China experiencing backwardness and impoverishment, which he developed into a metaphor for both the mental and physical quality of Chinese people.

few representative examples.[55] In her seminal book *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*, Susan Sontag strongly disputes the use of illness as a metaphor. She regards all human beings as born in dual kingdoms, the kingdom of the well and the sick. However, it is only about the latter that "the punitive or sentimental fantasies [are] concocted," and the kingdom itself is described as "not real geography, but stereotypes of national character" (3). In her call for a resistance to metaphoric thinking of illness, and for working "toward an elucidation of those metaphors, and a liberation from them" (4), Sontag does not necessarily target metaphor *per se*, but advocates a delinking from biased and stereotyped associations of illness. In *Dream of Ding Village*, the replacement of the term "AIDS" with the dialectal phrase "*rebing*" 热病 (the fever), despite retaining a metaphorical sense, can be seen as serving a similar function to Sontag's proposed revamping of the symbolism associated with illness, even if, as she also holds, "it is hardly possible to take up one's residence in the kingdom of the ill unprejudiced by the lurid metaphors with which it has been landscaped" (1).

Keeping all this in mind, I interpret "the fever" in *Dream of Ding Village* as a double metaphor, intricately intertwined in the discourses of the dialectal and rural and the public and urban. On one level, fever is a subversive reimagining of illness contextualized in the straightforward discourse of the sufferings of the marginalized; on another level, it is a re-enacted metaphor for AIDS as it exists in the public discourse, a

[55] A detailed description of the historical context of the seeming "weakness" of Chinese national character was offered by Paul B. Foster, 2006.

kind of halfway point between the contaminated mysteriousness of AIDS and its "purified" and euphemistic rendering in Henan dialect. This double metaphor, closely connected with and informing the whole story, serves as the theoretical basis for my discussion of the novel.

As both the cause and symbolic manifestation of the many troubles of the community of Ding village, AIDS is first and foremost used as a narrative thread that connects each fragment of the story and expresses the brutality reality of the *minjian* world under the threat of the man-made disaster. However, in spite of its being the main topic of the novel, the term AIDS *per se* only appears three times in the entire novel, in the opening chapter, probably for the reason of making the illness more perceivable to the readers so as to achieve a sense of authenticity. Thereafter, it is permanently replaced by "the fever," a dialectal phrase coined by the villagers based on the most obvious symptom of the illness. The replacement of AIDS with the dialectal term "the fever" not only represents the uniqueness of the life experience of the dialect speaker but also "indicates a certain relation between the dialectal and the public world" (蕴含着方言世界与公共世界之间的某种关系) (Liang, "Tuoxie" 53). According to Liang Hong,

> The dialectal and public worlds usually interact with each other. Dialects retain the traces of life and the emotion of a group. As an almost primitive and passive existence, dialects are bound to suffer from the impact of the public world, the latter often invading the former by modifying the original meaning of the former. . . . But on the other hand, with their own vitality, daily routine, and

capacity of resisting corrosion, dialects also change the appearance of the public world. （方言与公共世界之间常常是作用与反作用的关系。方言……存留着一个群体的生命痕迹与情感印记，作为一种几乎是原始意味、被动的存在，方言必然遭受着公共世界的冲击，后者常常侵入前者并修改着前者的本来含义……但另一方面，方言也以自己的生命性、日常性与抗腐蚀性改变着公共世界的面目。）(53)

The dialectic between the public and the dialectal illustrated above is fully manifested in the contrast between "AIDS" and "the fever." First of all, the very act of modifying the vocabulary of the public world can be regarded in itself as a demonstration of the dialectal world's resistance to the hegemony of the public world. In mainstream Chinese discourse, AIDS is a disease that continues to be negatively associated with sex, despite the fact that it has multiple causes.[56] Additionally, in the 1980s, during the early period of China's economic reforms and opening-up to the outside world, AIDS was often ironically used by the media as a comparison to the

[56] The first case of AIDS in China occurred in the 1980s, and AIDS was originally translated into Chinese as "爱滋病," literally meaning a disease related to sexual love. The association of AIDS with sex, particularly homosexual sex, was widely accepted by the Chinese public in the late twentieth century and was possibly further reinforced by the official organization of "National Center for AIDS/STD Control and Prevention," in which, the titular parallel of AIDS and Sextually Transmitted Disease further indicates a close relationship between the two. Around 2002, the term "爱滋病" was officially replaced by "艾滋病," in which "艾" is simply a transliteration of the first half part of the English term AIDS without any specific implication, with the aim of avoiding a misperception of or prejudice against the disease. Nevertheless, the stigma of AIDS has become deeply ingrained, and public attitudes have proven difficult to shift, even despite the fact that it is well known that HIV/AIDS is not transmitted exclusively by unprotected sex. For further reference, see Yang Zhendan(59-60).

coined phrase "*aizibing*" 爱资病 (loving capitalism disease), which is coincidentally homophonous with AIDS in Chinese. The phrase "loving capitalism disease" implies a craze for foreign capital, which is potentially detrimental to the "health" of China's long-term development. "*Aizibing*" was also used to criticize official and individual instances of corruption during the process of attracting foreign investments —particularly in the 1980s. Against such an imprinting of negative self-referential and metaphorical meanings in the public discourse, it is unsurprising that the public perception of AIDS has hardly altered since then. So despite the fact that "AIDS" and "the fever" refer to the same pathophysiology, "the fever" is used as an attempt to subvert these stereotyped social implications and rhetorical function of AIDS. Its use enacts a transgressive AIDS narrative that destabilizes mainstream perceptions of the illness. In the story, Ding villagers contact AIDS from contaminated medical equipment after having been cajoled by local officials and the local blood head into believing that selling their blood is the easiest way to make money and get out of poverty. It is the reused needles, blood containers, and dirty cotton swabs which are the main causes of the villagers' becoming infected with the disease. As an alternative to "AIDS," "the fever" is used within the community of Ding Village, a phrase inscribed with the local government's blind pursuit of economic progress, the transformation of Ding villagers' bodies into cheap commodities, and the paralysis mind partly resulting from bodily pain.

However, when the dialectal phrase "the fever" moves from the margin of its real world origin in Henan province to the centre of Yan's bestselling novel, it thereby

enters the public world and inevitably becomes associated with the public discourses of economic progress, modernity, and so on. Through this process, the metaphorical meanings constructed within its locality and particularity undergoes changes. In other words, although the local people's pain and suffering that is inscribed within the coined phrase are not necessarily negated, the term's implications are simultaneously and automatically modified by the existing rhetoric of AIDS in the public domain. It therefore becomes a metaphorical expression for the Ding villagers' fetishistic desire for money and power against a larger social background of pursuing economic progress. It becomes an embodiment of a diseased society replete with moral decay, political corruption, and loss of human rationality in the process of scrambling for material wealth and power. This metaphorical aspect, to use Freudian terms, can be read as the "manifest content" of the fever, with its "latent content" remaining hidden in a local/dialectal discourse with a potential capacity of "chang[ing] the appearance of the public world" (Liang, "Tuoxie" 53).

In this "latent" sense, the fever is an external manifestation of the ineffable pain that Ding Villagers have collectively suffered. This externalization of spiritual and psychological pain is further represented through a combination of realist understatement with respect to the physical pain caused by the fever and a mythorealist foregrounding of the existential pain associated with the fever. Below is an example of the former case:

> Most people, mistaking the symptoms for a common cold, would take medicine to bring down their fever and before long, they would be back to normal. But a

few months later, the disease would flare up again, and the symptoms would be much worse: weakness, skin sores, ulcers on the mouth and tongue, dehydration and weight loss. (*Dream* 2)[57]

This is an objective description of AIDS symptoms, which appears concise and emotionless. In the description, the pain caused by the illness is downplayed as merely "weakness, skin sores and ulcer." The neutrality of the description removes the author's own personal attitudes towards AIDS and seems to render the epidemic as a common illness whose sufferings do not need any more attention than any other. In a similar passage , the symptoms of the villager Ding Xianglin's is likewise described:

> Last night, his body hurt, and the whole body hurt. Now, it does not seem to hurt anymore, but the gray hair on his head was all white overnight. It turned white quietly.
>
> The reddish ulcer on his face is now turning greenish.
>
> If it is greenish, it is time for him to pass away. [58]
>
> (昨儿一夜的身上疼，全身疼，现在似乎不疼了。不疼了可原本他头上的花白头发全白了。
>
> 悄无声地就白了。
>
> 脸上原来带红的疮豆儿，现在也是青色了。

[57] For the sake of saving space, I will not provide the original Chinese texts for those passages quoted from the English translation, unless I have modified the translation.

[58] This is my translation. Cindy Carter simply omitted this part.

是青色就该要走掉了，该要下世了。)（Yan, *Ding* 24）

Ding Xianglin's physical suffering is mentioned vaguely in one short sentence, from which readers cannot discern how his "whole body hurt[ing]" is any different from, for example, the soreness caused by heavy physical work. This evading of the depiction of pain causes readers to contemplate whether the sufferings of AIDS patients is something that is representable. At the same time, these detached portrayals of bodily pain convey a numbing of human feeling that implies two types of attitudes towards the villagers' physical suffering: indifference from outsiders and insensibility among insiders. In the former case, the understatement of bodily pain implies that the outside world is indifferent to these people's pain, leaving them perish by themselves; in the latter, it implies that the Ding villagers have become used to their suffering and have grown apathetic and indifferent not only to their own pain, but also, and by extension, to the reality in which they live. It is the convergence of these attitudes which consequently gives rise to the existential pain of living in the world, regardless of whether one has personally felt it or not. This deliberate muting and understating of physical pain is part of Yan's narrative strategy of shifting the focus from the physical to the spiritual and psychological, but it is obviously insufficient in terms of counteracting the public discourse on AIDS. In fact, as Yan himself has stated in many situations, realist language is stripped of its power in the face of the brutality and absurdity of *minjian* reality, due to its inability to represent such a reality. Therefore, the text has to rely on a "non-public" narrative to make up that part which is missing or voiceless in the public discourse. This

task is taken up by a variety of *minjian* elements that form the novel's mythorealist narrative. These mythorealist components —such as the ghost narrator and dream sequences— create a dimension of a localized experience that is intertwined with the public discourse. It is out of this interchange between the public and the non-public that these ideological tensions (such as the two-dimensional metaphor of the fever) emerge and the novel's hidden contradictions are brought to the fore, the ultimate aim being the creation of a dialogic space for a conversation between the two, in which a negotiation of the double metaphor of the fever can occur.

In short, the fever serves as a double metaphor in that while it strives to modify the public discourse on AIDS, it is in turn modified when it enters this public discourse. On the one hand, it is a metaphor for the social disease of the dark side of Chinese rural modernity and for the evil in human nature, neither of which are necessarily associated with the "weakness" of traditional Chinese culture denounced by Lu Xun's generation. On the other hand, it is a metaphor for the spiritual pain of contemporary Chinese peasants, whose suffering is closely connected with the process of China's modernization, even while it is usually ignored. The "fever" provides both a stage for the "performance" of human irrationality and evil as well as a possibility for a reassessment of the "weakness" of the Chinese national character. The next two sections will deal with how the double metaphor of the fever is expressed in Yan's mythorealist narrative on both thematic and stylistic levels.

The Resistant Dialect and the Double Gaze

In her analysis of the aesthetic style of Yan's novel *Riguang liunian* 日光流年 (*The Sunlit Years*), Liang Hong 梁鸿 describes how "the [novel's] style supports the narrative of the story as well as the progression of the plot and participates in the formation of the meaning to the greatest degree" (文体支撑着故事的叙述与行进，并且最大程度地参与了意义的形成。) (133). It is much the same with *Dream of Ding Village*. In order to explore the novel's stylistic characteristics and Yan's narrative method, it is worthwhile to examine a particularly significant passage in detail. The following passage occurs in Part 3, Chapter 1, Volume 4, and describes a scene in which a crowd of bystanders gather around to observe the spectacle of the AIDS patients Ding Liang and his cousin's wife Lingling's being caught in their adulterous affair and locked in the hospice storeroom:[59]

> The night was cool and bright; moonlight spilled like water into the schoolyard. The crowd milled outside the storeroom, everyone telling others to unlock the door and let Lingling and Uncle out, but no one seemed to know where to find the key. Everyone had got dressed and turned out to watch the

[59] Here I use Cindy Carter's translation with a few of my own modifications. Overall, Carter's translation is faithful to the original text. However, there are primarily two factors that could possibly obscure the original meaning. First, the dialectal feature of the original language has been largely erased from the English text, probably due to untranslatability. Second, and perhaps in order to make the text less "redundant," and more accessible to Western readers, Carter makes some notable changes to sentence and paragraph structure, which has unfortunately erased the writer's original stylistic uniquenesses. In the current quoted text, I try to maintain the original Chinese sentence structure and content in the hopes that the stylistic features of the novel will be more apparent. However, it is quite hard to preserve the dialectal elements in English, something which I explain in detail below. Because this passage is quite long, I not include the Chinese version here but will instead append it to the end of my dissertation.

excitement, to watch the scene, and to watch the drama of forbidden lovers caught in the act.

. . .

Zhao Xiuqin stepped from the crowd, opened the kitchen door and turned on the light so that it shone on the adjacent storeroom. The lock on the storeroom door was brand new, its black-painted surface still shiny. ‘Brother Liang,’ she shouted. ‘I knew something was going on between you and Lingling, but I never breathed a word to anyone. My lips are sealed as tight as this door. But it’s not my padlock on there. Someone must have brought the lock from home so they could catch you two together.’

. . .

Zhao Dequan, one of the older villagers, peered at the faces gathered under the lamplight. he seemed to plead for my uncle:

‘Will someone please open the door?’

Jia Genzhu shot him a look. ‘But do you have the key?’

Zhao Dequan squatted back down on the ground, as silent and immobile as an old wooden post.

Ding Yuejin stepped forward, examined the padlock and turned back to the crowd. ‘Who locked this door?’ he demanded. ‘We’re all going to die any day now, and you’re catching adultery in act? If they can have one more day of

happiness, why can't you just let them enjoy it?" He continued, 'Ding Liang is a better man than his brother. Unlock the door.'

Jia Genzhu had also come forward and was examining the lock. Then he turned to the crowd and said, 'Someone please open this door. Ding Liang and Lingling are only in their twenties, and as long as they're alive, they still have to be able to face people. Whatever happens, we can't let this get back to the village or their families. They'd be ruined.'

A few of the other residents made the same appeal, but no one seemed to know who had locked the door or who had the key. . . .

. . .

Someone shouted: 'Look! Look! Isn't that Lingling's husband?'

Of course, everyone turned their heads to look.

It was Lingling's husband, and he was bounding towards them like a panther. Taking huge leaps like a tiger on the hunt. Grandpa saw him, too, and the colour drained from his face. . . .

The crowd stared as Ding Xiaoming advanced towards the storeroom. What no one had expected, what no one had anticipated, was that Xiaoming would have the key to the padlock. But he was the one who had had it all along. Taking up a stance before the door, Xiaoming produced a small silver key and tried to insert it into the lock. But the padlock wouldn't open, because he'd got the key in upside down. Then he turned the key the other way around.

. . .

The moment the door was open, Xiaoming grabbed his wife by the hand and pulled her out. It was as if she'd been waiting on the other side of the door for him to reach in and grab her.

. . .

'Xiaoming!' Grandpa shouted.

Lingling's husband stopped and turned around.

'Lingling is very sick,' Grandpa pleaded. 'Can't you show her some mercy?'

. . .

'Mind your own business,' he said coldly. 'And control that son of yours!'

With that, Xiaoming left.

He turned and left.

He turned and left, dragging his wife behind him.

It wasn't right. All the residents milling about the school-yard were in agreement. It wasn't right that things had turned out this way. Such a promising drama shouldn't conclude in such haste. They gazed after Xiaoming as dragged his wife across the schoolyard and out through the front gate. Long after he had disappeared, they remained motionless, as if unsure about what had just happened. They remained motionless.

They were all dumbfounded.

Standing there dumbfoundedly.

Aimlessly standing there, dumbfoundedly.

The moon is moving towards the west.

(*Dream* 138-144; *Ding* 134-141)

Although for the sake of saving space I have skipped over the description of the couple locked in the room, as well as some background information about Lingling's marriage, the stylistic features of the passage are still conspicuous. The passage offers a lucid and compelling representation of a complicated mixture of reactions and emotions among the bystanders. Here Yan has creatively employed the descriptive technique, originally deriving from traditional Chinese painting, that is particularly favored in traditional Chinese fiction. It is called *baimiao* 白描 (plain drawing),[60] referring to a simple and straightforward style of writing, without any flowery language, with the aim of bringing the prominent features of the characters and objects into focus.

[60] "*Baimiao*" (plain drawing, also translated as plain line drawing) is a chaste ink-monochrome outline technique used in traditional Chinese painting. According to Michael Sullivan, "its origins can be traced back in a direct line through Ku K'ai-chih to the paintings on silk of the Warring States and Western Han unearthed from Changsha. . . . This technique was used chiefly for figures and architectural painting." This term was borrowed by traditional Chinese fiction and became a prominent descriptive technique in traditional Chinese literature. Featured by simplicity and conciseness, *baimiao* endorses objectivity and avoid subjective intervention in narration. It describes reality in a matter-of-fact way, but subtly conveys a tone of irony. This descriptive technique was particularly favored by modern Chinese writer Lu Xun. Yan Lianke, in one of his interviews, states that the technique he uses in *Dream of Ding Village* is traditional Chinese *baimiao*. In fact, Yan's *baimiao* has integrated many other literary elements and thus is not exactly the original or "pure" *baimiao*, which will be clearly seen in my subsequent comparison of Yan and Lu Xun's style. Nevertheless, Yan's own style of *baimiao* is obviously the outstanding stylistic feature of the fiction in question. See Michael Sullivan, 1980, pp. 110; Suman Gupta, 2008, pp. 35.

At the lexical level, we can see that adjectives and adverbs rarely appear in this passage, and the few that are there are unembellished and colloquial. For example, “moonlight spilled like water”; “My lips are sealed as tight as this door”; “Zhao Dequan squatted back down on the ground, as silent and immobile as an old wooden post.” In contrast, there are great number of simple verbs, which has the effect of highlighting the bystanders’ behavior and providing a moving visual image of the bystanders in that moment. To take the first paragraph as an example: eleven verbs appear successively in two lines in the original Chinese text (they are translated into seven verbs in English: spill, mill, tell, unlock, let, know and find.). By using a series of simple verbs to offer a straightforward account of the bystanders, Yan has effectively represented the concrete side of “fact” in a plain style, with the presumably dramatic effect of the scandal described in plain language contained by the plain language.

In addition to a surfeit in simple verbs, the passage abounds with short sentences and single-sentence paragraphs serving a similar function. Characterized by clarity and lucidity, the passage’s short sentences lend force to the verbs and make a harsh style; at the same time however, the repetition of one part of a short sentence in another creates a sense of redundancy that seems to go beyond the traditional *baimiao* technique,. Perhaps this is also the main reason why Cindy Carter simply deletes instead of translating some of these repeated phrases. However, when such obvious repetition becomes pervasive in the text, readers may safely assume that it itself carries meaning

and should not be ignored —something which I will discuss further in the context of the Henan dialect. For the moment, let us consider the following example:

> They were all dumbfounded.
>
> Standing there dumbfoundedly.
>
> Aimlessly standing there, dumbfoundedly.
>
> The moon is moving towards the west. [61]
>
> (*Ding* 144)

In these four sentences that have themselves formed four single-sentence paragraphs, each sentence has been economically constructed for maximum effect. In particular, the repetition of the word "dumbfound" is rich in meaning and purpose. In Chinese, "dumbfound" is a hieroglyphic character comprised of two parts, with "mouth" (口) above and "wood" (木) below. "Wood" in Chinese is often figuratively used to describe a state of numbness; thus, the combined emotionlessness and emotion of the bystanders are paradoxically locked within the word of "dumbfounded," adding to the passage's comic image of the bystanders. This *baimiao* effect is heightened by echoing of "dumbfounded" in three of these consecutive short sentences/paragraphs. The conciseness of each sentence/paragraph, combined with the radical and plain repetition of the simple verb, function to emphasize the bystanders' strong disappointment in not being able to catch a glimpse of the presumably "wonderful" drama before it is brought

[61] This is my translation. In Cindy Carter's translated version, all these four lines were omitted and replaced by the translator's own explanatory statement.

to an abrupt end. The last sentence/paragraph "The moon is moving towards the west" is again strikingly short, colloquial (in the original text), and comic, which ironically suggests that the bystanders have spent such an excessive amount of time prying into others' affairs so that the next day has almost come. Beneath the overall farcical effect created by these short sentences is Yan's trenchant critique of the crowd's voyeurism nature and apathy to others' misfortunes.

Another prominent stylistic feature of this passage is the frequent use of direct speech in these short sentences and one-sentence paragraphs. As Adele Berlin observes, "Direct speech, besides adding to the scenic nature of the narrative, is the most dramatic way of conveying the characters' internal psychological and ideological points of view" (64). In this passage, direct speech also vividly depicts the characters' personalities in a distinctively colloquial way. Zhao Xiuqin has a quick tongue, and she is the first person to "open the show" by turning on the lights and shouting at the two lovers locked in the storeroom, reassuring them that it was not her but somebody else who had wanted to bring shame on them. In considering both her words and her manner of speech, however, it is clear that Zhao is not really showing consideration towards the couple; instead, she reveals herself to be one of many eager bystanders. Zhao Quande, the most honest and quietly modest person in the village (the only blemish on his character being his stealing of Lingling's coat in order to keep his promise of giving his wife a red coat before his death), exhibits his empathetic and gentle personality in one short utterance: "Will someone please open the door?" Ding Yuejin and Jia Genzhu likewise demand for the

door to be open and demand for the lock to be brought, but their motivations are quite different. They speak in more ambiguous terms, deliberately hinting at Ding Liang's immorality and shame in having an affair with his cousin's wife. Indeed, it was later revealed that Ding and Jia were the ones to have locked the door, and that they had then offered the key to Lingling's husband as a means to blackmail Ding Liang's father into giving up his leadership position and handing it over to them.

All the above stylistic features work together to construct a distinctly colloquial style that serves Yan's intent of telling the story from the *minjian* position. At the center of this colloquial style is the overwhelming use of Henan dialect.[62] Unfortunately, due to their untranslatability, these prominent linguistic features are difficult for English readers to perceive. One example of this is the manner in which, in Henan dialect, the reduplication of verbs often occurs. For instance, in the phrase "ba men kaikai," roughly translated as "open the door," the verb "open" is repeated in the original text, literally translated as something like "open the door open." In addition to this, the text is replete with "*erhuayin*" 儿化音 (the [ɚ] suffix) and modal particles, also two prominent features of Henan dialect.[63] To take modal particles as an example. Many verbs are

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[62] Henan dialect belongs to the Mandarin dialects, which, according to Jerry Norman, have four subgroups: northern Mandarin, spoken in the provinces of Hebei (including the city of Peking), Henan, Shandong, northern Anhui, Manchuria and parts of Mongolia; northern western Mandarin, spoken in Shanxi 山西, Shanxi 陕西, Gansu, Qinghai, Ningxia and parts of western Inner Mongolia; southwestern Mandarin, spoken in Hubei, Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, northwestern Guangxi, and the northwestern corner of Hunan; and finally eastern Mandarin (also referred to as the Jianghuai dialects). Although standard Chinese is based on a northern Mandarin dialect, that of Beijing, and thus is somewhat close to Henan dialect, the latter, as is demonstrated in my discussion, has many linguistic variants that easily distinguishes it from standard Chinese with respect to phonology, grammar, and lexicon. For more information about Chinese dialects, see Jerry Norman, 1988, pp.191.

[63] "E*rhuayin*" 儿化音 (the [ɚ] suffix), spelled as - er or - r and sometimes transcribed as [r], is historically related to the word [ɚ] "son," which also means "smallness," but the suffix does not always carry a meaning of smallness, and is

followed by modal particles such as "ba," "ya," or "la," each of which indicates the speaker's mood or attitude of uncertainty, surprise, indignation and so on. By creatively integrating dialect into the traditional descriptive technique of *baimiao*, Yan has offered a vivid and lucid representation of the Ding villagers' daily life alongside the death threat posed by AIDS, the effect being that the narrative unfolds as a kind of melodramatic, playful farce whose lightness is weighed down with a deep sense of despair and heaviness.

The use of dialect in modern Chinese fiction, alternatively expressed as "local color" by D.L. Holm and as "regional languages" or "local languages" by Edward Gunn,[64] is often taken as a means of counteracting the hegemony of standard Chinese, of demonstrating local resistance against the dominant ideology. As Gunn argues in *Rendering the Regional*, "Modern Standard Chinese. . . has [have] been set in opposition to local language as the signifier of the historical past, the intimate and domestic, the

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often more a stylistic feature rather than a grammatical one. *Erhuayin* is most common in the speech varieties of North China, especially in the Beijing dialect. In the above passage (in the original text), there are many *erhuayin*, such as "gaoyangr (lamb), "*yibur*" (one step), "*shuohuar*" (speak), "*yuanchur*" (the original place), etc., which effectively represent the colloquial style of the "bystander culture" narrative. San Duanmu has devoted a whole chapter to a detailed analysis of the [ɚ] suffix and its variants in his book *The phonology of standard Chinese*. The modal particles, also known as sentence-final particles, refer to words used at the end of sentences to imply mood or attitude. There are no equivalents to modal particles in English. Due to the subjective tone of modal particles, they usually add a bit of "flavor" to a statement. It should be clarified here that neither *erhuayin* nor sentence-final particles are a unique linguistic phenomenon of Henan dialect. However, their tonal values vary from dialect to dialect, differentiating Henan dialect from other Northern Mandarins as well from as standard Chinese. For more information, see San Duanmu, 2007, pp. 212-223; Charles N. Li and Sandra A. Thompson, 1989, pp. 238-317.

[64] In his essay "Local Color and Popularization in the Literature of the Wartime Border Regions," D.L. Holm analyzes the phenomenon of "local color" in some of the writings of the immediately post-1940 border regions, such as the writings of Zhao Shuli, Liu Qing, and Li Ji. Holm argues that this phenomenon of writing "is not only remarkably widespread in contemporary Chinese fiction and drama but has rather profound political and ideological ramifications." Similarly, Edward Gunn, in carrying out his geographically broader research and covering a wide range fields such as media, film, fiction, and local culture, argues that although the role played by local languages in various forms of creation is ambivalent and ambiguous, it destabilizes the hegemony of "standard" so as to make it possible for staging a transvaluation of signs. See D.L. Holm, 1986; Edward Gunn, 2006.

humorous, the mundane and philistine, the uncultured, crude emotions, and primitive behavior" (4). Instead of directly challenging these binary opposites, Yan's use of the Henan dialect in his writing of the "bystander culture," while it undermines the presumably "superior" qualities of the standard language, has also managed to attribute these same superior qualities to the local language. Yan's writing obviously cannot be taken as a simple counternarrative against the standard view or, in the current context, the domain of the public; rather, it must be understood as conveying a mixed sense of resisting the public/standard discourse while simultaneously dissecting the local/dialectal.

On the whole, dialect serves at least two purposes in the narrative of *Ding Village Dream*. From an aesthetic perspective, it helps to create a colloquial style that fits the content of the narrative. The characters in the story live in a poor and backward village and rarely have any connection with the outside world. Therefore, neither their world nor their logic of life should be perceived or interpreted through the linguistic lens of the public discourse. Henan dialect captures the authenticity of the local people's life experiences by its unique embracing of a full range of moods and emotions expressed through a variety of linguistic elements. From an ideological perspective, dialect conveys a more significant meaning than that of aesthetics. To some extent, this significance resonates with my reading of "the fever" as the local context counteracting the public rhetoric of AIDS. By defamiliarizing the everyday language of this public discourse,

Yan's dialectal writing makes impossible any attempt to understand the true story of this AIDS community without entering into its local discourse.

For a further demonstration of how Yan's dialectal writing of the bystander culture simultaneously resists the public discourse and dissects itself, a brief comparison between Yan and Lu Xun may provide some insights into where Yan's writing of the national character ultimately leads and how his stylistic devices are intended to address a *minjian* reality deviated from the conventional mainstream discourse of the national character. According to Lu Xun, "The masses, especially those in China, are always the spectators of the drama" (群众，尤其是中国的——永远是戏剧的看客。) ("After Lana" 170). "Spectator" or "bystander" (*kanke*) is a notion that is specifically used by Lu Xun to refer to the masses who are ignorant, numb and apathetic. In his short stories, Lu Xun portrayed numerous images of bystanders, most notably in "The True Story of Ah Q," "Kong Yiji," "A Madman's Diary," "Medicine," and "Sacrifice." Lu Xun's narrative of spectators or bystanders has been developed into the notorious notion of a "bystander culture" passed down from generation to generation, both signifying and reinforcing the weakness of Chinese national character. The following passage is taken from Lu Xun's well-known novella "Kong Yiji":

> One day he came to the wine shop and all the regulars, as usual, started to eyeball him and laugh. Somebody yelled, "Hey there, Kong Yiji, you've put a few new scars on that old face of yours!" Without responding, Kong looked straight toward the bar and said: "Warm two bowls of wine and let me have a saucer of

> fennel beans." He set out nine coppers all in a row. Someone else kept the fun going by shouting, "You must have been caught stealin' again!" Kong Yiji opened his eyes wide in indignation and replied, "How dare you, without a shred of evidence, besmirch a man's good name and even—" "What good name? Wasn't it the day before yesterday I saw you trussed up and beaten with my own eyes?" Kong's face flushed red and the veins stood out on his temples as he began to defend himself. "The *purloining of volumes*, good sir, cannot be counted as theft. The *purloining of volumes* is, after all, something that falls well within the purview of the scholarly life. How can it be considered mere theft?" Tacked onto that was a whole string of words that were difficult to understand, things like *The gentleman doth stand firm in his poverty*, and *verily* this and *forsooth* that. Everyone roared with laughter. The space within the shop and the space surrounding the shop swelled with joy. ("Kong Yiji" 43-44)[65]

In this passage, the main character Kong Yiji is made fun of by the people in the wine shop. Lu Xun provides a poignant sketch of Kong, whose name, notably, is a mockery of the surname of Confucius, as not only a pedantic and failed scholar but also a petty thief who ridiculously regards himself as a decent gentleman. The crowd in the wine shop is variously described as "the regulars," "somebody," "someone else," or

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[65] This passage was taken from William A. Lyell's translation of Lu Xun's "Kong Yiji." In the original text, it is one whole passage, but Lyell has divided the passage into several small passages, some containing one direct speech. In order to retain the flavor of the original text in the above quoted passage, I have reorganized the English text into one continuous passage.

“everyone” — not one of them having a name or a distinctive appearance. These nameless “started to eyeball” Kong Yiji, “laugh[ing],” “yell[ing],” “shouting,” and “roar[ing],” and we are told that the space “swelled with joy.” This scene of crowd behavior is presented as a “collective event,” exposing the bystander culture in which the weak character of the masses is manifested both in the ignorance of the gazers and the indifference of the spectators. In this regard, the most striking difference between Yan’s and Lu Xun’s bystanders lies in that, while the latter appear as a cohort, with no individual name or recognizable face, in Yan’s writing, the bystanders are frequently differentiated and recognizable, clearly possessing their own names and personalities despite some shared commonalities. This difference indicates Yan’s intentional or unintentional renegotiation of Lu Xun’s critique of the national character, in which Yan seems to ask whether it is a universal and collective characteristic of Chinese peasants’ nature (or character), or whether it is a particular phenomenon largely determined by certain social particularities. But at this point it is too soon to say.

Stylistically, Lu Xun’s writing is consistent with the style of clarity and conciseness that characterizes his description of Kong Yiji in the wine shop. He adheres strictly with the rule of *baimiao* and does not tend to use any redundant words or phrases. Yan, in contrast deliberately digresses from *baimiao* by using repetition and exaggeration at key moments. The main reason for this difference resides in their choice of language. While Yan writes in Henan dialect, Lu Xun sticks to standard Chinese. Depicted in a realist fashion, the bystanders in Lu Xun’s text demonstrate a kind of spiritual collapse

under the double impact of Chinese traditional culture (particularly Confucianism) and a modern Chinese crisis. Taking up the stance of an elite intellectual, Lu Xun depicts these masses as Others, whose "sickness and sufferings" (病苦) need to be exposed for the sake of "medical treatment" (疗救) ("Wo" 526), this "treatment" being intellectual enlightenment, which would aim to transform the masses into thinking individuals and eliminate the slavishness that has been imprinted in their minds.

Yan's own version of *baimiao* does not appear as authentic, standard, and objective as that of Lu Xun. He sometimes intentionally disrupts his overall stylistic feature of *baimiao* by using repetition and exaggerations. To some extent, such intervention compensates for the inadequacy of *baimiao* in representing the melodrama of life in the dialectal world. For example, in the wake of the exposure of Ding Liang and Lingling's affair, the villagers' obsession with other's misfortunes is dramatized in a portrayal of a large group of villagers chasing after Ding Liang's furious wife, flocking en masse to Ding Liang's "hiding" place:

No one knew quite what had happened, but there was a sense that something big was about to take place. A crowd of men and women, young and old, adults and tiny children rolled along behind my aunt [Ding Liang's wife] like a cavalry, leaving clouds of dust in their wake. (*Dream* 162)It is very likely that this memorable depiction of crowd behavior has outshone any other portrayal of Chinese masses' voyeurism in modern Chinese literature. Here, the quiet gestures of "peeping" or "gazing" are transformed into a farcical and noisy display of "rolling" and dramatically "leaving

clouds of dust in their wake." This brief account of the bystanders' movements lies both within and beyond the scope of *baimiao.* It interweaves exaggeration into a concise and picturesque representation of bystander culture, satirically burying the essence of bystander culture in the noisy and swift movement of the crowd. More notably, the individual bystanders have now converged into a collective group, whose own voyeuristic enthusiasm echoes Lu Xun's masses, who gather around to watch the execution of their compatriot apathetically, and who find pleasure in poking fun at Kong Yiji's existential plight and watching Ah Q's response to his own humiliation.

The comic effect of this description is achieved through, in Yan's words, "the effect of language that makes visible the playfulness and absurdity of life" (在语言推动下的生活的游戏性和荒谬性) (*Wupo* 41). However, upon close consideration of "playfulness" and "absurdity" in Yan's remarks, we may find that, instead of an uncritical turning back to Lu Xun, or to the Lu Xunesque critique of the national character, Yan's text may invite a more nuanced reading of these bystanders. That is, if this "playfulness and absurdity" is placed within the larger context of "the fever" narrative, this bystander scene may be read as an external manifestation of the Ding villagers' interior world, which has been emotionally and materially drained in the course of selling its blood in a failed a tempt to shake off its poverty. In this light, the crazy and clownish behavior of the villagers signifies a latent desire for the refilling of this drained and impoverished world — or, more precisely, their shared spiritual void— with whatever distraction they can grab. In this way, the weakness of the national character is

foregrounded against a variety of socio-political factors that are quite likely to have played a major role in its construction.

