

**TRACING *SHISHI* IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE HISTORICAL  
NOVELS**

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*To my family and teachers*

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation aims to address the lack of transcultural and historical perspective in the study of the Chinese term *shishi* and its role in the contemporary literature among the current scholarship. To begin with, the study traces the origin and genealogical development of *shishi* as a literary concept. It concludes that although it was initially invented as a translation for the Western term “epic,” the connotation of *shishi* was then greatly expanded and modified by Chinese intellectuals and should be understood as a unique aesthetic paradigm for evaluating literary works and inspiring writers, especially in terms of the criticism and the creation of historical fiction.

Guided by the craving for building a unified identity for the newborn nation with literary works inspired by communist ideology, the revolutionary historical novel from the “Seventeen-Year Era” (1949-1966) becomes the embodiment of the classic ideas of *shishi*: heroism and optimistic belief in social progress. With the revolutionary era coming to an end, the orthodox historical narrative was challenged by writers and critics who began to implement new and alternative methods of representing and reconstructing past events and memories, which leads to the renovation and diversification of *shishi*. With a combination of textual analysis and historical interpretation, this study shall examine the works of six writers with varied and distinctive features from the 1980s to the present and demonstrate their contribution to the continued relevance and vitality of *shishi* in Chinese literature. The final lesson is, instead of sustaining a static and definitive view of *shishi*, we should recognize and embrace its dynamic and plural natures, and its ability to adapt and innovate.

## CHAPTER 1. FROM: EPIC TO *SHISHI*

*Shishi* 史诗 is the currently universally accepted translation in Chinese for the English word epic, at least in its strict traditional sense.<sup>1</sup> However, this term has sustained an unusually strong sense of presence in modern China although the genre related to it was declared as dead more than once in the West.<sup>2</sup> Frequently making an appearance in contemporary literary studies and theoretical discussions, its popularity might confuse Western or even Chinese scholars themselves, seeing the term is often utilized in the analyses of various drastically different works with little clarification of its connotation and has even less to do with the traditional heroic poem (at least at the first glance). Part of the confusion derived from the attitude of treating the term as a simple translation of its Western counterpart, thus obscuring the complex nature of cultural transformations and the intricate historical contexts behind it. And the issue has ultimately resulted from the lack of in-depth and systematic study of the term, which is what this project sets out to accomplish: providing a better understanding of *shishi* and the role it played in the development of modern Chinese literature and culture, especially its complicated relationship with contemporary historical novels. By trying to answer how a foreign concept originated from the classical era has been transformed into something new and unique in modern China and left a subtle yet tangible impact on its literary modernity, my project moreover aims to expand its scale

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<sup>1</sup> There are many equally viable and fundamentally similar definitions available and this thesis uses a concise yet relatively comprehensive one from *The New Princeton Encyclopedia* as reference: “An epic is a long narrative poem that treats a single heroic figure or a group of such figures and concerns a historical event, such as a war or conquest, or a heroic or some other significant mythic or legendary achievement that is central to the traditions and belief of its culture.” J. K. Newman, “Epic,” in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, eds. Alex Preminger, and T. V. F. Brogan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 361.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret H. Beissinger, Jane Tylus, and Susanne Lindgren Wofford, eds., *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World: The Poetics of Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 4.

into a comparative study instead of a regional one. The comparison between literary works from different cultures and times in my understanding provide new insight into the possibility and potential of epic and *shishi* in our rapidly changing world.

### 1.1 The Origin of *Shishi* in Chinese

The Chinese word *shishi* 史诗 is a combination of two characters: *shi* 史 “history” and *shi* 诗 “poetry.” Thus, the literal meaning of the term is “poetry of history.” This word never occurs in traditional Chinese literary history but it could indeed remind us of another literary term with the resemblance in its form: *shishi* 诗史, composing of the exact same two characters but with reversed order. This is a specific concept in classic Chinese literature, originally associated with one of the greatest Chinese poets, Du Fu 杜甫 (712-770).<sup>3</sup> Many missionaries in China during the nineteenth century used to adopt *shishi* 诗史 as their preferred translation for the term “epic” and it is the German missionary Wilhelm Lobscheid (1822-1893), who also edited the first English-Chinese dictionary who invented the word *shishi* 史诗.<sup>4</sup> It is worth noticing that Lobscheid’s definition of epic or *shishi* is different from the most popular explanation nowadays. He interpreted

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<sup>3</sup> It is used to praise the literary and historical value of Du Fu’s writing. Following is the first appearance of the term in literary history: “The turbulence of the An Lushan Rebellion befell Du Fu and he took refuge in Longshu. He depicted all the events he experienced with his poem, revealing the most hidden detail, and leaving nothing unrecorded. Therefore, he was named as *shishi* by his contemporaries” 杜逢禄山之难，流离陇蜀，毕陈于诗，推见至隐，殆无遗事，故当时号为诗史。Meng Qi 孟棻, “Benshishi” 本事诗, in *Lidai shihua xubian vol.1* 历代诗话续编上, edited by Ding Fubao 丁福保 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), 15. For more information on this matter see Zhang Hui 张晖, “The Conception of *Shishi* (Poetry as History) in the History of Chinese Literary Criticism” 中国文学批评史上之 “诗史” 概念, PhD diss., (The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, 2005). The established cultural connotation of this term might also be the reason that it was eventually not accepted as the standard translation for the Western concept that is epic.

<sup>4</sup> Although there exists the possibility that someone might have used the term before Lobscheid, he is the earliest source of the word we can trace to according to the current material. For more information on the origin of *shishi* 史诗 see Tang Hui 唐卉, “*Shishi ciyuan kao*” 史诗词源考, *Journal of Jiangsu Normal Uni*, no. 5 (September 2015): 15-22.



“epic” as “narrative” and “epic poem” as “*jishi zhi shi*” 纪事之诗 (narrative poem),<sup>5</sup> which is actually quite accurate from an etymological perspective as epic ultimately came from the ancient Greek word ἔπος (epos), which means “word” or “story.”<sup>6</sup> The interpretation might also be due to Lobscheid’s cultural background since in German the term “Epik” could also refer to narrative literature in general, one of the three major literary genres divided by Goethe along with “Lyrik” (lyric) and “Dramatik” (drama).<sup>7</sup> This kind of utilization of epic is not uncommon among European intellectuals as we will see in the latter part of this chapter that the Czech sinologist, Jaroslav Průšek (1906-1980), tended to use epic to refer to narrative literature (as opposed to the lyrical one) in his essays on Chinese literary study.<sup>8</sup> In English, epic and narrative poetry are usually not interchangeable and the former has more specific meanings, referring to “lengthy heroic poem” since the 1580s.<sup>9</sup> The standard interpretation of *shishi* 史诗 in modern Chinese is also similar to that in English: “long narrative poems regarding the legend of heroes or great historical events.”<sup>10</sup> Also, unlike epic, *shishi* is usually used as a noun and rarely as an adjective in Chinese. People do often slightly modify its form into *shishixing* 史诗性 or *shishishi* 史诗式 to describe something with certain characteristics of an epic, basically the same as how the adjective version of epic is used in English.

The application of a word in real life is not always restricted to its definition in the dictionary, not to mention in a field as intellectually creative as literary practice. Thus, despite

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<sup>5</sup> W. Lobscheid, *English and Chinese Dictionary* (Hong Kong: Daily Press Office, 1868), 743.

<sup>6</sup> Henry George Liddell, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (New York: American Book Co, 1900), 309.

<sup>7</sup> Jochen Vogt, “Gattungen und Textstrukturen I: Epik,” in *Einladung zur Literaturwissenschaft* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2008), 114-138.

<sup>8</sup> Jaroslav Průšek, *The Lyrical and the Epic: Studies of Modern Chinese Literature*, ed. Leo Ou-fan Lee (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 10-25.

<sup>9</sup> “Epic,” Etymonline, accessed November 20, 2020, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=epic>.

<sup>10</sup> CASS, ed. “*Shishi*” 史诗. In *Xiandai hanyu cidian* 现代汉语词典 (Contemporary Chinese Dictionary), 6<sup>th</sup> ed (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2012), 1182.

having a clear etymology and a stable official definition with little controversy, the rich and convoluted cultural heritage behind epic is still difficult to unravel, especially taking into consideration the drastic transition it underwent in the modern era as well as from one cultural context to another. That is when philology fulfills its duty and social and historical study comes into play.

The statement that China does not have its epic tradition is a false proposition since many minority groups such as the Tibetan people and the Mongols that have long been an integral part of the nation have all had their own great epic poems and *Epic of King Gesar* from Tibet is even one of the longest in the world.<sup>11</sup> But there is also no denial that the Han Chinese, the majority part of the nation and the representative of its culture, indeed seem to lack their own epic and there is no tradition of epic writing in classic Chinese literature. In terms of “folk epics” such as *Beowulf* and *Nibelungenlied*, scholars still have not reached a consensus on whether the Han Chinese have one.<sup>12</sup> There are myths and legends that could be used as materials for epic recorded in ancient books such as *Shan Hai Jing* 山海经 (The Classic of Mountains and Seas) and *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (The Masters of Huainan), but they are scattered and in the form of succinct prose. From Qu Yuan 屈原 (340 BC-278 BC) to Bai Juyi 白居易 (772-846), many Chinese poets have written long lyrical or narrative poems but few of them meet the criterion of centering “on a heroic or quasi-divine figure on whose actions depends the fate of a tribe, a nation, or (in the instance of John

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<sup>11</sup> Lara Maconi, “Theatrical Gesar de Pékin? Le sort du Roi Gesar de Gling, héros épique tibétain, en Chinese (post-)maoïste,” in *Formes modernes de la poésie épique: nouvelles approches*, ed. Judith Labarthe (Bruxelles: Peter Lang, 2004), 371-419.