If one disregards the overall structure of the mythorealist narrative, it can be concluded that the portrayal of bystander culture epitomized by the Ding villagers has destabilized the binary oppositions characterizing conventional discourse on the national character, and has renegotiated the critique of the masses' "weakness" by perceiving them not as Others but as a historically-specific manifestation of a dialectical relation between the local/dialectal and the public/standard discourse. This is, to some extent, true. However, the most fascinating aspect of the novel lies not in its revelation or critique of the weakness of the national character in its depiction of bystander culture, but in the overall dialogical framework of the story that is constructed by the double gaze of the narrator and the bystanders. In other words, the story contains an ironical reversal. While the bystanders are gazing at the gazed-upon, both the bystanders and the gazed-upon are under the gaze of the narrator —the ghost of 12-year-old Xiaoqiang, who was poisoned to death by the villagers. Thus, the interplay of the fictionalized real —the bystanders— and the fictionalized imaginary —the ghost— has complicated Yan's intent of criticism, and cries for a further investigation of the imaginary.

In his discussion of how a work's narrator relates to its literary effect, Wayne Booth holds that "the moral and intellectual qualities of the narrator are more important to our judgment than whether he is referred to as 'I' or 'he,' or whether he is privileged or limited. If he is discovered to be untrustworthy, then the total effect of the work he relays

to us is transformed” (158). Undoubtedly, the tripartite merging of the first person “I,” the ghost, and the child as the narrator of the story produces a sense of unreliability among the readers. By discursively situating the realistic AIDS scandal within the context of the supernatural, the ghost narrator provides an alternative, self-reflexive way of seeing that to some extent undermines the accuracy of his disclosures. Moreover, as the omnipresence of the ghost performs a function similar to a third-person narrator, the first-person “I” does not actually restrict the narrator’s horizon in this story. Thus, in following Booth’s argument about “the moral and intellectual qualities of the narrator,” the following discussion will primarily focus on the narrator’s identity as a child who is also a ghost.

According to Costantino, the child narrator often appears in traumatic stories in which the author intends to lend “a human face to history and therefore offers readers a ‘user-friendly’ point of entry into difficult, complicated, and confusing historical events and cultural intricacies” (432). In other words, by recreating the past through the eyes of a child, the author makes “the text more easily accessible and seemingly transparent” (ibid). The child-ghost narrator of the current story certainly enables the text to achieve such an effect. The descriptions of the Ding Villagers’ suffering and death are suffused with a child’s naïve detachment, and the novel’s depiction of the dark side of human nature is tinted with childlike humor. By seeming to trifle with the serious social problem of AIDS, the narrator transforms the human tragedy into a dark comedy.

As a child's vision of reality is usually incomplete and restricted, the novel's representation of bystander culture will only reflect his limited understanding, even if this particular narrator, on account of his being a ghost, is able to see a great deal of what is going on. Neither is the child narrator able to offer an insightful commentary on the socio-political cause of the AIDS epidemic. What he perceives is an air of lightness and playfulness in face of death and the downfall of humanity. As for the fundamental causes of social issues such as poverty and AIDS, and the more essential truths concealed in the performances of the villagers, these can hardly be discerned by him. Thus, the child-ghost has potentially undermined the reliability of his commentary on the national character as well.

Such doubt finds its expression, first and foremost, within the distinctive stylistic features elaborated above. Dovetailing neatly with the child-ghost narrator's perspective, Yan's colloquial and dialectal style can be seen as a deliberate choice to counterbalance the seeming objectivity and rationality of the AIDS discourse by creating an effect of ingenuousness and subjectivity. The child's inability to apprehend objectively certain social phenomenon is manifested in the voices of the unsophisticated bystanders, whose remarks are replete with dialectal elements such as *erhuayin*, modal participles, repetition, and sometimes incorrect grammar. On the one hand, these elements represent an authentic *minjian* reality; on the other hand, however, they reflect a fragmented and subjective reality that cannot reveal the totality of the *minjian* world.

It is the same case with *baimiao*: while the conciseness and plainness of *baimiao* readily foregrounds the characters' moods and emotions and easily catches the readers' attention, its lack of detailed descriptions of the characters' psychology and the fever, conversely leads to an inadequacy or loss of information, inevitably contributing to the unreliability of the narrator. To this end, the text's stylistic features not only are effective in claiming a *minjian* position, but also serve to complement the child-ghost perspective. Serving as a link between the plausible and the implausible, the child-ghost narrator represents two different versions of reality while at the same time blurring the boundaries between the two. One reality is manifest in the objective behavior of the bystanders, while the other is conveyed through the child-ghost narrator. In the former case, the supposed weakness of the national character and the strongly malevolent dimension of the crowd of peasants is articulated in a realist way; in the latter case, the incredulity of the child-ghost narrator destabilizes this ostensibly realist narrative by urging the readers to reconsider the seemingly innocuous details provided by the narrator and contemplate what has been left out or overlooked during the process of the telling.

But why should Yan bother to beat around the bush with all these twists and reversals? Why does he present the weakness of human nature while simultaneously negating himself by indicating the unreliability of the narration? Besides other possible reasons, I will, in borrowing Auerbach's comments on the writing style of the French writer Jean de La Bruyère, put forth one possible explanation:

> He was also thinking of himself and of the general political and aesthetic situation; a situation which did permit him to treat great subjects, but only up to a point where he reaches a wall which may not be passed. . . . He could deal with them only in elevated moralizing generalities. Treating their concrete contemporary structure with complete freedom remained inadmissible for both political and aesthetic reasons, and political reasons and aesthetic reasons are interrelated. (367)

Although Yan's ideological concerns are always the starting point for each of my chapters' arguments, by invoking Auerbach here I want to emphasize how the strategy of using a ghost narrator has brought to the fore the tension created by the conflicting interplay of the fictionalized real and the fictionalized imaginary, a tension which is itself further emphasized in the tension between the representable and unrepresentable (which will be further discussed in the next section). In relying on *minjian* sources and writing from the perspective of an unreliable narrator, Yan defamiliarizes the conventional discourse on the national character as well as the public rhetoric of AIDS, thereby creating an aura of ambiguity and ambivalence in his social criticism. This does not, however, nullify the critical edge of the mythorealist narrative. As Julian Wolfreys argues, "ghosts cannot be either contained or explained by one particular genre or medium. . . . They exceed any single narrative modality, genre or textual manifestation. It is this which makes them ghostly and which announces the power of haunting" (1). I regard this statement as an expression of the ambiguity of the

ghost perspective and the power of this ambiguity. In the case of *Dream of Ding Village*, the "power of haunting," although forcing inconsistencies on readers and projecting Yan's suspicion of literature's ability to enact social change,[66] provides more interpretive scope to examine humanity. In mixing facts and imaginations, and in moving between the dialectal and the public, the haunting power of Yan's narrative reveals the unrepresentable truth of AIDS by confining its expression to the protagonist's haunting dreams. This does not necessarily dismiss the embedded socio-political interrogation of the "evil" of the peasants' characters or the culpability of the larger society, but it essentially distills the socio-political dimension of the story into a more particular and individual inquiry into social ethics that exemplifies the broader issue of the national character.

[66] In his dialogue with Xiaolei Yao, Yan argues: "The desire to reform the national character is not unacceptable; however, it makes literature bear too much that it cannot afford, or that it does not necessarily have to take on. Let's take Lu Xun as an example. Everyone says how great Lu Xun is; however, Lu Xun wrote so many works and has shaped so many figures, such as Xianglin's wife and Ah Q, to reveal the weakness of the national character. But several decades have passed and what existed still exists. Lu Xun's purposes in writing these stories is nothing but two, one for criticism and the other for change. The purpose of change is most fundamental. But one thing for sure is that this goal has not been achieved. Lu Xun engaged in changing the national character, but what has been changed was just a little bit of the disposition of scholars. Even if there are these people who make us know that the national character needs to be changed, so what? On the contrary, Chinese politicians are so powerful that Chinese history would not be like this even if without one of them. Thus, compared to China's politics, you will find how insignificant literature is. It is unable to achieve the same function as that of the soul engineer, neither does it create the great warning effect as we expected." These remarks explicitly demonstrate Yan's skepticism regarding literature's oft-cited function of enlightenment. His pessimism seems largely due to the overwhelming power of politics, which dominates and interrupts literature. This is probably the main reason that he refrains from criticizing the politics and focuses instead on writing and showcasing the weakness of the national character without the larger aim of seeking moral salvation for the masses. See Yan Lianke and Yao Xiaolei, 2004, pp. 84.

Haunting Dreams and the Tainted Moral Defender

Although protagonist Ding Shuiyang's dreams are narrated through the additional lens of the ghost narrator, these recurring dreams can be seen as constituting their own disparate narrative, one that both contrasts and supplements to the "bystander culture" narrative. Dreams and reality are so closely bound together in *Dream of Ding Village* that the one can hardly be distinguished from the other. To illustrate my point, I will start with a passage quoted from Part 3, Chapter 2, Volume 3, describing one of Ding Shuiyang's dreams:

> *When Grandpa entered the next workshop, a building constructed of pine boards and steel frames, he saw that the coffins being manufactured here were very different from the ones outside. Examining a dozen shiny black caskets, he noticed that three were made from four-inch-thick planks of paulownia wood, and two were constructed of even thicker planks of red pine. The latter was an extremely expensive timber, prized for its resistance to moisture, insects and rot, but it was rare in these parts. But it wasn't just the materials that set apart these caskets. It was the craftsmanship. Unlike the simple ideographs at the head of the other coffins, these had characters bordered by elaborate carvings of dragons and phoenixes. The sides of each casket boasted intricately wrought carvings of souls rising from the earth, ascending to the heavens and being welcomed into the Buddhist western paradise. With their gaudy carvings and gold adornments, the caskets looked like miniature pleasure palaces.*

. . . One panel featured a carving of a heavenly banquet table complete with packets of Great China brand cigarettes, expensive bottles of Maotai liquor, whole roasted chickens and plates of the rarest fish to ever swim the Yellow River. There were mahjong titles and decks of poker cards laid out, should the occupant of the casket fancy a game of chance, and nubile servant girls and stout retainers standing by, should be prefer to be fanned or massaged.

Even more oddly, the artisans who had carved this masterpiece, this vision of paradise, had filled it with a television set, washing machine, refrigerator and an array of gadgets and household appliances that my grandfather had never laid eyes on. Next to this wealth of modern conveniences was a traditional Chinese building, above whose half-moon door someone had inscribed the words 'People's Bank of China.' . . .[67] (*Dream* 116-120)

On a stylistic level, these descriptions stand in stark contrast to the portrayal of the bystanders discussed in the previous section. Here paragraphs become longer and sentences are imbued with similes, adjectives, and four-character words, are frequently interwoven with parallel words and phrases that are only accessible in the original Chinese. The vocabulary also becomes more formal and standard than that of the description of the bystanders. With unflagging enthusiasm, Yan spends almost six pages

[67] The italics are added by the translator, as an equivalent to the bold type in the original text. Yan used the bold type at many places, such as in the description of some dreams, in describing the natural scenery and in some short commentaries. There is no regular pattern for it, but in general, the bold type is used for highlighting and emphasis.

(two in the original Chinese) on graphic and elaborate descriptions of the fine detail and craftsmanship of the coffins of Grandpa's dream. These elaborated descriptions, characterized by these syntactic features, are diametrically opposed to the technique of *baimiao*, signifying a contrast between the mythorealist reality of the haunting dreams and the realist reality of the bystanders' world. Thematically, however, the two modes are complementary to each other. The narration of the bystanders primarily focuses on the weakness of Ding villagers' character and is quite brief in commenting the social reality that has helped to construct the AIDS community and determine the masses' worldview. In the dream narrative, the repressed and concealed realities of the material world are released, thereby supplementing the omissions of the bystander narrative. This is seen, for example, when the coffins in the dream ironically assume a hierarchy of social status, something which can be deduced from the observation that the "coffins being manufactured here were very different from the ones outside." While "the ones outside" have already been briefly depicted by the author earlier, it is "those being manufactured here" which are emphasized to the reader on account of their luxury and magnificence. Exhibiting rare materials, specific functions, and extravagant designs, these coffins suggest, albeit sardonically, a dazzling world of desire and hedonism.

The coffins' function as a symbol of desire alludes to the dominant discourse of modernity of contemporary China. For instance, the images of Great China brand cigarettes, Maotai liquor, mahjong tiles, and poker cards that are carved into the coffins' facades depict commodities common and popular amongst the prosperous during the

1990s, a decade when Chinese people were overwhelmed with the seeming joys of pursuing modernization and embracing Western capital. In particular, the inscription of "People's Bank of China" on one coffin —implicitly paralleled with the description of even more bank names carved on the narrator's coffin that occurs outside the dream sequence— puts the finishing touch to the entire description, ironically revealing a destructive social ethos that endorses the naked pursuit of money and material hedonism. Even more ironic is that, for the Ding Villagers who live in the impoverished and backward countryside, prosperity remains unattainable in any form but in the signs and symbols on the coffins, which even after death, imaginatively make up the gap between reality and desire.

The same stylistic features exist in almost all other of the protagonist's dreams, each one reflecting a different aspect of reality. The story's dream sequences function to bridge the objective world and the subjective one, creating a sense of disconnection not only between reality and its representation but also between an individual's consciousness and the impersonal external environment. Nevertheless, although it alludes to a specific historical moment and situation in late twentieth-century China, the dream sequences' representation of the essential "truth" of socialist modernity does not necessarily bring to the forefront the socio-political aspect of the novel. Instead, the historically-located critique of the collective desire for money and commodities that manifests in these dreams is gradually transferred to an exposure of individuals' corrupted morality. This becomes particularly obvious when dream and reality merge.

It is against the backdrop of these dream narratives that Ding Shuiyang (hereafter, Ding) —who is also the narrator's Grandpa and the father of Ding Hui and Ding Liang— makes his appearance. Ding is positioned at the opposite end from the bystanders, but he cannot be distinguished from them in terms of a dichotomous framework of good and bad. Rather, he shares with the bystanders certain od their own weaknesses, and represents a complex combination of heroism, ignorance, and slavishness.

Ding is among the few villagers who have not been infected with the fever, which implies a "healthy" mind in comparison to those who have been infected with AIDS. He is the only one in the village who volunteers to take care of the school when the epidemic breaks out. As a venerable senior, he is acknowledged as the village head. Here Ding is portrayed as a hero reminiscent of Dr. Rieux in Camus's *The Plague*.[68] Dr Rieux, when confronted with a prevailing pestilence and a denatured humanity, unhesitatingly throws himself into the task of fighting the epidemic, disregarding his own safety. But instead of fighting against the physical disease, as Dr. Rieux has done, Ding struggles against the spiritual disease of mind that is plaguing the masses, including his

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[68] In his lecture "Shenshi zhuyi de zhongguo yu wenxue" 神实主义的中国与文学 (Mythorealist China and Literature) delivered at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology in 2014, Yan spent much time talking about Camus's *The Plague*, praising the work as having "waded through the river of the secular world and reached the spiritual side of the river" (跨越世俗的河，到达精神的彼岸). He lauds the author's endeavor of demonstrating the elevated spiritual pursuit of his characters without breaking away from the secular world. He is particularly interested in Camus's portrayal of the complexity of human nature in face of disease and death, which cannot help but bring to mind the situation in *Dream of Ding Village*. Yan also spoke highly of Camus' protagonist Dr. Rieux, who in Yan's view represents the highest attainment of individual morality. In fact, Yan's "obsession" with Dr. Rieux is also manifested in his 2015 novel *Rixi* 日熄 (*The Day the Sun Dies*), in which he creates a Dr. Rieux doppelganger who burns himself to bring light to the entire village, even when he is not obligated to do so.

own son Ding Hui. Both Dr. Rieux and Ding's conduct represent the heroism of "ordinary people doing extraordinary things out of simple decency" (Judt 186). Dr. Rieux holds that "heroism and sanctity don't really appeal to me. . . What interests me is — being a man" (Camus, *The Plague* 209). While "man" to Dr. Rieux means "humanity," to Ding it means "conscience." In other words, while Dr. Rieux works hard for human goodness, Ding fights for conscience's sake. As a peasant who has lived out his life in poverty and did not receive much formal education, Ding is cheated and coerced by the Director of Education into persuading the Ding villagers to sell their blood. This issue becomes source of eternal because it means that he has, albeit unintentionally, betrayed his conscience by "cheating" the villagers into selling blood, and indirectly causing the disastrous illness. Ding's sense of guilt is compounded by his elder son Ding Hui, who has made a fortune from selling the villagers' blood, and whose irresponsibility has caused the villagers' to become infected with HIV/AIDS. Ding's additional anxiety over the consequences of his son's evil conduct invites further condemnation from conscience, torturing him and triggering a succession of dreams. Thus, for Ding, dreaming represents a withdrawal from a reality that has become too painful or traumatic for conscious awareness. His dreams manifest the repressed truths and overwhelming emotions that he is afraid to confront in reality but is paradoxically eager to explore in his unconscious.

In reality, Ding attempts to persuade Ding Hui to apologize to the villagers for selling their blood. After several unfruitful confrontations with his son, Ding perceives

the option of killing Ding Hui. The conflict between Ding and Ding Hui does not so much lie in the superficial binary logic of good and evil, as it does the confrontation between the different social mores at the times of their respective upbringings. Ding represents the old generation who respects the pursuit of knowledge and values, and the moral cultivation of family and society. Ding Hui, in contrast, has come of age in an era dominated by a commodity economy and rampant moral corruption, as have, presumably, all the other bystanders portrayed in the story. Unlike his father, Ding Hui does not hold a traditional regard for morality as such; instead, he views his despicable manner of pursuing wealth and power as a skill that deserves admiration from his fellow villagers.

However, it is Ding's own fearful respect for power which overdetermines his involuntary surrender to power and authority. The first time the director of education comes to look for him, Ding "flushed with excitement, tossed aside his broom and hurried to greet him" (*Dream* 28). The second time, during which he is urged by the director to persuade the villagers to sell blood, Ding is very reluctant but "mumbled at last, 'I'll give it a try.'" (*Dream* 30). And finally, the last time, when he is threatened with removal from the school if he does not continue to cooperate with the government, Ding gives up what is left of his resistance and again complies with the director's demands. It seems clear that Ding is more fearful than he is desirous of power. It is also obvious that this fear largely comes from the vulnerability of his marginal existence, a social status that has been constructed by the discourse of the alleged inferiority of Chinese peasants

in contrast with the alleged superiority of the power bestowed by property and social rank. Nevertheless, in the person of Ding Hui it would seem that the fear of and bending to power in Ding's generation has shifted into a lusting for and a deliberate collusion with power in the new generation.

Despite these differences, the two generations' attitudes towards power do not in themselves demonstrate a breaking away from the characteristics formerly associated with the national character. Rather, behind both Ding's fear and Ding Hui's worship of power is a shared implicit respect for and acceptance of power and the trappings of power. This unquestioned respect and acceptance persists as a certain core characteristic of the national character as represented by both Ding and Ding Hui's, even as it steadily grows and mutates alongside socio-economic development and the transformation of social values. This "core" of "slavish acquisitiveness" is more obviously manifested in Ding's reaction to his younger son Ding Liang and Lingling's coffins:

> As the villagers were marveling over Lingling and Uncle's coffins, Grandpa emerged from Uncle's house, beaming and looking years younger than he had just a few days before.
>
> 'Teacher Ding, these coffins are incredible,' said one villager. 'Liang and Lingling are very lucky.'

Standing beside the coffins, Grandpa said, ‘What luck? It is just worth dying for.’[69]

‘What kind of coffins are these?’ asked another.

‘The old-timers used to call them ‘gold and silver caskets’, but these are more modern versions. You probably noticed all the flourishing and prosperous scenes of cities.’[70] (*Dream* 268)

人们就围着叔的金棺看，围着玲玲的银棺看。看着不停地咋着嘴。

咋着嘴，爷就从叔家出来了，脸上放着红烂烂的光，显得比几天前年轻好几岁。

庄人们说：“丁老师，这下丁亮和玲玲有福了。”

爷就站在那棺材边上：“有啥福？不过死值了。”

庄人们说：“这叫啥棺呀？”

爷就说：“这就是老辈人说的金棺、银棺呀，不过现在都是新式的金棺、银棺了，棺上刻着繁华了。” (*Ding* 109)

These dialogues demonstrate a continuity of the bystander culture, in which the slavishness criticized by Lu Xun has changed its form somewhat and developed into a collective lust for power and wealth. However, instead focusing on the bystanders, my

[69] This English passage above is primarily based on Cindy Carter’s translation, except for some small modifications. The original translation is as follows: ‘I don’t know about lucky,’ Grandpa said, standing beside the coffins. ‘But at least they will be buried with respect.’ I also changed “Professor Ding” into “Teacher Ding,” for reason that the connotations of these two phrases are drastically different, even though the latter sounds somewhat awkward in English.

[70] In Cindy Carter’s translation, this is rendered: “You probably noticed all the city scenes.” Carter here is adopting a more liberal translation, which, although it makes the text more digestible to the target readers, loses the implication of the original Chinese.

analysis will focus only on how the collective character of the masses has contaminated Ding's individual character and rendered him a tainted hero. In this part of the story, the image of the bedecked coffins has been transferred seamlessly from Ding's dream to the reality of Ding Liang and Lingling's caskets. The coffins in these two contexts are mirror images of each other in that they are both engraved with modern-day scenes of prosperity. The only significant difference is that on Ding Liang's actual coffin, the high-rises, office buildings, cinemas, and theatres are "all clearly the property of the Ding clan. Signs over the entrances to the buildings read 'Ding Family Theatre,' 'Ding Family Cinema' and 'Ding Family Towers'. Even the appliances and electronics were labeled with Ding Liang's name" (*Dream* 267). This "privatization" of the images of prosperity carved on the coffins in Ding's dream is an ironic reflection of Ding Hui's insatiable greed and ambition for wealth and power. At the same time, this transferal of property from the domain of the public to the domain of the private implies a shift in emphasis from the socio-political critique of the dreams to the ethical analysis of the reality.

This shift is also enacted through the intermixture of the stylistic features of elaborate descriptions with those of *baimiao*, in particular, the switching between and mingling of the standard and the dialectal, and the public and the private. First of all, the elaborate and embellished descriptions of the coffins in the dream has created a space in which to explore the secrets of the public world, wherein the desire for material wealth and hedonist pleasure is deeply inscribed in the social ethos. This stylistic feature is repeated in the description of Ding Liang and Lingling's real-life coffins in reality,

indicating a blurring of the border between the reality and the dream. It at first seems to have opened a further possibility of deciphering the social problems hinted at in Ding's dream, but the opportunity is immediately withdrawn when the focus of the scene shifts from the coffins to the bystanders. Correspondingly, the register is switched back to the dialect, re-immersing the narrative in the *minjian* reality. In this *minjian* reality, Ding Liang and Lingling both die of the fever, and their deaths, like those of all the other villagers, have been accepted by everyone as an inevitable reality that is as natural as the fact that everyone is genetically programmed to die. Thus, it is not Ding Liang's death *per se* that causes Ding's grief. On the contrary, as is evident in the above dialogue, Ding can barely conceal his complacency or his satisfaction regarding Ding Liang's funeral, particularly with respect to the luxurious coffins, which have fully satisfied his sense of family honor. Here Ding's sense of family honor is grounded in his identification with the traditional family ethics of filial piety, in particular, the idea of hoping one's descendants having a bright future and bringing glory to their ancestors. Ironically, this seems to have been achieved through Ding Hui's "commitment" to his family in buying the luxurious coffins for his deceased brother and brother's wife.

As an embodiment of the marriage of wealth and power, Ding Liang and Lingling's coffins have been allegorically substituted for the traditional concept of "family honor" in Ding's mind. They have fully satisfied Ding's pride by proving to the villagers the "prosperity" of his family. At the same time, however, they have rendered the Ding's ostensible "family honor" into a slavishness of chasing power and wealth; in

this respect, he is no different from the rest of the villagers. Furthermore, Ding becomes enmeshed in an ethical dilemma upon his learning — first from his dream and again in reality— that Ding Hui has collaborated with the local officials in selling the government's free coffins to the villagers and has made a fortune out of it. Ding Hui's amassed wealth is tainted by his exploitation of the villagers, as are, by extension, the expensive coffins he has purchased for his family members. Thus, rather than reaffirming the family honor, Ding Liang and Lingling's luxurious coffins have only brought shame to the family.

The convergence of dream and reality creates a tension between familial and societal ethics, finally reaching a climax when the things happening in reality have already occurred in Ding's dream. In this surreal world, Ding Hui hatches a new scheme in which he makes money by matchmaking the dead. He even takes advantage of his own son's death by marrying him off to the county magistrate's dead daughter. In the wake of these new outrages, Ding's impulse to kill Ding Hui grows stronger. Eventually, on the day when Ding Hui is exhuming his son's tomb with the intention of holding a grand wedding ceremony for him, Ding follows Ding Hui to the graveyard, walks up behind him, and brings a club down on Ding Hui's head, killing him.

Ding's killing of his son appears to demonstrate a victory of conscience and social morality over selfish desire and individual interest. However, this would imply an underlying incompatibility between family and social ethics. In the novel, Ding Hui's death heralds the final alienation of family relations and the total disintegration of family

in a traditional sense, indicating a change in the family value system in an age in which the pursuit of profit and power has become the paramount goal for one to realize the value of life. In such a world, the family has lost its affective cohesion and its role in the moral education of its members. In this regard, Ding Hui's death can be hardly regarded as a victory; rather, given that family and social ethics should not be incompatible with each other in a healthy society, the collapse of family ethics also suggests that the society, as the family writ large, is similarly dysfunctional and that the people living in it are likewise alienated. However, the critical significance of the conflict of interest between family and society has not received the attention it has deserved, the vast majority of scholarship being preoccupied with the novel's socio-political critique rather than its ethical implications.

Ding spares no effort in his quest to restore social justice, which he simply regards as rewarding the right and punishing the wrong. As a result, in killing his evil son he naively thinks that he has acted upon his community's standards of good conduct and thereby has upheld social morality in an exemplary way. As a peasant who has neither received much education nor enjoyed much access to the outside world, Ding is unable to apprehend the manner in which a society imbued with the allure of modernity and corruption of power has managed to infiltrate the culture of his own marginal area of contemporary China. Although he has followed his conscience in attempting to compensate for what Ding Hui has done to the villagers, Ding is only met with coldness and indifference from his villagers, nearly all of whom are as ignorant, ungrateful and

selfish as Ding Hui. Ultimately, Ding's attempts to do battle with the epidemic of inhumanity and immorality that has infected his community turns out to be a failure. This is not only because he is alone in his fight against the moral bankruptcy of human soul, but also because he is incapable of recognizing the social changes that have generated this corruption of morality. His admirable qualities of kindness, selflessness, tolerance, and high moral standards are somewhat negated when coupled with his ignorance and slavishness towards power and wealth. Nevertheless, as Yao Xiaolei 姚晓雷 observes, "Ding. . . is the one who has his original sin and selfishness in real life but does not lose his good nature. He is a savior of both others and himself, who attempts to compensate others by deeds." (丁老师……是……一个在现实生活中有自己的原罪和私心却能不失善良本性，并企图以行动来补偿别人的拯救兼自救者。) ("Cangliang" 58).

To conclude, whereas the bystanders discussed in the previous section demonstrate indifference to their own pain as well as others', Ding is kind, selfless and conscientious. But the most distinctive feature of Ding's character that aligns with discourse of the weakness of Chinese national character is ignorance. On the one hand, this ignorance partially lies in a slavishness, derived from a post-socialist economic and political context in which power and wealth have become the new reference points for the social value system; on the other hand, it resides in the simplicity and naivety of Chinese peasants like Ding, who in following the intuitions of their own conscience understand individual moral failure as the root of social injustice and corruption and fail to perceive the impact of larger social trends, leading to the naïve belief that a morally

corrupted society can easily be "purified" by eradicating evil people. This belief is also manifested in the novel's closing dream sequence, which alludes to the Chinese myth of Nüwa who creates people out of mud. This dream implies an expectation of rebirth after the evil has been eliminated with the vanishing of the AIDS-infected village. Although there is a note of hope here, it is a hope for a utopian world far removed from the socio-historical context, one in which the ethical code of the social world is aligned with people's consciences and in which violent external intervention is not needed to keep evil impulses in check.

Conclusion

In mainland China, most modern writing about rural China, or *xiangtu wenxue* 乡土文学 (native soil literature), seems to go hand in hand with literary realism. This tendency can be roughly traced back to the two divergent traditions of the native soil literature in the wake of May Fourth Movement. One is the Enlightenment tradition represented by Lu Xun, and the other is the cultural conservatism of Shen Congwen.[71] In

[71] Both Lu Xun and Mao Dun were important pioneers in discussing and introducing native soil literature and nativist writers in their introductions to the five-volume *Zhongguo xinwenxue daxi* 中国新文学大系 (*Anthology of Modern Chinese Literature*, 1935). But while Lu Xun explicitly used the terms "*xiangtu wenxue*" (native soil literature) and "*xiangtu zuojia*" (nativist writers), Mao Dun did not use these specific terms; instead, he used "fiction that depicts countryside life/peasants" (写农村生活/农民的小说) in referring to this kind of literature. Whereas Lu Xun focuses on, in Rosemary Haddon's words, "the themes of nostalgia and anti-traditionalism," Mao Dun demands that "nativist literature [should] depict a 'struggle against fate'." Despite their somewhat divergent foci, they both have, to some extent, left behind a tradition of so-called enlightenment, with the overall theme of reforming the national soul. For a reference to their original discussion, see Yunfeng Liu, 2009, pp.114-120, 133-136. Also see Rosemary Haddon, 1994, pp. 109-110. Drastically different from the tradition of Lu Xun and Mao Dun, there is Shen Congwen, who, as David Der-wei Wang states in *Fictional Realism*, "has long been regarded as one of the most important native soil writers in modern Chinese fiction," and who contrasts strongly with Lu Xun and Mao Dun in his apolitical stance. Shen represents a totally different tradition of native soil literature, leaving behind a legacy of rural lyricism characterized by pastoral depictions of the romance of the countryside. See David Der-wei Wang, 1992, pp. 248. More scholarship

both literary discourses, no matter whether the work in question is a pastoral depiction of the romantic countryside, a sentimental expression of nostalgia and homesickness, or a harsh critique of the peasants' "weakness" infecting the national consciousness, rural China is has mostly been represented in a realist way. The "native soil" is either an object of derision characterized by ignorance and backwardness or an idyllic imagining of a utopian world imbued with energy and life. Albeit remarkably different, these two narratives have converged within the overall project of reforming the flawed "national soul" underlying the history of modern China. Chinese intellectual writers, upon encountering Western modernity, have more or less "otherized" the native soil as the antithesis of modern Chinese culture. In their view, native soil represents an archaic China standing in opposite to modern civilization and new ideas.

Contemporary Chinese nativist writers, especially those who have been influenced by the critical tradition of enlightenment in early native soil literature, are striving to reshape the conventional realist writing of rural China by moving away from this elitist position. This new representation of an alternative rural China is well articulated in the following statement by Chinese scholar Chen Guohe 陈国和:

> Countryside no longer exists only for the need of literary genre, nor is it an object observed externally or merely sympathized with. What matters is its perspective and position of taking care of itself and viewing the world. This perspective or

about the discussion of native soil literature, with some specifically focusing on Shen Congwen, can be found in Janet Ng, 2001, pp. 81-102; Jeffery Kinkley, 2003, pp. 425-430; Zhu Xiaojin, 1994, pp. 66-80.

method is obviously different from that of the Chinese literary tradition, which centers on the concepts of modernity such as science, rationality, criticism, progress, and morality. In the same vein, rural perspective is not a tool that is used to figuratively convey a certain idea; rather, it signifies a sympathy of placing oneself in others' position. (乡村不再只是题材的需要，或者只是外在审视或者叹惋的对象，更主要的是他们安身自身和看待世界的角度和立场。这种角度和方法显然不同于以科学、理性、批评、进步、道德等现代性理念为核心的文学传统，也不是那种形象化地传达某种理念的工具，而是一种设身处地的同情。) (83)

Arguably, in the theoretical context of contemporary Chinese literature, such a perspective indicates a romanticized *minjian* position, about which I have elaborated in the introductory chapter. Following Chen's insight, more specific questions may need to be asked, such as: what are the effective means of expression that can serve such an end? in what literary forms will the writing of rural China avoid a return to the traditional discourse of enlightenment? Both of these questions are complicated by the fact that the current situation in the countryside is far more complex than was the case during the last century, such that that many writers find it extremely difficult to represent adequately the reality of today's rural China. Some issues —such as the social existence and identity of today's peasants, the ongoing conflict between the traditional and the modern, and the many injustices and rampant corruption of the socialist transitionary period of economic development— are so pressing and salient that they probably cause a great deal of

writers' anxiety with respect to how best to express contemporary rural China and how to make peasants' voices heard.

In examining Yan's writing of rural China within the landscape of the native soil literature of modern China, we may find his writing to be so unique that it cannot easily be reduced to either of the traditions discussed above. Yan's ultimate goal in his interrogation of native soil is neither to criticize nor to praise but rather to reveal the "truth" to which he has been exposed and to look for the moral salvation of his characters. Instead of offering sweeping judgments, Yan demonstrates his emotional attachment to the native soil by showing "sympathy" —to borrow Chen Guohe's term— with his characters. But at the same time, Yan does not view *minjian* as "a place of non-discrimination, tolerance, and conservation,"[72] but a place of "*cangwu nagou*— collecting grime and containing wreckage" (Y. Zhang 248). The notion of "*cangwu nagou*," instead of referring to the juxtaposition of the essence of the folk culture with the residual tradition in Chen Sihe's theoretical context, indicates rather a mixture of residual tradition with the dark side of rural modernity, as in *Dream of Ding Village*. Against the backdrop of this "renewed" *minjian*, Yan reshapes the meaning of writing the national character, which continues to be a concern to some extent in writing rural China.

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[72] Based on my understanding of Chen Sihe's interpretation of *minjian* during different periods of the twentieth century, *minjian* contains double meanings. First, it is a spatial concept referring to the secularized and objective world of the native soil; second, it arises from an idealized position or stance taken by Chinese intellectuals in their portrayal of the reality of rural China or the secular culture in the modern economic society of China. Both of these implications will appear in my dissertation, but in order to distinguish the two, I use "*minjian*" to refer to the first connotation and "*minjian* position" to refer to the second. For most of my dissertation, *minjian* is understood as an idealized position or stance\; in current context, however, it indicates a spatial concept with slightly different implications. See Chen Sihe, 1997.

Although the purported weakness of the national character has been incessantly questioned in contemporary Chinese literature, Yan's narrative of national character has gone even further in not only shaking off the ideological burden of enlightenment but also returning to the practice of *minjian* through both formal and contextual innovations.

By retreating to the most isolated area rural China, Yan's story reaches the core of the *minjian* tradition by centering itself around those peasants who have never truly joined with the historical narrative of Chinese modernity. Unable to access to the fruits of modernization, these people signify a fracturing of the so-called modern civilization. They are, on the one hand, entrapped in pre-modern social conditions, and on the other, overwhelmed by both the impractical ambitions of rural modernity and the consumerist ethos of the post-modern world. In the former case, they are living in destitute poverty on the margins of the developed world; in the latter, even though they have not yet physically escaped from their pre-modern ways of life, they nevertheless are tempted by the lure of a collectively imagined material modernity. The confrontation of these two lifeways leads to the existential pain of being psychologically split between the traditional and the modern, which itself results in the foregrounding of human desire and the concomitant disappearance of the most valuable feature of human society.

In the novel, the confrontation between the outside world and the village, or the public world and the *minjian*, has generated a unique rural or village logic, which is, in Liang Hong's words,

> … different from the mainstream discourse of political power or the elite intellectuals. It also differs from the *minjian* spirit proposed by Chen Sihe. Village logic is an open and extremely stable space for thought. It can digest and assimilate the mainstream discourse of the time that overrides the ordinary life. With this ability, it also destabilizes the mode of power discourse, thus constituting its unique way of expressing power. Although it has its own strength and resistant capacity, village logic is often suppressed by and subject to various political discourses and eventually turns back to work for them. The power [of village logic] only lies in its capability to resolve contradictions from within. . . The nature of its position of living has decided that the village logic cannot be rational in a real sense. Instead, it imitates and reproduces power [logic] and epitomizes the collective character [of the group]. (不同于主流政治权利话语，不同于精英知识分子话语，也不同于陈思和所提出的“民间精神”，它是一个开放的同时又是极为稳定的思维广场，以它对漂浮在民众生活之上的时代主流话语的消化能力和同化能力消解着权力话语形态，从而形成独特的权力表达方式。它虽然有自己的力量和反抗方向，但是却常常受着各种政治话语的挤压并最终受之牵引为之服务，它的力量是内部性的消解……它的生存立场使它无法形成真正的理性立场，而表现为对权力的模仿、复制和“群体性”。) (*Wupo* 175-176)

This rural logic involves a dialectical relationship of discipline and anti-discipline, and self-othering and de-othering —both textually and contextually. This

dialectical relationship is manifested first of all in Yan's unique writing style, here a unique intermixture of formal/standard language versus Henan dialect, and a careful balancing of the elaborated description with the *baimiao*. On the one hand, the formal/standard language, together with the detailed description, constructs a public world, in which a space is created for the darkness of socialist modernity to be articulated through the metaphor of dreams. On the other hand, the dialect and the lyrical simplicity of *baimiao* construct a *minjian* world, in which the conventional bystander culture created by the discourse of enlightenment is destabilized and renegotiated from a *minjian* perspective.

Nevertheless, there is hardly a distinctive boundary between these two worlds. While ostensibly in opposition to each other, the two frequently assimilate each other's vocabularies and modes of narrative. In particular, the *minjian* world is no longer a pure *minjian* due to the ongoing incursions of the public world, something which is metaphorically reflected in the intersection of the respective narrative styles of the descriptions of the coffins in the dream and in reality. Here, the detailed descriptions of the luxurious coffins taken to represent the logic of socialist modernity are subtly re-imagined to symbolize the individual's desire for power and money upon the native soil. This shift in meaning demonstrates how *minjian*, while resisting the public, dominant discourse, simultaneously pays tribute to the public, mainstream discourse by imitating and reproducing the latter's power and logic. This process echoes the Ding villagers' gradual self-otherizing by their alternatively accepting the oppressive social relations of

the larger society and assimilating themselves into the mainstream discourse of "progress." Desire for power and money permeates Ding villagers' daily life and even dwells in the innermost soul of the protagonist Ding Shuiyang, revealing a collectively-renewed, modern slavishness.

This rural logic also informs the narration of the story, particularly in the mythorealist elements of the ghost narrator and dream sequences, littering the discourse of rural society with many contradictions and tensions. By transcending the boundaries between the real and the unreal and the rational and the irrational, mythorealism represents a real rural China with the unreal, and an irrational native soil with the rational, implicitly reflecting Yan's own ambivalent and uncertain attitudes towards *minjian*. In particular, the ghost narrator offers a vivid description of real rural life by painting pictures of a variety of individual onlookers in which human nature is explicitly represented as evil, and in which immorality and inhumanity are shown to be prevalent in the AIDS-ravaged community. Nevertheless, the paradoxical disposition of the ghost child as a simultaneously omniscient, unreal, omnipresent, and naive narrator subverts the credibility of the ostensibly realist narration. That is, the mythorealist modality of the narrative carries an embedded implication of unreliability and self-reflexivity. Consequently, the apparent weakness of the peasants' character is simultaneously constructed and deconstructed within the context of the bystander culture.

In a manner that is both complementary to, and the inverse of, that of the ghost narrator, another mythorealist element, the dream sequences, appears to reveal the reality

of the unreality and make the invisible reality visible. Although commonly seen in literary works, dream sequences do not necessarily create any special textual effects in most realist narratives, nor are they usually treated as a primary device in staging the entire plot of a story. However, in *Dream of Ding Village*, by creating a mysterious atmosphere shrouding the whole story, the protagonist's dreams translate a mundane rural society into an ambiguous and enigmatic existence. Opening the story are three dreams taken from the Hebrew Bible, all of which indicate a cause-and-effect logic of greed and punishment. These dream comprise the first volume of the novel on their own, setting the tone of an inquiry into social morality. They are resonant with the protagonist's following eight dreams, and together they form a thread suggesting an alternative way of perceiving and talking about the rural world.

The increasingly direct connection of the protagonist's dreams with the real life of the village indicates a dislocation of the presumed rationality and objectivity of the public world, and by extension, the public discourse. That is, dreams *per se* are irrational and subjective, but they are depicted more rationally and objectively than is the ostensibly realist bystander narrative. As discussed previously, both the linguistic and the stylistic features of the dream narrative are in contrast to those of its bystander counterpart, signifying a contrast between the public and the dialectal world. However, this contrast becomes less sharp in that it is the formally subjective and irrational poetics of the dream sequences that have conveyed the objective and rational reality of the public world and the public discourse. In this light, the subversive capacity of the dreams does

not reside merely in the nature of dreams *per se,* but in their self-contradictory role in the story. More so than the peasants' self-othering reflected in the "discipline" aspect of the rural logic, the dream sequences and the ghost narrator are the means by which Yan de-otherizes the othering. They have epitomized the "anti-discipline" aspect of the rural logic.

By presenting a self-contradictory public world through the medium of the protagonist's dreams, Yan seems to be satirizing and invalidating the use of public discourse in writing the native soil. It also implies the dilemma between his uncompromising position on the AIDS issue and his inability to reach the public world in the face of various pressures from the external realities of his own life. The novel's dream sequences deconstruct the hegemonic public discourse in the story, but due to their irrationality and subjectivity, they are unfortunately incapable of reconstructing a new set of discourses for a more poignant social critique. As a result, it is only within the *minjian* world or the dialectal discourse that the highly politicized AIDS issue is "legitimately" transformed into the *minjian*-issue of human morality and individual conscience, one that is able to be resolved in a "*minjian*" or "private" mechanism of the rural logic.

With all the twists, contrasts, and ambiguities represented in the "*minjian*" mythorealist narrative, one must ask: where does the text eventually lead if it does not aim or is unable to provide a solution to the problems it raises? Although the redeeming aspect of the story is obvious, the mythorealist manifestation of Yan's sympathy with *minjian* is by no means intended as a panacea that can transform the publicly and

ideologically "contaminated" discourses of the countryside and the peasantry back into a purified or forward into a redeemed alternative. Instead, Yan's sympathy directs to an ambiguity regarding the native soil. This is accomplished through the novel's deconstruction of the dichotomy of countryside and urbanity, a revelation of the fragility of human nature from within the native soil (as opposed to from without), and an attempt to negotiate between external (beyond the boundaries of the native soil) and internal (within the boundaries of the native soil) perspectives from within the discourse of the Chinese national character.

The renegotiation or re-interrogation of the national character does not so much lie in that Yan has utterly deconstructed the othering of the peasants in the conventional, elitist, intellectual writing of the national character, but more so in the dynamic of the text's vacillation between Yan's efforts in de-otherizing the othering of the bystanders and the Ding Villagers' own self-othering, both of which are embedded in the same rural logic. Two statements Yan has made elsewhere may help to resolve this tension and conflict. In one of these statements, Yan announces, "Today, it is by the twenty-first century, when Hua Laoshuan has died for long, his graveyard has been deserted, and the human-blood steamed bun has ceased to exist,[73] the numb peasants and the peasants' numbness are still thriving like the green leaves in the tree" (到了今天，就是到了 21

[73] A refernce to Lu Xun's short story "Yao" (Medicine), in which Hua Laoshuan is depicted as an apathetic character who watches the execution of a revolutionary without sympathy and brings to his sick son a steamed bun soaked with the latter's blood.. Hua Laoshuan, together with other of Lu Xun's characters such as Xianglin's wife, Ah Q, etc., represent the negative stereotypes of Chinese national character or Chineseness.

世纪，华老栓早已死去，坟丘都已荒芜，人血馒头也不再有了，但麻木的农民和农民的麻木却依然的青枝绿叶，有旺盛的生命力。) (*Fanshen* 171). In another, Yan argues, "it should be said that numbness is a spiritual regression, but you must understand that the numbness of the peasants is not ignorance or insensitivity. The peasants can only survive with numbness" (麻木应该说是一种精神的倒退，但是你必须理解，农民的麻木不是愚昧，不是无知，而是只能用麻木来对抗生存。) (*Wupo* 198). Perhaps this self-othering numbness is best understood as a strategy that has been developed as one part of the rural logic of these AIDS villagers, without which they are unable to endure the many obstacles in their struggling to survive, even while it simultaneously reinforces their alienation. In the end, Yan does not provide a direct answer to the enigma of a century, the weakness of the national character. Instead, relying on the mythorealist narrative, Yan creates in the text a dialectical relationship between discipline and anti-discipline, and de-otherizing and self-otherizing in his own inquiry into the national character. The open-endedness of the textual meaning leaves the final judgement to the readers.

Chapter Three Gazing at the Absurd History: Docile Body and Ethical Self in *The Four Books*

Introduction

In his essay "Guojia shiyi yu wenxue jiyi" 国家失忆与文学记忆 (National Amnesia and Literary Memory), collected in a 2014 anthology, Yan Lianke discusses both state-sponsored amnesia and Chinese writers' collective silence over China's past, and expresses his wish that "a memorial to amnesia engraved with all our nation's painful memories of the past century could one day be erected on Tiananmen Square in Beijing" (北京天安门广场上建一座"民族失忆碑"，刻写下我们国家自某一历史时期以来的全部伤痛与记忆) (*Chenmo* 23). Amnesia, or, more specifically, national amnesia, is a concept with which Yan is deeply concerned, as it often emerges in his essays, interviews and speeches delivered worldwide. In 2012, for example, after exchanging stories about their experiences teaching in Chinese university classes with Torbjorn Loden, the Swedish professor of Chinese language and culture based in Hong Kong, Yan writes that "thoughts about the loss of memory in China on a national scale, a phenomenon that people have long been discussing but only in private, remain lodged in my heart like thorns. From time to time, guilt —along with painful memories of the past and thoughts about losing the memories— torment me and refuse to leave me alone" ("State-Sponsored Amnesia"). Such amnesia, in Yan's words, has resulted in "an escapism of literature and the estrangement of literature from the reality" (文学的逃避，与现实的隔阂) and bears "literature's guilt" (文学的愧疚) (Yipai 46) with respect to

reality, in that Chinese writers' "silence" has also encouraged this "amnesia" (*Chenmo* 15). In contrast, Yan praises writers such as Milan Kundera, Agota Kristof, and Russian writers such as Bulgakov and Pasternak, holding that "their writings are more about preserving and restoring a nation's memories rather than resisting the state power" (与其说是对权力、制度的抵抗，倒不如说是对记忆、遗忘的修复和疗救。) (*Chenmo* 16).

"Remembering," first and foremost, requires a writer's courage because it is a provocative gesture of questioning "what happened," which is deeply ideological and, by extension, political. It is a behavior that is highly relevant to the notion of "contemporariness" in its very nature of being "untimely" to the zeitgeist of the present society. This commitment to remembering the past and fighting against "forgetting" demonstrate Yan's political and ideological stance, and constitute the main reason for him to write *The Four Books*, a novel "dedicated to the history that has been forgotten, and to millions of intellectuals who lost their lives and who are living" (献给那被忘却的历史和成千上万死去与活着的读书人).[74] First published in 2010 in Hong Kong, *The Four Books* is set against the historical backdrop of some of the most traumatic events in modern Chinese history: the Anti-Rightist Movement (1957), the Great Famine (1957-1959), and the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960). These events have been more or less taboo in Chinese literature, although various forms of literary works have been dedicated

[74] The statement appears on the cover of the Chinese version of *The Four Books*. It is translated by me.

to the traumatic memory of these periods and intermittently published since the 1980s.[75] *The Four Books* won Yan the prestigious Franz Kafka Prize in 2014, but was unfortunately rejected by more than twenty publishing houses in mainland China due to the political sensibility of its content,[76] and perhaps also its "too unconventional" (太另类了) (Feng Yu) narrative style,[77] which is "heavy on structure, scope, and symbolism" (Johnson).

It is not an easy undertaking to read *The Four Books* because, unlike Yan's other fiction, it is highly abstract, allegorical, and structurally complicated. Therefore, it

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[75] Works such as essays, memoirs, biographies, and fiction related to these historical events (albeit not as many as those concerning the Cultural Revolution) have come out since the 1980s, somewhat mushrooming in the 1990s, primarily due to the relaxing political milieu during this period. There are some particularly influential works; for example, in 1998, Han Niu and Jiuping Deng edited a three-volume version of "The Literary Series of Recollection," respectively, *Grass on Prairie* (*Yuanshang cao), Snow in June* (*Liuyue xue*), and *The Thorny Path* (*Jingji lu*), all under the subtitle of "the Anti-Rightist Campaign in Memories" (jiyi zhong de fanyoupai yundong). See also: Li Rui's *A Personal Account of the Great Leap Forward* (*Dayuejin qinli ji,* 1996); Zhang Yihe's *The Past has not Gone Up in Smoke* (*Wangshi bingbu ruyan,* 2004), which tells fragmented life stories of some leading rightists; Yu Xiguang's *A Collection of the Petitions made during the Hard Times of the Great Leap Forward* (*Dayuejin: Kurizi shangshu ji*, 2005); Yang Jisheng's *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine, 1958-1962* (*Mubei: Zhongguo liushi niandai dajihuang jishi, 2008*); Yang Xianhui's *Memory of Jiagoubian* (*Jiagoubian jishi*, 2008); and Liu Qingbang's novel *Ballad of the Plain* (*Pingyuan shang de geyao*, 2009), which is often regarded as the first work of fiction centering on the Great Famine. For a detailed analysis of the publication history of books related to the "Anti-Rightist Campaign," see He Guimei, 2000.

[76] Regarding why *The Four Books* cannot be published in mainland China, Yan has also expressed his own opinion. In his conversation with Li Chuangwei, a journalist from *the Southern Metropolis Daily* (Dec.18, 2012), Li was curious about why "*The Four Books* encountered difficulties in publishing, but some works involving the "anti-rightist" and the Great Leap Forward were actually published." Yan explains, "I am a person who is cared for too much. When you are cared for too much, […] everything comes to you. I think that if *Dream of Ding Village* and *The Four Books* are written by another writer, there will be no problem (of publication). Some of your novels will be amplified infinitely. When everyone is misreading you, some other things addressed in the novels are thus obscured."

[77] On her *Sina* blog on Mar. 18, 2016, the freelance writer Feng Yu posted a letter to her readers discussing Yan Lianke's *The Four Books*. Specifically, she raises questions on Yan's unrealistic style of writing, which, to her, can hardly represent the historical truth. Feng Yu implicitly points out that such unrealistic style is *intended* to obscure the historical reality so as to avoid censorship. She also comments that the reason for the rejection of this book by Chinese publishing houses is probably not due to the content as much as the "alternative and unacceptable style." Indeed, there have been many sporadic comments in Chinese scholarship on Yan's mythorealistic style in this novel; the overall impression and comments from scholars include, but are not limited to: "shock" (震惊) (Chen Xiaoming, 2013), "challenging the limit" (挑战极限) and "wield" (怪) (Sun Yu, 2012), "unfamiliarized" (陌生化) (Wang Binbin, 2011), "alternative" (另类) and "anti-conventional" (反常规) (Cheng Guangwei, 2012), "peculiar" (奇特) and "fierce" (凌厉) (Cheng Guangwei, Qiu Huadong, et al, 2011), "anti-novel" (反小说) (Sun Yu, 2015).

is necessary to offer a brief description of the structure and a summary of the plot. Structurally, *The Four Books*, with its title alluding to the Four Books of the classical Confucian canon, is a metafictional work interwoven with a patchwork of excerpts from four different manuscripts detailing intellectual criminals' various fates in the labor camp. Each of the four manuscripts has its own backstory. Among these four, two make up the main body of the novel, namely, *Heaven's Child* and *Old Course*. The former is an anonymous manuscript written in a somewhat detached, biblical style, focusing on its protagonist, named the Child, and relating the story of the labor camp in a sweeping and allegorical way. The latter is a private memoir, written in the first person, with its own Author serving as one of the main protagonists of the novel. *Old Course* depicts what is going on with the intellectuals in the camp during two of these catastrophic historical events, with the latter half of the narrative centering around the Author's search for a kind of meaningful atonement. The third text is excerpted from a collection of documents called "Criminal Records," which are secret reports on the criminals in the camp produced by the Author for the Child. These three narratives mutually interpenetrate the novel as fragmented excerpts, together unfolding the catastrophes of the times and the intellectuals' suffering in the camp. Finally, the fourth text, which is also the final chapter of the novel, is a philosophical reflection on divine punishment and human response entitled "A New Myth of Sisyphus." It is a preface excerpted from the philosophical manuscript *A New Myth of Sisyphus,* ostensibly authored by the Scholar, another character in the novel.

Thus constructed, *The Four Books* tells a fictional story about a group of intellectuals who are politically “re-educated” in a remote labor camp named the Ninety-Ninth District, close to the Yellow River. These intellectuals are called criminals, labelled as rightists or counter-revolutionaries and known only by their former professions: the Author, the Scholar, the Theologian, the Musician, and so on. Imprisoned in the camp, they are heavily tasked with growing wheat and smelting steel and are forced to meet impossible production quotas imposed from the higher-ups. These criminals are overseen by a preadolescent camp leader, the Child, who enjoys his surveillance system of punishment and reward. This system not only demands obedience and high levels of production but also engenders an alienation of the camp companions’ humanity. For example, almost everyone in the camp scrambles to inform on each other’s “deviant” behavior to the Child in order to be rewarded. What is even worse is that, when the great famine arrives, these criminals are left on their own to survive and must confront the collapse of their morality in the face of extreme circumstances. They steal and sell whatever they can in order to get some food. They resort to eating tree barks, bird droppings and, ultimately, human flesh, but still cannot escape from slow death by starvation. The story ends with the Child’s ultimate disillusionment with his political pursuits and his reconstitution of his self as a moral subject through a ritual of religious purgation, namely, he releases all the criminals and crucifies himself in a stark parody of Christian scripture.

The novel's themes include, but are not limited to "the madness and the suffering of men, the cynicism of the powerful, the cowardice of the intellectuals and a sense of absurdity that cannot be redeemed by religion or even human love" (Bertrand Mialaret). Yan confronts each of his characters with the question of self-reconstruction in the face of brutality, immersing them in the enigmatic atmosphere of religion and myth. As Guo Xiaolu puts it, "the novel gives us a strangely abstract, almost disembodied idea of human suffering; it is depicted as an all-pervading atmosphere, from which neither religion nor human love can offer any escape" (Guo Xiaolu).

Yan considers *The Four Books* his most satisfying work (*Yipai* 107), claiming "I've always dreamed of being able to write without any regard for publication. *The Four Books* is (at least partially) an attempt to write recklessly and without any concern for the prospect of getting published" ("*Sishu* houji").[78] This statement conveys at least two somewhat contrasting meanings: first, as an outcome of "recklessness," *The Four Books* bears testimony to Yan's courage in remembering the forgotten through his revelation of the truth of history; second, the qualification "(at least partially) an attempt" implies that, given the novel's censorship on the mainland, Yan nevertheless cannot write with absolute freedom, for, as Sebastian Veg puts it, "How can the responsibility to remember and the intention to commemorate be translated into an open literary form, without the risk of being reduced to silence by the institutions of literary censorship in China?"

[78] The English translation was quoted in Carlos Rojas, 2015.

(10)[79] This ambivalence is further expressed in that, rather than offering a more conventional realist representation of this particular period of history, Yan openly declares his betrayal of literary realism in the "Afterword to *The Four Books*" by labelling himself "a traitor" who has resorted to a mythorealist way of representing reality in his novel. In addition to aesthetic considerations and to Yan's literary ideal of writing political subjects while transcending politics, this strategy of writing, as discussed in the introduction of this dissertation, also partly serves as a method of both illustrating and addressing his concerns. Thus, by using mythorealism, the novel, "on the one hand, escapes from and betrays the real world of China; on the other hand, through this escape and betrayal, it directly intervenes in the reality and reaches out to truth" (对中国的现实世界是逃离的，又是背叛的，可却又以这种逃离、背叛完成着直接的介入和真实。) (*Chenmo* 148). Cheng Guangwei's comments on the novel may shed some light on this seemingly paradox:

> The storyline of *The Four Books* does not necessarily offer the readers the historical truth; instead, the writer intentionally misleads the readers by using allegories and digressing from the historical facts. However, if understood from an alternative perspective, this misdirection is intended to conceal and protect the

[79] This concern is also revealed through Yan's remarks in his "A Traitor to Writing: Afterword to *The Four Books*" (2013), in which Yan says, "Honestly, *The Four Books* that readers see now is a version that has been adjusted, modified, and abridged multiple times. These multiple modifications have numbed my sense so that I am not even able to tell whether the current version has become aesthetically better or simply proves a hurt of helplessness to me. Originally not written for publishing, the book turns out to be revised again and again in order to get published, from which the readers may understand that a writer is ultimately eager to communicate with his readers, particularly the writer with a writing of "apostasy."

historicity embedded in the novel. The writer tries to imply that confronted with an era where the logic of daily life has entirely disrupted (or the right and the wrong have been reversed), the writer's task is not to record all the details of life that have happened, but to subvert them by using a new internal logic so that the reconstruction is possible. ("Fenshu" 90).

Both Yan's "intervention" and Cheng's "new internal logic," then, have attributed to the mythorealist narrative mode of *The Four Books*, which decisively influences and shapes the textual meaning of the work. One fact that cannot be ignored is that, alongside the publication of *The Four Books* is Yan's essay collection *Discovering Fiction*, which was written only two months following the completion of *The Four Books* but published several months earlier. This collection, as has been extensively discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation, is itself a theoretical contribution to Yan's literary practice of mythorealism, particularly epitomized in *The Four Books*, for the purpose of, in Yan's words, "letting people see their own history and reality through 'the reconstruction of history and reality'" (使人们在"再造历史与现实"中看到自己的历史与现实) (*Jiqiao* 64).

With this considered, the things which interest me most about *The Four Books* and which I aim to investigate in this chapter, are: how does the narrative mode expressed through mythorealism effectively reshape "forgotten history" and reconstruct the subject of history? Does the "remembering" conveyed through *The Four Books* primarily focus on, in Kundera's words, "the illustration of a historical situation, the

description of a society at a given moment, a novelized historiography," or, otherwise, does it "examine the historical dimension of human existence" (35)? More importantly, is it possible that the stylistic "intervention" enacted by mythorealism opens up a multitude of possible interpretations such that it ultimately relocates the writer's originally-intended political critique of state-sponsored amnesia within an overwhelmingly more profound textual meaning or ideology? As my discussion unfolds in this chapter, I will investigate how Yan's literary configuration of the Ninety-Ninth District as a political allegory of the Foucauldian panopticon, epitomizing the manner in which the traumatic past of modern Chinese history has been gradually relocated to a universally existential situation, one in which the characters become corrupted in confronting the extremes of the human condition but nevertheless strive to seek out ways of reconstructing their selves as ethical subjects. Finally, I will argue that this transformation of the text's meaning, understood as a deviation from Yan's original intent of political critique, is achieved precisely through his use of mythorealism, that is, through the integration of the religious, the supernatural, the grotesque, and the mythological into the realist frame narrative of the intellectuals' "re-education" in the labor camp and the realistic historical setting of the Great Leap Forward and the Great Famine.

This chapter represents a departure from the analytical style of Chapter 2, but it retains a sense of connection to the previous chapter in that both discussions center around the representation of diverse mythorealistic elements in the novel that engender

themes and metaphors transcending a purely political interpretation. First of all, in terms of mythorealism, *The Four Books* is narrated in a mythorealist style drastically different from the "*minjian*" mode of *Dream of Ding Village*. *Dream of Ding Village* is replete with mythorealistic elements of "folk" and "*minjian*"—in particular, the ghost and the haunting dreams— which are expressed through the contrast of public and dialectal discourse. If the dreams sequences in *Dream of Ding Village* are the poetic counterpart to the specter wandering on the vast plain (of Henan), and if the *minjian* writing is meant to embody the obstinate and unnoticeable wild flowers growing on the plain, then the AIDS patients in the Ding village represent both the exiled and self-exiled creatures to the plain, passively running their own course. *The Four Books*, however, represents a totally different stylistic landscape. The conflation of multifarious texts in *The Four Books* constructs a self-enclosed physical space that is characterized by the absurdness of the Kafkan castle and the disciplinary power of the Foucauldian panopticon.[80] Several intertwined mythorealist components —namely, the supernatural, the religious, the

[80] My motivation of comparing Yan's ninety-ninth district with Kafka's castle is based on two aspects. First, although Yan doesn't specify that his inspiration of portraying the ninety-ninth as an absurdist enclosed space derives from Kafka, it is an undeniable truth that Yan is a fan of Kafka and has explicitly declared that his writings are inspired by Kafka and other writers (for example, see Robert Anthony Siegel's interview with Yan). More notably, in *Discovering Fiction*, Yan offers a detailed analysis of the plot and the absurdist implication of *The Castle* (82-87), and holds that "regarding zero cause-and-effect, *The Castle* is a greater masterpiece that has put this theory into practice" (就零因果而论，《城堡》是更大的实践之杰作。) (78). Moreover, as I mentioned previously, Yan completed and published *Discovering Fiction* and *The Four Books* in the same year and even declared *Discovering Fiction* to be a reflection on some issues of literary creation that he had being thinking about during the process of his writing *The Four Books* ("Chongshen" 59). Accordingly, Yan's discussion of *The Castle* in *Discovering Fiction* indirectly serves as a reference for the ninety-ninth district in *The Four Books*. Second, I would like to explain why I am more interested in *The Castle* instead of *The Trial*, given the fact that the latter also shares a certain affinity with *The Four Books* in terms of their penal focus. My primary reason of invoking the absurdity of *The Castle* rather than that of *The Trail* lies in my consideration that *The Castle* fits better into my perspective of framing the ninety-ninth as both a politically and philosophically constructed space. By aligning the ninety-ninth with the castle and the Foucauldian panopticon, I deliberately look into the operations of power exercised through the enclosure of space, both literally and metaphorically.

grotesque, and the mythological— not only allegorically render the space alienating and impregnable, but also transform the docile body confined in this space into the rebellious and thinking body.

Focusing on the enigmatic narrative mode of mythorealism, this chapter starts by investigating the entanglement between body and space in light of Foucault's theory of the "technology of disciplinary power," with the aim of exploring how disciplinary power exercises surveillance over the collective group of the intellectual criminals by means of an intangibly confining space to produce docile bodies and corrupted humanity. Building upon on this preliminary investigation of the interplay of body and space, I then argue that the textual meaning, while ostensibly remaining centered on the mythorealist recounting of the contingent historical actualities and the criminals' suffering, gradually shifts to a broader philosophical mediation on the enigma of human existence and a moral inquiry into the "possibilities remain[ing] for man in a world where the external determinants have become so overpowering that internal impulses no longer carry weight" (Kundera 26). This turn of textual meaning from the political to the philosophical coincidently parallels with Foucault's theoretical turn from "technology of disciplinary power" to the "technology of the self." While the first of Foucault's technology connotes a negative meaning of manipulation and domination, the second suggests a more positive meaning of ethical self-government as a practice of freedom. Thus the main body of this chapter will analyze how the three main protagonists, the Child, the Author, and the Scholar, in turning their docile bodies into thinking bodies,

each strive to uncover the enigma of humanity's essential nature and endeavour to constitute themselves as ethical, and therefore human, subjects.

The Re-Ed(ucation) District: An Absurdist Foucauldian Panopticon

Michel Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish*, states, "Discipline sometimes requires enclosure, the specification of a place heterogeneous to all others and closed in upon itself. It is the protected place of disciplinary monotony" (141). Here Foucault interprets "discipline" as "technology of power" exercised by systems of surveillance, best exemplified by the interplay of space and surveillance within the discourse of Panopticism. This statement describes well the nature of the Re-Ed District, which is itself further epitomized by the ninety-ninth district of the labor camp. According to the record in *Old Course* (*Gudao*)[7]—again, one of the four interwoven fictional texts in *The Four Books*— the ninety-ninth is a subdistrict of a Re-Ed region composed of 127 criminals, of which 95 percent are intellectuals. The following description offers an overall picture of how the mechanism of the Re-Ed District is effectively a function of its geographical remoteness and disciplinary enclosure:

> The ninety-ninth was located farthest from the headquarters and closest to the Yellow River, and consequently there was no need to fear that anyone would flee. If someone were to proceed to the left, right, or straight ahead, for the first ten or twenty *li* they would be hard-pressed to find anyone other than other groups of criminals undergoing Re-Ed. Finally emerging from the wildness, they would see

> plowed field and might assume that they'd made it back to society, though in reality these would actually be farms cultivated by criminals from other Re-Ed districts … According to Re-Ed regulations, criminals who report one of their own with the intent to flee will be rewarded with a monthlong visit home … everyone is waiting for an opportunity to report someone or catch someone trying to escape … Some people have tried to flee, but they were all caught by others and brought back … (*The Four Books* 22-23)

The Re-Ed District constitutes a space "closed in upon itself." Although it does not literally demonstrate a line-of-sight surveillance system dependent upon the inescapability of constantly being physically watched, it is very much a functional equivalent to the Foucauldian Panopticon in that the ninety-ninth is an individual "cell" built into the panopticon, metaphorically functioning as a microcosm of the latter. The surveillance system governing the ninety-ninth can almost perfectly be interpreted in light of Foucault's theory of technology of power. First of all, the control of space as an essential constituent of this technology is embodied in the geographical enclosure of the ninety-ninth: on the one hand, the Yellow River and the boundless cultivated land belonging to the Re-Ed property constitute a naturally insurmountable wall preventing the criminals from escaping; on the other, the criminals' unsuccessful attempt at escaping from the enclosed ninety-ninth inversely makes the technique of the control of space meaningful and significant from the disciplinary perspective, given that the ultimate goal

of discipline is “to increase both the docility and the utility of all the elements of the system” (*Discipline*, 218).

More notably, the impregnability of the geographical space is physically and psychologically embodied by the ten commandments issued to the criminals in the ninety-ninth, in which all aspects of the criminals’ resting, working, reading, and chatting are regulated in great detail within a mechanism of hierarchical control operated through a reward and punishment system. Besides the surveillance performed by the Child and sanctioned by the supreme authority of the higher-ups, the criminals are themselves motivated to observe and scrutinize each other. For example, the Author is secretly commissioned by the Child to write the Criminal Records, recording all the discussions and actions of the criminals in the ninety-ninth. In return, he will be quickly judged as having been “reformed” into a “new man” and allowed to return home. To keep everyone in the ninety-ninth under an ever-present inspection, the Child also implements a Red Blossom and Pentagonal Star system modeled on the practices of the higher-ups, according to which:

> If you are obedient, we will issue you a small red blossom. If you earn an award, we will also issue you a little red blossom… Once you have five small blossoms, we will award you a medium-sized one, and once you have five medium-sized blossoms, we will award you a large pentagonal star. Once you have five stars, you will be permitted to return home to your family. . . (*The Four Books*, 40).

Thus, the ninety-ninth "functions as a kind of laboratory of power" (*Discipline* 204), whose built-in mechanisms of observation ultimately penetrates the criminals' collective behavior and successfully transforms external surveillance into an internalized panoptic gaze. The latter is manifested in the criminals' avoidance of risk-taking —in particular, in their hesitancy in escaping from the camp— and in their currying favor with the Child by voluntarily reestablishing themselves as accomplices of power. Consequently, the docile body that "is manipulated, shaped, trained" (*Discipline* 136) is effectively produced in the ninety-ninth, and with it the internalization of one's own subjection, which in turn accelerates each individual's collapse of personal integrity and gives rise to the collective corruption of humanity.

As a site of the disciplinary intervention, the body is denied its significance both by those who exercise power over it and by others who are being observed and disciplined. The docile body, either literally or allegorically represented in the novel, exemplifies well the relationship between dominance and subordination. With respect to the former, it demonstrates the physical numbness to bodily hurt. The Theologian, for example, literally leaps at the opportunity to clean up the overflowing latrine by physically jumping in and using his bare hands to remove the feces. "After the latrine was cleaned up, he went to the river to wash his hands and feet, whereupon he would then extend his hand—now red from the cold—to the Child to accept a medium-sized blossom or two" (*The Four Books*, 87). Likewise, the Author, in volunteering to grow oversized ears of wheat for the Child in exchange for five stars that could legitimately

secure his freedom, regularly slices open various parts of his own body and uses his own blood to fertilize the wheat. This horrible bodily performance eventually evolves into a collective behavior: “every three or five days, everyone had to cut their fingers or wrist, and pour their blood onto the roots of their designated corn sprouts” (*The Four Books* 222).

The docile body is also allegorically expressed through different forms of compromise and complicity. In order to win more red blossoms, the criminals choose to keep silence their commonsense objections and commit to the ridiculously high grain quotas, evoking the “practice of irresponsible exaggeration” (*fukuafeng*) during the Great Leap Forward. Later, in order to survive the great famine, the criminals voluntarily hand over their valuable books to the Child and renounce their beliefs in exchange for a handful of food. For example, the Theologian deliberately grinds his foot on the Virgin Mary’s portrait’s eye, leaving it a black hole; the Author offers to continue to spy on his fellow inmates; the Musician has sex with an official; and the surviving camp companions collectively cannibalize dead bodies. The ninety-ninth has become an utterly degraded world, requiring penitence and redemption.

However, the Foucauldian panopticon described above only describes part of the reality of the Re-Ed District, that is, its manifestation of the visible practice of power, those which actually can be observed, remembered, or traced back from historiographies, memoirs, and biographies. These “tangibles” are usually where most realist novels end. Thus, this leads to a question, as asked by Hayden White: “How is the *unspeakable* to be

spoken about? Certainly, we ought to speak about it, but how can we ever do so?" (33, emphasis mine) As a proponent of literary modernism, White strongly rejects those kinds of oppositions forced upon readers' minds, such as those "between agency and patiency, subjectivity and objectivity, literalness and figurativeness, fact and fiction, history and myth, and so forth" (39). By invoking Barthes's concept of "intransitive writing" and Derrida's notion of "différance," he proposes a style of "middle voicedness" to depict the "supposedly unimaginable, unthinkable, and unspeakable aspects [of history]" (41) and to challenge the traditional mode of narrative that "is inadequate to the representation of events … which are themselves modernist in nature" (39). Bearing this in mind, I will return to the Ninety-Ninth District to argue that, as Yan's mythorealist narrative unfolds, the ninety-ninth seems to have gradually shifted from a purely Foucauldian panopticon to a Kafkaesque one, in other words, one with the absurdist overtone of the Kafkan castle, with the effect of closely aligning the novel's political criticism with absurdist philosophy.