<sup>12</sup> How to classify the *Heian chuan* 黑暗传 (*Epic of Darkness*), a collection of tales and legends of primeval China in poetry form, the first manuscript of which was found in 1982 and whether it is indeed the traditional oral epic is still a matter of debate. See Zheng Shusen 郑树森, “Heianzhuan shibushi hanzu changpian shishi” 黑暗传是不是汉族长篇史诗, *Journal of Shanghai Normal University*, no. 1 (1990) : 127-130.

Milton's *Paradise Lost*) the human race.”<sup>13</sup> In this sense, epic is truly an absent part of classical Chinese literature, where such narrative, be it verse or prose never fully developed to the same height as in the West.

Furthermore, the lack of an epic tradition in Chinese literature used to cause much discussion and anxiety among Chinese writers and literary scholars. One important reason for it is that the literature revolution, part of the New Culture Movement that took place in China in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century aimed to use Western literature as examples to reinvigorate the traditional Chinese literature that was deemed by many intellectuals as stale and outdated at the time. Since epic and tragedy are both highly regarded genres in Western literary tradition, their relatively weak status in Chinese literary history was naturally interpreted by many Chinese intellectuals as the unfortunate fact that Chinese literature was lacking in terms of the most important genres. Wang Guowei 王国维 (1877-1927), one of the most influential Chinese scholars at the time argued that the lyrical works were the true strength of Chinese literature while the narrative works (such as epic and drama) were underdeveloped. He then concluded that even the most brilliant Chinese literary works could not compete with the literature in Western Europe.<sup>14</sup> This even led to the reevaluation of classical Chinese literature: demonstrating certain outstanding traits of epic or tragedy is a good enough way to prove the high aesthetic value and historical status of a work. Wang Guowei's study of *Honglou meng* 红楼梦 (*Dream of the Red Chamber*) is a good example.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> M. H. Abrams, and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 11<sup>th</sup> Edition (Boston, Mass.: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2012), 109.

<sup>14</sup> Wang Guowei 王国维, “Wenxue xiaoyan” 文学小言, CText, accessed November 27, 2020, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=560665&remap=gb>.

<sup>15</sup> Wang Guowei 王国维, “*Hongloumeng pinglun*” 红楼梦评论 (Commentary on *Hongloumeng*), in *Wenxue lunzhu sanzong* 王国维文学论著三种 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2000), 1-29.

Wang Guowei's attitude is representative of many other literary scholars, critics, and writers that are obsessed with the ideas carried by epic. Such an obsession still exists today to some degree, but it first appeared and grew in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century during a series of literary discussions and social movements. Like Wang Guowei, other intellectuals at the time also noticed the drastic difference between the Chinese and Western literary tradition and they set out to investigate whether there were works that could be deemed as epic according to the Western standard, or what is the cause that leads to the lack of epic in Chinese literature. A lot of debate surrounding this subject could be traced back to Hegel's analysis of Chinese literature:

The Chinese, on the contrary, possess no national Epos. The prosaic basis of their imaginative vision, which even to the earliest origins of history offers the jejune form of a prosaically organized historical reality, opposes from the first to this the most noble type of epic composition an insuperable obstruction. The religious conceptions of this people, little adapted as they are to artistic configuration, contribute to the same result. We find, however, at a later date and as some compensation, for their elaboration is most profuse, little narratives, and romances spun out to great length, which astound us by the vividness in which situations are realized, the accuracy with which private and public relations are depicted, the variety, fine breeding, or rather I should say frequently the fascinating tenderness they display, more particularly in their female characters, and in short by the art in every respect which succeeds in making works so consummate.<sup>16</sup>

We should notice that the discussion of epic here is not just about a literary genre, but deeply related to the world view and historical context that produced the ideas behind the literary form. Similar to Wang Guowei, many Chinese scholars did not solely focus on the traits of the genre or form but instead talked more about the cultural and psychological structure hidden under it. For example, Zhu Guangqian 朱光潜 (1897-1986) argued that one major factor contributing to the lack of epic in China is the underdevelopment of philosophy and religion. People tend to avoid

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<sup>16</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, Vol IV, trans. F. P. B. Osmaston (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1920), 175.

exploring the inner struggle of human beings and there is no tradition of discussing the tension between men and gods. Also, ancient Chinese poets were good at depicting subjective feelings instead of recording detailed historical or imaginative events.<sup>17</sup> Zheng Zhenduo 郑振铎 (1898-1958) argued that ancient Chinese intellectuals such as Kongzi (Confucius) 孔子 (551-479) and Mozi 墨子 (468-376) were too preoccupied with solving the social-political and moral issues at the time to acknowledge the significance of preserving folklore and other literary materials. As a result, the opportunity of creating great epic literature like the *Iliad* or *Odyssey* was missed.<sup>18</sup> Hu Shi 胡适 (1891-1962) pointed out that traditional Chinese intellectuals and writers were not familiar with the proper fictional narrative and their narrative writings were mainly aimed for argumentation or lyrical purposes and incapable of generating epics.<sup>19</sup> These scholars realized that the problem of the epic is not an isolated case, but something rooted in China's unique cultural and historical tradition.

Although Hegel's analysis does reveal certain typical traits of traditional Chinese literature, it is not difficult to spot the arrogance and a sense of superiority within those lines, condemning China's narrative development to a preliminary and immature stage. In his context, Chinese culture is more of an exotic specimen used to prove the advanced status of the West tradition and an orientalized object.<sup>20</sup> And we should remember that history was shaped by many different elements and coincidences and truth always has more than one face or depends on which perspective you choose to take. Wang Guowei's eagerness to reevaluate Chinese literary works

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<sup>17</sup> Zhu Guangqian 朱光潜, *Collected Works of Zhu Guangqian* 朱光潜全集, Vol 8 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008), 125.

<sup>18</sup> Zheng Zhenduo 郑振铎, *Wenxue dagang vol.1* 文学大纲上 (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2003), 131.

<sup>19</sup> Hu Shi 胡适, *Baihua wenxue shi* 白话文学史 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1999), 48.

<sup>20</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 25th Anniversary Edition (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 1-25.

with the Western criterion might lead him to somewhat overlook the achievement of Chinese narrative literature. Zhu Guangqian's stand is more comprehensive on this matter, acknowledging that China has its strong and unique narrative tradition. Instead of being in the form of epic, it thrived in the area of literary fiction, folklore, and historical narrations. Like many other cultures in their early stage, ancient Chinese did not have the concept of literature like we do today. Recording historical events was also considered a form of literary creation. While there were no long narrative poems such as *Iliad*, the Chinese have created great history works such as *Shiji* 史记 (Records of the Grand Historian), depicting thousands of years of history in great detail. The poetry, on the other hand, was dominated by lyrical works, following the example of *Shijing* 诗经 (Classic of Poetry). Poets that were devoted to depicting social reality such as Du Fu or Bai Juyi are exceptions, not the norm.<sup>21</sup> But narrative literature still flourished in other forms and gained popularity among ordinary people despite not receiving enough recognition from the orthodox literary tradition. Jaroslav Průšek even argued that *huaben* 话本 (a form of short- or medium-length Chinese story written mostly in vernacular language and popularized during the Song dynasty) has certain epic characters (by that he meant the vivid and wide-range depiction of real-life).<sup>22</sup> Thus, we could say that China has its long and outstanding narrative tradition in the form of prose instead of verse.

When some scholars tried to prove that China indeed has epic works, they were not purely driven by academic interest, but more by the “anxiety of influence.”<sup>23</sup> Chinese intellectuals in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were faced with a great challenge from Western civilization and the pressure of

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<sup>21</sup> Chen Guoqiu 陈国球, *Jiegou zhongguo wenxue chuantong* 结构中国文学传统 (Wuhan: Huazhong shifan daxue chubanshe, 2011), 70.

<sup>22</sup> Jaroslav Průšek, “Outlines of Chinese Literature,” *New Orient*, no. 5 (1966): 145.

<sup>23</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1-15.

finding a path for their nation's future. They concluded that to make China stronger, they have to acknowledge its inferior status and learn and adapt to the advanced culture from the West. The fact that epic was at the center of Western literary tradition while China lacked such forms of literature caused their immense anxiety. But according to our analysis above, it was just a common misconception of using the Western experience as the universal model of human culture. We now come to accept that the literary value could never be measured in the same way as scientific fact with objective "better" or "worse." Looking back today, it would be natural for us to point out that the anxiety or even inferiority complex of that generation of Chinese intellectuals largely came from their strong desire to assimilate "advanced culture" and revolutionize their own: they mistook Western culture as a superior model and the universal criterion. Moreover, their eagerness to take the West as the "canon" resulted in them diminishing China's unique literary tradition. But we should remember that for the Chinese intellectuals who were personally experiencing the turbulence in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the situation seemed far direr for them: it was a matter of renewing and surviving or sticking to the old ways and becoming extinct. They did not have the luxury of taking a more prudent approach and appreciating the value of the tradition as we do today. It might be easy to criticize their biased and radical opinions, but it would be more appropriate to take the historical dilemma they had into consideration and sympathize with their intentions.