The ponderously allegorical texts in *The Four Books* construct an intentionally disturbing narrative space, in which the repeated shifting back and forth among the manuscripts, modes of narratives, and narrative persons (first and third person), all of which create a bewildering effect that echoes the mythical and enigmatic overtone of the geographical space of the ninety-ninth. Like the Kafkan castle, the ninety-ninth constitutes a space featured by mysteriousness and supernatural qualities. The characters in *The Four Books,* like the protagonist K in *The Castle,* appear as a group of faceless

archetypes who are identified only by their previous professions. The dehumanizing aspect these nameless names convey is further reinforced by the fact that most of the characters are flat, that is, they are without the prominent features that readers would need to see them as individuals. Likewise, their predicament of not being able to walk out of the Re-Ed District is reminiscent of K's plight of being unable to enter the castle. Although, ostensibly, the castle is inaccessible from without while the ninety-ninth is inescapable from within, both spaces fundamentally convey the feeling of trapped hopelessness and the absurdity of power within a world governed by the absurd.

As incomprehensible as the castle official Klamm, the camp leader, the Child, likewise remains as an enigma, with a complete absence biographical background and no clues offered to explain the illogical logic of why a child has been entrusted with such great power as to supervise a group of adult intellectuals and easily make them obedient to him. More bizarrely, the Child exercises his power of supervision in an almost supernatural way. He "appeared to be omniscient. Wherever he claimed someone had hidden books, there turned out to be books; and wherever he claimed people had hidden valuables, there turned out to be valuables" (*The Four Books* 16). Throughout the novel, there is no mention of how or from where the Child has gained this God-like prophetic power. This kind of quasi-supernatural power also occurs elsewhere in the story, continually upsetting principles of logic, implicitly pointing to the ubiquity of the eerie operations of power that have penetrated the objective world and transgressed rational human thought until it all reaches the point at which any and all protests of irrationality

and illogicality become redundant. It is in this sense that the ninety-ninth becomes a combination of the absurdness of the castle and the disciplinary power of the panopticon.

This combination is even more strikingly represented in Yan's mythorealist narrative when a group of criminals attempts to escape the Re-Ed District. Following a path that winds through the fields and toward the outer world, they finally see the town at the end of the road and realize that if they could make it past the town, they would have left the Re-Ed District. Unfortunately, it turns out that a National Inspection Station separates them from the entrance to the town, and they have to decide to divide into groups and sneak around the outskirts of the town after it gets dark. What follows is that:

> When the sun came up the next day, the two groups reunited in a ditch beyond the road. They had thought that all they needed to do was make it past that national inspection station. They discovered, however, that the place where everyone reunited was actually the same location where they had separated the night before. (*The Four Books,* 316-317)

The same thing happens the following night and the night after. The would-be escapees continue to divide into groups at the same place the previous night and arrive at the same location the next morning, the result being that nobody ever makes it out of the Re-Ed District. Especially at this point, the narrative is heavily saturated with the Kafkan absurd, indicating an allegory of existential futility and the Kafkan fatalism that "man is a prisoner who cannot escape his fate" (Daniel-Rops 23). At the same time, the seemingly unremarkable "National Inspection Station," which is symbolic of political

power, invites a political interpretation. It is possible that the writer takes refuge in the absurd to speak against the insidious hidden power structure that manipulates individuals by confining them in a disciplined space and paralyzing their minds by turning them all into docile bodies. In neither sense can be said that the Re-Ed District has been fully interpreted. Despite its essentially straightforward, realist depiction, upon closer inspection it becomes evident that the text by no means constructs a Foucauldian panopticon in its original sense. Rather, through the uncanny and absurdist representations of the criminals in the extreme circumstances, the textual meaning vacillates between the political and the philosophical. As Sun Yu 孙郁 comments, "*The Four Books* seems to be parodying history, but in fact, it is a struggle of dealing with the blind spot of the rational world" (《四书》好像在讽喻历史，实则在挣扎里处理知性世界的空白) (123). So while the absurdist Foucauldian panopticon reveals the disciplinary power that objectifies the human subject and reduces the subject's awareness of living as a thinking being, it simultaneously invites a philosophical meditation on how this same human being, in the face of the brutality of power and futility of resistance, seeks the possibility of reconstructing itself as ethical subject.

Along with the unfolding of more mythorealist happenings in the story, the thematic core of the novel gradually moves from the docile body to the ethical subject, or from the political critique of the "technology of power" to the philosophical contemplation of the knowing of one's self — itself coincidentally resonating with another theory of "technology" from Foucault, namely, the "technology of the self," also

called “care for the self.”[81] Foucault formulates this “technology of the self” as grounded in the fundamental concept of ethics. According to him, ethics is a mode of self-formation involving “a struggle for freedom within the confines of a historical situation” (Gutting 162). It is also the “process in which the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice, defines his position relative to the precept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral goal” (Gutting 151). The “technology of self” thus means to “fit one’s self out with truth” is fundamentally linked to ethics, and is also the means of the construction of the ethical self through the process of correctly finding the self “in a measure to behave correctly in relationship to others and for others” (“The ethics” 7). In *The Four Books*, the protagonists, particularly the Child, the Author, and the Scholar, all seek to “open possibilities for new relations to self and events in the world” (Gutting 162) through reconstruction of self as an ethical subject. Drawing thus on Foucault’s theory of the “technology of the self,” the next three sections of the chapter will explore how these characters, undergoing a psychological transformation in the process of being disciplined

[81] Foucault’s idea of the “technology of the self” originally derives from that of the “technology of power.” In the early 1980s, Foucault transfers the concept of technology from his study on power relations to his investigation of the way individuals enact their subjectivity. This shift is manifested in *The History of Sexuality*, with the first volume focusing on sexuality as a technology of power and the second and third volumes focusing on the problem of the technology of self. In a nutshell, the difference between the two technologies lies in that the former signifies the practice of power exercised on the individuals from outside, while the latter means the individuals make themselves the object of their own technical practices. Foucault draws his inspiration from Greek ethics in formulating his theory of the “technology of the self,” and, moreover, holds that the “care for the self,” which is another way of expressing “technology of the self,” is ethical in itself.

and disciplining, strive to construct their subjectivity from three different perspectives: the religious, the secular, and the mythological.

The Devil and the Sacred: Rediscovering *haizi*

In *Heaven's Child*, the Child (*haizi*) makes his first appearance in a structurally dislocated narrative of Genesis juxtaposed against the realistic background of the turbulent times in modern Chinese history. The following is the beginning of *Heaven's Child*:

> The great earth and the moral path returned together.
>
> After autumn, the vast wilderness was leveled, and the people appeared small and insignificant. A black star began to grow. The houses in the Re-Education district parted and the heavens and split the earth. People settled down there. So it came to pass. Together, the great earth and the mortal path returned. The golden sun began to set. So it came to pass. The light was thick and heavy, and each beam weighed seven or eight *liang*. There was one beam after another, creating a dense forest. The Child danced in the light of the setting sun. The warm air painfully pressed down on his feet, on his chest, and on his back. His body pushed against the warm air, and the warm air bore down on his body…
>
> The Child returned, following along the mortal path. The doors of Re-Ed opened. The Child whistled, and as the sound echoed across the land, people began arriving one after another. God said, Between the water, there shall be air. He

> created air, and divided the water below and above the air into two regions. So it came to pass. The region above the air was called the heavens, and the region below was called the earth. The earth supported the people, who arrived one after another. (*The Four Books* 1-2)

Using highly religious vocabularies, Yan strives to escape the creative repression brought by the linguistic habit of realist writing so as to resist conventional logic or truth. Narrated in the biblical style, *Heaven's Child* constitutes one of the most striking features of *The Four Books*, rendering the novel into a mythorealist work by disrupting poetically the empirical universe and connecting elements of the real world to allegorical meanings. In other words, the text, taking advantage of the sacred narrative and blurring the distinctions between secular and the spiritual, reveals an inter-relatedness of the logical and illogical within the mundane world itself, and represents an uncanny return of the oppressed fragments of history. The elusive religious dimension is incorporated seamlessly into the narration of the realistic events, creating an obstacle for any conventional perception or straightforward interpretation of the Child. Nearly all the scholars who comment on *The Four Books* agree the Child is the most complex character to understand. For example, Liu Jianmei holds "the Child is the key character and also the one that is most difficult to interpret in *The Four Books*" (孩子这个形象是《四书》中最关键也最难以阐释的形象) (69). Sun Yu claims "everything about him goes beyond the paradigm of an ordinary person" (他的一切都不在常人的轨道上。) (120). Chen Xiaoming comments "what kind of person is this child? You feel that he is totally

beyond your comprehension" (这个孩子是一个什么样的人你感觉完全抓不到他) ("Chongshen" 57).

Haizi (child/children) has always been a politically-charged concept in the context of modern Chinese history.[82] Among many narratives of "*haizi*," which is sometimes interchangeably used with "*shaonian*" (teenager) since the late Qing dynasty, there are three widely known and frequently evoked images of *haizi* in Chinese intellectual,[83] literary, and political contexts which are necessary to note in order to

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[82] The Chinese term "*haizi*," like its English equivalent "child" or "children," is a common and daily used term roughly referring to those who are under 18 years old. However, while *haizi* is generally taken as hope for future in various cultures, the notion is particularly politically-loaded in the context of modern Chinese history due to some famous invocations of the concept in certain 20th-century canonical texts of literature, intellectual and politics. See Mary Ann Farquhar, 1999; Cai Jianxin 蔡建鑫, 2011; Chien-hsin Tsai, 2011; Long Huiping 龙慧萍, 2014. Yan's own "obsession" with *haizi* is evident in the fact that "almost all his novels have a child character" (几乎所有他的小说里都有一个角色是孩子) (Liang Hong 148), including, besides the Child in this novel, the child-ghost narrator in *Dream of Ding Village* (*Dingzhuang meng*, 2006), the intellectually disabled child-protagonist Li Niannian in *The Day the Sun Died* (*Rixi*, 2015), and the four idiot children in the renowned novella "Palou tiange" 耙耧天歌 [Marrow, 2001]. Although the children in the 2006 and 2015 novels are not necessarily related to any historical discourse of *haizi*, the children in "Marrow" are written as an allegory, evoking Lu Xun's short stories "Yao" 药 [Medicine], in which a father treats his son's disease with a steamed-bun soaked with a revolutionary's blood, and "Kuangren riji" 狂人日记 [A Madman's Diary], in which the madman cries for saving children. In *The Four Books*, Yan contextualizes the Child as a leading figure in the setting of both the Anti-Rightist Movement and the Great Leap Forward, two political events taking place not long before the Cultural Revolution. As some scholars, such as Sebastian Veg (2014: 11) and Liang Hong 梁鸿 ("Chongshen" 2011: 53), have pointed out, Yan's portrayal of the Child, including his tyrannical behavior, political power, and social position, explicitly alludes to the little red guard of the Cultural Revolution. Other scholars parallel the Child with Lu Xun's concern with "saving children." For example, Liu Jianmei 刘建梅 argues that, rather than Lu Xun's theme of our saving children, Yan expresses the theme of children saving us (2014: 69). Chen Guohe 陈国和 holds the Child is different from Lu Xun's "children" in that the Child's pure, naïve, and curious qualities entail hope (6). In this regard, I would like to argue that the theme of "child as hope," rather than being manifested in the text of Heaven's Child, is more obvious in the concluding text "A New Myth of Sisyphus," in which the Eastern Sisyphus finds the meaning of life in watching a child playing along the road and at the foot of the mountain. The Child in Heaven's Child is also compared to "*shaonian*" 少年 [teenager] in Liang Qichao's 梁启超 essay "Shaonian zhongguo shu" 少年中国说 [Ode to the Young China] and Chen Duxiu's 陈独秀 poem "Gao shaonian" 告少年 [To Teenagers] produced during the late Qing dynasty. Long Huiping 龙慧萍 holds the image of the Child is similar to the allegory of "juvenile China" in the late Qing discourse and thus represents the national image of China at its growth stage during the 1950s and 1960s. See Long Huiping (81-82).

[83] The images of "*haizi*" in these three historical discourses respectively refer to teenagers (Liang Qichao), pre-pubescent children (Lu Xun did not specify, but probably meant children below 14 years old), and young people who are not adults yet (Mao Zedong). Although these phrases do not all refer to the same age group, they all fall into the category of "*haizi*" (child or children) in a Chinese sense, and share the same evocation of China's future and hope.

identify an affinity between them and the Child in Yan's context. One is "*shaonian*" (the teenager) in Liang Qicaho's essay "Shaonian zhongguo shuo" 少年中国说 ("Ode to the Young China"), published in 1900. Liang's *shaonian* is energetic, enterprising, and adventurous, representing a young Chinese nation that is going to replace old and declining empire. Another is Lu Xun's "*haizi*" (children) in the famous plea to "save the children" at the end of his short story "A Madman's Diary," published in 1918. Like Liang Qichao, although Lu Xun places the hope of saving China in the young generation, his "*haizi*" are nevertheless pure, naïve, and vulnerable. That is, they are not yet physically and mentally mature enough to protect themselves from being contaminated by the traditional "man-eat-man" culture, and thus need protection. The third image is "*nianqingren*" (young people) from a well-known quotation of Mao Zedong's 1957 speech: "You young people, full of vigour and vitality, are in the bloom of life, like the sun at eight or nine in the morning. Our hope is placed upon you" (Schram 165). Mao's "*nianqingren*" are revolutionary and aggressive, ready to take up the responsibility of constructing a new China but unfortunately aligning with the image of the Red Guard in the Cultural Revolution.

Arguably, *haizi* is primarily a political construct, and, despite there being a clear-cut distinction between these three discourses, each of them is endowed with a special meaning characterizing its own time. Liang's "*shaonian*" is burdened with the expectation of a rejuvenating Chinese nation against the historical backdrop of the military invasion from the West; Lu Xun's "*haizi*" represents the concerns of Chinese

intellectuals' grand project of reforming the national character; and Mao's "*nianqingren*" has been intentionally pushed to the center of the historical stage of revolution. But unfortunately, none of these *haizi,* are seriously treated as subjects who are able to think for themselves; rather, they are represented with an lack of human characteristics and individual subjectivity. Despite Lu Xun's *haizi's* displaying of human vulnerabilities, they are also faceless and hardly able to think at all for the reason that they are too young to make ethical choices. Overall, *haizi*, in the political realm of modern Chinese history, reveals a wide gulf between the politicalized signifier and the referent.

The literary reconfiguration of *haizi* in *Heaven's Child*, with the complex history of its political implications embedded within its very nature, draws elements from each image of *haizi* in the above discourses. It is true that the conventional way of perceiving *haizi* as a static political symbol that is incapable of thinking independently increases the difficulty of understanding the Child in our current text. As a strange mixture of divinity and secularity, demon and naïf, the Child represents a transgression of epistemological norms and calls into question the plausibility of empirical assumptions. Shrouded in the uncanny garb of religion, the complex image of the Child defies any one-dimensional definition, whether it be a little young Fascist (Cai 14, Liu 68), a little Red Guard (Veg 11), or even Jesus or Moses (Cai 15, Veg 11, Cheng 90). Each of these possible interpretations only loosely defines him, as the complex character of the Child demonstrates an ambiguous and manifold nature as a naïve and kind child who is inquisitive to knowledge and truth, a ruthless and tyrannical camp leader who

represents power and pursues unattainable political honor, and a savior — a Jesus or a Moses who leads his people to the path of salvation.

Just a few examples: as a child, the Child is naïve and not able to understand the adult's political world. Upon seeing people crazily raise the already massively inflated production quotas to more and more unattainable levels at a country meeting, the Child "stares in shock,[84] unable to comprehend the scene unfolding before his eyes" (*The Four Books* 36). Although the Child is vulnerable to the increasingly absurd operations of power from above in the same manner of his criminals to him, he learns quickly from the higher-ups and soon becomes the "*haizi*" that Lu Xun cries for saving, forcing the criminals to pursue unachievable levels of grain production through grueling physical work. The Child is also a sinister combination of Liang's "*shaonian*" and Mao's "*nianqingren*" in that he is energetic and ambitious, revolutionary and aggressive. He fanatically follows the political trend and pursues his heroic ideal of becoming the one to produce the most grain and melt the most steel so as to be rewarded with a visit to the capital. He is obliviously complicit with the national power apparatus and has grasped the technology of discipline by arbitrarily exercising power over his vulnerable criminals, by burning the intellectuals' books, forcing the Author to trash his own works, and threatening the Theologian by threatening to urinate on the portrait of the Virgin

[84] In order to keep closer to the original text which says "孩子惊恐瞪着眼," I replaced the "in bewilderment" of the English version with "in shock."

Mary. Most ridiculously, he frequently bullies the criminals by demanding they cut his head off if somebody does not obey him.

At the same time, however, the Child demonstrates his humane side. He can be kind and benevolent, and he always turns away from what he has threatened to do. He burns the books he has confiscated but secretly stores away some of the more valuable ones; he rejects the Musician's offer of having sex with him in exchange for food and instead gives her food for free; and he generously distributes his own food to those who beg, even though he himself is suffering from starvation as well. Although the Child's contradictory disposition may have differentiated him from his predecessors discussed above, he is at most an updated political construct with both repressed humanity and inexplicable compassion for others. Within the realistic framework, at the point when his own hold on existence becomes tenuous when confronted with the extreme environment, the Child, upon his realization of the futility of labor and his disillusionment with the higher-ups' policies, has only two choices: either to continue to transfer the power exercised on him by the higher-ups to the criminals in his charge, disregarding his moral obligations in the face of hunger and death, or else to revolt against the power structure by collaborating with the criminals. While the first choice would seem to go against the overall trajectory of the plot, the second would probably meet the majority's expectations, which are well reflected, for example, in the following comment: "I would feel more touched if he [the Child] leads these criminals to walk out of the camp and rush toward the inspection station, and is finally shot by the gun of 'dictatorship'" (如果

他带领这些罪人走出集中营，冲向检查站，并死在“专政”的枪口下，我会更感动。) (Wang Binbin 23).

Without playing down the absurdity and trauma of this epoch of history, the religious way of releasing the Child of his predicament nevertheless ultimately transcends both revolutionary and political rationality and disrupts the logic of the manifest reality. It is spiritual development that moves the Child's humanity forward and fights against evil living within his political self. Upon his coming back from the capital, a journey whose events are left deliberately vague, the Child releases all the criminals and then kills himself in an religiously-inspired act of self-sacrifice:

> Like Jesus, the Child nailed himself to a cross covered with red blossoms. The blood from his hands and feet dripped down the wooden cross, like spring flowers on white wood. Those drops of blood flowed over the flowers like water toward the sea, drippling to the ground and mixing with the dirt. But there wasn't a trace of pain visible on the Child's face. Instead, he looked serene and composed, and even had a trace of a contented smile, as though an enormous red flower had suddenly bloomed in the sky above the cross. (*The Four Books* 325)

Although the entirety of *Heaven's Child* is pervaded by a mystical overtone, this unexpected ending still tends to catch everyone —both the readers of the novel and the characters of the story— unprepared. There are a great many ambiguities about what the Child has been thinking in the face of the increasing number of deaths resulting from the famine and in the wake of the horrible episode of cannibalism, as well as further

questions about why he chooses a religious rather than a secular way of killing himself or even why he should kill himself at all. A seemingly irrelevant statement may shed some light on these confusions: “The Child had grown bigger and taller, and now had black facial hair on his chin and over his lip” (322). This limited description of the Child’s physical appearance is constantly repeated in various nuanced forms, and thus renders the presumably objective phenomenon uncanny and mysterious. It is a realist manifestation of the mythorealistic logic of “an invisible truth, and a truth concealed by truth” (*Faxian* 154). The Child’s physical change implies his psychological transformation from being naïve and ignorant to becoming an individual who thinks for himself and accepts the responsibility of becoming a moral subject.

In a shockingly masochistic demonstration of his newfound self-reflection, the Child emancipates himself from the stifling pressure of politics and existential despair by imitating the crucifixion of Jesus, through which he accomplishes his fundamental transformation from a political lackey to a moral agent. The significance of this renunciation of self through religious inspired suicide thereby extends the novel’s scope beyond political interrogation into a wider enquiry of how one can construct a meaningful ethical subjectivity. In other words, how does one discover one’s true self within the confines of a particular historical situation and how does one establish a new relation to self and the world that may alienate it? As Foucault insists, one must correctly find oneself by caring for oneself, but “one must not have the care for others precede the care for self” (“The Ethics” 7). This claim challenges some one-dimensional scholarly

comments that characterize the Child's self-crucifixion as a salvation of the remaining intellectuals in the ninety-ninth (Liu Jianmei 69) or even "a martyrdom for the socialist idealism, by which he will be immortalized" (对社会主义理想的殉节，借此他将永垂不朽) (Cai 16).

In contrast to Liu and Cai, I read the Child's crucifixion as an unloading of the political burden that has been imposed upon *haizi* for over a century of Chinese history, and as a mythorealistic statement of self-reflection on —as well as a penitence for— his own complicity. From showing interest in the Bible at the beginning of the story to crucifying himself at the end, the Child has learned to think during the period of his long silence. He is obviously in despair and feels helpless and unable to exist in reality. While he has produced docile bodies from his criminals, at the same time he himself has been similarly disciplined by the powers above and has himself turned into a docile body. The Child's self-crucifixion is an outcome of his psychological struggle to break away from this docile body. Compared to the pedestalized *haizi* in certain modern Chinese canonical texts, the Child is unconventional and is "not the same as before"[85] (*The Four Books* 264). His empathic nature does not allow self-forgiveness for the crimes he has committed against others. Religious self-immolation, then, provides him a fitting expression of his self-condemnation. His naïve imitation of Jesus's crucifixion, rather

[85] As discussed previously, throughout the whole novel, there is no description about the Child's physical features, except for one oft-repeated expression begging the readers' attention that the Child has grown taller/grown up. I take this as indicating that the Child has been psychologically transformed from a naïve child to a mature adult. I also take this statement as a reflection of the novel's thematic expansion, implying a transformation of the *haizi* narrative from the realm of the purely political concern to the realm of human subjectivity.

than conveying a deeply-held religious belief, is more an existential attempt to reconstitute himself as an ethical subject and to demonstrate that he is not an anonymous political symbol but an individual human being who can think freely and who willingly takes responsibility for his own mistakes. To go back to Foucault, it is only through his (admittedly counterintuitive) "care for the self" that the Child can possibly establish a new relation to self, and consequently to the others and to the world. Therefore, his own "technology of self" is achieved through a redemptive self-sacrifice, which then possibly serves as a salvation for the criminals in the Re-Ed District, for the higher-ups dominating them, and so on.

Crazy Wheat and Cannibalism: Renegotiating Self through the Grotesque

The Author's character is paralleled with that of the Child in *Heaven's Child* and is the primary focus of *Criminal Records* and *Old Course*, both of which have been written by the Author himself, according to "The New Myth of Sisyphus." *Criminal Records,* which is said to have been "published in the 1980s as a collection of historical documents" (*The Four Books*, 331), is the secret report commissioned by the Child and written by the Author to record the "misdeeds" of the criminals in the ninety-ninth. *Old Course*, whose title refers to the real historical event of the Yellow River's change of course that generated flood catastrophes killing millions of people, is the Author's more honest account of the criminals' experience during the Great Forward Leap and the Great Famine. This five-hundred-page historical account is said to have been published in

2002, "by which time circumstances had changed to the point that it was greeted with almost complete silence" (*The Four Books*, 331). These two texts, albeit disproportionately distributed throughout the novel, structurally form a contrast of two different versions of the history of the ninety-ninth. *Criminal Records*, written in the stereotypical language of Maoist political criticism, is a striking manifestation of the new normality of psychological alienation that characterizes the power of social discipline, as discussed above. *Old Course*, however, while echoing this sense of alienation, primarily focuses on the inner struggle of the innately vulnerable subject against the extreme environment.

Both quite different from the quasi-biblical narrative of *Heaven's Child*, in which the Child seeks his true self through a mytho-religious lens, *Criminal Records* and *Old Course* are, in general, narrated in the first person in an ostensibly realist mode. As *Criminal Records* constitutes a very small portion of *The Four Books* and seems to exist only to complicate structurally the overall narrative of the novel, the following discussion will focus primarily on *Old Course*, in which another component of mythorealism, namely, the grotesque, stands out as a subversive element that disrupts the picture of reality as envisioned in the novel's more realistic discourse. Moreover, in transferring the semiotic unintelligibility of this particular segment of history into a manifestation of the grotesque, and in contrasting the allegorical meanings of the grotesque from two different sub-contexts, the text gradually develops from a focused political critique to a larger query of the possibility of (re)constituting one's self as a

thinking being in an extreme environment, all the while maintaining a tension between these two themes.

The notion of the grotesque suffers from an uncertainty of referent. One of the most frequently quoted definitions is from Wolfgang Kayser, who defines the grotesque as "the fusion of realms which we know to be separated, the abolition of the law of statics, the loss of identity, the distortion of 'natural' size and shape, the suspension of the categories of objects, the destruction of personality, and the fragmentation of the historical order" (185). This comprehensive interpretation of the grotesque is obviously closely linked to other mythorealistic elements discussed previously, such as the supernatural. Nevertheless, in the current discussion, instead of taking all aspects mentioned by Kayser into consideration, I will try to separate the grotesque from the supernatural by foregrounding its more distorted, deformed, and estranged characteristics. Meanwhile, I will also look at the grotesque as a notion closer to Harold Bloom's affective description, which states that "Astonishment is the mode of the Grotesque, though this is tinged with distaste, unlike the transcendent astonishment induced by the Sublime" (xv). In particular, I will read the grotesque in *The Four Books* as both a continuity with and a subversion of Lu Xun's famously grotesque discourse of cannibalism. Cannibalism, as the canonical manifestation of the grotesque in Lu Xun's "A Madman's Diary," has been extensively discussed in the literary world. Arising from the madness of the madman, human beings become distorted and disfigured as barbaric, cannibalistic men who have been reduced to animals. As Wang Ban holds, Lu Xun's

"penchant for the grotesque" is marked by "the impulse to turn a familiar human figure into a less human and even beastly being" (252). In *The Four Books*, however, the grotesque also characterizes one of the important aspects of the mythorealist narrative, thus going beyond Lu Xun in exploring its constructive potential. This is manifested in descriptions of various kinds of cannibalism, such that Yan's mythorealist writing ultimately disrupts Lu Xun's narrative of the grotesque, thereby indicating a way of reconfiguring ethics as well as reconstituting the ethical subject.

In *Old Course*, the grotesque is almost invariably manifested in the peculiar and grotesque bodily rituals performed by the Author. The lengthy and surreal description of planting wheat with human blood, briefly mentioned above, stands out in sharp contrast to the overall realistic tone of *Old Course*. Struck by the thought that he may be set free if he could help the Child fulfill his longtime wish of visiting the capital, the Author offers to grow a field of wheat with ears larger than ears of corn which the Child could then take them to the capital to present to the higher-ups. To accomplish this aim, the Author nourishes his wheat in an appalling way by feeding them with his own blood. At the very beginning, he accidently uncovers a wound on his finger, causing blood to flow into the bowl of water that he uses to feed two weak wheat sprouts. The next morning, he discovers that the withered leaves have been magically revived and the leaves of the two weak sprouts have grown thicker and brighter than the other plants. This mysterious incident inspires him to slice the other parts of his body so that he can continue feed the

plants with blood. The Author's perverse delight in detailing the cruelty and violence he inflicts upon his body culminates in the following passage:

> Previously, I would cut open five or six of my fingers at a time, to ensure that each wheat plant would receive at least ten or twenty drops of blood. Now I need to prick them again before the old cuts were even healed, leaving all ten of my fingers a mass of scars and open wounds. Given that I always used my right hand to cut the fingers on my left hand, the resulting wounds had begun to fester, despite the fact that I would always use salt water to disinfect them. Later, I increasingly began to use my left hand to cut the fingers on my right, and once the fingers on my right hand became sliced up as well, I began cutting my palm. But then I found that I was unable to do any other work, given that I couldn't hold my hoe, my shovel, or even the cleaver I used to prepare my food. In the end, I decided I had to preserve my palms, and particularly the right one. Therefore, when I needed to irrigate the wheat with my blood-water, I made a series of cuts along the side of my wrist. When both of my arms were so full of open wounds that it was not possible to continue cutting them, I turned to my legs, starting from the calves. I would position my legs over the buckets, letting the blood flow in. (*The Four Books* 204-205)

As is shown from the above depiction, the disfigured and defamiliarized body engendered by the frequent cuts and loss of blood does not quite generate a conventional sense of the grotesque human figure. In some ways it resonates with Lu Xun's depiction

of cannibalism both in "A Madman's Diary" and "Medicine," but only in an inverse way. That is, rather than being afraid of being eaten or of "eating" another's blood, the Author voluntarily offers himself to be consumed. His self-mutilation is an externalization of his inner alienation, through which the boundaries of the rational world have been redrawn, and the grotesque world of physical suffering in the realistic sense has been replaced by the mythorealistic world of physical masochism.

Meanwhile, the Author's perverse behavior of cutting his body and using his blood to feed the wheat seedlings is also a corporeal manifestation of the Author's internalized political madness. It is allegorically paralleled with Chinese people's feverish and absurd political enthusiasm at the time of the Great Leap Forward, as well as with the pathopsychology of sadism and masochism. Arnold Heidsieck interprets the grotesque as "the product and reflection of social discourses of power, progress and ultimately of dehumanization" (Cosgrove 39). In a similar vein, the grotesque in *Old Course* mirrors the social discourse of political madness, which transforms human existence from a goal in itself to a slavish procedure, and reduces the meaning of human life to production quotas of grain and steel. Without knowing it, the Author, in his attempt to enable the political fantasy of the Child, or, more specifically, the higher powers from above, has dehumanized himself to the level of a gear in a machine. In Sun Yu's words, the Author "lives a normal life in an extreme way" (以极端的方式正常地生活。) (120).

But of course the true “crime” the Author commits is that “he lost his subjectivity as an intellectual and gave up his critical spirit, and voluntarily reduced human dignity and value to the animal level for the long-term goal of the Utopian project” (没有坚守过知识分子的主体意识和批判精神，而是为了乌托邦工程的远景目标，自愿将人的尊严和价值降到物以下。) (Long 79). What is fundamentally missing in the Author reflections upon his bodily performance of inverse cannibalism is “the human cognitive capacity to perceive and to assimilate the totality of what was really happening at the time” (Laub 69). In other words, it is his incapability of comprehending the absurdity of the historical events of which he is doomed to be part that hinders his self-perception and enables his self-dehumanization.

Nevertheless, instead of a necessitating permanent suspension of the Author’s conscience or ability to think, embedded in such moral and existential chaos is an irreducible tension between being a politically disciplined and alienated automaton and an inner desire for freedom, if only within the political constraints and possibilities of his limited circumstances. The Author’s desire for freedom, most clearly expressed through his desire for being physically set free, ultimately manifests in his search for an ethical self by means of participating in an even more grotesque portrayal of cannibalism. In such a way, the politicality and particularity of the Author’s self-cannibalistic behavior of feeding the plants with his blood is caught up in a broader philosophical inquiry into the universal pursuit of freedom and ethics.

The philosophical relationship between the two notions of freedom and ethics is well illustrated in the following statement by Foucault: “in order to practice freedom properly, it was necessary to care for self, both in order to know one’s self … and to improve one’s self, to surpass one’s self, to master the appetites that risk engulfing you” (“The Ethic” 5). Thus the Author’s dilemma of freedom, which is ultimately an ethical dilemma, is like that of the Child, not resolved in a realistic vein but rather mythorealisitic one, namely, through the grotesque. Upon observing the goodness of humanity in the persons of the Scholar and the Musician, who hide evidence of the Author’s betrayal and who continue to treat him kindly even though they are severely punished due to his reporting of their affair to the Child, the Author feels guilty and ashamed. These feeling of shame and guilt are increased during his stealing of the food that the Musician has secretly left for the Scholar.

But it is one incident in particular that really triggers the Authors moral awakening. In order to survive the famine, the Musician prostitutes herself to an official from a neighboring camp for handfuls of fried soybeans. On the day when the Author happened to discover the Musician’s secret arrangement with the official and decides to use it to blackmail the official for food for himself, he finds her having choked to death in an abandoned furnace as a result of her having stuffed her mouth with soybeans while in the act of congress with the official. The Musician’s death becomes the trigger that evokes a consciousness of the Author’s own moral existence, which is evil, ugly, and repulsive to himself. This generates a deep despair in himself, torturing and urging him

to confess his transgressions and seek a recovery of something valuable that has been gradually receding from him, that is, the integrity of his own self. In response to this feeling of despair, the Author disfigures his body in an even more cruel and radical way, now with the aim of destroying the totality of the evil which has permeated his being. He cuts off two strips of flesh from his own body, boils them, and presents one to the Musician's grave and the other to the Scholar. This episode is related with over ten pages detailing the grotesque nature of his slicing his own flesh as a means to honor the Musician and feed the Scholar, conveying a barbarism and brutality that aims to horrify and disgust the reader. In the following passage, the scene of the Scholar's eating the cooked flesh and broth from the Author is detailed:

> I stared intently at the Scholar… He ate the meat and drank the broth, then placed another handful of soybeans into the bowl to soak… I watched his mouth, and saw that he had picked the strips of my flesh out from between his teeth. The sight of his chewing lips made the corners of my eyes hurt. (*The Four Books* 296)

Once again, the grotesque manifested in the disfiguration of the body is not expressed through a strikingly deformed body stripped of human shapes but rather the taboo behavior of cannibalism. This time, the Author's masochistic enjoyment of the Scholar's eating his flesh and drinking the broth is overshadowed by a tremendous feeling of relief:

> Just as the Scholar was about to finish eating, the spasms running through my body began to subside, as did the shivers down my spine. I felt as though I had just taken a bath. At this point, I knew that the thorn embedded in my heart had

> finally been dislodged. I understood that I had not done this for the sake of the Scholar or the Musician, but rather I had been using them to extract this thorn from my heart. I began to feel grateful to them, as though they had helped save me. (*The Four Books* 297)

Here, then, it is the redeeming and reconstructive quality of the grotesque that distinguishes this episode of cannibalism from the previous ones, and, moreover, from the recurrent theme of cannibalism in the Chinese literary tradition, thereby bestowing it with new meaning. David Der-wei Wang invokes Lu Xun's statement that "Chinese society as a whole is guilty of cannibalism" (52). Indeed, the representation of cannibalism in Chinese literature is most famously exemplified in "A Madman's Diary" and Mo Yan's political allegory *The Wine Republic*, both of which offer a critique of darkness of human evil, and a manifestation —or renewed manifestation— of the diseased national body in the form of what C.T. Hsia diagnoses as an "obsession with China." But this is not the case with the Author, who seems much more "obsessed" with the negotiation of his own moral subjectivity than with the taking up of a particular political stance. Through the Author's offering of his cooked flesh to the Scholar, who, significantly, accepts it without knowing the truth, the grotesque of the cannibalism has been subversively transformed into a redemptive behavior which functions to pull the Author back from an ethical abyss. It is this particular bodily performance of cannibalism, diametrically opposed to the previous performances, which opens a way of ethical existence, which, again, fits into the framework of Foucault's "technology of

self." In other words, the Author's behavior signifies a transgression of the norms of corporeal existence and a reclaiming of his freedom to constitute his ethical self by means of separation from the contingent circumstances of history that have degraded and dehumanized him.

To conclude, by contrasting the two "cannibalisms" performed by the Author, I am trying to bring the historical and political relevance of the alienated individual into the larger interpretive framework of the reformation of the ethical self. In this I do not intend either to gloss over the decisive factor of the external environment which has generated the alienation and the distortion of the Author's psychology or claim that the evil that has corrupted him is merely "thorn in his flesh" that he must struggle to dislodge. Rather, it is my view that the one's confrontation of the dark side of one's own self figuratively signifies a confrontation with the darkness of Chinese history, most clearly manifested in the Author's absurd behavior of feeding wheat seedlings with his blood. It is the extremity of the existential situation allegorically conveyed through the grotesque which reminds the protagonist as well as the readers of the overwhelming effects of power and the reality of human vulnerability. Thus, grotesque cannibalism of *The Four Books* is not about politics *per se* but the Author's own process of "caring for the self" as a means of integrating his conflicted self. To borrow Kundera's words, it "represent[s] one fundamental possibility of man and his world, a possibility that is not historically determined and that accompanies man more or less eternally" (106).

The Eastern Sisyphus: Harmonizing the Internal with the External

The text concluding *The Four Books* is the preface of a philosophical manuscript, entitled *A New Myth of Sisyphus,* which is written by the Scholar, and which constitutes an additional mythological dimension of Yan's mythorealist narrative. It is itself a rewriting of Camus's *Sisyphus*, in which the mythical hero is transformed from a Western Sisyphus into an Eastern one. The Eastern Sisyphus suffers more from the god's punishment than his Western counterpart. In contrast to the Western Sisyphus, who must forever push his boulder uphill, the Eastern Sisyphus must use all his strength to push his boulder down the other side of the mountain, and is thereby deprived of the joy of meeting and communicating with a child whom he has met along his previous journey. The eastern Sisyphus, however, has come to terms with this inverted punishment with transferring his past joy in life to his joy in viewing the lovely image of the mortal world at the base of the mountain. This highly allegorical text, while in part revolving around Western philosophical reflections on the absurdity of life, is also suggestive of the Chinese philosophical wisdom of "*congshi*", roughly translated as "a process of familiarization" or "familiarity" (*The Four Books* 332, 335). The Sisyphus depicted in this text is a self-portrait of the Scholar, reflecting his own inner struggle to negotiate a way to retain his moral and intellectual integrity, even upon the realization that his struggle against political persecution and corruption is doomed to failure.

In contrast to the Author, who fights against his own moral collapse and seeks to constitute his ethical self without thinking too much of his intellectual self, the Scholar

consciously persists in his identity as an upright, integrate, and unyielding intellectual. Although, like all the other criminals in the Ninety-Ninth, the Scholar has experienced a spiritual odyssey consisting of helplessness, compromise, resistance, and reflection, he does not develop a split sense self or personality as does the Child and the Author. In contrast, his moral self remains entirely integrated with his intellectual self, something which brings to mind Edward Said's discussion of "intellectual representations" that are "dependent on a kind of consciousness that is skeptical, engaged, unremittingly devoted to rational investigation and moral judgment" (15). Thus, the Scholar's "technology of self" is, to some extent, overlapped with his "care for others" from the very beginning, the relationship between the two being explained by Foucault's assumption that "the one who cared for himself correctly found himself, by that very fact, in a measure to behave correctly in relationship to others and for others" ("The Ethic" 7).

The Scholar's distinguishing himself from others as an intellectual who cares for himself by means of caring for others is demonstrated several times. Unlike the other criminals, who succumb to the temptation of earning red blossoms as a means of escaping the camp, the Scholar disdains the Child's offer of such rewards and refuses to join the group heading to the Yellow River to smelt steel from black sand when he knows full well that it is a means to discipline the criminals into docile bodies that will ultimately become completely alienated. Later, although he is tempted by the Child's promise to set him free, the Scholar refuses to reveal the names of the criminals who are lying about the number of red blossoms they had accumulated before the big fire

destroyed the evidence. He also steals and hides the Author's ears of wheat, leaving a note saying "I'm sorry. This year these blood ears will be donated to the higher-ups, and to the capital, and next year the entire country will be using blood to raise wheat, the same way they began using black sand to smelt steel" (*The Four Books* 215).

The Scholar is the only intellectual in the ninety-ninth that preserves his capacity to love and care for others no matter how difficult and extreme the situation becomes. His practices of love and care derive more from his sense of responsibility as an intellectual and his refusal to be alienated from himself by the operation of political and disciplinary power. Nevertheless, two questions arise: to what extent is the Scholar able to resist the camp's disciplinary power, given the fact that he himself is irrevocably under the power system? And how can his resistance and persistence be transformed into a meaningful relatedness to himself, others, and the world in a practical sense? Albeit reluctantly, the Scholar is forced to cooperate with the other criminals, , "cheating" the higher-ups by "fill[ing] the sacks of sand" and then joining in the crowd's "shouting that they could definitely produce fifteen thousand *jin* of corn per *mu*, and ears of corn that were as big as a hammer and as thick as a man's leg" (*The Four Books* 221). Afterwards, he slaps himself and shouts: "Fuck, and you call yourself a scholar!" (ibid.) Overwhelmed by a feeling of powerlessness and despairing of his lack of control over his own fate, the Scholar can find no way out. These feelings of powerlessness and despair culminate in his realization that he has been made to eat the Author's flesh without knowing it. Then, "after a long silence, he wailed toward the wasteland and the

open sky" and shouts "Scholars. . . scholars. . ." (*The Four Books* 300). Ironically, the cannibalistic "feast" forced upon the Scholar, while serving as a redemptive act of penance and self-sacrifice for the Author, is to the Scholar a catastrophic moral failure and symbolic regression to the barbarian history of China.

Here again, the heightened tension between the political and the ethical is revealed as fundamental to the Scholar's "technology of self" and "care for others." Ultimately, the Scholar cannot escape from the political as that represses and alienates him, for his efforts at personal integrity and his commitment to caring for both himself and his inmates —as befits his own self-image of an intellectual— are all at once rendered a fruitless labor because in the end he is not, in fact, free. But even despite this, the Scholar's does not fall into a defeated mindset of helplessness, condemnation, and self-pity. Rather, he stubbornly continues to care for the fate of the nation and condemns his own complicity with power. This sentiment is well illustrated by the following stanza in Bei Dao's poem "Accomplices":

> we are not guiltless
>
> long ago we became accomplices
>
> of the history in the mirror, waiting for the day
>
> to be deposited in lava
>
> and turn into a cold spring
>
> to meet the darkness once again (89)

Written shortly after the Cultural Revolution, this poem explicitly expresses the poet's conviction that all individual have been complicit with the evils of history and his anxiety over inevitably "meet[ing] the darkness [of the history] once again." This complicity, as clarified by Ben Dao in an interview, is explained as a "universal predicament." In the poet's own words, "it is the responsibility of every person to, first of all, acknowledge that this contradiction exists in life, that we are all a part of this contradiction and it cannot be avoided. And it is the responsibility of each individual to struggle against this in the best way that he can" (Ratiner 228). Although Bei Dao does not seem to offer a solution for to how to fulfill this responsibility, his comments nevertheless provide us a good starting point from which to reenter *A New Myth of Sisyphus*. Sharing a similar concern for a future shrouded in the dark shadow of the present, the Scholar's own concerns with this so-called "universal predicament" —and in particular with the predicament of intellectuals' embeddedness in historical contingencies— are expressed by means of his own image of the self projected onto the character of Sisyphus as simultaneously a manifestation of his "technology of self" and his "care for others." Through the mythical hero of Sisyphus, the Scholar reflects on the possibility of individual intellectuals' transgression of the repressive power inflicted upon them, and seeks an answer to the Foucauldian question of "What can be the ethic of an intellectual. . . if not that: to render oneself permanently capable of getting free of oneself?" (Gutting 160)

The initially realistic depiction of the intellectual's political dilemma is thus gradually transferred to a mythorealist imagining of the possibility of seeking a moral freedom transcending politics. The use of mythological characters and tropes as a means of social commentary is not unfamiliar to readers, particularly those readers familiar with works of magical realism. However, this strategy is also understood as creating an effect that "has totally altered the work from that of one more protest against brutal power to that of an allegory of the human condition" (quoted in Shaw, 50). The Scholar's (or Yan's) rewriting of the myth of Sisyphus has likewise transformed the ostensible political critique into a philosophical inquiry into the existential project of (re)constructing an ethical selfhood.

In his philosophical essay "The Myth of Sisyphus," Camus elaborates on his own concept of "the absurd," which he defines as man's futile search for meaning and clarity in the face of an unintelligible world that is devoid of God, eternal truths, and values. Camus's solution to the universal predicament of human beings is "revolt," as is poetically expressed in the conclusion of his essay: "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (123).

Having taken these qualities of Camus's Sisyphus as a departure point, the Scholar's Eastern Sisyphus goes further in seeking an Eastern way to express defiance toward and revolt against the absurd world. He has developed:

> a sense of familiarity and comfort with respect to the difficulty, change, boredom, absurdity, and death resulting from their punishment. . . . As a result, the

> punishment ceases to be an external force, and instead can be transformed from a form of passive acceptance to a beautiful significance. (*The Four Books* 335)

Here, the Scholar's "sense of familiarity and comfort" is a rough translation of the original Chinese phrase "*congshi*," which implies a kind of Buddhist philosophical view of life. "*Congshi*" indicates an attitude that entails a seemingly passive accommodating of oneself to circumstances in which a person's mind does not become disturbed by the external environment no matter how difficult and absurd it may be, and maintaining the serene attitude that makes possible profound thought and reflection. "*Congshi,*" then, can be understood as "an adaptation that humanity has evolved in the face of hopelessness and inertia," but "this unavoidable inertia also has the potential to become a meaningful force of resistance in its own right" (*The Four Books* 335).

Chinese scholar Long Huiping uses here another Buddhist term "*yuanrong*" (roughly, harmony) to further interpret the Eastern Sisyphus's adoption of "*congshi*":

> *A New Myth of Sisyphus* in *The Four Books* is basically consistent with Camus's Sisyphus in that both have conveyed human beings' inner consciousness of accepting and defying the absurdity of life …. However, *A New Myth of Sisyphus* is invested with an air of Chinese literati's harmonious thought [*yuanrong*]; in other words, what the Eastern Sisyphus embraces is not the boulder *per se* but the scenery along the road which symbolizes the secular life. . . . No matter what fate looks like, there are always unexpected gifts from it. To put it alternatively, the life journey and destiny should be looked at dialectically. This attitude embedded

in *A New Myth of Sisyphus* has disrupted the pure, monotonic, and self-enclosed structure of Camus's myth of Sisyphus, and thus helps to create an oriental and quotidian "myth." This myth, albeit tragic on the whole, conveys an overtone of tolerance, that is, life embraces fate. (《四书》的《新西绪弗神话》，接受和蔑视荒谬命运的内在意识和加缪思想基本一致……但却加入了中国文人的圆融，拥抱的不是巨石本身，而是在推巨石的路途上看到的风景——也就是生活……无论是什么样的命运，都有期待之外的馈赠。也就是说，道路和命运，并不是一绝对之物，这就打破了原来《西绪弗的神话》纯粹的、单一、封闭的结构，书写了一个东方的、生活化的"神话"。这个神话在整体上仍是悲怆的，但在悲怆的基调之上，生活包容了命运。) (83)

Both "*congshi*" and "*yuanrong*" characterize the Eastern Sisyphus as a philosophical convergence of the West and the East, a figure who, when subjected to an absurd world confronted with the futility of searching for meaning, resorts to a kind of self cultivation in pursuing a dignified and harmonious way of dealing with his predicament. Aligning himself with the Eastern Sisyphus, the Scholar strives to resolve his own predicament by adopting to the philosophy of "*congshi,*" something which not only implies "strength" (*The Four Books* 335) but also entails responsibilities, as is manifested in the Scholar's comment:

> Sisyphus had already come to regard this eternal recurrence as a requirement and a responsibility, and if he were to escape the prison house created by this

perpetual repetition, Sisyphus would have felt that his life had lost all meaning" (*The Four Books* 333).

Obviously, "*congshi*" is by no means an overtly aggressive or radical stance to adopt in challenging the absurd world; rather, it is a pliable but determined resistance that is grounded in the ethical subject's self-perception and self-reconstruction.

Whereas the Child ultimately resorts to a religious self-immolation and the Author to a grotesque self-cannibalism, the Scholar, rejects both of these strategies of "caring for the self." Nor does he intend to seek solutions within a political framework that leads nowhere. Instead, having secretly worked on *A New Myth of Sisyphus* for six years, the Scholar places his last hope on this manuscript, commissioning the Child to deliver the manuscript to Zhongnanha and hoping the leaders there will "understand what has befallen the people of our nation" (*The Four Books* 308). Unfortunately, this last hope ends in silence from the supreme authority and in self-crucifixion on the part of the Child. However, while all the other criminals take advantage of the opportunity to leave the Ninety-Ninth by "follow[ing] the wide, wide road leading to the outside world" (*The Four Books* 329), the Scholar chooses to stay behind and take care of the crucified Child. This choice of remaining in the Ninety-Ninth signals a reclaiming of not only his own sense of what it means to be an intellectual but also control over his own moral destiny. Following the example of Sisyphus, the Scholar has reinterpreted the unintelligible and absurd punishment of the Re-Ed District as an intrinsically valuable existential journey. By refusing to leave, he steadfastly follows his own precepts,

accepting his fate, and transforming his understanding of his own powerlessness into a personal challenge, that is, a means to carry out the ethical path of intellectual by perpetually declaring a secret war against the irrationality and insanity of the world.

Conclusion

I would like once more to invoke Foucault with the aim of guiding both my readers and myself away from Yan's mythorealism and back to reality. When asked if he thought that "the Greeks offer an attractive and plausible alternative" to those seeking the best way to "care for the self," Foucault answered: "You can't find the solution of a problem in the solution of another problem raised at another moment by other people" ("Genealogy" 231). Thus, rather than offering a definite answer, Foucault only raises the possibility of dealing with the (post)modern crisis of subject formation from within his own postmodern theoretical framework. What is embedded in his rather indirect reply that allows us to shed light on the current discussion is the idea that human beings must endeavor to constitute themselves as moral subjects with the context of their own lives; there is no prescribed path one can follow and, considering human individuals' constantly changing concerns, historical circumstances, and socio-political milieus, it is impossible to find a universal way to address the human predicament.

In one sense, Yan seems to echo Foucault by presenting multiple possibilities of "technologies of the self" through the character arcs of his protagonists; in another sense, he seems to depart from Foucault's more optimistic stance in his transporting of the

escaped criminals into a kind of non-utopia. This non-utopia accords with the dystopian conclusion to the story, as a means of subtly invalidating the protagonists' efforts in striving to (re)constitute themselves and free, ethical subject. At the end of the story, when the Child finally grants the criminals permission to leave the ninety-ninth and they arrive at the shores of the Yellow River, they suddenly meet with thousands upon thousands of refugees heading *toward* the Ninety-Ninth, delightedly declaring that "We heard that over here there is a lot of land and few people, and after the spring harvest there is more food than you can eat" (330). These refugees' swarming into the prison camp from the "outside world" suggests a final impossibility of the criminals ever achieving true freedom. Meanwhile, the merging of the two groups of people symbolically destroys the boundary between the supposedly real outside world and the absurdist Foucauldian panopticon, rendering the entire narrative into an absurdity that hopelessly repeats itself. This illustration of the ultimate futility of human beings' efforts against the absurdity of the world, given the cyclical nature of history, takes on an absurdist philosophical flavor once again. Thus, while Foucault's uncertainty regarding the applicability of any solution derived from one situation to the problems of an entirely different situation suggests a kind of ironic optimism, Yan echoes this same uncertainty in a much pessimistic way.

If human history as it is depicted in the novel is ultimately absurd, unintelligible, and inescapably recurrent, what then is the purpose of trying to remember it? Yan answers this question in this novel, and in doing so seems to echo Kundera's

remarks that “History reveals what man is, what has been in him ‘for a long long time,’ what his possibilities are.” (116). In this light, the ultimate significance of *The Four Books* has gone far beyond the reconstruction of an unofficial version of historical events and an experiential remembering of its human costs. In other words, the essence of the novel does not lie primarily in its critique of the political power enacted by the “technology of discipline” —though of course this is an important aspect of the novel. Rather, it is more about an existential, moral crisis; as Liu Jianei argues, it tends to “inquire into the spiritual (or psychological) truth that has been buried in the absurd era, in particular, the spiritual (or psychological) truth of the intellectual group in that absurd age” (叩问出表象背后那个荒诞时代的精神真实，尤其是知识分子群体在那个荒诞时代真实的精神真相。) (66).

I would even say that, although *The Four Books* tells a story of imprisoned and criminalized intellectuals, its inquiry into these intellectuals’ own “spiritual truth” nevertheless has extended itself into that of humanity as a whole . It tells a story of a specific epoch in history that is then “understood and analyzed as an existential situation” (Kundera 38). The Child and the Author’s reconstruction of their respective ethical subject can be read as a strong evidence of this universalizing tendency. Disregarding the Child, whose enigmatic identity would seem to represent every possibility except for an intellectual, the Author’s process of psychological transformation and struggle for a true self entails a striving to emerge from his ethical predicament as a thinking human being, instead of merely as an intellectual. The Author

perceives the reality unfolding before him from a different perspective than the Scholar. He perceives it as a human crisis whereas the Scholar regards it as a political crisis that demands only his commitment as an intellectual. Therefore, the only character who really represents the intellectual's "spiritual truth" is the Scholar, whereas the Child and the Author's struggling, fighting, and resisting have been bestowed with the universal significance of pursuing an ethical subjectivity.

The last point that I would like to make has to something do with how mythorealism should be evaluated within the framework of Yan's historical narrative. Mythorealism does not entail realist answers or results. Each protagonist's "technology of the self" is uniquely constructed upon and emergent from that character's specific experience of the intersection of reality and allegory as well as the interaction between the real and the imaginary. Thus, these solutions cannot be read solely from a realistic perspective. It is mythorealism that unveils their invisible and unrepresentable truths through its revelation of a kind of "spiritual (or psychological) truth." The mythorealist elements, such as the religious, the supernatural, the grotesque, and the mythological, which together characterize the narrative mode of this novel, transgress the empirical world and evoke the elusive realm of the phenomenological reality of consciousness. However, the overlooking of this aspect by some scholars has unfortunately led to the dislocation of the realistic interpretation from the mythorealistic truth. For example, Long Huiping argues the Author's alternative cannibalism "has trapped him in the paradoxical logic of eating and being eaten so that it is impossible for him to face his

own sin rationally and normally; thus, there is no possibility of redemption in a real sense" (陷入吃与被吃逻辑的个体，根本无法以理智、正常的心态来面对自身的罪孽，也就无从谈到真正的救赎。) (80-81). Long sees cannibalism here as a realistic behavior and interprets it from the realistic point of view; as a result, she overlooks the constructive potential of cannibalism that the writer tries to express through mythorealism.

It is the mythorealist transgression of rationality that perfectly illustrates the idea that "the sole raison d'etre of a novel is to discover what only the novel can discover" (Kundera 5-6). Mythorealism provides otherworldly solutions to the unsolvable, and the otherworldliness, in return, prompts readers to reflect on that which seems impossible, unspeakable and unrepresentable. Just as Cheng Guangwei 程光炜 comments: "it is impossible and unrealistic that the reflective character such as the Child can exist in a realistic work; if he does, he may have already been kidnaped by a certain kind of social ethos" (孩子这种反省式的人物在现实主义文学中是不真实的，他也许已经被某种社会思潮所捆绑。) (95). Unleashed from restraints of realism, the protagonists' decidedly unrealistic endeavors to (re)constitute their ethical subjectivity have constructed a mythic and allegorical response to an unrepresentable reality. By bringing to the fore not so much the forgotten history as the forgotten being-in-the-world, Yan makes his characters confront themselves and reconfigure themselves as accomplice, agent, victim, and finally writer of history.

Chapter Four In the Name of Absurdity: Disenchanted *Shijing* and Spiritual Crisis in *The Odes of Songs*[86]

Introduction

In the postscripts to *The Odes of Songs* (*Feng ya song*, 2008), a novel celebrated in Chinese media as "a scathing criticism of academia" (Leung 271) and "thematically challenging" (Fu Xiaoping), Yan Lianke seems eager to defend himself by clarifying that he is not in a position to make a critique of contemporary Chinese intellectuals and merely intends to reveal his own weakness and obsession with the idea of "drifting and homecoming" (漂浮与回家) (*Feng ya song* 421). Perhaps due both to his own lack of confidence in viewing himself as an intellectual and to the ambiguity regarding how intellectuals should be defined in today's society, Yan makes a point of including three short essays at the end of *The Odes of Songs*, in which he attempts to get himself out of the dilemma between his criticism of contemporary Chinese academia as an "outsider" and his impulse to self-disclosure as a writer who shares similar humanistic

[86] As the Chinese concept of "*jingshen*" 精神 (adjectival form is "*jingshende*") is the key concept of my analysis and will be referred to frequently throughout this chapter, it is necessary to clarify that, although literally translated as "spirit" ("spiritual") in most academic scholarship, the Chinese term "*jingshen,*" relates more to psychological and mental aspects of self irrelevant to the religious implications of the English "spirit." It may be more proper to interpret the Chinese term as "non-empirical," a concept proposed by Joyce Piell Wexler in 2004. While discussing the modernist use of symbols that expands a reader's sense of interiority without demanding (religious) belief, Wexler explains: "I use the term 'non-empirical' to encompass all the discourses that offered supplements to empiricism. 'Spiritual' would be too mystical, 'ideal' too metaphysical. . . 'ideological' too political, 'uncanny' too fantastic, 'unconscious' too psychological" (166). It is much the same with the Chinese concept "*jingshen,*" which can possess a multitude of interpretive possibilities, none of which can precisely express the original meaning. Nevertheless, in this chapter, I choose to use "spirit" ("spiritual") rather than "non-empirical" so as to align myself with its use in the majority of scholarship concerning the Chinese "*jingshen*" and not to confuse readers.

concern with those "insiders."[87] But rather than clarifying his motivations for writing this novel, these postscripts only seem to make matters more complicated and add even more ambiguity to his critical position. And as it turns out, his stated concern that "I have a foreboding that the publication of *The Odes of Songs* will incur many condemnations" (我冥冥中有些预感, 《风雅颂》的出版，会招致一片谩骂之声。) (*Feng ya song* 426) comes true immediately after the book's publication.

The Odes of Songs is comprised of two parts: the first part, Vol. 1 to Vol. 4, centers around the exposure of the corruption of contemporary universities and intellectuals. This part of the story takes place at the university and psychiatric hospital in the fictional capital. The second part, Vol. 5 to Vol. 12, is the main body of the story and takes place primarily in the protagonist's hometown on the remote Palou Mountain, and revolves around the protagonist's several visits to the town's brothels and his accidental discovery of the ancient *Shijing* site. Although the storyline is not overly complicated, it is by no means an easy-reading novel. Overall, *The Odes of Songs* tells the story of an associate professor named Yang Ke who is an expert on *Shijing* at Qingyan University.[88] Yang Ke catches his wife in bed with the vice-president of the

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[87] Yan Lianke was employed as a professor of literature at Renmin University at the end of 2008, which means he was not part of the university system or academic world in any real sense at the time *The Odes of Songs's* publication.

[88] *Shijing*, usually known as *Book of Songs* or *Classic of Poetry,* is the oldest existing collection of 305 Chinese poems (songs) dating back to the 7th centuries BC. *Shijing* contains themes such as love and courtship, longing for an absent lover, soldiers on campaign, farming and housework, and political satire and protests. The poems are organized into three main sections according to their content: the airs of the States, the eulogies, and the hymns. The titles of these three sections respectively correspond to the three characters of *Feng ya song* (*The Odes of Songs*). In this dissertation, following the practice of prominent sinologists such as Stephen Owen, I use *Shijing* instead of its English version in order to maintain a sense of authenticity.

university, Li Guangzhi, on the very day he comes home with his newly-finished manuscript on *Shijing*. After a series of issues following this event, Yang Ke ends up in a psychiatric hospital, where he is asked to teach *Shijng* to a group of his fellow patients; somewhat surprisingly, his lecture is well-received. Later, Yang manages to escape from the psychiatric hospital to his hometown in Palou Mountain, where he attempts to renew his relationship with his ex-fiancée Lingzhen. Disappointed upon seeing that Lingzhen's is no longer young and beautiful, Yang Ke turns to the Paradise Street brothels, regularly visiting the young prostitutes with ambiguous motivations. Toward the end of the story, Yang Ke Yang transfers his ambiguous emotional attachment to Lingzhen, who commits suicide for him, and then to her daughter Xiaomin, going so far as to murder her husband on their wedding night. Next, while escaping to the more isolated area of Palou Mountain, Yang accidentally discovers an ancient *Shijing* site and becomes the leader of a utopian community that is comprised of a mixture homeless prostitutes and intellectual exiles. The story ends with Yang Ke's eventual departure from the commune and his setting out to look for the next *Shijing* site.

As indicated above, *The Odes of Songs* has been subjected to accusations from the mainstream academic world that began immediately following its publication. Overall, these criticisms claim a major discrepancy between the putative merits of the contemporary Chinese university and the corrupt and amoral intellectuals portrayed in Yan's writing. Scholars accuse Yan of "cast[ing] aspersions on Peking University, slander[ing] the humanist traditions of higher education, and wantonly demoniz[ing]

intellectuals at institutes of higher education" (影射北京大学，诋毁高校人文传统，肆意将高校知识分子形象妖魔化) (Fu Xiaoping).[89] Among these offended scholars, Shao Yanjun 邵燕君, a literary critic based in Peking University, criticizes Yan's "interpretation of the essence of the university into 'countryside logic' and 'slave logic'" (以"乡村逻辑"＋"奴才逻辑"演绎大学精神) (6). She fiercely denounces Yan's lack of basic knowledge both of the university's institutional structure and its true cultural spirit, concluding that Yan's "impudence derives from his ignorance" (因为不懂，所以放肆) (Fu Xiaoping). Yunlei Li also condemns Yan's implied "slander of Peking University" as the breaking of "a major taboo of writing: that it should adhere closely to real life, and to real people. He has substituted his own fantasy as a target for criticism" (Eric Abrahamsen).[90]

Besides the so-called "Peking University complex," the majority of the existing scholarship, while applauding the aggressive and deconstructive overtones of the novel, is mostly concerned with Yan's ambiguous critical position and the objectivity and rationality of his social critique. For example, Liu Zhirong Liu 刘志荣 comments that the character Yang Ke "embodies the ambiguity of this novel's critical awareness" (体现了这部小说批判意识的暧昧性). That is, although Yan "has the awareness of criticizing

[89] The name of the fictional Qingyan University is an amalgamation of China's two top universities: Qinghua and Peking University, the latter of which was once called Yanjing or Yenching University. Although Yan denies an allusion to either of these universities, he was still furiously condemned by certain scholars, particularly those from Peking University, due to both the similarity of the novel's university's name and some similar characteristics of locations between the respective campuses.

[90] Also see Fu Xiaoping, 2008.

power and corruption in the society and analyzing the weakness of Chinese intellectuals themselves" (阎连科既有对社会权力和腐败风气进行批判的意识，也有对中国知识分子本身弱点进行分析的意识) (217), nevertheless, his criticism appears "exaggerated, superficial, and not down to earth" (夸张肤廓、不够落实), and his analysis "lacks the courage for an in-depth dissection [of the reality], resulting in the superficial criticism and excess sympathy, or bluntly speaking, narcissism and self-pity" (缺乏深入解剖的勇气，导致实际表现上，批判并不明显，而寄托了过多的同情乃至——如果不客气地说的话——自恋和自怜。) (217). Wang Yao 王尧, while defending the novel against the charge of slandering Peking University, comments Yan "creates the novel relying on his own imagination, but as for to what extent it has achieved his own goal, it is open to discussion" (凭借自己想象创作出的作品，在多大程度上达成了自己的目标值得商榷。) (Fu Xiaoping). Hong Zhigang 洪治纲 and Ouyang Guangming 欧阳光明 likewise think the novel has greatly challenged the realistic ethics in contemporary China; however, they hold that "no matter whether it is an interpretation of the spiritual dilemma of Chinese contemporary intellectuals or a representation of their fate in the modern social system, *The Odes of Songs*. . . does not really provide an effective reflection on either." (无论是对中国当代知识分子精神困境的演绎，还是对他们在现代体制中的生存命运的表达，《风雅颂》……却并没有提供有效的思考。) (105). And finally, Yao Xiaolei states that the novel's merit lies in its poignant revelation of the abnormality of social reality and its criticism of the spiritual alienation of contemporary university intellectuals. However, he argues that Yan's parodying *Shijing*,

"in terms of the author's subjective attitude, entails an unclear discursive position and lack of critical consciousness derived from modern rationality" (就作者的主观层面而言，却缺乏明确的、由现代理性精神所派生出的话语立场和批判意识) (269).

In summarizing these representative criticisms of *The Odes of Songs* from mainstream Chinese scholarship,[91] I observe that these scholars, while heavily grounding their arguments in the absurdity of its storyline, seldom pay close attention to the fact that it is the striking narrative style of the novel that essentially renders the story absurd, exaggerated, and emotional, in Zhirong Liu's words, "reduced to… an overly subjective and emotional critique" (流于……过于主观的情绪化批判) (212). The unrealistic narrative style of the novel reflects Yan's consistent practice of the mythorealism that characterizes his other novels. Thus, any interpretation based on a realistically-inclined reading of the novel will likely miss the central ideas purposely put forth by means of the irrationality, absurdity, and even illogicality of the narration.[92]

In this chapter, I will provide an alternative perspective on the novel and challenge the "social critique" argument, whether it be positive or negative, in the majority of the scholarship. To some extent, the apparent ignorance of the stylistic features of the novel and the disproportionate emphasis on the obvious absurdity of

[91] As this novel is inaccessible to Western scholars on account of it not having been translated into English, I did not find any Western scholarship on this novel except for a few brief summaries of the story.

[92] There are many critiques on the illogicality of the narration in the novel. One typical example is Liu Zhirong's comment that "The discovery of the ancient *Shijing* site cannot attract attention. This is a very serious drawback in the credibility of the narrative." (诗经古城的发现不能引起关注，这是在叙述可信性上有非常严重的弊端。) See Liu Zhirong (213).

certain of its fragmented plot have resulted in a too-easy interpretation of the novel's meaning. This may be the main reason for certain strands of criticism, such as the putative slandering of Peking University, the lack of rationality and so on. I maintain, however, that the readers of *The Odes of Songs* are deliberately suspended between realistic and mythorealistic ways of reading this novel, and hold that it is in fact the tension generated between these two ways of reading that characterizes this novel.

Yan arguably gives priority to form and style rather over mimeticism in his writing, as can also be seen in the other two novels discussed in this dissertation. He holds "the strength and symbolism of the story are more from the power of the style itself" (故事的强度和象征性却更多地来自于文体本身所具有的力量) (*Huanghua* 133). He also argues that, without its being imparted through certain literary forms, "social critique may be better reinforced in the novel, but it does not help the development of the whole novel in terms of the spirit it conveys" (可能会使小说在对现实批判层面得到某些强化，但是，却无助于整个小说精神的扩张。) (134). These statements are particularly true of *The Odes of Songs*. In saying so, I do not mean to dismiss the significance of the narrative style in Yan's other novels; each novel is, to some degree, unique in terms of its form and style. However, it is my hypothesis that the peculiarity of the narrative style in this novel is what will be the key to reversing the "verdict" of its being a superficial, ignorant, and irrational social critique, and will provide evidence for reexamining whether it is simply a novel of social critique or whether it is an investigation into the deeper psychology and spirituality of Yan's

protagonist. Like the previous chapters, this chapter will center around the overall description of how the novel's mythorealistic narrative style, while not canceling out Yan's social critique, functions to transfer his critical impulse to something different, which may otherwise seem too controversial and sensitive.[93]

The mythorealistic characteristics in *The Odes of Songs* are drastically different from those of Yan's other two novels discussed previously. This novel does not involve the supernatural, magical, mysterious and grotesque elements pervading most of Yan's fiction.[94] Instead, a complex mixture of exaggeration, imagination, and irony embedded in a variety of recurring patterns —verbal, syntactic, thematic, and narrative— characterizes the mythorealist narrative of this novel, creating a cumulative effect of overall absurdity. In other words, absurdity is the prominent feature of mythorealism in this novel, but it should be differentiated from the concept of absurdism or the absurd as it appears in *The Four Books*, carrying an absurdist or existentialist implication. In our current text, "absurdity" will simply mean "the quality or state of being ridiculous or

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[93] One point that must be clarified is that, on the envelope of the 2010 edition of the book published in mainland China, the publisher has added "the master of absurd realism" (荒诞现实主义大师) for the sake of promotion. This phrase caused considerable controversy. For instance, Liu Zhirong argues that, "considering the excessively subjective imagination in this work, it has basically departed from 'realism,' and thus cannot be classified as 'absurd realism,' either" (这部作品的主观狂想性太强，基本上可以说脱离了"现实主义"的范围，因此也不能归入"荒诞现实主义"行列。) (214). Fortunately, the controversy surrounding the "naming" is not the focus of this chapter, and neither is it much of an issue at all, given that the term mythorealism, coined in 2011 by Yan himself, has effectively characterized the overall style of all his novels.

[94] There is only one exception, which is actually negotiable: in Volume 8, there is a detailed description of Lingzhen's coffin, on which numerous colorful butterflies are landing. Given it happens in winter, the presence of butterflies is illogical and contradictory to the law of nature. However, this presumably supernatural scene is subverted by Yan's own explanation. It is almost known to any Yan Lianke researcher that Yan has described in many different situations this butterfly scene he experienced in his real life and claims it has totally changed his idea about truth and reality. In other words, Yan wrote the butterfly scene as a real happening in life rather than something supernatural.

wildly unreasonable" (OED). How this strain of absurdity manages to achieve "the deep logic of the inner cause-and-effect" (内因果的深层逻辑) and reach "human soul, spirit of life, and the almost imperceptible logic in reality" (人之灵魂、生活之精神、现实中几乎无法感知的逻辑之血脉) (*Faxian* 208), is one of the major concerns of this chapter.

My reading of this novel is concerned with both thematic interpretation and the relation of rhetorical forms to meaning. Based on a mythorealistic interpretation, I read this novel as being set within a desymbolized world, or a world that has lost its symbols, and interpret this as a representation of the protagonist's own schizophrenic response to reality in his process of seeking spiritual origin (*jingshen benyuan*). This desymbolized world is manifested in the allegory of the disenchantment of *Shijing,* which signifies the deconstruction of the existing symbol of Chinese intellectual culture and thus portends an increasing void of meaning within the academic world. By focusing on two of the novel's recurrent motifs, sex and disgust, analyzing each from a different perspective, I investigate how each motif speaks from its own space to reveal a lost soul, a soul whose own self-disclosure exemplifies contemporary Chinese intellectuals' collective anxiety and spiritual crisis in a world that has lost its symbols and has become pervaded with an instrumentalist ethos.

The Desymbolized World and the Disenchanted Intellectuals

The following section will interpret a single scene, in which a number of the novel's recurrent stylistic and thematic elements are introduced. By looking into the structural, thematic, and rhetorical features highlighted in this episode of the story, I will

then analyze how *Shijing* is shaped as an allegorical representation of an intellectual world that has lost symbols, echoing the disenchantment of contemporary intellectuals in China's educational and academic system. In particular, I will seek to answer the following two questions: 1) how Shijing is presented as being disenchanted textually and contextually; 2) how the main character, a marginalized intellectual, represents himself within the historical process of desymoblization and disenchantment.