Scholars such as Andrew H. Plaks have already demonstrated that despite the absence of epic as a formal genre, classical Chinese literature has its own strong narrative tradition with a similar aesthetic function.<sup>24</sup> Other scholars such as Chen Shih-hsiang 陈世骧 (1912-1971)

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<sup>24</sup> Andrew H. Plaks, *Zhongguo xushixue* 中国叙事学 (Chinese Narratology) (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2018), 35-36.

accepted that China lacks the Western-style epic and went on to argue that it does not make Chinese literature inferior since its strength lays somewhere else. He established the model picturing traditional Chinese literature as a tradition centering on lyric and inner feelings, starting the study of the Chinese lyrical tradition.<sup>25</sup> A potential problem of Chen's interpretation of Chinese literature is that despite acknowledging the uniqueness of Chinese culture, it attempts to generalize its research subject into a monotone stereotype. The rich and diverse heritage of Chinese literature could not be summarized under the single concept of lyric, just like Western literature also has many other strong traits besides the epic tradition. Chen was under the pressure of proving the strength of Chinese literature<sup>26</sup> and it ironically drove him to simplify its accomplishment, ignoring those brilliant works outside the field of lyric. We have to understand the complicated nature of certain large subjects such as European or Chinese literature and examine them within a specific context instead of inventing a universal theory that tries to explain everything. After all, history is not a set course with a predetermined destination, and an unexpected turn could lead it to an entirely different direction. Imagine if none of Homer's works survived and all that left from the ancient Greek literature is lyric poetry, there is no doubt that Western literary history would change drastically. Things we usually considered natural are more likely the result of a mixture of chance and intentional selection. The so-called tradition is constantly reshaped and modified, full of gaps and inconsistency.

Similar to Chen Shih-hsiang, Průšek also stressed the significance of Chinese lyric literature, stating that it not be considered as secondary to epic or drama, but rather a genre that "alone out of the whole world literature can occupy a place among the peak creations of world

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<sup>25</sup> Chen Shih-hsiang 陈世骧, *The Lyrical Tradition of Chinese Literature*, ed. Zhang Hui 张晖 (Shanghai: Sanlian shudian, 2014), 30-34.

<sup>26</sup> Xu Cheng 徐承, *Zhongguo shuqing chuantong xuepai yanjiu* 中国抒情传统学派研究 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2015), 34.



literature, alongside the Greek epic, Shakespeare's plays, and the Russian novel."<sup>27</sup> But unlike Chen's focus on classic literature, Průšek was more devoted to the study of the modern era. He used "the lyrical" and "the epic" to describe the major trends of modern Chinese literature and concluded that the dynamic interaction between the two created the driving force for the literature revolution.<sup>28</sup> His model was further developed by David Der-wei Wang's *The Lyrical in Epic Time*, in which he stated that he used the term "lyrical" or "epic" to refer to "not only a genre or style that informed a literary culture but also a set of values or a 'structure of feeling' that registered a social episteme."<sup>29</sup> Both Průšek and Wang have expanded the concept of epic beyond the boundary of genre and opened new possibilities for its research. The problem is that in both of their discourses, epic is too much of an overarching device that could use more scrutiny to reveal its nuance and complexity. Also, the rigid dichotomy between lyrical and epic, just like that between novel and epic when we discussed Bakhtin's theory before, could potentially prevent us from seeing the diversity within the concept. After all, the inclusive and flexible nature of epic should not make it the opponent of the lyrical mode. As will be revealed later, even in revolutionary historical novels that are filled with epic characters, there is still space for the lyrical expression of personal feelings.

The discussion so far has already shown the complex nature of our research subject and it would only become more intricate when the actual historical analysis is involved. Had the discussion surrounding *shishi* just served to reevaluate the literary heritage, it would not have had

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<sup>27</sup> Jaroslav Průšek, "Some Marginal Notes on the Poems of Po Chu-I," in *Chinese History and Literature: Collection of Studies* (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1970), 76.

<sup>28</sup> Jaroslav Průšek, "Subjectivism and Individualism in Modern Chinese Literature," in *The Lyrical and the Epic: Studies of Modern Chinese Literature*, ed. Leo Ou-fan Lee, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980): 1-28.

<sup>29</sup> David Der-wei Wang, "The Prologue," in *The Lyrical in Epic Time: Modern Chinese Intellectuals and Artists through the 1949 Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), x.

such an impact on the field of theory and practice of modern Chinese literature. On the contrary, the idea of *shishi* was a crucial part of the creative activities involving many of the most influential writers and critics in China's modern literary history. This might sound surprising at first since we just mentioned that when envisioning a new form of literature, Chinese intellectuals took Western culture as their model. Modern Chinese literature rose around a time when modernism became dominant in the West, a literary trend that does not seem to have an intimate link with epic. In fact, few poets attempted to revive classical epics after 1800 in the West. As Harold Bloom stated: "There is no longer a clear genre we can call 'the epic,' in the sense that Homer, Virgil, and Milton composed epics."<sup>30</sup>

Many modern literary critics deemed epic as something that belonged to the past. Bakhtin described epic as the opposite to the newly risen novel: "we encounter epic as a genre that has not only long since completed its development, but one that is already antiquated."<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, scholars such as Paul Merchant tried to maintain its relevance, stating that "The epic is a still developing and expanding form."<sup>32</sup> The difference of opinions might come from the way how they interpret and envision the concept. Bakhtin recognized the innovative power of the novel and to fully illustrate its progressive value, he might have willingly or unintentionally made epic into a conservative "antagonist" that could only use the "absolute past" as its subject, fixed on national tradition and devoid of personal experience and free thought, and is separated from the contemporary reality.<sup>33</sup> Only a few classic epics could meet these requirements and even some

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<sup>30</sup> Harold Bloom, "Introduction," in *The Epic (Bloom's Literary Criticism 20th Anniversary Collection)* (New York: Chelsea House, 2004), xiii.

<sup>31</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, "Epic and novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 3.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Merchant, "Prefatory Note," in *The Epic* (London: Methuen, 1971), viii.

<sup>33</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, "Epic and novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 13.

well-accepted masterpieces such as Dante or Milton's works would be excluded from the list according to these. The problem is that when a theorist focuses too much on the connotation or the true "essence" of the concept they try to construct, they tend to overlook the complexity of the historical context that produces the concept in the first place. In Bakhtin's case, he was more invested in revealing the universal, absolute "epicness" or "novelness" instead of discussing the formation of individual works under specific circumstances. For example, Gregory Nagy pointed out that even the *Odyssey* seems to be closer to Bakhtin's own classification of the novel, rather than his definition of the epic.<sup>34</sup> John P. McWilliams has also made a great argument on this matter:

Bakhtin's brilliant argument for closing the epic out of post-Renaissance literature rests upon an assumption that is fundamentally misleading. Bakhtin's view of epic as a static genre elegizing past heroism does not allow for the rebellion and transformations that have occurred within the epic tradition itself. Virgil, Dante, Milton, Wordsworth, and Whitman all felt that they possessed their own "higher argument" that would transform the tradition begun by Homer and modified by intervening poets. As ideas of heroic behavior changed, so did the form of the epic poem; its admittedly special conventions have been a way of measuring changes as well as enforcing conformity. As long as the heroic narrative poem retained power over its audience, the cultural prestige of the familiar form of epic was assured. Why then is it not possible for still higher – or simply different – models of heroism to be convincingly represented in the genre that enjoys contemporary power and prestige?<sup>35</sup>

"The genre that enjoys contemporary power and prestige" could very well include the novel, which tends to be most frequently associated with epic when people use the term broadly. *War and Peace* and some other masterpieces of historical novels are often praised as epics in modern times. György (Georg) Lukács (1885-1971), another important literary theorist of the 20th century who

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<sup>34</sup> Gregory Nagy, "Epic as Genre," in *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World: The Poetics of Community*, ed. Margaret H. Beissinger, Jane Tylus, and Susanne Lindgren Wofford, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 28.

<sup>35</sup> John P. McWilliams, *The American Epic: Transforming a Genre, 1770-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 6.

also extensively talked about epic and novel, even claimed that both the epic and the novel have the same underlying spirit, although faced with different historical conditions: “The novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality.”<sup>36</sup>

It should be pointed out that despite seemingly being against Bakhtin’s argument, Luckas’s understanding of the epic and the novel revealed the same tendency as Bakhtin of valuing the essence of the concept over its specific context. While Bakhtin expected the triumph of the energetic, polyphonic novel over the outdated, monophonic epic, Lukács mourned the loss of the golden age of epic and tried to prove that the novel could be used as salvation. The similarity is that for both of them, the inherent nature of their ideal versions of the epic and the novel matters more than the fluid form in the real world that constantly changes due to the shifting circumstances. The so-called epic tradition in Western literature is not something homogeneous and consistent, but full of diversions and dynamic changes. There is no static, essential connotation that determines what is the essence of epic. But it also does not mean people decided the quality of being epic out of random thoughts. Just like Eagleton’s famous analysis of literature: “If it will not do to see literature as an ‘objective’, descriptive category, neither will it do to say that literature is just what people whimsically choose to call literature. For there is nothing at all whimsical about such kinds of value-judgment.”<sup>37</sup> We could replace the word “literature” with “epic” and these lines still ring true. Furthermore, “the value-judgments by which it is constituted are historically variable ... these value-judgments themselves have a close relation to social ideologies.”<sup>38</sup> The

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<sup>36</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Theory of The Novel: A Historico-philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock, (London: The Merlin Press, 1971), 56.