The protagonist's own crisis of meaning begins in the opening scene of *The Odes of Songs* (the first four pages of the story). Associate professor Yang Ke, after five years' hard work and frequent estrangement from home, finally finishes his manuscript: *The Songs of Feng Ya: A Study of the Spiritual Roots of Shijing* (*Fengya zhi song: Guanyu Shijing jingshen de bengen tanjiu*). Leaving the room where he has worked on his project, its walls covered in dust and dirt "like a huge cloth stained by feces" (如同沾上了粪便的巨大抹布) (*Feng ya song* 27),[95] Yang Ke returns home triumphantly with his manuscript, only to find his wife in bed with the university's vice president, Li Guangzhi. Heavy with black humor and irony, Yan Ke's description of the erotic bed scene subverts the readers' customary expectation of a husband's response to his wife's infidelity: "he [Li Guangzhi] is sprawling on my wife's body, like a dried shrimp clinging to a white fish. The stark contrast between the two, white and black, fat and skinny, gleaming and dull, immediately makes me think they have difficulty in reaching

[95] All the translations are done by myself unless otherwise indicated.

orgasm" (他趴在我妻子身上，宛若一只晒干的虾米缩在一条白条鱼的身上。这一白一黑，一肥一瘦，一明一暗，让我当时就想，他们难有性高潮的到来。) (*Feng ya song* 28). What follows this embarrassing encounter is a long, redundant, self-narrating monologue, interwoven with a variety of rhetorical forms such as parentheses, oxymoron, repetition, and paradox, forms that dominate the following passage and recur throughout the novel:

> The moment he looked at me waiting for my response, I was looking at the pile of manuscript next to the coffee table and smiling at him (weakly, and significantly), saying, Vice President Li, I have completed *The Songs of Feng Ya: A Study of the Spiritual Roots of Shijing*; with this monograph, I'll have everything. Nothing is needed anymore. If you really feel you are wrong from the bottom of your heart, feel sorry for me Yang Ke, and really repent, I ask you for a favor for three things. First, my mind is not liberated enough to accept this, so I beg you two: would you please not do it again? Second, I am not open enough to follow new things, so I beg you: would you please not do it again? I said sadly, about to cry. However, when I was going to burst into tears, my heart squirmed all of a sudden, and as if driven by a ghost, I stood up from the sofa involuntarily (strategically) and, stormily, kneeled in front of him (I kneeled so violently and fiercely, like a falling tree wanting to conquer a mountain). I kneeled, looking at him and my stunned wife aside, and repeated: I, by the honor of a professor, plead with you two: first, would you please not do it again? second, I beg you: would you please not do it

> again? Third, I kneel to beg you: would you please not do it again? (在他等我的回话那一刻，我看了茶几旁我的那堆书稿后，朝他淡淡笑了笑（笑得软弱无力、意味深长），说李副校长，我的《风雅之颂——关于，<诗经>精神本根的探究》写完了，有了这部专著，我什么都有了。什么都不再需要了。你要从心里觉得你错了，觉得对不起了我杨科，要真心真意悔改了，我有三件事请你们为我帮个忙，一是我思想不解放，你和赵茹萍的事情请你们下不为例好不好？而是我观念还不新，求你们下不为例好不好？我说着悲从心来，想要哭出来。然就在我将要泪流满面时，心里蠕动一下子，我鬼使神差（计从心来）地从沙发上站起来，晴天霹雳地在他面前跪下去（我跪得猛烈而有力，像倒下的一棵树要征服一座山），跪下看着他，也看着惊怔在一旁的妻子赵茹萍，重复地说，我以一个知识分子的名誉，一是请你们下不为例好不好？二是求你们下不为例好不好？三是我跪下来请求你们下不为例好不好？(*Feng ya song* 32)

Replete with self-effacing sarcasm, this opening scene of the story is structured around a number of thematic elements that will be repeated throughout the novel, such as sexuality, homecoming, intellectual culture, and disgust. How these motifs and rhetorical patterns make possible the decoding of both the main character and the overall theme of the novel will be progressively explored in this chapter. In this section, I will start with considering the subtitle of this opening scene, which itself exemplifies the structural pattern of each of the novel's parts. Structurally, each volume of the novel is framed with a title taken from the three categories in *Shijing*, namely, "Air" (*feng*), "Hymn" (*ya*),

"Eulogy" (*song*), or "Air, Hymn, and Eulogy" (*feng ya song*). Each subsection included in each volume is likewise named after the title of a song in *Shijing*, most of which are contradictorily or ironically linked to the subsection's actual contents.

The opening subsection of the story is titled "Guanju" (Crying Ospreys).[96] In *Shijing*, "Guanju" is a love song expressing the poet's longing for a girl.[97] This song is applauded by Confucius as being "joyful but not licentious; melancholy but not hurtful" (乐而不淫，衰而不哀) (*Feng ya song* 27). Love between the sexes is a recurrent theme of *Shijing.* Despite most being impassionate or unbridled, "all these love poems are the 'true voice of the mind' with the least sign of affectation or decadence" (Yao 9).[98] The novel's opening scene of Yang Ke's wife's adultery with the vice president of the university is thus ironically juxtaposed with *Shijing*'s "Guanju." By playfully replacing the themes of "love" and "sex" in the original "Guanju" with "loveless sex" in the

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[96] The most famous lines of the song are as follows: Merrily the osprey cry, / On the islet in the stream. / Gentle and graceful is the girl, / A fit wife for the gentleman. See Dan Yao, 2010.

[97] There is also an ancient tradition of reading this poem in a highly politicized way. From the *Mao Commentary* on, it is often read (with some variations) either as praise of King Wen and his virtuous queen, Tai Si, or as a metaphor for an abused and misunderstood official complaining to his lord. In most of these interpretations, the man in question is either a king, prince, or official. Given Li Guangzhi's position of authority as a university vice-president, Yan is possibly invoking the political context of this poem. For different interpretations of "Crying Ospreys," see John Minford and Joseph S. M. Lau (92-97).

[98] It is necessary to clarify the relationship between the concept "love" and "sex" in *Shijing*. Most love songs or poems in *Shijing* contain sexual connotations. In his 1927 article "Shijing de xing yugan" 诗经的性欲观 ["The Notion of Sexuality in Shijing"], Wen Yiduo 闻一多 identifies implied eroticism in more than forty poems by examining the various tropes as being allusions to sexual content. The theme of sex in these poems is closely related to the themes of love and courtship, unsurprising given the deep concern of the ancient Chinese culture for prolificacy and fertility as a means of securing a great number of offspring. Therefore, in many love songs in *Shijing*, it is common to see the narrative arc of a young man and girl liking each other, having sex in the wild, and becoming husband and wife. This most basic model of love and sex renders these songs/poems, in Confucian's words, as having "si wu ye" (思无邪), normally translated having as "no deviant or twisty thoughts." See also Wen Yiduo, 1993; Wang Zhisheng, 2015.

current "Guanju," the sacred *Shijing* is knocked off the pedestal and reduced to vulgar erotic representation.

Shijing is at the core of the early Chinese textual tradition and remains central to Chinese cultural imagination. Historically, its importance as a source of historical knowledge and moral edification became elevated to such a high level that *Shijing* was a mandatory subject in the civil service examination in ancient China. Throughout the long river of Chinese history, *Shijing* was internalized by many Chinese scholars as a symbol of China's cultural origin and the spiritual root of the Chinese intellectual tradition. Nevertheless, in our current story, apart from its providing a textual subversion of the hitherto revered "Guanju" discussed above, the symbolic meaning of *Shijing* is also profoundly subverted in the context of a modern society in which the cold rationality of the marketplace has spread the concept of an exchange economy even to intimate relationships. The relationship between Li Guangzhi and Zhao Ruping is an outcome of this logic. Li is well versed in Western philosophy and aesthetics and is recognized as an outstanding scholar within his academic circle. He moves through the bureaucratic system with ease, and has a mastery of transforming his academic capital into personal gain. Yang Ke's wife Zhao Ruping does not have much learning herself, but she is intensely aware of the instrumentalist ethos dominating university education and the academy. Like Li, she is opportunistic and is well adept at playing the games of power, sex, and knowledge, taking advantage of whatever she can. These two take what they need from each other and, as the story unfolds, they both achieve success in their careers

through exchanging and leveraging the social power embedded in their respective networks. Li and Zhao undoubtedly belong to the mainstream intellectuals of the time.

It might be helpful at this point to define what "intellectual" signifies in this context, even if its complex lineage in different cultures and historical milieus makes an exact definition of the concept difficult. In order to explain its relevance to the contemporary social context as well as to the text, I will, first of all invoke Frank Furedi, who, in questioning the British education system in *Where Have All the Intellectuals Gone? Confronting 21st Century Philistinism*, criticizes the instrumentalist ethos pervading modern-day intellectual culture and university education.[99] According to Furedi, this instrumentalist ethos values knowledge and culture not as ends in themselves but only when they serve as instruments to achieve economic and political purposes. Furedi thus regards "true" intellectuals as "an endangered species" (31), holding that real "intellectuals are not defined according to the jobs they do but the manner in which they act, the way they see themselves, and the values that they uphold" (31). In short, "whatever definition we prefer, being an intellectual involves an intimate relationship to the pursuit of ideas and of truth" (36).

Ferudi's interpretation of the intellectual poses a serious question concerning how to perceive and define contemporary Chinese intellectuals. In his newly published

[99] One point that must be clarified here is that Furedi's invoking of Matthew Arnold in the title of this book and his seemingly elitist stance may give readers the impression that he dismisses political interpretations of phenomena as somehow not being real knowledge. However, Furedi's argument for "genuine learning" does not emphasize the supposed elitism of pure knowledge *per se* as much as it does intellectually demanding forms of cultural and educational experience. Overall, his criticisms on the "instrumentalist ethos" and the concomitant phenomenon of "philistinism" is meaningful for the current discussion.

book *Minjian: The Rise of China's Grassroots Intellectuals*, Sebastian Veg reports that "a new figure of the intellectual appeared in the 1990s, breaking with the universalist, enlightenment paradigm of the 1980s as well as with the older, traditional figure of the advising and dissenting literati" (7). He calls these newcomers "*minjian*" or grassroots intellectuals who "no longer indulged as frequently in sweeping discourses (*jiang da daoli* 讲大道理) about culture, the nation, or democracy"; in his view, "their legitimacy derived from their work with 'vulnerable groups' and their shared experience with marginal realms of society" (7). At first glance, Sebastian Veg's perception of contemporary Chinese intellectuals appears incompatible with Ferudi's concerns, in that Veg's celebration of the down-to-earth intellectual seems to be in contrast with Ferudi's ostensibly elitist position. Nevertheless, the two converge in their shared conviction that intellectuals everywhere should "speak out publicly on the basis of their specific knowledge" (Veg 13) and should refuse to be defined by their professional position or use their elite status to escape their social responsibilities.

Evidently, Li and Zhao do not belong to Ferudi's category of "endangered" intellectuals or Veg's "grassroots" scholars. However, the focus of Yan's novel is not to judge to what degree Li's and Zhao's conduct is common among today's intellectuals. Rather, as two foil characters that will soon retire to the background, Li and Zhao are only temporarily placed at the forefront in order to fulfill a specific symbolic (or de-symbolic) role. That is, they are the incarnation of the modern-day intellectual's loss of spiritual grounding and represent the erosion of the traditional role and identity of the

Chinese intellectual. They are both the cause and the effect of what Ferudi calls the instrumentalist ethos of the time, and their career success signals the unnatural "mutation" (Readings 2) of university education.[100] This "mutation" is revealed through exaggerated depictions of Zhao and Yang's classes that create a sense of absurdity. Zhao's overwhelmingly popular cinema class is satirically contrasted with Yang's *Shijing* class, which is in jeopardy of cancellation for not being amusing enough to students. Although he is far more dedicated to his *Shijing* class, Yang must follow his wife's example of adding vulgar content to his lectures in order to keep his remaining students from leaving. In a somewhat surprising twist, Yang's *Shijing* lectures are warmly welcomed by patients in the psychiatric hospital. This is perhaps a parodic allusion to Lu Xun's "A Madman's Diary" in that, instead of the insane being the only ones who perceive clearly the need to reject the restraints of tradition, here they are only ones left who are able to see the value of classical culture. While manner in which such meanings are generated through devices such as exaggeration and irony will be more closely examined in the following section, in the current discussion my intent is to emphasize that it is through the characters of Li and Zhao that an intertextuality between the social and textual contexts related to *Shijing* is established. On one level, *Shijing* has

[100] In his book *The University in Ruins*, Bill Readings uses the term "mutation" to refer to the decline centrality of modern American universities' traditional emphasis on humanistic concerns and national culture, pointing out that the contemporary university is busily transforming itself into "a bureaucratically organized and relatively autonomous consumer-oriented corporation" (11). Readings' discussion centers around the university's role in education, and criticizes modern universities' emphasis on an ideal of excellence that is driven by market forces, and that is more interested in profit margins rather than in original thought. Although *The University in Ruins* cannot be fully applied to the situation of the university of the novel, undoubtedly the latter is also in a process of "mutation" and decline.

lost its symbolic, almost sacred function; on another level, as Li and Zhao's relationship exemplifies, is a corresponding process of disenchantment amongst contemporary intellectuals.

The metaphorical representation of desacralized *Shijing* in the novel's opening scene carries a tone of social critique that will continue to run through the first four volumes in particular, and more importantly, it serves as an allegory of a desacralized and desymbolized world. It provides the background against which the protagonist Yang Ke exists, and it also foreshadows the absurdity of the rest of the story. The various consequence of desymbolization in different situations can take different forms. For example, since the late 1980s the disenchantment with the figure of the hero and the glory of the revolution, rather than generating a crisis of belief, has marked an important victory of Chinese literature over ideological and political intervention, and has made it possible for the ordinary people to utter their voice and to be heard. However, what cannot be ignored is that the loss of symbols, be it in literature or social discourse, frequently leads to a loss of meaning. If new symbolic meanings cannot be effectively reconstructed after the deconstruction of the old meanings, people's perception of the world and their own selves may turn empty and nihilistic. This may be the problem of the present day. Although today's materialistic society is trying to ritualize and celebrate its new symbols, one result of this being the promotion of happiness by means of encouraging people to possess more things, it has failed to transform allegorically important other human experiences such as pain, death, and loss. In a market-centered,

production-based society, “Any value that is beyond the value of economic exchange obviously depends on the existence of social symbols” (任何超然于经济交换价值之外的价值显然都需要依赖于社会象征的存在。) (Geng 40). In this way, the loss of symbols has generated modern people’s incapability of comprehending and integrating experiences beyond physical and material pleasure.

The acclaimed literary critic Geng Zhanchun’s 耿占春 interpretation of the notion of disenchantment offers a further understanding of the consequences of the loss of symbols in modern human society:

> Disenchantment is the elimination of cultural symbols embedded in the universal connection of things. We live in a historical process in which symbols are continuously missing. Symbols are like the sediments deposited in things. They reflect both the empirical forms in the classical period and the moment when the perception of meaning is shaped through common subjectivity. Symbols construct a meaningful world that is full of possibilities. (祛魅就是对沉积在事物普遍关联中的文化象征的祛除，我们生活在一个持续的去象征化的历史过程之中。沉积在事物中的象征是古典时代的经验形式，是社会的共同主观性形成意义感知的时刻，它建构了一个充满可能性的意义世界。) (39)

Building upon this statement, a symbolic discourse is necessarily comprised of both a belief system and the social experiences that encompasses the belief system. Accordingly, a symbolic exchange system differs from an equivalent exchange system in that, while the former produces meanings related to spirit, belief, and idea, the latter

encourages people to consume things and enjoy themselves without also enabling them to transform the joy of owning things into a more profound meaning. Similarly, the symbolic void resulting from the disenchanted *Shijing* represents a dysfunction of the social-symbolic system more generally, in which knowledge is not only devalued but also loses its humanistic value. Knowledge itself is reduced to a product or object that can be exchanged for other commodities —such as sex, power, and social status— based on the materialist principle of equivalent exchange. The replacement of a symbolic exchange of knowledge with that of an equivalent exchange model demonstrates intellectuals' being driven by instrumentalism, through which the intangible cultural essences such as love, truth, ideals, and ethics are degraded and deconstructed.

The opening scene shows the protagonist's psychological fragility and nascent schizophrenia in this allegorical encounter with the chaos of the desymbolized world. Yang Ke is assumed to be profoundly learned in *Shijing*. He takes *Shijing* research as his life pursuit and serves as the mouthpiece for *Shijing* in the novel. Indeed, Yang Ke's interpretation of *Shijing* informs the entire novel, and he himself believes that his monumental work on *Shijing* "has re-examined the origin and essence of a classic, reshaping the spiritual home and backup for a nation without faith" (重新揭示了一部经书的起源和要义，为一个没有信仰的民族重塑了精神的家园与靠山。) (*Feng ya song* 27). Unlike Li and Zhao, Yang Ke comforts himself with the illusion of a still-existent symbolic exchange system, sincerely believing his research will have profound impact on rebuilding the spiritual faith for this nation; however, at the same time, he does

not remain untouched by the instrumentalist ethos of the time, eagerly expecting his academic achievement will naturally bring him honor, status, and material gain.

Yang's mentality here exposes a contradiction and instability within his self-image: he does not position himself as either entirely inside the symbolic exchange system nor entirely outside the equivalent exchange system. Put differently, Yang Ke is both victim and collaborator in the larger historical process of desymbolization, albeit, given his marginalization, he certainly does not dominate this process. This is particularly manifested in his ironic performance of kneeling before Li. How one interprets Yang Ke's kneeling to his "rival in love," also the vice president of the university, will determine how one understands Yang Ke's positioning of himself in his larger desymbolized world. The existing scholarship almost unanimously interprets Yang Ke's kneeling as a surrender to power and a gesture of giving up of intellectual integrity (*qijie*). While regarding this as a possible interpretation, I would also like to challenge it by identifying some contradictory evidence embedded in the rhetorical forms in this passage.

The most striking stylistic characteristics that feature in this passage are Yang Ke's eccentric self-narrating monologue, the repetition of parentheses appearing in brackets, and the use of paradox. First of all, the self-narrating monologue is, in Dorrit Cohn's words, "a first-person variant of the third technique for rendering consciousness in third-person fiction" (167). This device, as Cohn elaborates in *Transparent Minds*, usually creates the following effects: it "render[s] moments of climactic conflict or high

pathos" (161), "presents a more substantive problem of credibility" (162), and generates an "ambiguity" (164) that effaces the demarcation between the real and unreal as well as between past and present thoughts. Either of the three effects listed above may call the taken-for-granted interpretation of Yang Ke's kneeling as a surrender to power into question. Throughout the monologue Yang Ke talks in a desultory and redundant fashion, and he converses without anyone speaking back to him. There is even no evidence for whether his intended audience has remained there or not. It is possible that he has become delirious due to the shock of discovering his wife's affair. It is also possible that Yang Ke is deliberately concealing his real thoughts to protect himself.

This ambiguity is reinforced by the use of parentheses and paradoxical statements. Yang Ke's behavior is often contradicted or mocked by himself in parentheses, rendering the truth murky and confusing. For example, Yang Ke reacts to his wife and Li's adultery by kneeling in front of them "involuntarily." The word "involuntarily" is juxtaposed with the word "strategically" in brackets. The effect created by the adverb "involuntarily" is subverted by the oppositional meaning of "strategically," and thus the validity of this statement becomes questionable. This use of parentheses in the passage often put readers in a dilemma: which "voice" should they listen to? The one outside or inside the brackets? Even when the contents inside and outside the brackets are not mutually contradictory, it is still difficult to decide what the narrator really wants to express. For instance, Yang's kneeling is also followed by an interpretive parenthesis, rendering the act as being like "a falling tree wanting to conquer a mountain." To some

extent, this figurative expression adds a heroic and tragic flavor to the presumed slavishness of the act of kneeling, perhaps revealing part of Yang Ke's true self.

These rhetorical devices —along with the other narrative elements that have not yet been discussed— render the form of the novel unnatural and sometimes anti-narrational, implicitly revising and reshaping the manifest meaning of Yang Ke's behavior. They grant an alternative insight into the character's inner world, but in doing so also constitute the most difficult aspects of understanding the text. As Dorrit Cohn holds, "if a text never adheres to formal mimeticism in the first place, it can shape a different logic of its own, in which the same simultaneity of language and action helps to create and to sustain the illusion of a mental quotation" (215). This statement is particularly true with respect to Yan's *The Odes of Songs*. By focusing my analysis on the opening scene of the story, I do not only mean to make an argument about how the disenchanted *Shijing* is represented in the text, how it is used as an allegory for a desymbolized world, or how Yang Ke ambiguously represents himself as a marginalized intellectual against the backdrop of a world that has lost its symbols. More importantly, I hold that this opening scene also serves as an "archetypal" model in terms of the rhetorical forms, motifs, and narrative patterns that repeat themselves throughout the novel. In the similarity of the dissimilar and the dissimilarity of the similar, the text shapes an absurd logic of its own. In the next section, I will look into the motif of schizophrenia as it relates to the novel's various narratives of sex, and I will investigate the manner in which the text undergoes a spatial shift and transformation of meaning

from the public to the private, such that its critique of the social reality is transferred to the exploration of a more spiritual predicament.

The Indeterminacy of Sex and the Schizophrenic

In *The Odes of Songs*, sex as a parody of *Shijing*'s songs of love and sex is one of the most conspicuous of the novel's motifs. From the salacious scene in Yang Ke's bedroom to the repression of sexual desire, and from the carnival of sex in the brothel to the "democracy" of sex at the ancient *Shijing* site, the novel's depiction of sex is transformed from the realistic to the mythorealisitc. In the second part of the story, these multiple narratives of sex gradually divorce themselves from reality, creating a strange atmosphere of hallucination as well as a sense of schizophrenia. As Mark Kindead-Weekes says, often "sex is a way of talking about something else" (quoted in Wexler 172), and it would seem that Yan's mythorealistic portrayal of sex is likewise a way exploring other concerns.

In this section, by reexamining the recurring rhetorical forms that first appear in the novel's opening scene, I will investigate how the various narratives of sex as both a transgressive and non-transgressive phenomenon shapes Yang Ke's schizophrenic perception of his own personal and intellectual spiritual crises. Meanwhile, by identifying a tension between the public and private discourses represented in the novel's formal "repetitions," I will look into how Yang Ke's schizophrenic dissolution of his spiritual home as depicted through the narrative motif of sex, is, at least to some extent,

transferred from the contemporary social phenomenon of Chinese intellectuals' collective spiritual crisis to the study of an individual case, thus softening the socio-political thrust of the allegory of the disenchanted *Shijing*.

The narrative motif of sex occurs eight times in the story, serving as a kind of thread that weaves itself throughout Yang Ke's countryside trip in search of a spiritual home. Sex in the novel is taken as a source of primordial energy as well as a corrupting force that contrasts the spiritual universe of *Shijing* with the present world as it exists in reality. In the former case, it symbolizes love, reproduction, and a pure and primitive human pleasure; in the latter, it is an exchangeable commodity that signifies animal lust and carnal desire. This contrast is introduced in the opening scene, in which Li and Zhao's carnal desire ironically parodies the pure impulse of love in "Guanju," suggesting a desymbolized world devoid of ethics, value, and meaning.

Yang Ke's frequent visit to the brothels on Paradise Street might be treated as a metaphor for his attempt to subvert the existing sex narrative that has been "contaminated" by a contemporary social discourse replete with an instrumentalist ethos. This subversion is carried out through his reimagination of the symbolic meaning of his universe by making recourse to the spiritual origin of his interpretation of *Shijing*.[101]

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[101] Yang Ke interprets this spiritual origin as love. In his *Shijing* lecture delivered to the prostitutes in the brothel, Yang Ke concludes: "Love is the ultimate dwelling of human spirit and the essential home of those who are spiritually lost.… All the love songs in *Shijing* are the road signs and hints leading to our spiritual home. They tell us that only love can bring care and comfort to human beings who are in spiritual crisis, mending and showing us the location of the most essential home of human spirit." (爱，才是人类精神最终的家园，是一切精神失落者最为本根的故乡……《诗经》中所有的爱情诗，都是我们今天通往精神家园的路标和暗示，都在告诉我们只有爱和爱情，才能给精神危机的人类，带来抚摸和安慰，才能给我们修补和指明，最本根的人类的家源在哪儿。) Yan, Lianke, *Feng ya song* (163).

Thus, if Yang Ke's experiences in the brothel —disregarding whether they are comparable to those described in *Shijing*— happen, to borrow Confucius's words, "without deviated thoughts," sex, then, is likely to become a transgressive symbol, signifying Yang Ke's defiance and resistance to a world that has lost its symbols. This hypothesis, however, needs to be tested in the text itself.

Yang Ke's motivations for visiting the brothel appear ambiguous. He plans to visit Paradise Street ten times to persuade the youngest prostitute in each brothel to quit her job so that he can sponsor their journey home and prevent their coming back. He even decides to "take it as [his] career in Palou Mountain (as whole-heartedly as [he] was dedicated to [his] monograph those years)" (把这当成我回到耙耧山脉的事业做（和那几年我一心一意撰写我的专著样。) (*Feng ya song* 194). The supplementary statement in the parentheses compounds the satirical and comic effects of Yang's taking up his "business" in the brothel as his career pursuit. Perhaps due to the "sacredness" of the elusive "ideal," in most cases the portrayal of Yang Ke's experiences on Paradise Street is devoid of sensory details or, more precisely, is not erotic. However, the narrative style always seems to reflect a tension within him, exposing the schizophrenic aspect of Yang Ke's personality. In the following passage, Yang Ke is waiting in the room of a brothel for the youngest prostitute:

> She was not a waitress who delivered water (I knew she was not a waitress for water). She was a young girl who served men in the name of massage. Among all the girls in the store, she may not be the most beautiful one, but she was indeed

the youngest (I checked their ID card each time). I was waiting for her coming, yet afraid of her arrival. . . . I was nervously enjoying her waiting for me at the door and my imagination of her appearance (how old is she indeed? What does she look like? Is she local or not? Does she look darker or paler?). Not until I leisurely (hurriedly) washed my hands again, thinking that I have stretched the length of her waiting time from inches to feet, did I start to walk out of the bathroom. (她不是送水的服务员（我知道她不是送水的服务员），她是以按摩为名专门伺候男人的小姑娘。那店里所有的小姐中，也许她不是最为漂亮的，可确实是年龄最小的（每次我都会看看她们的身份证）。我胸中狂跳，又貌似心不在焉，等着她的到来，又似乎害怕她的到来…… 紧张快乐地享受着她在门口等我，我在卫生间里设想她是什么样儿的猜测和臆断（她到底有多大？长得什么样？是当地人还是外地人？肤色红一些还是白一些？）。直到我不慌不忙（急急忙忙），再一次洗了手，以为我已经把寸长的时间拉到丈长后，才开始从卫生间里走出来。) (*Feng ya song* 196)

On the face of it, this passage suggests nothing other than a psychological depiction of a brothel visitor new to the place and uneasily waiting for the services of a prostitute. However, this is the fourth time Yan Ke has visited Paradise Street and has interacted with a prostitute. Furthermore, he has not come for sex, so what makes him so nervous? What information is embedded in this description that is not easily perceived in the manifest plot? Finally, what is the connection between this passage and the others which are similarly concerned with sex but do not necessarily involve eroticism?

In taking a look back at the narrative style of the opening scene, readers may get a sense that this later passage —rather than being merely a psychological description— repeats the fundamental rhetorical features of the novel's opening scene. In both cases the story is narrated in the first person through the eyes of Yang Ke, but Yang Ke is evidently not a reliable narrator. In the above passage, Yang Ke's manner of narrating appears dreamy and surreal, replete with contradiction, redundancy, and ambiguity, all functioning to draw attention to narrative form rather than content. These textual effects are primarily created by parentheses. For example, the first parenthesis, "I knew she was not a waitress for water," appears redundant, echoing the preceding paragraph in which Yang Ke deliberately responds to the prostitute's knocking at the door by "nonchalantly saying: are you coming for delivering water? Come in" (若无其事地说，你是送水的吗？进来吧。) (*Feng ya song* 196). This self-deceiving response is challenged again and again by his unconscious repeating: "She was not a waitress who delivered water (I knew she was not a waitress for water)." The repetitive parenthesis here does not make sense except in that it signifies the gradually intensified unease within Yang Ke, in that his excuse for visiting the brothel is in conflict with his awareness that as a professor he does not belong here.

The second parenthesis is ambiguous and absurd. The pronoun "they" can refer either to all the prostitutes in the brothels or only to the youngest ones. Based on the context, it more possibly refers to the latter. It is common sense that Yang Ke cannot conclude that the prostitute is the youngest simply by checking her identity card without

also verifying the other prostitutes' ages. Thus, this parenthesis indicates two possibilities: Yang Ke is either mentally disordered or he is lying. Both interpretations, as will be discussed further below, are reinforced in the subsequent scenario. The third parenthesis suggests a deviation from Yang Ke's attempts to justify his "noble" purpose of visiting the brothels to an unconscious admission of his erotic longing. His eagerness to know the prostitute's appearance is foregrounded by the details in the parenthesis. In particular, his imagination of the prostitute's complexion can be read as a hint of Yang's sexual imagination, giving readers reason to suspect his sincerity of "redeeming" the youngest prostitutes from their disgrace. Building on the above analysis, the last parenthesis of "hurriedly," contrasting with the word "leisurely" outside the brackets, is an oxymoronic juxtaposition that represents Yang Ke's mental disorder and reinforce the tension between his inner desire and pretended disinterestedness. Overall, the contents of the parentheses do not necessarily play an important role in the development of the plots *per se*; however, they reveal what is hidden behind the narrator's mask by in that they are not being linked together logically but in a psychologically spontaneous order. These parentheses transcend linguistic barriers and serve as a disruption and distraction that makes any straightforward interpretation of the text impossible.

This passage in particular seems to suggest Yang Ke's vacillation between the two discourses of sex: *Shijing* and reality. While Li and Zhao's affair arguably embodies the intellectuals' spiritual degradation against the backdrop of a desymbolized world, Yang Ke's visits to the brothels suspends the black-and-white of sex as being sacred and

innocent in *Shijing* but profane in reality, thus creating a sense of moral ambiguity. And of course, Yang Ke's "noble" intent of visiting the brothel is also questioned and subverted in the realistic content of the text. Whether sex serves as a metaphor of redemption or a path of no return to a moral abyss is indeterminate here.

Entangled with this indeterminacy is the motif of the schizophrenic. My own interpretation of Yang Ke's keeling to the vice president in the opening scene as a manifestation of a nascent schizophrenia, has by now developed to a more recognizable extent. The concept of schizophrenia is often interpreted as a social phenomenon. My use of this term, characterized by the clinical symptoms of abnormal behavior, confused thinking, and maniacal self-repression draws inspiration from, but is ultimately different from, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's schizoanalysis, in which the schizophrenic becomes a tool of socio-political criticism. In liberating desire through resistance to the Oedipus complex —and, by extension, other forms of oppressive power— Deleuze and Guattari emphasize the revolutionary and subversive potential of the schizophrenic, and render these qualities as a manifestation of, in Wang Ban's summary, "the body's revolt against the rigid inscription of social meaning and instrumentalization" (246). My own investigation of the schizophrenic is contextualized in the narratives of sex and interwoven with the motifs of intellectual identity and spiritual crisis. I take the schizophrenic as a transgressive power in parallel with sex, but remain uncertain as to what extent the schizophrenia can represent a constructive force for the protagonist to reconfigure and rebuild an imagined world of symbols.

In depicting sex, the text makes a connection to the schizophrenic that characterizes not only the protagonist but also the narrative *per se*. The very nature of the tension residing in the schizophrenic, as described above, always needs to be reflected through narrative style, by means of such devices as oxymorons, redundancy, parentheses, digressive dialogues, and self-narrating monologues. In one particularly carnivalesque scene of sex that is also replete with absurdity, the schizophrenic is represented on levels of both form and content. It registers as the surface manifestation of a deeper plot and assumes a certain kind of coherency not in terms of its subversive inclination, but in its relation to the collapse of meaning of the world.

In order to provide a general idea of this scene, I will condense Yan's sixteen-page description into a few representative moments, without significantly altering its language and meaning. The scene is an odd mixture of sensual carnival and amorous feast of *Shijing* appreciation. Yang Ke has been spending the New Year holidays while residing with a group of young prostitutes in a hotel on Paradise Street. On New Year's Eve, the girls, in order to express their respect and gratefulness to Yang Ke, who has offered them money and persuaded them to leave prostitution, decide to wish him a happy new year by kowtowing to him naked. After that, they request that he choose one or more from among them to have sex with him. Unsurprisingly, Yang Ke "is stirred by their request, a craving for doing that thing wriggling inside like a worm" (被她们说动了，想做那件事情如同一条虫样在心里蠕动着。) (*Feng ya song* 248). However, he eventually wins the battle against carnal desire. Instead of going to bed with them, he

decides to take these still-naked prostitutes on as his students and deliver them a *Shijing* lecture.

The following dialogues take place after Yang has arranged for the girls to sit down, instructing them to act as his students at Qingyan University:

> They looked at me with some surprise, saying Professor Yang, you don't like the thing in bed? I said that I really had not taught at Qingyan University for half a year. They said that God, how unexpected that there is a man in the world who is unwilling to do that thing. I said that stop talking, you are now my bachelor, master, and doctoral students. Let's concentrate on a classical literature class, a lecture on *Shijing* appreciation. (她们有些吃惊地望着我，说杨教授，你不喜欢床上那事情？我说我真的半年没有给清燕大学上课了。她们说天呀，天下还有不愿做那事情的男人哩。我说别说话，你们现在都是大学生，都是研究生和我的博士生，我们集中起来讲一节古典文学课，讲一节《诗经》欣赏课。) (*Feng ya song* 249).

These passage is quite representative of the typical pattern of "dialogues" pervading *The Odes of Songs.* Dialogues never take place in a direct style, but appear as a mixture of self-narrating monologues mixed with third-person free indirect discourse, thereby creating a sense of dislocation and disorientation. Here Yang Ke digresses from his dialogue with the girls by responding incongruously. Digression is another prominent stylistic feature embedded in the characters' dialogues. In most cases, the speaker's mind seems to be drifting away and the character fails to respond to the other person directly.

The overall effect of these rhetorical devices is not only to reinforce the surreality and ambiguity generated by the self-narrating, but also to produce a kind of schizophrenic effect in which the internal and external worlds of the speaker are dissolved, the subjective and the objective blurred, and the real and the unreal merged. Yang Ke's digressive response to the prostitutes may be read as a deliberate avoidance of the topic of sex or simply a manifestation of his schizophrenia, but either is inescapably linked to his moral struggle between the allure of sex and maintaining his integrity as a professor.

Yang Ke's confusion of these naked girls with his students in Qingyan University and his insistence on giving them a lecture on *Shijing,* deliberate or not, is strikingly absurd but also quite revealing in the sense of mythorealism. If his *Shijing* lecture to the patients in the psychiatric hospital had aimed to satirize his schizophrenic society, his current voluntary offering of a *Shijing* lecture to a group of naked prostitutes reinforces his personal diagnosis schizophrenia as well as, perhaps, a real deeper semiotic and spiritual predicament inscribed upon this schizophrenia. Yang Ke talks "with cadence" (抑扬顿挫) and "explains profound ideas in simple ways" (深入浅出), but he "doesn't know whether they understand or not" (不知道她们听懂没听懂). He "feels they must have understood" (觉得她们一定听懂了), but then he "feels they don't seem to have understood" (又觉得她们好像没听懂。) (*Feng ya song* 251). Yang Ke's self-contradictory monologues, as David Der-wei Wang observes, "represent the disorder of the semantic system itself" (呈现语意系统的紊乱), and "are consequently followed by the confusion of values" (以及随之而来的价值混淆。) (294).