<sup>37</sup> Terry Eagleton, “Introduction: What is Literature?” in *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Malden: Blackwell Pub, 2008), 14.

<sup>38</sup> Eagleton, “Introduction,” 14.

reality is even more complicated since not only do social ideologies shape value judgments, the latter could also influence the former. Thus, even when the social context of Homer's epics is long gone, Lukács still considered Homer's works as the most ideal, or even the only model of a true epic.<sup>39</sup> But Lukács' interpretation of Homer also inevitably differs from how Homer was understood in his time since he was more interested in using Homer as a symbol to develop his literary ideal instead of conducting the historical analysis.

Lukács is not the first theorist who tried to use a coherent model to "tame" the unstable variables within the concept of epic. His spiritual mentor Hegel has more systematic theories of the development of epic in Western and world literature.<sup>40</sup> It is kind of surprising that despite being one of the earliest Western theorists with detailed analysis of epic, Hegel was to some degree more liberated and open-minded than his successors such as Lukács and Bakhtin. Lukács was too obsessed with Hegel's concept of totality to see other possibilities of epic and even tried to assign the newly risen novels with the same function.<sup>41</sup> Bakhtin tried to highlight the innovative and progressive values of the novel and ended up picturing the epic as static and outdated, without the ability to adapt.<sup>42</sup> Hegel, on the other hand, despite considering Homer's works as the greatest example, has at least acknowledged the value of different variations of epic in various cultures and times. He even briefly mentioned the potential of novels being the new form of epic in a modern society, playing a similar yet different role.<sup>43</sup> The point here is, all these theories are an attempt to standardize what epic should be instead of trying to faithfully depict what specific changes this concept actually went through. If such a depiction exists, it would not be difficult to imagine that

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<sup>39</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of The Novel*, 12.

<sup>40</sup> Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, Vol IV, 106-180.

<sup>41</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of The Novel*, 19-40.

<sup>42</sup> Bakhtin, "Epic and novel," 13.

<sup>43</sup> Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, Vol IV, 172.

it is nowhere near as coherent and consistent as a lot of people would like to see. In terms of the role of *shishi* in modern Chinese literature, it was closer to Lukács's vision in the first three-quarters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With the end of the revolutionary era, *shishi* partially retains its influence while gradually shifting to the destination designed by Bakhtin. This transition will be explored in detail later in this chapter.

Another related problem when examining “epics” within their social and cultural context is how to deal with the relationship between all the different variants. It is understandable to claim that “one of the greatest strengths of the epic tradition is its variety, and a study which confined itself to the long narrative poems, superlative though they are, would do epic an injustice.”<sup>44</sup> But even if we restrict the field of study within the verse tradition, the matter would not get any simpler. “A long history, as in the case of the epic, or the sheer volume of production, as with the novel, breaks up the form into subgenres. Hence the term ‘epic’ often receives from its critics a determinative epithet ... Few instances are pure examples of their type, for the subgenres intersect.”<sup>45</sup> It is obvious that when we praise Balzac's novels for being epic, we do not mean that they belong to the same category as the *Iliad* and other classical epics. Literary critics such as Harold Bloom would include texts ranging from Genesis to *Moby-Dick*, and *The Magic Mountain* under the characteristic of heroism,<sup>46</sup> which seems a little arbitrary. Scholars such as Franco Moretti provided inspiring theory about modern epic, trying to categorize some of the most complicated modern literary works as “world texts,”<sup>47</sup> but his criterion remains to be somewhat vague. And things do not get easier when we turn to an official guide for help: in *The New*

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<sup>44</sup> Merchant, “Prefatory Note,” vii-viii.

<sup>45</sup> J. B. Hainsworth, *The Idea of Epic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 5.

<sup>46</sup> Harold Bloom, “Introduction,” xiii-xiv.

<sup>47</sup> Franco Moretti, “Introduction,” in *Modern Epic: The World System from Goethe to García Márquez* (New York: Verso, 1996), 1-7.

*Princeton Encyclopedia* mentioned above, despite providing a relatively straightforward definition in the beginning, it refers to all sorts of distinctive works when it comes to the modern era: from Joyce's *Ulysses* to Pound's *Cantos*. Are these highly original and creative writings, which obviously do not match the definition given by the same text also belong to the epic family? The entry does not give a clear answer, simply describing them as "inspired by" or "attempt at" epic.<sup>48</sup>

It is, after all, the inevitable difficulty of the challenge to consolidate various concepts and usages from different traditions and within different socio-historical contexts. An attempt to construct a super-genre of epic that contains works from ancient poetry to modern sci-fi movies could potentially yield an intellectually stimulating product,<sup>49</sup> but that is not the interest of this project. Such an attempt still bears the underlying desire for the unifying defining nature, which might once again fall into the trap of "methodological essentialism" described by Popper.<sup>50</sup> The question that truly matters is not "what is epic (in a universal and predefined sense)" but "What do they really mean when they use epic *here at this* moment." A quote from the aforementioned encyclopedia, when replacing "narrative poetry" with "epic," adequately sums up this approach: "A history of narrative poetry has to be plural, and rooted in local intention, not framed as a problem of genre. Where genre is involved, history must be concerned with shared intentions, not necessarily with shared forms or terminological correctness."<sup>51</sup>

That is to say, the subject we are dealing with is usually more than genre or some predefined form. The ideas behind the terminology are more important and should be understood within the

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<sup>48</sup> Newman, "Epic," 369-370.

<sup>49</sup> In terms of the discussion of a general theory of epic cross genres, see Luke Arnott, "Epic and Genre: Beyond the Boundaries of Media," *Comparative Literature* 68, no. 4 (December 2016): 351-369.

<sup>50</sup> K. R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies: The Spell of Plato* (London: George Routledge, 1947), 25-27.

<sup>51</sup> T. V. F. Brogan, "Narrative Poetry," in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 815.

cultural and historical contexts that produced them. Various intellectual activities regarding different aspects of the concept all deserve their separate and detailed case analysis. We are so used to looking for common features, to wave the confusing real-world events into a coherent narrative. But the study of epic does not equal the composition of one. Those “minor differences” we have omitted or trimmed down are the clues that truly matter. The reality is not a well-crafted story, but one riddled with contradictions, fractures, and inconsistencies. Our task is not to make amendments, but to accept its “undesirable” condition and try to figure out how it comes into being. Thus, the wise strategy of studying the development of *shishi* in modern Chinese literature is not to create a polished, all-encompassing narrative that cuts rough edges resolves all the disputes, which would be appealing looking but end up being artificial and misguided. The exposition of complicated or even contradicted ideas would be more favorable. Instead of providing a master theory to explain all the functions of *shishi* in modern Chinese literature, a better choice would be to investigate how different individual and social forces worked together to shape and revolutionize people’s understanding of this concept.

A lot of discussions surrounding the concept of *shishi* in modern Chinese literature often took what I call the “literary critic” approach. That is to say, they might point out that writers’ obsession with such an ideal (sometimes called “epic complex” 史诗情结) will not necessarily lead to fruitful results and could even be harmful to their writing;<sup>52</sup> Others would suggest how writers could improve their thought and skill to truly live up to the standard of *shishi*.<sup>53</sup> In both of these arguments, *shishi* was regarded as a high literary ideal that despite being difficult to reach, is still worth pursuing. The important question is, what produced the criterion that this ideal is

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<sup>52</sup> Wang Benchao 王本朝, “Epic Nature and the Aesthetic Puzzle of Contemporary Literature” 史诗性与当代文学的美学迷思, *Seeking Truth*, no. 5 (September 2014): 134-141.

<sup>53</sup> Wang Lu 王璐, “On the Identity of Modern Epic” 现代史诗标识论, *Tianfu xinlun*, no. 6 (2006): 136-138.



modeled after? Since epic is ultimately a borrowed concept from the West, it is natural for Chinese critics to look up to the canonical Western examples. But there is always the danger “to mistake the classical epic as the only model for all subsequent epics, instead of being determined in part by its own cultural milieu.”<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, as we discussed in the previous part, the concept of epic in the Western tradition is not a static and indivisible unity but rather something that is constantly evolving and expanding. Thus, trying to find a solid foundation from the West for the ideal Chinese *shishi* becomes extremely difficult as the real issue lies beyond the realm of aesthetics.

My research is not against aesthetic interpretation, it just has different priorities. Instead of joining the debate about which modern Chinese literary work deserves the praise of being epic, it is more interested in the question of “why” and “how.” Why is epic important among these debates? How did it become a worth pursuing goal in the first place? The answer to these questions transcended the boundary of the sphere of literature, merging with socio-political and even ideological practice, leading to an attempt to read literature in its inhabited social-historical context instead of pure aesthetic contemplation. Mai Mang’s retrospective on the “epic complex” in Chinese new poetry is a great example of this kind of interdisciplinary approach<sup>55</sup> and I would like to extend it to the study of other genres and ideas associated with epic. The task is not easy since sometimes even if we realize that we are examining a dynamic historical phenomenon, the impulse of discovering the “true nature” of our research subject might still drive us to build a pre-determined interpretive framework and tailor the facts according to it when even though they do not fit our model. Such is the case of Liu Yong’s study of the construction of epic ideology in

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<sup>54</sup> Luke Arnott, “Epic and Genre: Beyond the Boundaries of Media,” *Comparative Literature* 68, no. 4 (December 2016): 357.