However, in discoursing with these naked girls, Yang Ke is so absorbed in his interpretation of *Shijing* that it is very possible he does not have any obscene thoughts in his mind. This seems to echo the spirit of the sexual scenes described in the love poems in *Shijing*, which are "joyful but not licentious." This moment well exemplifies Georges Bataille's argument that "Obscenity is relative … it is not exactly an object, but a relationship between an object and the mind of a person" (215). Following his lecture, Yang Ke joins his ecstatic audience, and he signs his name on their naked bodies. Finally, chanting the line of a love poem from *Shijing* that Yang Ke has written on a girl's breasts —"without you, even one day, for me it is as long as three years" (一日不见，如隔三秋) (*Feng ya song* 253)— the girls strip off his clothes and carry the naked Yang Ke off into the bedroom.

Greatly departing from ordinary reality, the ecstatic imagination of the sexual carnival culminates in mythorealism. It thus invites a mythorealistic reading. First of all, there is a kind of pessimism here, signifying Yang Ke's inner tensions trapped in, to appropriate Lu Xun's phrase, "the array of nothingness" (*wuwu zhizhen*).[102] Instead of

[102] In his prose-poem "Zheyang de zhanshi" 这样的战士 [Such a Fighter, 1925] collected in *Wild Grass* (*Yecao*), Lu Xun portrays a lonely soldier who fights the battle of nothingness and is only defeated by the absence of his enemy. According to Lu Xun's preface to *Wild Grass*, he wrote this piece to criticize the social phenomenon of intellectuals and scholars working for warlords. The notion "*wuwu zhizhen*" 无物之阵 [the array of nothingness] continues to draw academic interest and sparks heated discussions among scholars. Overall, it has been read differently amongst mainstream Chinese and Western-influenced scholars. Zhu Ping neatly sums up the two primary interpretations of the notion in his doctoral dissertation "Women and the Nihil: The Shadow Subject in Chinese Literary Modernity, 1915-1936." According to Zhu, "Orthodox Chinese scholars [such as Qian Liqun] tend to use a socio-political approach to decipher the meaning of Lu Xun's literary image, more often regarding 'the array of nothingness' as a reference to the social, political, and historical reality that exasperated Lu Xun and forced him into the position of a lonely fighter, who fights against the whole society in despair." Western scholars, however, "find that the prose-poems in *Wild Grass* are highly personalized, emotional, and philosophical." For instance, "Leo Ou-fan Lee suggests reading *Wild Grass* as Lu Xun's 'surrealistic world of the subconscious'," and regards "the 'muddled' phrasing serves to bring out not merely his [Lu Xun's] dissatisfaction with the social environment but, more importantly, certain configurations of his inner tension

understanding Lu Xun's "array of nothingness" in a political vein, I take Leo Ou-fan Lee's reading of it as a "surrealistic world of the subconscious" (quoted in Zhu 24) that has gone beyond realistic constraints. The sexual carnival is a metaphorical battle of despair and anti-despair against the amorphous void permeating Yang Ke's universe. Like Lu Xun's soldier, in this battle, Yang Ke does not really have a clearly identifiable rival. In part, his rival is the world of lost symbols, but Yang Ke is also the rival of himself in that he has been complicit in his own spiritual and moral degradation. Nevertheless, reflecting as it does the combined overtones of the Nietzschean Dionysian and the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, the episode also conveys subversive messages. It expresses an unrestrained desire for love, recognition, and identification. It is also an expression of the many unexpressed emotions that Yang Ke has accumulated in the course of his seeking a spiritual home, emotions which return as symptoms of schizophrenia. Yang Ke's schizophrenia, then, manifested in the bizarre spectacle of the sexual carnival which is itself a counter-narrative to the opening scene of his wife's adultery, has a flavor of "violence being met by violence," suggesting an attempt to reach beyond the mundane reality of carnal eroticism to a symbolic world of primordial sex.

In this mythorealistic interpretation, Yang Ke's dilemma seems to have been allegorically resolved; however, the tension that has been lurking in the background

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which certainly goes beyond the realistic confines of politics and political ideology" (Zhu 24-25). In my discussion of Yang Ke's own's situation, I take both interpretations into consideration, but tend to focus more on Leo Ou-fan Lee's interpretation, choosing to regard this strange sexual carnival as a manifestation of Yang's "surrealistic world of the subconscious," and a configuration of "his inner tensions" that go beyond the realistic confines of the socio-political world.

between his social reality and the imagined universe created by mythorealism gradually rises to the surface and reveals another problem, namely, that Yang Ke's perception of sex has been based upon a false sense of love and spiritual origin that he thought originate from *Shijing*. In imitating the praise of sex and love in *Shijing*, Yang Ke nonetheless ignores a hard fact: the brothel *per se* is symbolic of moral degradation, something which in itself suggests a sexual desire deeply disguised in his schizophrenic talks and behavior. The site of brothel, to some extent, cancels out the potentially subversive implications of the locales in *Shijing*. Consequently, the legitimacy of Yang Ke's search for spiritual origin is questionable.

More notably, both the brothels and even Paradise Street itself, despite their being by definition public venues, have been "privatized" and "personalized" by Yang Ke as his own personal haven divorced of their public or social attributes. In other words, these spaces, like the ambiguous space of limbo, belong neither to, to borrow Chen Sihe's critical terms, "court" (*miaotang*), nor "square" (*guangchang*), nor "folk" (*minjian*).[103] These three spatial divisions emerge in modern Chinese intellectual discourse representing intellectuals' different critical positions: the official, the public,

[103] These concepts are formulated by Chen Sihe in the late twentieth century, and accepted among Chinese scholars as important and influential concepts in the critical discourse of Chinese intellectuals. Overall, "*miaotang*" literally refers to the imperial court wherein intellectuals are employed as officials, striving for power, status, and prestige by serving the state. "Guangchang" refers to the politicized public space in which elite intellectuals, such as the May Fourth intellectuals, disseminate new and transgressive ideas with the aim of fostering social change and public enlightenment. "*Minjian,*" literally "folk," is a concept formulated later and hailed as a revolutionary development in its capacity to work against the mainstream ideology and refers to the unofficial and marginal spaces represented by the village culture in the traditional countryside. The concept of "*minjian*" has been extensively discussed in the Introductory Chapter and Chapter 2 of this dissertation. Although these three spaces are mutually penetrating and influencing, "*minjian*" has become the most important critical discourse in contemporary China due to its potential for subversiveness and resistance to the mainstream ideology. For more references, See Chen Sihe, 1994, 1997, and 2005.

and "*minjian*." Although the major part of Yang Ke's story occurs in the countryside, which is identified as "*minjian*," the narrative motif of sex is uprooted from its "grounding" in *minjian*'s heterogeneity and subversiveness.

It is the same case with the schizophrenic. Although. as Foucault argues, the schizophrenic is "a psychological manifestation of the sociological problem of alienation" (Behrent 69), it is also portrayed as a way for Yang Ke to escape the constraints of his real universe back at Qingyan University and thereby break away from his schizophrenic society. Nevertheless, for most of the story, Yang Ke's schizophrenic behavior appears completely unrelated to social protest and does meet with any opposition from the powers in society. Without such a conflict, his stance for and defense of his identity as an intellectual appear ungrounded and nihilistic. This is ultimately reflected in his eventual enmeshment in sensual indulgence and spiritual exile. The sexual carnival in the brothel, despite its potential for a critical reimagining of the social order, unfortunately marks the start of Yang Ke's real fall. After this episode, Yang Ke revisits Paradise Street and has sex with prostitutes without moral scruples. His moral degradation is further compounded by his sexual fantasies about his late ex-fiancée's teenage daughter and his subsequent murdering of the latter's husband out of jealousy.

Before moving on to the "democracy" of sex, which is closely connected to the theme of "disgust" to be discussed later, I would like to conclude that the narrative motif of sex largely functions to undermine and dislocate the conventional narrative mode of realism, creating a textual universe in which the schizophrenia of Yang Ke is investigated

from an internal rather than an external standpoint. Instead of delving deeper into the complexity of the desymbolized social world, mythorealism transfers the novel's focus from the collective crisis of reality to the exploration of an individual's inner struggle against his own spiritual collapse. This by no means erases the problems of the socio-political reality or avoids confronting its many repressions and anxieties. In taking a different approach than realist novels of social critique, *The Odes of Songs* integrates the social phenomena into the protagonist's subjective perception of reality, resulting in an unleashing of his own nascent irrationality. In the next section, I will look into how the "aphasic" or "silenced" social element, likewise disguised in the mythorealistic mode, is activated through a latent narrative of disgust and how, toward the end of the story, the narrative motif of disgust converges with the narrative motif of sex, revealing both the impossibility of transcendence as well as a note of hope for the reconstruction of a symbolic world.

The Disgusting and the Dystopian Imagination of Spiritual Home

In this section, I will return to the opening scene to answer another of the questions posed at the beginning of this chapter, that is, what examples of literary repetition in *The Odes of Songs* will enable understanding of the way repetition generates meanings beyond the content itself? Rather than focusing on the recursive pattern of the various stylistic features that have been extensively discussed above, I will focus on the motif of disgust, particularly visceral disgust, revealed through the recurring images of

human waste such as urine, excrement, sputum, dirty toilet tissue, stinky sweat, and so on. These images may be passed over as merely trivial, but as Hillis Miller holds, "in a novel, what is said two or more times may not be true, but the reader is fairly safe in assuming that it is significant" (2). Indeed, the recurrence of similar images of disgust throughout the novel has caused the motif to stand out as a narrative in itself that is able to generate important meanings. Within the framework of aesthetic ugliness, I regard Yan's use of the ugly or disgusting images throughout novel as a mythorealistic representation of a real world that is unrepresentable by conventional literary language. As a trope of the unaesthetic, disgust differentiates the schizophrenic Yang Ke from the coherent Yang Ke by means of his one consistent response to his chaotic reality, signifying an incessant self-deconstruction.

In the opening scene discussed in the first section of this chapter, we are told that the walls of the room in which Yang Ke has been confined for five years while working on his monograph *The Songs of Feng Ya*, are covered by dust and dirt "like a huge cloth stained by feces" (*Feng ya song* 2). This disgust-inducing image of "feces," abruptly appearing at the very beginning of the novel and strikingly juxtaposed with the sacredness of *Shijing*, sets an ironic and gloomy tone for the whole novel. Nevertheless, it barely arouses any negative affective response from readers until the recurrence of similar disgusting images makes it retrospectively recognizable and meaningful. Correlated with the metaphorical discourse of the disenchanted *Shijing*, which focuses on the degradation and downfall of intellectual culture against the social backdrop of

pragmatism and instrumentalism, it is evident that these obtrusive images of disgust do not appear randomly or arbitrarily. Rather, the repetitive pattern of disgust shapes a latent narrative alongside the narratives of the desymbolized world and sex, connecting "the public" and "the private" and conveying meanings which both reaffirm and disrupt them.

Before moving on to the specific nature of disgust, I would like to seek some theoretical support for Yan's use of disgust to construct meanings that contain transgressive forces. First of all, I will raise Carolyn Korsmeyer's questions: "What does *feeling disgusted* add to the experience of art that justifies the arousal of such an unpleasant affect?[104] Are there not more elevated ways of conveying the same insight?" ("Disgust" 755-756). Following Korsmeyer here, I will investigate why and how disgust, —more so than any other form of literary aesthetic— so effectively challenges readers' comfortable assumptions about social normality, and how in the novel it shapes the way the protagonist is able to make sense of the desymbolized world and to conceive of his spiritual universe by moving back and forth between the two. The following frequently quoted statement from Kant provides an oppositional perspective or theoretical basis for understanding both the validity and the consequences of taking disgust as a literary or artistic aesthetic:

> There is only one kind of ugliness that cannot be presented in conformity with nature without obliterating all aesthetic liking and hence artistic beauty; that

[104] The italics are added in the original text.

ugliness which arouses disgust. For in that strange sensation, which rests on nothing but imagination, the object is presented as if it insisted, as it were, on our enjoying it even though that is just what we are forcefully resisting; and hence the artistic presentation of the object is no longer distinguished in our sensation from the nature of this object itself, so that it cannot possibly be considered beautiful. (180)

This famous assertion that disgust is something not worthy of any extended attention is notably disputed by Carolyn Korsmeyer, who, in *Savoring Disgust*, argues that "aesthetic disgust is a response that, no matter how unpleasant, can rivet attention to the point where one may be said to savor the feeling" (3). Contextualizing disgust in the scope of certain psychological and philosophical theories of emotions, Korsmeyer maintains that disgust has "a paradoxical magnetism" (3) in that it "converts from pure aversion to paradoxical attraction while retaining its trademark visceral shock" (11). Thus, the transgressive power of disgust, according to her, lies in that disgust "become[s] beautiful not just because the rendering is deft or poetic but also because [it] capture[s] in a breathtaking manner something terrible that we may recognize as true" (175).

The significance of Korsmeyer's counter-argument against Kant's rejection of disgust has broad implications in a variety of spheres. Within scope of literature, disgust gives literary works an alternative aesthetic power and rhetorical force to offer a possible opening onto an otherwise inaccessible reality. In this regard, disgust is aligned with other mythorealistic components in Yan's writing in that they all work to reveal invisible

or unrepresentable truths. The transgressive embrace of disgust in *The Odes of Songs*, rather than repelling the readers, gives rise to a comic effect and a strong sense of irony and absurdity. In this context disgust resembles neither Kafka's anxious repulsion nor Sartre's existential nausea, both of which appear abstract and enigmatic; instead, it derives primarily from the figurative image of human waste and is comically associated with both the decadence of society and the protagonist's self-mockery of his simultaneous distaste for and complicity with such a society. Such use of disgust achieves, in Korsmeyer's words, "scatological humor," in that "disgust is mixed not only with amusement but also with contempt, perhaps even vengefulness" ("Disgust" 758).

A description of "peeing" occurs in the novel's second chapter. After his completion of *The Songs of Feng Ya*, we are told that Yang Ke "wanted to cry out" (想唤) and "sing" (想唱); however, he "didn't do anything" (什么也没做) (*Feng ya song* 48) but "went to the public toilet, stretching himself and peeing" (到公用厕所伸个懒腰撒了一泡尿。) (49). "Peeing" is an image that appears in different situations throughout the novel and thus demands an extensive discussion. In these few words, an image of a distinguished *Shijing* expert peeing in the toilet vividly portrays Yang Ke's self-mockery of the orthodox representation of intellectuals. After deliberate consideration, Yang Ke chooses to "celebrate" his elevated academic achievement with the vulgar pleasure of urination. In marking the triumphal and solemn moment of the completing of his magnum opus with the performing of an unexpected but perfectly normal bodily function, Yang subverts the lofty image of intellectuals and the value of their academic

pursuit in a teasing tone, indicating his perception of the academic world itself as vulgar, disgusting, and absurd.

This subjective projection of Yang Ke's own perception of reality onto his intellectual identity and pursuits is reinforced by a number of metaphors relating to the feeling of disgust aroused from sticky sputum, shit-stained toilet paper, rotten smells, and stinky sweat. In one particularly eventful *Shijing* class delivered to more than two hundred university students, Yang Ke's careful preparation and insightful analysis of *Shijing* fail to capture his students' attention. Only a dozen of them stay till the end of the class and only do so for the reason that, being unable to afford a ticket for an American film, they have nowhere else to go. Yang Ke "sees students slipping out of the classroom from the back door like thieves … their footsteps hesitating, like sputum stuck in the throat" (看见有学生贼一样从后面溜出门……脚步声吞吞吐吐，如憋在喉咙里吐不出去的痰。) (71). Meanwhile, "the floor was littered with 'The Notice about Strictly Strengthening the Teaching of *Shijing*' issued by Li Guangzhi for [him], like the shit-stained toilet paper in the open-air toilet in my [his] hometown in the Palou Mountain" (满地由李广智为我签发的《关于要严格加强<诗经>解读课教学的通知》，像我家乡耙耧山脉露天厕所里扔的擦过屁股的纸。) (72). Closely linked with the above description is Yang Ke's failure to maintain his identity and social status in the university. Following a conspiracy amongst the university leaders, Yang Ke is ordered to receive medical treatment in the university's psychiatric hospital. When the vote is cast, he sees their raised hands "like lombardy poplars surrounding the table, filling the

meeting room with rotten smells emanating from forest and stinky sweat in their fists" (像一排箭杆杨般围桌而立，使会议室里到处都弥漫着森林的腐味和他们捏在拳头里的汗臭味。) (*Feng ya song*, 105).

The absurd irony embedded in the objective facts of his students' indifference to the *Shijing* class and his colleagues' decision to send him to the hospital is conveyed compellingly through the figural representation of visceral disgust. These disgusting imageries, while violating the readers' whitewashed concept of university life, symbolize well Yang Ke's own negative emotions towards the reality of the university environment. The association between disgust, the *Shijing* class, and the raised hands brings to the fore the fundamental concern that underlies Yang Ke's very existence; that is to say, by mocking his own ineffective presence at the university, he expresses subconscious anxiety about the crisis of intellectual identity in contemporary society.

Yang Ke's self-mockery is also deeply intertwined with his satirizing of social reality and intellectuals as a group. His perception of the world as being absurd and disgusting is closely aligned with his reflections on the true essence of being an intellectual in such a society as evoking nothing but a response of disgust. This insight is repeatedly manifested in the act of "peeing." After being driven out of the National Institute of Archaeology for the reason that nobody believes he has discovered an ancient *Shijing* site, Yang Ke stands on the side of the road, looking at the city dwellers who are in turn looking at him, "like a pile of shit seeing another pile of shit" (像一堆屎看见了另外一堆屎。). At that moment it suddenly occurs to him that he "wants to find a place

and pee" (忽然想要去哪儿撒上一泡尿。) (*Feng ya song* 401). In the space of one and half a pages, Yang Ke comically describes his frustration of not being able to find a satisfactory place to pee. At last, when he finally decides to pee against the wall of the Ministry of Public Security, hidden from view among pine trees, a policeman discovers him, Yang Ke is so frightened that he has to hold back the urine. After his introducing himself, the policeman says to him: "Ok, pee. [He said] for intellectuals' sake, if you really can't hold, pee here but don't do it again" (你尿吧。[他说]看在你是知识分子的分上，实在憋不住，就下不为例让你在这儿尿一泡。) (*Feng ya song* 402). However, it turns out that although Yang Ke uses all his strength, he "cannot squeeze out one single drop of urine" (没能挤出一滴尿水来。) (402).

The episode of Yang Ke's aborted peeing against the wall of the Ministry of Public Security and the policeman's granting him permission on account of his intellectual identity, albeit flippant and absurd, is also ironic and revealing. Peeing against the institutional wall has, to some extent, transcended the significance of his previous act in the university toilet. It seems to aim to subvert the practices of institutional power at an even higher level and hence critique the discursive power originally emanating from there. Such a critique, lurking as it does behind the narration of absurdity and disgust, never really becomes the main focus of the novel. Instead, intellectuals as a group are relentlessly mocked and ridiculed. Although this satirical affirmation of an intellectual's right to pee on the wall of the Ministry of Public Security

carries a transgressive and subversive overtone, it is rendered irrelevant by Yang Ke's subsequent inability to do so.

As demonstrated from the above discussion, although the tone of the novel's social critique is made ambivalent through the narrative motif of disgust, the disruptive effects of pee/peeing remain, and are constantly repeated in the text. Together with other disgust-inducing images, peeing epitomizes the disturbing and repulsive feelings residing in Yang Ke, and the depiction of peeing as such is a nonrealist way of representing what is unrepresentable in an utterly realistic style. In transcending the linguistic limitations of conventional literary discourse, disgust provides an alternative point of reference from which Yang Ke can make sense of the desymbolized world, and evokes a reflective consciousness of his self-representation in reality.

Before deciphering how disgust —or more specifically, peeing— moves the narrative space from the public to the non-public and eventually converges with the narrative motif of sex toward the end of the story, I would like to look into the interrelationship between these two seemingly contrasted narratives. This latent narrative of disgust, particularly, Yang Ke's peeing in two "solemn" situations, is not reminiscent of the portrayal of the schizophrenic in the narrative of sex, at least as far as its stylistic features are concerned. One interesting point is that the act of peeing and imagery of disgust are entirely absent from Yang Ke's experiences on Paradise Street. This separation indicates a contrast between private and public discourse. Sex, as discussed in the previous section, by its being contextualized in an enclosed and privatized space, is a

manifestation of both Yang Ke's progressive self-degradation and his inner struggle against this process. Disgust, in contrast, works in a reverse way, from the external to the internal. As a relatively stable affective response in both the objective and subjective world of Yang Ke, disgust is a metaphorical representation of a stable centre of reality within Yang Ke's subjective perception of the objective world. And finally, it is through disgust that the part of social reality that has been missing from the narrative motif of sex is retrieved in a mythorealistic way and set into relation with Yang Ke's schizophrenia.

In the next "peeing" episode to be discussed, we will continue to see how the social critique embedded in the narrative of disgust implicitly self-deconstructs. While in the process of escaping to the remote Palou Mountain after murdering Xiaomin's husband, Yang Ke "pulls [his] penis, the ugly thing, out of his pants (no longer like a professor), and pees toward the east. Afterwards, [he] tucks it back into his pants, and yells at the sky in the east: I am Yang Ke. I am a professor. I am an amazing expert. Do you know that?" (掏出他[我]的丑物(再也不像教授了)，朝着正东的天地撒了一泡尿。尿完后，还把他[我]的丑物装进去，大声地对着东方的天空扯着嗓子唤，我是杨科我是教授我是了不起的专家你们知道不知道？) (*Feng ya song* 347). Having distanced from the public by walking into the wild, Yang Ke not only pees comfortably, but also pees towards the east, a direction that explicitly signifies a political posture and easily triggers rich associations. The release of the transgressive power of peeing in this scene is in the compelling contrast to Yang Ke's inability to pee against the institutional wall in the previous one. This contrast seems to reveal a secret: the shift in space from

the public to the non-public, and the return of Yang Ke's schizophrenia —or at least a heightening of its symptoms. In other words, it is only in the garb of the schizophrenic and away from the supervisory center of official power that Yang Ke, the marginalized, can "speak" with authority. However, this moment of social critique lacks a certain weight because it is overshadowed by the semiotic uncertainty of the schizophrenic: its irrationality undermining the legitimacy and credibility of the narration. It is also worth noting that this scene follows Yang Ke's murdering Xiaomin's husband, which, to some extent, already undermines his moral and intellectual authority.

As the text stands, the narrative of disgust conveys an implicit tension between self-mockery and social critique, which is present in all the scenes involving disgust. As this sense of self-mockery is strongly transmitted in the absurdity of the depiction, the social critique seems to melt away, yet tenaciously lingers in the text as a reminder of the external conditions that have, at least in part, triggered Yang Ke's schizophrenia and spiritual crisis. In most cases, whether the transgressive power of disgust is released or not, the narrative constantly seems to subvert itself by self-deconstructing its own socio-critical potential, and in doing so makes place for an exploration of or meditation on human spirituality. The reasons behind this phenomenon are complicated and beyond this chapter's scope, whereas the intended focus of this chapter is how mythorealism channels the social critique implied by the disenchanted *Shijing* or the desymbolized world into a philosophical reflection on an intellectual's spiritual crisis.

In this light, where does disgust eventually lead? The most subversive episode of peeing happens at the end of the story, in a collective and primitive fashion. Yang Ke has accidentally discovered an ancient *Shijing* site on the isolated Palou Mountain. Together with some homeless prostitutes and exiled intellectuals, he turns the ancient *Shijing* site into a utopian community, a duplication of Tao Yuanming's Peach Blossom Spring or an imagined society in *Shijng*. In this enclosed and self-sufficient community, they lead a primitive, unsophisticated lifestyle, working together and sharing everything. Even the prescriptions for disease is tinged with primitive romance: "one *qian* of cloud, two *qian* of air, three *qian* of sunlight, four *qian* of moonlight, and five *qian* of fragrance of flowers" (一钱白云，二钱空气，三钱日光，四钱月色，五钱花香) (*Feng ya song* 412).[105]

Most strikingly, it is here, in the discourse of the ancient *Shijing* site, that the narrative motifs of sex and disgust converge in a mythorealistic way, replete with absurdity and irony. In this utopian community, sex is distributed through contests of peeing: "men who pee highest win and girls who pee farthest win" (男人们比赛看谁尿得最高，姑娘们比赛看谁尿得更远). (*Feng ya song* 416). In this way, both sex and peeing in this utopian context are endowed with new symbolic meaning and serve as subversive forces in deconstructing an outside world that has lost its symbols. Sex here symbolizes the essential form of human existence which is no different than other human

[105] Q*ian* is a unit of weight, which equals 5 grams. This term was used in ancient China.

activities such as eating, sleeping, and working. Its distribution exemplifies the ideal social system of democracy and equality. The act of peeing loses much of its repulsive characteristics and represents the evaluation system of this society. Meanwhile, it also allegorically signifies the courage of speaking from the margins. Its subversive force is revealed in Yang Ke's remarks: "we are people who didn't even dare to pee, but today we just pee boldly" (我们是些先前连尿都不敢尿的人，但今天我们就要放心大胆的尿。) (416).

This ancient *Shijing* site is Yang Ke's imagined spiritual home. It is an idealized model of society in opposition to a desymbolized world. Like Shouhuo Village in another of Yan's novels, *Lenin's Kisses*, it is a "more organic community, a nonconflictual and harmonious space that exists outside of history and modern civilization" (Liu Jianmei 14). Nevertheless, compared to Shuohuo Village, which is at least set against a realistic background, the ancient *Shijing* site is an utterly mythorealistic construct, with no realistic point of reference other than to oppose conventional assumptions. Thus, the significance of its discovery resides in its allegorical rather than realistic meaning, that is, it conveys a utopian hope for intellectuals like Yang Ke who seek to withdraw from the fallen world.

Even so, the *ancient Shijing* site is not necessarily an ideal construct. By attempting to return to the ancient time of *Shijing* and taking refuge in vague imaginings of a perfect world, Yang Ke and his followers' spiritual home is a place divorced from true social realities. Living out a hollow escapist fantasy, Yang Ke's seeking of spirit

origin becomes, in David Der-wei Wang's words, "nothing more than a victory of Ah Q spirit" (无非是一场阿 Q 精神的胜利大逃亡) (*Feng ya song* 15). Following Yang Ke's eventual departure to seek out the next hidden *Shijing* site, the text deconstructs itself once again, and the ancient *Shigjing* site is turned into a dystopian spiritual home.

To conclude this section, I must go back to the imagery of disgust, particularly, peeing, to emphasize how the critical strain of the narrative of disgust is also performed beyond the text through the author's own reluctant intervention. Two years after the first version of the novel was published in Taiwan, *The Odes of Songs* was successfully republished by Henan Literature and Art Publishing House in mainland China. In this version, the carnivalesque depiction of the peeing contest is effaced from the text. The distribution of sex is revised to be decided by the neutral drawing of lots rather than the subversive peeing. The external reason for this change is unknown, but Yan himself has mentioned that he is often required to revise his manuscript in order that it can be successfully published. However, this "text's violence" also ironically mirrors the novel's tension between the author's own critical impulse and the text's overall theme of intellectual spiritual crisis. From the disgusting stain on the wall at the very beginning of the novel to the disappearance of the bizarre peeing contest at the end of the story, the narrative of disgust represents a clear pattern of how the social criticism embedded in the text is overshadowed by and strategically subsumed by Yang Ke's self-satirizing existential quest and futile pursuit of an unattainable spiritual home.

Conclusion

In responding to the majority of existing scholarship on *The Odes of Songs*, this chapter does not so much argue against those scholarly criticism on this novel as it does provide an additional "mythorealistic" perspective to reread the story. At the same time, I am also fully aware that Yan Lianke's ambiguous position as the narrator's double should not be glossed over in the discussion. Quite contrarily, it is paradoxically through Yang Ke's seemingly anachronistic or temporal disconnection from his own time that the author Yan Lianke's contemporariness is highlighted. Unlike the other two novels analyzed in this dissertation, in which Yan tries to erase himself from the text, in *The Odes of Songs*, he is seen participating in the story in different ways both inside and outside the text. Besides the obvious textual clues such as the first-person narrator-protagonist's name sharing the same character "ke" as in Yan Lianke and the similar family names "Yang" and "Yan," Yan also demonstrates his intention of intervening in the text by enclosing three postscripts to the novel that explain his purpose in writing this novel.

Even so, a reader may still have reason to suspect whether Yan's explanations in those postscripts sincerely or truthfully reflect his real motivations beyond literary creation *per se*, something which has already been questioned by scholars such as Shao Yanjun. The name Yang Ke and use of a first-person narrator are also insufficient to declare that the protagonist is an unrealistic portrait of Yan himself as is claimed in the postscripts. Before explaining why this matters to my argument, I would like, first of all,

to point out an almost unanimously ignored detail in the story. After his discovery of the ancient *Shijing* site, Yang Ke returns to the city for short visit to Qingyan University and his former home, during which he finds his wife Zhao Ruping living with Li Gaungzi. Unsurprisingly, Zhao treats Yang Ke coldly and leaves him alone in her new home: "Like an unwelcome guest, Yang Ke was left alone in the luxurious living room of his host. Hearing the elevator rattling down outside the door, he sat down helplessly. He found the sofa under his buttocks was strikingly soft. All a sudden, he fell into a trance of bewilderment" (杨科像不受欢迎的客人样，被孤零零地留在主人家豪华阔大的客厅里。听着门外电梯润滑的响动声，他无力地坐下去，原来屁股下的沙发惊人的软。猛一下他就一屁股陷在了一堆云雾里。) (*Feng ya song* 381).

In this brief description, the third-person narrator stands out noticeably from the rest of the text. Indeed, this is the only place in the whole novel that the narrative perspective shifts from the first-person to the third-person. But why? And what is the third-person point of view intended to convey? I take it as Yan's intentional intervention in the text with the aim of deliberately causing confusion among readers over the identity of the third-person narrator so as to prompt the questions: who has been speaking? Whose story it is? Yang Ke's or Yan Lianke's ? The sudden shift of the pronoun from "I" to "he" is also likely to signify that Yan Lianke has been talking through the voice of Yang Ke, but at this juncture his empathy for his protagonist has reached an uncomfortable level of intensity due to their shared feeling of the loss of "drifting and

homecoming" (漂浮与回家) (*The Odes of Songs* 421). Thus, he cannot help withdrawing himself from the text and observing his protagonist from a distance.

In any case, the abrupt change of narrative perspective serves as another proof of Yan Lianke's empathetic connection with Yang Ke despite his disapproval of the latter and despite the latter's moral degradation. Yan's intervention into the text in this novel can be read as a strong evidence further reinforcing the thesis of the whole dissertation. That is, the mythorealisitic narrative, while transferring the politically sensitive subject matter or social critique to broader humanistic concerns such as individuals' potentialities and spiritual predicaments, should not simply be dismissed as an expedient strategy of engaging social problems but avoiding social criticism. Rather, it is a means of exploring new forms of language to express humankind's pervasive but "inexpressible" predicament of existence in the face of various modern crises. Therefore, although Yan explicitly states that "it is the result of the system having formed and alienated people, and those alienated people merging and interacting with the system" (Li and Yan 158), his writing often breaks new ground in terms of subject matter, and his focus on the alienated self is always more pronounced.

The subversive writing of sex and disgust is a response to the collapse of meaning. It creates a strong sense of absurdity full of carnivalesque feeling. As the most prominent characteristic of mythorealism of this novel, absurdity does not so much work to subvert the absurdity of the desymbolized world, as to underline it and make it more visible to the readers. More importantly, absurdity is in this novel the externalized

representation of Yang Ke's spiritual confusion and moral predicament. Such self-reflexivity can refer back to the tradition of modern Chinese literature of evoking "a self in a state of crisis over its own identity" (Feuerwerker 167) dating from Lu Xun's "A Madman's Diary." In particular, it echoes Yu Dafu's *Chenlun* 沉沦 (*Sinking*) in that both convey an autobiographical compulsion to expose the protagonist's inner weaknesses through fantasies of sex. In claiming that "the individual portrayed in his fiction was often himself" (Feuerwerker 178), Yu Dafu similarly structures the plot of *Sinking* around the emotional states of the protagonist, who confesses his longing for sex, his voyeurism, and his sexual experiences with a prostitute. Unable to achieve self-affirmation, Yu's protagonist ends by drowning himself in the sea. In *The Odes of Song*, by contrast, Yan's impulse to use mythorealism as a literary means to seek a way out for his protagonist suggests a more positive endeavor.

The most significant allegorical meaning of *The Odes of Songs* resides in the intersection of the narratives of sex and disgust in the context of the ancient *Shijing* site commune. By attempting to reconstruct a symbolic utopian world and then subsequently abandoning it, Yan suggests that neither escaping into the idyllic past nor dwelling on the problems of the present will fundamentally solve modern people's collective spiritual crisis that has been triggered by the various crises of modern society. The utopian/dystopian spiritual home serves as a reflection on and warning against human beings' alienation of mind and gradually faded ideals that can result from the process of pursuing the meaning of the world. The ancient *Shijing* site is a symbolic construct that,

in Yan's own words, "is illusory but more real. It does not exist in the reality, but exists in everyone's heart" (是虚幻的，但更加真实。它是不存在的，但存在于每个人的内心。) ("Yan Lianke"). Meanwhile, as an unrealizable and ultimately dystopian imagining, the *Shijing* site simultaneously self-deconstructs any possibility of retiring into the remote ancient times, a possible path for the future is opened by means of Yang Ke's departure to look for the next ancient *Shijing* site. As Chen Xiaoming comments, "Yan Lianke's works have always had a strong sense of criticism, with an overall inclination of deconstruction. In the cultural environment pervaded by postmodern value rationality, it is difficult for us to expect writers to construct new spiritual coordinates. In this sense, deconstruction itself is a kind of construction" (阎连科的作品，一向具有强烈的批判意识，他的总体取向是消解的，在后现代盛行价值理性的文化环境下，我们很难期待作家再去建构什么新的精神坐标。从这个意义上讲，解构本身其实就是一种建构。) (Fu Xiaoping).

To conclude, structured as it is around Yang Ke's personal experience, *The Odes of Songs* also conveys a tension between the individual metaphor constructed by personal experience and the social metaphor of the desymbolized world. In this, Yan does not abandon his critique of the current social reality and he still retains a hope of a way out of the spiritual predicament facing modern people. In order to demonstrate his sincerity in cherishing such a hope, he opens new possibilities at the conjuncture of the real and the fictional by sending his protagonist to the unknown future.

Conclusion

This dissertation opens with Agamben's notion of "contemporariness" and now returns to it as a way of moving towards its closing. What lies at the centre of Agamben's contemporariness is his philosophical interpretation of "the present," or "the now," as well as his understanding of the stance a writer should take in his/her representation of the historical present. The present in question by no means signifies the current moment that separates itself from the past and the future, but is always a past that has slipped into the future by the time it is represented in the future. Thus, to be contemporary, according to Agamben, indicates the capacity of representing contemporary experiences through the disclosure of temporality and historicity. A contemporary writer must be able to reveal the depth of history and reality by perceiving its darkness and obscurity as being inextricably interwoven into the very texture of the present. In this light, contemporariness invites a reflection on the immediate reality or, more precisely in Yan's case, the immediate socio-political reality. It addresses questions such as how he avoids being trapped in this immediate reality, and how he is able to penetrate its superficiality and transcend its transitory nature by offering critical responses to the hidden truths of social reality and human existence from his own particular perspective.