<sup>55</sup> See Mai Mang 麦芒, “Epic Complex and the Modernity of Chinese New Poetry” 史诗情结与中国新诗的现代性, *Shi tansuo* 诗探索, no. 3 (2005): 39-70.

modern Chinese literature, in which his study eventually became the construction of epic ideology itself rather than an analysis of the act of construction.<sup>56</sup> And this is what my dissertation would try to avoid: pretending that there exists a transcendent entity that intentionally adjusts the discourse of *shishi* into a single set direction. I would instead showcase the competition between various ideas and attempts and their different degrees of success and failure.

## 1.2 *Shishi* in Modern Literary History

As has been stated before, this project would not take a simplistic “literary critic” approach, which sets a predetermined model of *shishi* and criticizes each work according to that criterion. It is tempting to take this opportunity to organize some of the most iconic works of modern Chinese literature into a tradition of some sort, similar to what Leavis did to English novels in *The Great Tradition*.<sup>57</sup> But doing so would overlook the complex social and cultural context in which those works were produced, which is what is truly important to the comprehensive understanding of their historical development. Such development begins with the literary and social movements in China during the 1930<sup>th</sup> and 1940<sup>th</sup>, a time when this concept first attracted great attention in terms of literary creation. Before people began to use the term epic in literary discussion, there was a tendency of calling for “great works” during the second decades after the New Culture Movement and literature revolution. For example, Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (1892-1978) argued in 1928 that despite the series of great historical events that happened recently, the field of literature was still a piece of blank paper and the writers were unable to capture the zeitgeist.<sup>58</sup> Mao Dun 茅盾 (1896-

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<sup>56</sup> Liu Yong 刘勇, “Introduction,” in “On the Construction of Epic Ideology in Modern Chinese Literature” 论中国现代文学史诗意识的构建, (PhD diss., Wuhan University, 2005), 1-28.

<sup>57</sup> F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition: A Study of the English Novel* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1954), 9-41.

<sup>58</sup> Guo Moruo 郭沫若, “The Dancing Table” 桌子的跳舞, in *The Selected Documents of Revolution Literature*, vol.1 革命文学论争资料选编上 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1981), 359.

1991) also reviewed the achievement of literature since the May Fourth Movement in 1929 and concluded that there were no works that could reflect the great time.<sup>59</sup> The so-called “great works” might sound ambiguous and subjective at first, but it is not too hard to understand within the social-political context. This term is almost always connected with “great time” or “great events.” That is to say, Chinese intellectuals at the time realized that they were in a great time and assume that literary works should reflect it. The connotation of the great time is the drastic social and historical changes, including a series of rebellions, labor movements, and even armed revolution.<sup>60</sup> People at the time could feel the fundamental shift the whole society was going through and they were witnessing the history. Even though some of these events such as the *Kangri Zhanzheng* 抗日战争 (Second Sino-Japanese War, 1937-1945) have inflicted great torment on people’s life, literary critics and writers tended to be excited for its potential as a source of inspiration for new material.

Such a tendency also reflects the Chinese writers and critics’ special passion for literary realism at the time. For them, literature, especially narrative works were considered as the direct representation of social reality. Critical realism from 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe has been adopted by many intellectuals since the Chinese literature revolution in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the hope of reflecting social issues and awakening the repressed masses, leading to reform and the improvement of the status quo.<sup>61</sup> During the 30<sup>th</sup> and 40<sup>th</sup>, such preference persisted but it is less about revealing the problems of the society but rather about recording the exciting historical

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<sup>59</sup> Mao dun 茅盾, “Reading Ni Huanzhi” 读倪焕之, in *Maodun Wenyi Zalunji*, vol.1 茅盾文艺杂论集上 (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1981), 278.

<sup>60</sup> Jiang Guangci 蒋光慈, “Modern Chinese Literature and Social Life” 现代中国文学与社会生活, in *The Selected Documents of Revolution Literature*, vol.1 革命文学论争资料选编上 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1981), 83.

<sup>61</sup> The reception and development of literary realism in modern China is a complicated matter and is beyond the scope of this project. When the term is used in the discussion, I will specify which subcategory (critical, socialist, etc.) it belongs to and elaborate its connotation. For more information, see Marston Anderson, *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period* (Berkely: University of California Press, 1990), 27-75. And David Der-wei Wang, *Fictional Realism in Twentieth-Century China*, 1-24.

progress, making a literary monument for the ongoing real-world events. However, the connection between the great time and great works is not as simple as many writers and critics would like to believe. The creation of great works requires a series of complex elements such as rich life experience, outstanding art talent, and deep philosophical thinking. Simply describing what happened during the great time would not necessarily lead to the birth of great works. Also, literary writings tend to come into fruition later than the time it tries to depict. Homer's poetry is about the war centuries before his time and Tolstoy wrote *War and Peace* fifty years after the French invasion of Russia. Hoping that great works would occur instantaneously as the historical events took place is just too impractical. It also shows that the literary activities were so deeply entangled with social and political movements at the time that it is difficult for writers to separate them from each other.

This eagerness to create great works also reflects the fundamental shift of literature type and hierarchy. In classic Chinese literature, the two highly regarded forms are *shi* 诗 (poetry) and *wen* 文 (prose). The former focuses on the lyric and inner feelings and the latter discusses moral and political lessons. Neither aims to represent the features and essence of time and society through fictional narratives. The literary stories are named *xiaoshuo* 小说, which literally means words with little importance. After the New Culture Movement, fiction, especially novels gradually gain the central status of serious literature.<sup>62</sup> And this kind of shift could be seen as the most significant feature of modern Chinese literature. China has a strong narrative tradition, but it is not until this point that literary fiction received official recognition as a part of the high culture.

This also partially contributed to the fact that when *shishi* was eventually acknowledged as a literary ideal, most writers that tried to pursue this goal chose the form of prose instead of

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<sup>62</sup> Wu Fuhui 吴福辉, Qian Liqun 钱理群, and Wen Rumin 温儒敏, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue sanshinian* 中国现代文学三十年 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1998), 72-75.

narrative poems. The narrative poems were underdeveloped in classic Chinese literature when compared to their Western counterpart while the fiction written in prose despite not receiving recognition from the upper class, have thrived for a long time and produced many masterpieces. Also, the transition from classic Chinese to vernacular Chinese was extremely difficult for poetry due to the nature of language and genre. The poetry composed in vernacular Chinese was considered inferior when compared to that composed in the classical language by many critics at the time.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, although epic was traditionally considered among the highest forms of Western literature, its creation has drastically decreased and a large part of its function was inherited by novels since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Ancient epic mostly deals with legend and mythology, which was never the high point of Chinese culture. Novels on the other hand could freely utilize contemporary materials. With all these factors combined, the idea of epic was mostly incarnated in modern China as long narrative prose instead of poetry. It is not to say that modern Chinese literature lacks narrative poems, some scholars have already done excellent research in this area.<sup>64</sup> But none of these poems have received the same amount of attention as fiction or novels from the same era, nor have they been highly regarded in canonical literary history. A few well-received and innovative attempts to capture the spirit of epic later in the 1980s are not narrative poems, such as Hai Zi 海子 (1964-1989) and his unfinished long poem *Taiyang* 太阳 (*The Sun*)<sup>65</sup> but they are beyond the scope of this project.

During the third decade after the New Culture Movement and literature revolution, the concept of *shishi* was finally pushed to the front stage and received great attention. Writers and

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<sup>63</sup> Wu Fuhui 吴福辉, *Zhongguo xiandai*, 142-145.

<sup>64</sup> Lu Yaodong 陆耀东, "On the Long Narrative Poems in the 1940s" 四十年代长篇叙事诗初探, *Literature Review* (May 1996): 5-15.

<sup>65</sup> Hai Zi 海子, *The Complete Poems of Hai Zi* 海子诗全集, ed. Xi Chuan 西川 (Beijing: Zuo jia chubanshe, 2009), 527-970.

critics began to actively use this term in their arguments and discussion. For example, during the *Kangri Zhanzheng* (Second Sino-Japanese War), Mao Dun deemed the fight against the Japanese invasion as a magnificent *shishi* written by Chinese people's blood and flesh.<sup>66</sup> He also encouraged other writers to merge their personal feelings with the great national fight against enemies and create the *shishi* of the new time.<sup>67</sup> By saying that, he referred to works that could reflect the great struggle of Chinese people and its important historical meaning. It is in the same vein that people would call works such as *War and Peace* epic for their grand scale and excellent depiction of historical events. Creating *shishi* became a goal of many writers who were eager to help their nation and prove themselves. Of course, as we discussed before, the concept of *shishi* was not strictly understood as a genre or literary form but rather as an ideal or a model that is worth pursuing. The following part will try to identify the reason why *shishi* would become a literary ideal and the connotation of such an ideal.

First, we should remember that literary creation is always entangled with social and historical conditions. Faced with the Japanese invasion, Chinese intellectuals gained both the motivation and materials needed for the writing of *shishi*. As Hegel pointed out in his argument of epic:

Under the broadest review of this question, we may say that the conflict of the belligerent condition is that which supplies the Epos with its most pertinent situation. In war it is obviously the entire nation which is set in activity, and which, as a whole placed under similar conditions, is moved and stimulated in a novel way, in so far at least as it possesses any claim, as such a whole, to participate in it ... At the same time we must not overlook a respect in which the possibilities of epic narration is essentially restricted. It is only wars waged between one foreign nation and another which partake of a truly epic character ... Not every war, however, waged under ordinary conditions between two hostile nations is necessarily on that

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<sup>66</sup> Mao dun 茅盾, "The Poetry of this Time" 这时代的诗歌, in *Maodun Wenyi Zalunji vol.2* 茅盾文艺杂论集下 (Shanghai: *Shanghai wenyi chubanshe*, 1981), 684.

<sup>67</sup> Mao dun 茅盾, "Guanyu guci" 关于鼓词, in *Maodun Wenyi Zalunji*, vol.2 茅盾文艺杂论集下 (Shanghai: *Shanghai wenyi chubanshe*, 1981), 704.

account of an epic character. We must have a further condition satisfied, namely, the justification on broad historical grounds for the bellicose attitude thus adopted. Only when we have this do we obtain a picture of an enterprise at once novel and more exalted, which does not present the appearance of something apart from universal history, the purely capricious subjugation of one state by another, but is absolutely and essentially rooted in a profounder principle of necessity.<sup>68</sup>

Hegel's theory of epic is closely related to his philosophy of world history, which does not necessarily correspond to the conflicts in reality, but it still to some degree explains the situation that China was facing at the time. On another note, Hegel's discussion of epic tradition and calling for the reconstruction of the national epic was also entangled with the troubled modernization of his own land.<sup>69</sup> Similar to that, many Chinese intellectuals saw the war between China and Japan as a precious opportunity to fight for a brighter future for their nation and get rid of the dark past in the process and that is the reason that during the revolutionary era, when writers tried to build a unified identity for the newborn country with epic-inspired literary works, their practice was in line with Hegel's discussion of epic's "peculiarly national character."<sup>70</sup>

The foreign invasion and the fight against enemies have interrupted the dull and mundane life of every day, creating new public and political routines. Heroism became a major theme among the intellectual discussion. Some critics claimed that "the hero should return to the novel, along with its epic nature."<sup>71</sup> Many people felt thrilled and relieved. Hu Feng 胡风 (1902-1985) considered this war as a movement that stimulated everyone, involving the whole nation in an exciting event. It "removes the depression, meets the expectation, and realizes the potential of the

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<sup>68</sup> Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, Vol IV, 132-133.

<sup>69</sup> Mai Mang 麦芒, "Epic Complex and the Modernity of Chinese New Poetry" 史诗情结与中国新诗的现代性, *Shi tansuo*, no. 3 (2005): 43.

<sup>70</sup> Simon Dentith, "Mapping Epic and Novel," in *Epic and Empire in Nineteenth-century Britain* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 111.

<sup>71</sup> Lan Hai 蓝海, *The Literary History of Kangzhan* 抗战文艺史 (Jinan: Shandong wenyi chubanshe, 1984), 4.

whole nation.”<sup>72</sup> People believed firmly that they have “the justification on broad historical grounds” in this conflict. The war between China and Japan was not simply understood as the fight between two nations, but rather the conflict between good and evil, the bright and dark of human history in a transcendental sense. The resistance of the Chinese has been interrupted in sublime terms. It was not just about driving off enemies and liberating the nation, it was a struggle for justice, for the inevitable new order of history, and a better future for humankind.

The Chinese people’s attitude towards the war has its own unique traits when compared to other nations under the background of World War II. When we examine the literature in other cultures and nations around the same time, it becomes clear that a righteous war does not necessarily serve as the most suitable situation for the production of *shishi*. We have to further investigate the historical progress and deep cultural structure in modern China to fully understand the passion and excitement among Chinese intellectuals during the war. While almost the whole world was involved in World War II and the anti-fascist movement, most of the nations did not share the same reaction as China did in terms of literary and intellectual discussion. In the US and many parts of Europe, for those determined supporters of liberalism, the war was often seen as a humanitarian disaster, revealing the fragile foundation of human civilization. There was a pervasive feeling of pessimism and disillusion towards the traditional value and beliefs, along with the fear and worry for the destructive irrational power of humankind. The result is a series of works directly or indirectly reflecting upon the causes and consequences of the war. It also led to the thriving of existentialism in the field of philosophy. In the Soviet Union, which had a similar socialist and revolution background as China, instead of being excited about the fight against foreign aggression, people tended to be angry about the sudden interruption of social development

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<sup>72</sup> Hu Feng 胡风, *The Collected Works of Hu Feng*, vol. 3 胡风全集 3 (Wuhan: *Hubei renmin chubanshe*, 1999), 174-175.



and progress.

Chinese intellectuals at the time also actively introduced other nations' contemporary works to their audience and were well aware of their different approaches. But they still developed their own literary ideas rather than simply imitating others. One major factor is that the influence and acceptance is a two-way process and those who import foreign ideas also have an active role in selecting and reshaping those ideas to suit their needs. Learning from Western culture does not equal wishing to become the West. And Western culture itself is also not static and timeless, but dynamic and evolving constantly. When Chinese writers and critics introduced the concept of epic into their culture, they eventually changed it into something new based on their social and historical context. To understand their excitement and eagerness to create epic works during the fight against the Japanese invasion, we have to trace the road of Chinese modernization.

The modernization of China is a long and hazardous route. It is full of cultural and political crises that fundamentally challenged people's worldview and shook the traditional superiority felt towards foreign civilization. This had caused the above-mentioned great cultural anxiety and the impulse to transcend the current humiliating position and take back the country's lost glory. Thus, the Japanese invasion was deemed as an opportunity and a turning point. People hoped that once they had defeated the enemy, the whole nation would have the chance to begin again and wash away the shameful memory. While in the West intellectuals cared more about individual and personal freedom, focusing on the cause of the war, the evil within humankind, the Chinese at this point valued higher the elevation and resurrection of the whole nation.

What is worth mentioning is that there was once a popular opinion among Chinese literary critics that modern Chinese literature is inferior to the Western counterpart since the former mainly dealt with its own nation and social issues while the latter focused more on the inner complexity

of human beings as universal existence.<sup>73</sup> This dissertation does not intend to make any value judgment in this matter and I just would like to point out that this so-called humanity does not exist in a vacuum and is ultimately shaped by the social and cultural structures in which it finds itself. Thus, calling some literary works showing the pure inner quality of human beings is just an illusion. The characters in Western literature could of course be understood and appreciated by readers from other cultures in certain ways, but at the end of the day, they are still specific human beings produced by their unique historical context and are limited by it.

Therefore, when Chinese writers and critics tried to search for examples of epic from the West, they were still restricted by their own cultural tradition and the most urgent social and political needs despite having seemingly a large variety of options. Also, we should notice that the development of *shishi* in the field of modern literature was still in its premature stage during the 30s and the 40s. Despite the calling for great works that has been mentioned before, few have received the recognition of being considered *shishi*. Literary critics and scholars at the time also tended to use the term in a casual manner without in-depth scrutiny or interpretation. Writers of literary history and researchers of certain writers sometimes apply the concept of *shishi* indiscriminately to works from that era,<sup>74</sup> but that is more of a retroactive action and does not reflect the true aspect of the literary ideas at that time. Nevertheless, it would still be beneficial to analyze some of the predecessors whose work led to the maturity of *shishi*, of whom Mao Dun 茅盾 is the most representative. Although he never used this term when talking about his own writing, many scholars have pointed out that his works have certain traits related to the epic. His writings were characterized in official Chinese textbooks as having deep thoughts, wide historical content,

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<sup>73</sup> C. T. Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 501-520.

<sup>74</sup> Wu Fuhui 吴福辉, Qian Liqun 钱理群, and Wen Rumin 温儒敏, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue sanshinian* 中国现代文学三十年 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1998), 237.

and an epic nature that reflects the full picture of his time.<sup>75</sup> Western scholars such as Průšek argued that “the pessimistic, tragic mood of Chinese youth in the period of the Great Revolution is most effectively expressed by the greatest contemporary writer of epic, Mao Dun (Shen Yen-ping 沈雁冰), in his excellent trilogy ‘Eclipse’.”<sup>76</sup>

One major reason that critics and scholars tend to use *shishi* to describe Mao Dun’s writings is their grand scale and his ambition to capture the time in which he lived as a whole. In fact, he has constantly run into problems of having too much to work with for his works and had to trim it down: “I feel that all the topics that I am familiar with are suitable for long narratives and there is no way to make them shorter ... I think those historical events could not be thoroughly explored unless using novels with more than ten thousand words.”<sup>77</sup> Mao Dun always tried to represent the universality of all human beings in his work, despite the impossibility of it. He wanted to show the grand picture of the whole society and even saw Lu Xun’s 鲁迅 (1881-1936), the most well-regarded writers since the literature revolution) works as unsatisfying for they only displayed a corner of the life of modern Chinese people.<sup>78</sup> Unlike Lu Xun, who did an excellent analysis of the deep psychological and cultural structure of Chinese people through focused observation of individual cases, Mao Dun was more interested in the vastness of the social reality and tried to find a proper way to describe it objectively. But he did not simply put all the different materials together without a well-organized structure, he has a strong sense of history and attempted to create

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<sup>75</sup> Wu Fuhui 吴福辉, *Zhongguo xiandai*, 251.

<sup>76</sup> Jaroslav Průšek, “Subjectivism and Individualism,” 6. The reference here is to the novel *Shi* (蚀) (Eclipse) and which is comprised of three volumes, *Huanmie* 幻灭 (Disillusioned) (1927), *Dongyao* 动摇 (Wavering) (1928), and *Zhuiqui* 追求 (Pursuits) (1928).