These questions naturally lead to the discussion of Yan's "political writing." Being contemporary, in Agamben's sense, inevitably indicates an involvement with socio-political issues. Most of Yan's works explore devastating events in the history of

modern China and the consequences of the rapid development of the socialist market economy. The subject matter of his novels, including those not discussed in this study, mostly centres around such socio-political issues and historical events, such as the AIDS scandal in *Dream of Ding Village*: the catastrophic intersection of the Anti-rightist Movement, the Great Famine, and the Great Leap Forward in *The Four Books*; and the corruption of academia and the university education system in *The Odes of Songs*. This list can be expanded to the representation of the Cultural Revolution in *As Hard as Water*; a rural community's explosive growth from a small village to a megalopolis against the background of the market economy in *The Explosion Chronicles*; the exposure of corruption in the funeral business in *The Day the Sun Died*, and so on. These works are politically engaged, but they are not political in a pure sense of the term; in other words, they do not serve a merely political end.

Thus, Yan's writing offers an alternative contemporariness that shares the essence of that proposed by Agamben. As is briefly discussed in the opening of this dissertation, "alternative contemporariness" refers to Yan's persistence in taking a *minjian* position in his writing, and his daring to take the risk of uttering a voice from the margin in challenging the dominant ideology of contemporary China and drawing attention to "unrepresentable" social problems. It also refers to Yan's efforts to seek unconventional literary expressions to write about social problems but then transcend them by exceeding the provincial limits of historical events and broadening his writing into an interrogation of humanity and the condition of human existence. Thus, Yan's

alternative contemporariness is also a matter of his perception of a writer's obligation in the process of the reconfiguration and reformation of contemporary Chinese society.

In his conversation with Chinese scholar Zhang Xuexin 张学昕, Yan advances his view of the function of literature:

> while the social value system is so chaotic, shouldn't literature represent and ponder something seriously? While everyone feels extremely confused in the face of the chaos of social value and morality, literature should be more or less able to reflect on people' spirit and emotions. . . . The society in transition needs [literary] attention, but at the centre of the attention should be the spirit and emotion that pervade this period" (社会价值体系如此混乱，文学难道不应该去反映和思考一些什么吗？在混乱的价值和道德中，所有的人都异常迷茫，文学或多或少是可以对人们的精神、情感有所梳理的……转型期的社会是需要关注，可这个时期的精神、情感才是我们关注的焦点。) (*Wode* 63).

This thought has been internalized as his responsibility as a writer, repeatedly expressed in various situations such as in his interviews and biographical essays and penetrating each of his creative pieces. It also differentiates Yan's works from the instrumentalism of mainstream modern Chinese literature, particularly those written in the first half of the 1990s. The latter is often —albeit controversially and problematically— projected onto the totality of the third world's "national allegory" postulated by Jameson, in which "the telling of the individual story and the individual

experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the experience of the collectivity itself" (85-86). Or, it similarly reveals an "obsession with China," which, according to C.T. Hsia, means that Chinese writers always give priority to national crisis in their writing, resulting in a "certain patriotic provinciality and a naiveté of faith with regard to better conditions elsewhere" (536). Yan's writing does neither. Instead, having shaken off the yoke of nationalism, his writing on modern Chinese history and contemporary social problems, ostensibly appearing to take an "inward turn by concentrating on local predicaments" (Wang David Der-wei xvii), actually looks outward both for formal "stimuli" (xvii) and for resolution. In the context of this dissertation, this "resolution" specifically refers to Yan's deconstructive manoeuvre and broad humanistic concern conveyed by his mythorealist narration of Chinese history and social issues. Like Dostoevsky and Conrad, Yan probes into the illness of modern civilization and the dark side of modernity as a means of looking into humanity's moral existence, the latter becoming the overarching themes that move beyond the particularity of the political subject matter in each piece to address universal themes. This transcendence of pure politics is strikingly evidenced in the three novels discussed in this dissertation. Humanity remains the core of Yan's inquiry, no matter whether it is investigated through the deconstructive writing of national character against the AIDS scandal in *Dream of Ding Village*, the reconstitution of the ethical self against the extreme external environment in *The Four Books*, or the collapse of contemporary intellectuals' spiritual and ethical values against the widespread problem of consumerism and instrumental

ethos in *The Odes of Songs*. The similarity of these novels lies in that, instead of writing a straightforward statement of political resistance, Yan tempers the political tenor of social and historical events and transcends the thematic limitations of a purely polemical narrative by taking advantage of the ambivalent effects of mythorealism.

Nevertheless, such a shift from provincialism or particularity to a kind of universality does not blunt the critical edge of his writing. Instead, an unresolvable tension between social structure and human vulnerability, as well as between power and resistance, is always embedded in the mythorealist narrative, whose multifaceted nature —or, more specifically, whose —political and aesthetic function, has been fully explored. Strategically, Yan uses mythorealism as a means to escape state censorship by deliberately diluting the political thrust of his subject matter. But this does not necessarily contradict his desire for a formal and stylistic innovation to represent the unrepresentable, which is, in his words, "so outrageous that it renders realism inert" (Fan). Both Yan's strategic self-obfuscation and his aesthetic innovation indicate his deep concern with how to represent a contemporary Chinese reality that is both unique and universal in today's world. While some realities cannot be fully represented through realism, because their complexities have gone beyond the descriptive capacity of realism, others simply cannot be explicitly represented in the realistic form because of their political sensitivity. These two aspects are inextricably entangled with each other and cannot be distinguished from one another in Yan's mythorealist texts.

Yan contextualizes his theoretical construction of mythorealism in the tradition of socialist realism by completely rejecting this tradition, but simultaneously his own attachment to a kind of vague and unrecognized realism seems to grow stronger in his process of literary creation. While his mythorealist techniques depart greatly from those in the conventional sense of realism, Yan's stories *per se* convey a strong realistic sense, being as they are situated in real social events and historical moments in modern China. They are, on the one hand, surreal, absurd, strange, and allegorical, but on the other hand, realistic, historical, and satirical. Yan describes his formal experiment as an endeavour of taking a third path between that of Lu Xun and Shen Congwen, calling it an "art of banging one's head against the wall" (撞墙的艺术) (Yan and Zhang 52). While "banging one's head against the wall" refers to Lu Xun's courage in confronting social realities in his critique of Chinese culture, "art" signifies Shen Congwen's apolitical and artistic representation of rural China. To Yan, the idealized integration of the two indicates a new possibility of representing rural China by making a compromise both aesthetic and thematic between Lu Xun's straightforward social critique and Shen Congwen's disengaged poetic writing.

Apparently, in sharing certain commonalities with Lu Xun's and Shen Congwen's modernist inclination, Yan's writing, while essentially different from Shen's rural lyricism,[106] does not strictly follow the path ideally set by himself. Instead, and as

[106] For more information about Shen Congwen and his writing style as well as the tradition of native soil writing, please see Chapter 2, Footnote 70.

this dissertation's exploration of the different modes of Yan's mythorealist narratives attempts to demonstrate, the realist tradition from which he has critically distanced himself follows gradually reveals itself as a recognizable fact. Yan's contemplative insights into key historical movements, the allure of modernization, and the crisis of socialist developmentalism reveal a paradoxical vision of hopelessness and hope, strongly reminiscent of Lu Xun's paradox of profound despair and resisting despair. Meanwhile, Lu Xun's moral introspection, self-dissection, and combative spirit are also enthusiastically echoed by Yan in his shaping of protagonists such as Ding Shuiyang in *Dream of Ding Village*, the Child, the Scholar, and the Author in *The Four Books*, and his spiritual "double" Yang Ke in *The Odes of Songs*.

Essentially, what resides in the core of Yan's mythorealist writing is a tradition of critical realism inherited from Lu Xun, with a strong dose of Lu Xunesque existentialist leaning and critical spirit. Yan shows a consistent admiration for Lu Xun, having claimed in many situations that "after Lu Xun, there is no critical realist writer in China" (鲁迅之后中国没有批判现实主义作家) ("Yan Lianke"). Such admiration has been transformed into an internal motivation for him to write critically after the manner of Lu Xun and relate himself responsively to the contemporary era. We see Lu Xun's most prominent literary motifs such as "bystander culture" in *Dream of Ding Village*, cannibalism and "*haizi*" (the Child) in *The Four Books*, and "madness" and "the array of

nothingness" in *The Odes of Songs.*[107] Instead of invoking these canonical motifs in passing, Yan renegotiates and reconstructs them in his mythorealist texts, and in doing so opens a dialogue with Lu Xun's social and cultural critique.

However, the "pervasiveness" of Lu Xun in Yan's writing does not indicate a reductive return to critical realism. Whereas Lu Xun's critical realism "came to carry the profoundest burden of hope for cultural transformation" (Anderson 201), Yan's mythorealism does not signify an immediate political objective, but carries a different "burden" of strategically expressing his resistance to and condemnation of a repressive and absurd reality by representing the unrepresentable, and of transcending provinciality by seeking answers to universal human predicaments that grow out of social particularities. Thus, Yan's reflecting on and imagining of the changing moral and socio-political climates, which are essentially different from those of Lu Xun's time, call into question the effectiveness of Lu Xun's narrative mode, although Lu Xun himself strives for "formal defamiliarization" (3) as a means of expanding the expressive potential of realism. In taking a departure from the limits of critical realism, which has become unable to represent the unrepresentable social reality of contemporary China, and in moving beyond Lu Xun's ambition of formal experimentation, Yan appears more radical in his formal and stylistic innovations. By integrating many anti-mimetic components into his realistic settings, Yan's practice of mythorealism has brought about the

[107] In fact, similar images and themes that are well-known in Lu Xun's literary context also recursively appear in Yan's other novels, but they are beyond the scope of this dissertation.

possibility of extending the category of critical realism. By redefining the boundaries of the rational world, mythorealism finds a new entry point to understanding humanity, reality, and the world.

Realistic settings and mythorealist narratives are nested inside each other in Yan's works, generating an unconventional representation of reality in which binaries dissolve and historical logic breaks down in the presence of mythorealist "illogicality." This study has identified three different modes of mythorealist narrative. They are, respectively, the "*minjian*" mode in *Dream of Ding Village*, the "religious, grotesque, and mythological" mode in *The Four Books*, and the "absurd" mode in *The Odes of Songs*. Positioning itself against a more ambiguous articulation of social determinants of historical events that is perhaps more straightforward in a purely realist text, each mode of mythorealist narrative move its texts from the purely political aspect of the subject matter to the existential problem of negotiating an alternative reality.

Dream of Ding Village represents a typical "*minjian*" mode of mythorealist narrative that features the most representative characteristics of Yan's writing on rural China. "*Minjian*" components primarily comprise elements from Chinese folklore and folk culture, such as the supernatural, the unexplainable, ghost narrator, haunting dreams, and so on. In this novel, these folk elements are taken as ordinary matter and integrated into the materiality and rationality of conventional realism. Moreover, Yan's *minjian* style is also manifested here in his use of Henan dialect and invented dialectal phrases that aim to deconstruct those socially biased vocabularies within standard Chinese. These

stylistic features enable Yan to articulate from the margin and represent a disruptive narrative mode which subverts the stereotype of rural China as is either primitive, backward, and underdeveloped, or simple, victimized, and traumatized. Yan's rural China is an ambiguous site where humanity is not only oppressed by the lure of modernization and the corruption of the rural political system, but also by the insatiable greed and desire residing in the deepest soul of human beings.

In addition to *Dream of Ding Village*, Yan's pessimistic perception of rural China as a land of mixed malignancies conveyed through a "*minjian*" narrative is present in *The Sunlit Years*, *Lenin's Kisses*, *The Explosion Chronicles*, and *The Day the Sun Died*. Nevertheless, despite its being shrouded in the midst of moral corruption and the darkness of rural modernity, the rural China of Yan's mythorealist imagining is always a paradoxical place, one whose existence entails a sense of tenacity, a glimmer of hope out of hopelessness, and a ray of light into darkness. Yan shapes his peasant protagonists and crowds (or bystanders) by taking a *minjian* stance, which signifies a strong sense of connection between him and his characters. He does not reduce his pity and sympathy for his characters to a purely affective involvement; rather, his imperfect protagonists are tainted with the weakness of humanity confronted with harsh reality. They are situated in despairing situations but they simultaneously resist despair by shaping themselves as moral beings. This is manifested, for example, in Liu Yingque's deliberately makes himself handicapped to join the village of Liven in *Lenin's Kisses*, Ding Shuiyang's killing his own son to uproot the evil of the village in *Dream of Ding Village*, and Li

Tianbao's burning himself to bring light to the villagers in *The Day the Sun Died*. It is these very act of resistances articulated through the ostensible illogicality of mythorealism that shines through these protagonists' defects and renders them as tenacious and formidable.

The crowd, rather than being depicted as the "anonymous and undifferentiated" peasant "other" in the discourse of "disaffected intellectual[s]" (Anderson 183), becomes recognizable as composed of individual in Yan's *minjian* narrative. Despite the collective "evil" of the crowd's ignorance, selfishness, and apathy, —which is usually taken as the weakness of the Chinese national character "inherited" from their peasant predecessors in the enlightenment discourse of modern Chinese history— such "evil" is articulated through a marginal language and marginal way of narration. It signifies the crowd's othering and self-othering in the process of being passively and actively integrated into the market economy and rural modernity. The crowd in Yan's mythorealist narrative, then, subverts the standard images of revolutionary force, political discontent, or backwardness that hinder rural development. They are treated human beings whose flaws are rooted in the very nature of humankind and whose moral degradation is often triggered by external oppression and a desire for survival.

Yan's writing of the crowd involves a kind of "fellow feeling," a phrase borrowed from Marston Anderson. However, in departing from what Anderson describes as the contemporary strategy of being "restrained and unsentimental" (193) as a means of

contrast with “the dramatized expressions of pity” in most 1920s’ realist works, Yan identifies himself as part of the crowd primarily because of his similar struggle to break away from poverty and desire to acquire power in his earlier years. He appears sentimental and non-restrained in his narration, as reflected in his non-realistic, absurd, and surreal portrays of the crowd’s alienation, evoking strong responses in his readers, and strong opinions in many scholars and critics. However, Yan’s criticism of the crowd usually overshadows his pity on them, and becomes a form of catharsis not leading so much to purgation but to a better understanding of the “*minjian*” reality, which is manifested, for example in his reshaping of Chinese national character in *Dream of Ding Village*.

The second narrative mode of mythorealism, exemplified by *The Four Books*, contains a mix of influences from Chinese and Western culture and includes phenomena such as the supernatural, religion, and mythology on the one hand, and literary modalities such as the grotesque, the fantastic, and the absurdist on the other. These mythorealist components are unequally integrated into a framework of metafiction, as is the case in *The Four Books*, *The Explosion Chronicles*, *The Day the Sun Dies*, and *Want to Sleep Together Quickly*. Among the diversity of subject matter in these novels, *The Four Books* stands out by its taking up of a new historical perspective to recreate history and bringing into question the “facts” and “truths” that have been written into the official version of history. In pulling together fragmentary points of view through various

narrative perspectives, the metafictional text carries a strong sense of self-deconstruction and appears to tell itself instead of being told by an authoritative author.

Added to the deconstructionist tendencies of the metafictional structure is the subversiveness of its mythorealist components, which not only disturbs the boundary between the real and the unreal, and the physical and the spiritual, but also challenges the epistemological and ontological assumptions upon which official history relies. Nevertheless, unlike many new historicist novels that adopt a playful tone to interrupt the logic of history,[108] Yan's mythorealist narrative does not always flirt with the mainstream historical narrative by taking on a teasing and light tone.[109] Rather, as is the case in *The Four Books*, it conveys a sense of solemnity and heaviness in humankind's confrontation with historical contingencies. The assimilation of the mythorealist components to the realistic historical location makes it possible for a dialogical

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[108] The Western idea of new historicism was introduced into Chinese academia in 1993 through a selection of new historicist articles translated from English and published under the title *Xin lishi zhuyi yu wenxue piping* 新历史主义与文学批评 (*New Historicism and Literary Criticism*). Chinese new historicist novels are identified as a new genre theoretically based on the Western new historicism and derived from Chinese new historical novels that gained prominence in the 1980s. Literary critic Zhang Qinghua 张清华 regards the new historicist novel as a more avant-garde style, and attributes it to the Western philosophies of existentialism, postmodernism, poststructuralism and deconstruction theory. The most representative works of the new historicist novel include most of Ge Fei's 格非 works, Su Tong's 苏童 *Wo de diwang shengya* 我的帝王生涯 (*My Life as Emperor*), Yu Hua's 余华 *Xianxue meihua* 鲜血梅花 (*Blood and Plum Blossoms*) and so on. For more information on new historicist novels, see Zhang Qinghua (82-92).

[109] The characteristic of playfulness is more evident in his earlier works such as *As Hard as Water* and *Serve the People*. In both works, Yan's playful revision of revolutionary slogans and Maoist sayings satirically and humorously subverts their revolutionary teachings. However, as he observes in his later literary creations, while playfulness arguably continues to possess a transgressive power, Yan's facetious burlesque also destroys the more cutting meaning of the text… Thus, playfulness never appears as a striking feature of the mythorealist narrative in his later works; rather, he tries to keep a balance between the playfulness inevitably generated by his deconstructionist approach, and the sense of solemnity and heaviness that he intends to express in his works. For more information, see Yan Lianke's 2018 interview: "Yige weida wenxue de shidai yijing qiaoran xiaoshi" 一个伟大文学的时代已经悄然消失 (The era of great literature has quietly disappeared).

conversation between the mythorealist and realist narrative modes, allowing the anti-mimetic mode of the former to speak into the semiotic absences of the latter to challenge a totalizing history.

The unrepresentable trauma inflicted upon the human individual, who is always a historical subject, is alternatively embedded in and expressed through the aesthetics of mythorealism, which does "not [aim] to mystify or re-sacralize seemingly unnatural events, but rather to destabilize or defeat naturalistic explanations" (Helgerson 144-145). In particular, mythorealist elements such as the religious, supernatural, and mythological have broadened the writing of history from the material and physical facts of historical events to the psychological and spiritual aspects of the human beings in this history. Rather than focusing on the revelation of the atrocities of history in themselves, though they are also represented in the text, mythorealism tends to inquire into the universal significance of human existence in extreme environments and reflect upon the ordinary individual's part in these historical events, be it positive or negative. Seen in this light, these imaginings of non-material experience and illustratings of physical extremity —such as the unconventional depictions of cannibalism— align closely with the theoretical essence of mythorealism: the authenticity of fabrication. In converting the physical sensations of pain resulting from heavy labor, abuse, hunger, and surveillance, to an affective interplay of style and content, the provinciality and temporality of historical events becomes part of a broader process of reflection on the spiritual

connection of the individual to the past and the present, a process which aims to capture both the story of history and the nature of the human condition in general.

The third mode of mythorealist narrative, exemplified by *The Odes of Songs* and striking in its absurdity, is drastically different from the previous two in that it involves very few elements of folklore or folk culture, or references to myths, legends, fantasy, or religion. Instead, it relies heavily on imagination, exaggeration, parody, black humour, irony, and other Western modernist techniques, and is characterized primarily through the recurrence of a set of structural, syntactic, and thematic features. While this narrative mode is also exemplified by Yan's 2013 novel *The Explosion Chronicles* — despite the syntactical and structural differences, — *The Odes of Songs* appears unique among the bulk of his mythorealist works and demonstrates Yan's continuous pursuit of formal experiment in a new domain.

Regarding the aesthetic features of *The Odes of Songs*, these mythorealist techniques generate a striking sense of absurdity, which appears both real and unreal. It appears real because the story refers to actual happenings in the contemporary Chinese academic world and university education system; it appears unreal because Yan's unbridled imagination has greatly breached the conventionality limits of rhetorical devices such as metaphors and similes. By rendering the absurdity of the actual social reality into a defamiliarized world of absurdity, Yan produces a text that resists any literalist reading and that demands a non-realist interpretation. Although the text ostensibly appears, in some commentaries, as "nonsensical" (荒唐) (Shao, "Huangdan"

6) due to its excessive exaggerations, the force of the narrative lies, ironically, in its ability to bring about a sense of familiarity by its evoking authenticity through mythorealist fabrication. In other words, the real significance of the novel's absurdity does not reside in its representation of concrete cases of institutional corruption in the story, which is banal and superficial. On the contrary, by dramatizing "the real" in an unreal way, the mythorealist narration —particularly, the exaggeration and imagination— provoke a hesitation in the readers in identifying the realist and mythorealist explanation of the events described. Thus, readers are prompted to move away from the manifest social reality and, voluntarily or involuntarily, to integrate themselves within the chaos of the inner world of the characters.

Such an "absurd" narrative mode is closely related to Yan's endeavour to seek a new literary style within the framework of mythorealism, as well as his intent to represent the existential predicament of contemporary intellectuals, who like the peasants of his other novels are similarly struggling at the bottom of different social hierarchies, even while their situations are drastically different. For Yan, the difficulty of writing about contemporary intellectuals lies not only in the fact that it is an unfamiliar topic for him,[110] but also in his penchant for contextualizing his story in real social predicaments,

[110] Yan seldom writes intellectuals. *The Four Books,* despite its anti-rightist (intellectuals) movement background, involves so many equally significant motifs such as the rewriting of history, the reconstruction of self ethics, the suffering of man, and thus it seems difficult to categorize it as a novel exclusively about intellectuals. In fact, as I have analyzed and explained in Chapter Three, although *The Four Books* inarguably involves intellectual characters, it is a novel exploring the psychological and spiritual truth of man rather than intellectuals because the three protagonists respectively represent three different types of psychological identity.

which, as is proved by the negative response of some scholars to *The Odes of Songs*, appears provocative and "dangerous." While the "provocative" aspect is also, to some extent, diluted by the effect of absurdity, the text gradually moves away from the highlighting of particular social phenomenon to a deep concern for the characters — although an irreducible tension between society and the individual always remains in the text. Reminiscent of Dostoevsky's writing of the underground man but situated in a different social reality, Yan's "absurd" narrative subverts the conventional critique of intellectuals in both Chinese and Western discourse, which emphasizes intellectuals' social responsibilities and functions but seldom delves into intellectuals' psychology. Yan's intellectual protagonist is as schizophrenic as the society he lives in. He appears weak and loathsome, corrupted and cynical, but he simultaneously demonstrates a courageous form of self-reproach and self-dissection. His moral ambiguity, like that of the peasants in Yan's other fiction, suggests a narrative strategy that partly diffuses the radical intent of political and social critique and provides opportunities for a more multi-dimensional interpretation of the text.

In general, no matter what the mode of mythorealist narrative, the brutal reality addressed in each novel is always realistic and Yan's core concern for the condition of human existence remains constant. As seen from the three modes of mythorealist narrative in question, by combining different elements of mythorealism with historical realities, Yan brings marginal characters into the wider social discourse by weaving their voices into his writing on socio-political problems. For example, in *Dream*

of Ding Village, the tension between standard Chinese and Henan dialect, —more specifically, the use of the dialectal phrase "the fever" to replace "AIDS"— fully demonstrates Yan's intent of letting his characters speak by themselves. To this end, the significant meaning of mythorealism, first and foremost, lies in its deconstructive function of an authorial voice speaking from outside the dominant culture and ideology, and in its reconstructive function of giving voice to underrepresented reality.

In the former case, it is through the irrational and subjective representation of the "rational" and "objective" world prescribed by realism that mythorealism is able to provide distance from both the mainstream narrative of reality, and from the authority of the author, who is conventionally assumed to be a reliable and objective storyteller. This is strikingly manifested, for example, in Yang Ke's schizophrenic dissolution of spiritual homecoming in *The Odes of Songs,* as well as in Ding Hui's complicity with the corrupted officials in cheating Ding villagers, here revealed in Ding Shuiyang's haunting dreams in *Dream of Ding Village*. In both cases, Yan aligns himself with the marginal characters by appearing as irrational, emotional, and subjective as are his characters; in other words, Yan erases his own "rational" voice from the text by writing "irrationally." This way of handling the authorial voice results in an undermining of the authority of the author and engenders an unstable narrative voice, thus resulting in an ambiguity of textual meaning that reflects Yan's own ambivalent critical position. However, such self-deconstruction does not indicate a dissolution of meaning; instead, it shortens the distance between the author and his characters, and ultimately prevents the author from

consciously or unconsciously taking up an intellectual stance and speaking from a position superior to his fictional characters. In this regard, what mythorealism seeks to resolve is a long-lasting dilemma that many Chinese writers face: they strive to take a "*minjian*" position and speak from the margin, but in many cases, the characters' voices are weakened by the intervention of the author's own voice. Sometimes, as Anderson argues regarding the 1920's realist works, an author displays excessive empathy for his characters, which only leads to a purely affective involvement and cheap catharsis. Mythorealism provides a possibility of subverting the authorial voice while simultaneously maintaining a variety of narrative voices that interweave with each other. It thus problematizes any simple or exclusive interpretation.

This self-deconstructive characteristic of mythorealism generates an ambiguity and uncertainty in the textual meaning, inviting reflective reading. It allows readers to see and examine the absurd but often obscured reality of real life and thus makes it possible to give voice to those underrepresented realities. In particular, it creates a contradictory and paradoxical world in which a dichotomous worldview is completely subverted. This can be seen from many aspects. For example, Yan fashions peasants and intellectuals as "othered," but instead of merely depicting them as passive victims of suffering and oppression, he portrays them as being both othered and self-othering, as is the case, for example, with the AIDS patients in *Dream of Ding Village* and Yang Ke in *The Odes of Songs*. Most of his protagonists appear paradoxically vulnerable but invincible, evil but positive. On the one hand, they represent the dark and sinister side of

humanity; on the other hand, they struggle to redeem themselves and develop a utopian vision of a future world that is rid of suffering, human evil, and violence. Resultant to this subversion and deconstruction of the stereotype of the oppressed and marginal victim of history is that many conventional or canonical literary themes are able to be renegotiated and reformulated within the framework of mythorealism, such as Chinese national character, suffering, revolutionary spirit, the origin of the evil of humanity, socialist developmentalism, and so on.

The significance of mythorealism as a literary device also resides in its contribution to the genre of native soil literature.[111] As Yan observes,

> One of the most confusing aspects for [nativist] writers, who set their stories in the background of countryside, is that while benefiting from local sources they have accumulated in their local life, they are also, to some extent and at some level, subject to the limitations of local life. As a result, many [native soil] works suffer from a lack of imagination and repeat themselves a lot. ([乡土]作家写作中最为困惑的地方之一，就是以乡村为背景来写作的作家们在得益于乡土生活积累的同时，在某种程度和某些层面上，也受制于乡土生活的局限，以致不少人在创作中缺少想象力的飞扬和升腾，存在不断重复的现象。) (Yan et al. “Tudi” 61).

[111] For the concept of “native soil” and a brief summary of the genealogy of “native soil literature” in the context of modern Chinese literature, see the conclusion of Chapter 2.

This statement reflects a common concern regarding the development of native soil literature among Chinese writers. How to maintain the originality, locality, and particularity of native soil literature —while at the same time bringing new writing techniques and literary elements into the sub-genre— has become a problem with which Chinese nativist writers are struggling. The native soil in Yan's writing is a paradoxical representation of a fight for survival, a desire for modernization, and a nostalgia for the rural past and tradition. It is a strange mixture of the modern and the primitive, the local and the universal, despair and hope.

As both content and formal experiment, mythorealism provides a cosmopolitan perspective and new horizon in native soil writing. It integrates the most creative and local elements of Chinese rural society and life into a kind of postmodern synthesis. In particular, it inscribes the idea of self-deconstruction into the most simple portrayal of the "authentic" life style of native China. Meanwhile, its writing of the usual theme of native soil literature, namely, suffering, transcends the historical particularity of Chinese peasants' suffering *per se*, and amounts to a broad concern with humanity and the human condition. In this sense, mythorealism opens more possibilities for Chinese native soil literature to be understood by readers from different cultural backgrounds and thereby to be assimilated into world literature. This is proved by the fact that Yan's works have already been translated into twenty-four languages and enjoy a popular reputation worldwide.

Mythorealism also opens a window for readers to perceive a paradox in the work of Yan Lianke. As a sensitive soul responding to contemporary Chinese social reality, Yan's view of rural China and ambivalence in writing the marginal are fully illustrated through mythorealism. Yan's works are easily misrepresented and misinterpreted as either based on a purely realist perspective or — particularly as articulated in Western scholarship— guided by a preoccupation with political criticism. In both cases, scholars tend to focus on the subject matter and plot structure of his stories, ignoring the fact that the mythorealist form itself conveys irreducible meanings, as can be seen in the ghost narrator and haunting dreams in *Dream of Ding Village*, the biblical style in *The Four Books*, and the parodying of *Shijing* in *The Odes of Songs*. As has been discussed in the main text of the dissertation, the subversive and transgressive nature of mythorealism generates a sense of ambiguity and contradiction, consequently preventing a final and definitive interpretation of the texts.

The ambiguous nature of mythorealism places Yan himself in a self-contradictory position, implying an unresolved conflict between his desire to speak for the oppressed and marginal and his uncertainties about humanity and about the capacity of literature to reshape the moral fabric of society. In the former case, in representing a repressed reality that cannot be effectively represented by literary realism, Yan exhibits his empathy toward those who live at or are reduced to the bottom of the social hierarchy. Using folk elements as well as modernist and postmodernist techniques to create a sense of absurdity and irrationality, Yan reveals an absurd and irrational world in

which his protagonists, such as the Author in *The Four Books*, struggle to survive and fight against their own moral corruption, although they mostly end up with a sense of weariness and futility. In the latter case, Yan's own vision of humanity is deeply pessimistic. While his descriptions always waver between what is socially constructed and what is innate human nature, the degradation of humanity is a recurrent theme informing most of his writing. There is a long list of examples, such as the Ding villagers' voyeurism and apathy to others' misfortunes, Ding Hui's insatiable greed and desire for power, the intellectuals' informing against each other in order to get set free from the labour camp, the university vice president Li Guangzhi's adultery with his colleague Zhao Ruping, Yang Ke's moral and psychological decline, and so on. Nevertheless, Yan's refusal to uncritically promote worthwhile ends or accommodate teleological evaluations of the traits of his characters, rather than being a defect of his writing, is a transgressive strength that resists the realist concept of "the typical" both aesthetically and ideologically.

Additionally, such transgression is not only a matter of strategy or choice, but is also a reflection of Yan's "penchant" for perceiving darkness, something which can be taken as an active response to Agamben's idea that the contemporary should "firmly hold[s] his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness" (44). The darkness in Yan's context, as with Lu Xun's metaphor of the iron house, prompts him to consider, in response to Lu Xun's conviction, that while "the greatest darkness is people's adaptation to the darkness" and "the most terrible darkness is

people's indifference to and oblivion of light living in the darkness,"[112] whether should he strive to bring them out of darkness or choose to leave them be, given that he himself is not sure what lies ahead. In this regard, Yan's ambiguous attitude towards his characters and towards rural China at large becomes easier to understand: the darkness of humanity depicted in the mythorealist narrative is not necessarily a representation of what actually happens, but perhaps a revelation of how his hopeless and despondent writing of the condition of human existence might have led him to a new reflection on the contemporary realities of real life. In evoking the darkness and the pessimism of the past and present, his eyes are turned to the future.

This also explains the puzzling and contradictory utopian vision in each work of fiction, in which the deeply pessimistic and hopeless narration is invariably intertwined with a note of hope. Such a vision does not necessarily entail, in itself, the possibility for hope, given that it appears only in passing at the end of each story, and is frustratingly vague and ambiguous. The meaning of the utopian vision therefore does not lie in the vision itself but in the very act of Yan's writing, which reveals a profound anxiety about the moral corruption of individuals and society. In the end, one thing is certain. Yan does not intend to bring to his readers an enjoyable and consolatory experience; on the contrary, he intends an uncomfortable and difficult reading to prompt

[112] These lines are taken from Yan's acceptance speech for the Franz Kafka Prize in 2014, translated by Carlos Rojas. For more information, see the introductory chapter of this dissertation.

thinking about the potential and the limits of a humanity confronted with an ambiguous, absurd, and violent world.

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Appendix

夜还是清朗朗的明，月光水一样洒在校院里，人群在那门前散散乱乱立站着，都说把门开开吧，开开让他们出来吧，可却是找不着钥匙在那里。人都穿上衣服出门看热闹。看风景。看天下最有看头的贼欢被人捉了的事。

……

赵秀芹就从人群走过去，拉亮炊房的灯，让灯光从门口出来映着邻仓屋门上的锁。见是一把新的锁，锁上黑漆的光亮都还看得见，就对着仓屋里唤：“亮弟啊，这门可不是我锁的。我早就看出来你和玲玲好，可我谁都没说过。我的嘴严得和这屋门样。这锁是谁从家带来的新铁锁，是人家早就要抓你和玲玲了。”

……

赵德全在那人群中是年纪偏大的，他借着灯光望望门前的人，像替我叔求情一样说：

“把门开开吧。”

贾根柱也便瞅着他：“你有钥匙呀。”

赵德全便又木桩一样蹲在地上了，不言不动了。

丁跃进就从人群走出来，到门口拉着那锁看一看，扭回头来瞟着人群问：“是谁锁了门？”说：“人都活到快死的时候了，还捉奸干啥呀，能高兴一天就让他们高兴一天吧。”说：“把门开开吧，丁亮比他哥丁辉好得多。把门开开吧。”

贾根柱也上前看看锁，扭回头来说："把门开开吧，丁亮和玲玲都才二十大几岁，活一天他们就要做一天的人，千万别把事情闹回到庄子里，闹到他们两个的家里去，那样他们就没法做人了。"

都上前看了锁，都扭头说了要开门的话，却是不知是谁锁了门，不知钥匙在谁的手里边。……

玲玲的男人丁小明从庄里急急赶到学校了。

……

没想到，谁也想不到，谁都想不到，我堂叔他手里竟握有那仓屋门的白钥匙。他竟有着那钥匙。竟然有着那钥匙。到门前立住脚，他从手里拿出一把钥匙就把那屋门打开了。先是没打开，钥匙往锁里插时反着了向，插不进，他又把钥匙翻过来。

……

门开了，堂叔一把就把玲玲抓在了手里边，像玲玲就站在门口等着他去抓。

…… 我爷往前追了一两步，也就一步儿，立下来唤：

"小明……"

他就顿了脚，回过了身。

"玲玲的热病已经不轻啦，你就放他一回吧。"

没有立刻说话儿，也没有停多久，我堂叔小明立在灯光里，乜了我爷一眼睛，朝地上"呸！"一下，在我爷的面前"呸！"一下，又用鼻子哼了哼，冷冷说：

“管住你家儿子吧！”

也就走掉了。

转身走掉了。

一转身拖着玲玲走掉了。

这时候，校院里的热病们，赵秀芹，丁跃进、贾根柱、赵德全，七七八八的人，八八九九的人，都觉得事情不该是这样。一场大戏不该这样简简单单收场样，直望着我堂叔拖着玲玲穿过校院子，跨过大门消失掉，都还站在原处儿，如同没有明白发生了啥儿事，都还站在原处儿。

就都那么木呆着。

呆站着。

无所事地呆站着。

月亮偏西了。

（《丁庄梦》，134-141）