<sup>77</sup> Mao Dun 茅盾, “My Review” 我的回顾 in *Collected Works of Mao Dun*, vol. 19 茅盾全集卷十九 (Beijing: *Renmin wenxue chubanshe*, 1991), 407-408.

<sup>78</sup> Mao Dun 茅盾, “Reading Ni Huanzhi” 读倪焕之, in *Maodun Wenyi Zalunji*, vol.1 茅盾文艺杂论集上 (Shanghai: *Shanghai wenyi chubanshe*, 1981), 273.

a kind of totality or completeness through his writing. Focusing on social issues and recording all different events is not new for Chinese literature as many fictions in the late Qing dynasty were famous for doing so. But those works usually lacked a central theme and were loosely put together. A lot of classic literary narrations also have a great amount of social depiction, but they still did not reach the modern aesthetic standard. As Průšek pointed out:

The old literature in *wen-yen* constituted, in fact, an immense archive of facts, elegantly recorded, but not as a rule worked up into a higher artistic unity. It lacked, for the most part, epic character, what Goethe called *Lust zum fabulieren*, which links up, thanks to its inner dynamism, interesting facts to a higher organic whole, unifies and elaborates them in a new, artistic structure.<sup>79</sup>

This “artistic unity” and “organic whole” are what distinguish Mao Dun’s works from those that only recorded fragments and pieces. Furthermore, besides the aesthetic style, Mao Dun also emphasized the significance of representing the zeitgeist and the necessity of history, which links his writing practice with Lukács’ theory of “totality”<sup>80</sup> and gives the narrative a higher purpose. After all, *shishi* as epic is not just about depicting reality, it needs to transcend it by revealing a deeper meaning or showing a new form of salvation. However, the appearance of his belief in historical progress in his works is subtle and often overshadowed by his overly detached perspective.

Overall, Mao Dun has made a great contribution to the further development of ideas of *shishi* in modern Chinese literature. His method might not be always consistent, just like what his name indicates (which has the same pronunciation of “contradiction” in Chinese). He tried to

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<sup>79</sup> Jaroslav Průšek, “Reality and Art in Chinese Literature” in *The Lyrical and the Epic: Studies of Modern Chinese Literature*, ed. Leo Ou-fan Lee (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 91.

<sup>80</sup> Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1968), 8-10. For more analysis of Mao Dun and Lukács, see Chen Jianhua 陈建华, *Revolution and Form: Mao Dun’s Early Novels and Chinese Literary Modernity*, trans. Carlos Rojas (Boston: Brill, 2018), 27-40.

pursue artistic unity and had a strong sense of historical necessity, but his objective attitudes and the self-restriction of avoiding obvious feelings prevent his works from distorting the reality to suit what ideal demands like the later arisen revolution literature. And despite being a left-wing writer, he was never fully devoted to the new style of revolution literature that we will discuss later. And that is also why during the post-revolutionary era, some writers' attempt of renovating the revolutionary *shishi* form could find their inspirations from Mao Dun's works.

Back to the literary history and we would find that it was not until the late 1940s that the concept of *shishi* developed into a more mature form and began to receive increasingly greater attention, especially during the time of *Shiqi nian wenxue* 十七年文学 (Seventeen-Year Literature) (1949-1966).<sup>81</sup> It was during this period that *shishi* became its own term with unique connotations instead of the mere translation of "epic." When choosing terms that are most naturally related to the spirit of the "Seventeen-Year Literature," *shishi* 史诗 would definitely be one of them. In his *A History of Contemporary Chinese Literature*, Hong Zicheng 洪子诚 especially talks about the pursuit of *shishixing* 史诗性 (it was translated as "epic character" in the English version and as mentioned before, this thesis will keep the original form of the Chinese word due to its complex meanings) as a major literary theme during that period.<sup>82</sup> And unlike discussing earlier modern writers such as Mao Dun or Lao She, the word *shishi* does not need to be used retroactively since it was already among the trending phrases at the time. Taking a glimpse at the numerous cases from the *Shiqi nian* 十七年 (Seventeen-Year) era in which *shishi* entered reviews and critiques as

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<sup>81</sup> *Shiqi nian wenxue* 十七年文学 (Seventeen-Year Literature) was that produced during the *Shiqi nian* 十七年 (Seventeen Year) Era between the founding of the *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo* 中华人民共和国 (Peoples Republic of China) and the beginning of the *Wuchanjieji wenhua dageming* 无产阶级文化大革命 (Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution), 1949-1966.

<sup>82</sup> Hong Zicheng 洪子诚, "The Pursuit of the Nature of *Shishi*" 史诗性的追求 in *The History of Contemporary Chinese Literature* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 1999), 108-111.

praise and compliment, we will soon realize how widespread the term had become even then. Besides novel and narrative poetry, the genres that are commonly considered to have a closer relationship with *shishi*, we can find movies, choir performances, and new style Beijing opera also labeled with the term. Even non-fictional works such as documentaries and collective biography have made the list.<sup>83</sup>

If historians are tasked with finding the “golden age” of *shishi* in terms of modern Chinese literature, then the “Seventeen-Year” era would be their best bet. Some of the most significant works from this time, the so-called *sanhongyichuang* 三红一创 (three reds and one achievement), namely the novels *Hongyan* 红岩 (Red Crag), 1961, by Yang Yiyan 杨益言 (1925-2017) and Luo Guangbin 罗广斌 (1924-1967),<sup>84</sup> *Hongri* 红日 (Red Sun), 1961, by Wu Qiang 吴强 (1910-1990),<sup>85</sup> *Hongqipu* 红旗谱 (Genealogy of the Red Flag, aka Keep the Red Flag Flying), 1957 by Liang Bin 梁斌 (1914-1996),<sup>86</sup> and *Chuangye shi* 创业史 (The Builders, aka History of the Pioneers), 1960, by Liu Qing 柳青 (1916-1978),<sup>87</sup> have all been compared to or praised as possessing certain characters of *shishi*. However, a further investigation would reveal that the usage of the word was not always that straightforward or simplistic. Even during its heyday, *shishi* was never a well-defined terminology and its application by critics and theorists seems to be a little

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<sup>83</sup> For more examples where the term *shishi* was used during the “Seventeen-Year” era, see the chart attached to this article: Zhang Huiqiang 张慧强 and Zhang Lijuan 张立娟, “Feng Xuefeng shishiguan yu zongtixing siwei” 冯雪峰史诗观与总体性思维, *Chinese Language and Literature Study*, no. 3 (2019): 127-128.

<sup>84</sup> The narrative of Jiang Jie 江姐 (Sister Jiang), the main character in this novel, is based on the life of the Revolutionary Martyr, Jiang Zhuyun (江竹筠) (1920-1949).

<sup>85</sup> Based on the Lianshui 涟水县, Laiwu 莱芜, and Menglianggu 孟良崮 campaigns fought in Jiangsu and Shandong Provinces in 1947 in which the Red Army was victorious over Nationalist forces.

<sup>86</sup> The chronicle of three generations of peasants in Hebei Province in Northern China their struggle against their landlords, and their eventual victory under the leadership of the Communist Party.

<sup>87</sup> Set during the initial period of the *Nongcun gongshehua yundon* 农村公社化运动 (Agricultural Cooperatives Movement) of the early 1950s chronicling the rise of the *Shehui zhuyi xinren* 社会主义新人 (Socialist New Man).

random and careless at best. It was not treated as a normal genre since so many different art forms or even news reports have received commendations. And it was also not an ordinary aesthetic mode since its connotation is often beyond the field of literature. Feng Xuefeng 冯雪峰 (1903-1976) and his perspective on *shishi* could serve as a good example.

Feng Xuefeng is not the first critic who tried to apply the term *shishi* in their literary discussions,<sup>88</sup> but he is the one who maintained a special passion for it and used it in a consistent manner. He tended to use it to describe narrative poems or novels featuring wars and great social movements, such as *Taiyang zhaozai sangganhe shang* 太阳照在桑干河上 (The Sun Shines over the Sanggan River) by Ding Ling 丁玲 (1904–1986)<sup>89</sup> and *Baowei Yan'an* 保卫延安 (Defend Yan'an) (1954) by Du Pencheng 杜鹏程 (1921-1991).<sup>90</sup> However, as already pointed out by other scholars,<sup>91</sup> his attitude towards those works that were named by him as *shishi* is ambiguous. He mentioned that *Taiyang* was not the greatest *shishi* and *Baowei Yan'an* is but a draft of *shishi* and could be further improved.<sup>92</sup> When it comes to the detailed explanation of the important characters of *shishi*, Feng admittedly did a more solid job than many other critics. We could take a look at his argument of *Baowei Yan'an*:

Its foundation for a heroic *shishi* was already constructed. Our readers' authentic impression is the reliable proof: in its strong and consistent atmosphere, in its all-

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<sup>88</sup> For example, there is discussion of the possible merging of heroic epic and novels not long after the Sino-Japanese War. See Lan Hai 蓝海, *Kangzhan wenyishi* 抗战文艺史 (Jinan: Shandong wenyi chubanshe, 1984), 4.

<sup>89</sup> Although this novel was first published in 1948, Feng Xuefeng's review of it that containing the term *shishi* did not appear until 1952. See Feng Xuefeng 冯雪峰, *Xuefeng wenji* 雪峰文集 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1983), 416-417. The novel deals with the process of land reform in Northern China not just in terms of the establishment of a just social order, but also as an unstoppable peasant revolution under the leadership of the Communist Party.

<sup>90</sup> The story of the struggle in 1947 to recapture Yan'an (延安) in Shaanxi Province which since 1935 had been the headquarters of the Communist Party.

<sup>91</sup> Zhang Huiqiang 张慧强 and Zhang Lijuan 张立娟, "Feng Xuefeng shishiguan yu zongtixing siwei" 冯雪峰史诗观与总体性思维, *Chinese Language and Literature Study*, no. 3 (2019):121-122.

<sup>92</sup> Feng Xuefeng 冯雪峰, *Xuefeng wenji* 雪峰文集 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1983), 281.

round and focused depiction of the war, it is such a representation of the revolutionary war, especially its great spirit that so vividly and deeply exhilarated us. The author has illustrated the revolutionary war with such a fighting spirit, which filled his work with uplifting power.<sup>93</sup>

Here Feng obviously emphasized the significance of the spirit of revolutionary war or revolution in general. It is such a spirit that granted *Baowei Yan'an* its quality of *shishi*. He also mentioned that the achievement of the novel is exemplary since portraying positive, advanced, and heroic figures are the fundamental task of socialist realism literature.<sup>94</sup> Feng's usage of the word might also be influenced by Russian literature since the writers and critics there were adherents of socialist ideology at the time and tended to use "epic" to describe certain realism literary works.<sup>95</sup>

Despite the somewhat ambiguous usage of the term, *shishi* was nonetheless accepted by mainstream literary critics and gained popularity and prestige. It is also not difficult to perceive the connections between those works categorized under this concept. They often involve narrative structures with great temporal and spatial scale, the mixture of historical events and fictional imagination, the revelation of the "essence" of history, and the depiction of heroes and their heroic deeds. *Baowei Yan'an* as already shown features a real event of the war between Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party that happened in Yan'an in 1947. Heroism is the major theme of the novel due to its in-depth description of several hero figures and their strong will when facing adversity. Through its vivid representation of individual and regional activities, the novel tries to

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<sup>93</sup> Feng Xuefeng 冯雪峰, "Lun Baowei Yanan" 论保卫延安, *Wenyibao* 文艺报, July 18, 1954. The translations if not mentioned otherwise are all done by myself.

<sup>94</sup> Feng Xuefeng 冯雪峰, "Lun Baowei Yanan." For more information on socialist realism, see Regine Robin, *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic*, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 3-77.

<sup>95</sup> Железный поток (Iron Flood, aka Torrents of Steel) (1924) by Alexander Serafimovich (1863-1949) is a socialist realism novel that was influential in China during the revolutionary era. It tells the story of a force of irregular soldiers in 1918 during the Russian Civil War making their way across the Caucasian mountains to join up with the main forces of the Red Army. In the foreword written by Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白, he used "epic" to describe the novel. See Alexander Serafimovich, *Iron Stream* 铁流, trans. Cao Jinghua 曹靖华 and Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白 (Harbin: Beifang wenyi chubanshe, 2017), 6.



demonstrate the whole picture of the war. Another example is *Hongqipu*, unlike *Baowei Yan'an* which focuses on one grand event, it involves a series of activities in chronological order, attempting to reveal the origin and genealogy of revolution. It tells the story of the fight for liberation and freedom of three generations of a Chinese farmer family and their ultimate victory with the guidance of the Communist Party.

When we compare these novels to works with similar features from earlier writers such as Mao Dun, the difference is obvious. Mao Dun's writing was greatly influenced by literary realism and naturalism from European literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. That is also why scholars like Průšek will compare him to writers such as Balzac and Zola. He attempted to present a panorama of modern Chinese society, a literary encyclopedia that records all the details while also explaining the whole picture. Although fictional writing could not really be seen as "objective," he still tried to remain neutral when it comes to the description of his chosen materials, to the point of rationalizing the "dark side" and negative elements of social life and human nature. No wonder he was criticized by other more "progressive" writers for his dubious perspective, saying that his attack against nihilism is too weak.<sup>96</sup>

The revolutionary historical novels also have a strong desire to depict the whole picture of the time and society, but they went further to pursue something that could be called "historical totality." Some Chinese scholars tend to trace this concept back to Lukács<sup>97</sup> since he has made great emphasis on the significance of totality: "Whereas Lenin really brought about a renewal of the Marxian method my efforts resulted in a Hegelian-distortion, in which I put the totality in the

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<sup>96</sup> Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白, "On *Sanrenxing*" 谈谈三人行 in *Documents of Contemporary Chinese Literary Study: Mao Dun Special*, Vol. 2 中国当代文学研究资料: 茅盾专辑第二卷, eds. Tang Jinhai 唐金海 and Kong Haizhu 孔海珠 (Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 1985), 912.

<sup>97</sup> Yao Dan 姚丹, "Lying the Foundation for Shishi Nature of People's Literature" 为人民文学的史诗性开山, *Literary Criticism*, no. 3 (2014): 106-114.

center of the system, overriding the priority of economics.”<sup>98</sup> He argued that what truly differentiates Marxism from bourgeois science is not economic motives in historical explanation, but the point of view of totality. However, it is highly unlikely that Lukács’ theory influenced Chinese critics’ and writers’ literary practice. In fact, he was often treated as a negative example and criticized as a revisionist of Marxism during the “Seventeen Year.”<sup>99</sup> Furthermore, Chinese intellectuals at the time were less interested in the definition of a philosophical concept. They were much more passionate about social movements and related political ideologies. In other words, merely reflecting and explaining the reality like what Mao Dun did could no longer satisfy them and they were eager to participate in the reform of the society, just like Marx’s famous words: “Die Philosophen haben die Welt nur verschieden *interpretiert*; es kömmt drauf an sie zu *verändern*.” (Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.)<sup>100</sup>

This historical totality is more like a makeshift term that describes the common tendency among critics and writers during the revolutionary era. It is deeply entangled with Communist ideology and its political practice, aiming to construct a grand narrative that is coherent and continuous. The result is a form of a priori, holistic history. Instead of objectively reflecting the social reality, its major function is to prove the inevitable victory of the proletariat revolution and justify the uncompromising armed struggle that would lead to such a victory. Under this premise, any disturbing and uncooperative elements that hinder such a narrative will be suppressed. The complexity and paradox of the real-world experience, as well as the self-consciousness of human

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<sup>98</sup> Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971), xx.

<sup>99</sup> Yang Lin 杨林 and Zhang Xueli 张雪丽, “Lukács’ Literary Thoughts in China: The Review and Revelation of the Reception History” 卢卡奇文艺思想在中国: 一个接受史的回顾与启示, *Chinese Comparative Literature*, no. 3 (2018): 145-156.

<sup>100</sup> Karl Marx, “Thesen über Feuerbach,” *Exzerpte und Notizen Sommer 1844 bis Anfang 1847*, ed. Georgij Bagaturija et al., *Karl Marx Friedrich Engels Gesamtausgabe*, 4<sup>th</sup> Division: Exzerpte, Notizen, Marginalien 3 (Berlin: Internationalen Marx-Engels-Stiftung/Akademie Verlag, 1998), 21.

beings, will be enclosed within the essential characters of certain social classes through derogatory rhetorical strategies. On the other hand, certain social phenomena that are still not pervasive or typical such as the awakening of proletarians will be exaggerated as imminent and unavoidable, to strengthen the righteousness of the historical narrative.<sup>101</sup>

Thus, despite its superficial similarities with other existing genres, *shishi* as a literary concept became rather distinct during the Chinese revolutionary era. Both *shishi* and traditional epic would feature heroic protagonists, but the heroes in *shishi* are usually ordinary people instead of legendary figures or noble warriors. They are regarded as heroes not just because of their wit and strength, but more importantly due to their firm belief in the specific political ideology. They represent the progressive power that will lead society into a bright future. Even in literary works featuring real historical figures such as Li Zicheng 李自成 (1606-1645), the peasant leader who overthrew the Ming Dynasty in 1644, the hero was still depicted as a typical proletariat revolution leader.<sup>102</sup> It may seem anachronistic for a peasant revolt leader in the Ming dynasty to have the awareness of a socialist, but it is an understandable reimagination due to the ideological nature of revolution historical literature.

To sum it up, the idea of *shishi* in the revolutionary era ultimately led to the practice of radical modernity. Rather than following the famous pattern summarized by Matei Calinescu (1934-2009), in which aesthetic modernity stands against social modernity,<sup>103</sup> it attempts to merge the two modernities into one by recklessly inserting social-political ideas into the aesthetic dimension. The literary works produced during the revolutionary era were often considered as a

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<sup>101</sup> Liu Yong 刘勇, "On the Construction of Epic Ideology in Modern Chinese Literature" 论中国现代文学史诗意识的构建, (PhD diss., Wuhan University, 2005), 111.

<sup>102</sup> Dong Zhilin 董之林, "Guannian yu xiaoshuo" 观念与小说, *Wenxue Pinglun* 文学评论, no. 2 (2008): 75.

<sup>103</sup> Matei Călinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 41-45.

setback and interruption of the modernization of Chinese literature. But it should be seen as the continuous development and the unique representation of literary modernity in China, just like social revolution is a more extreme method of carrying out the ideas that originated from the Enlightenment. The overlapping of literature and politic indeed caused a lot of tension and struggle among writers and critics, but it does not mean we should write it off as a period of embarrassing memory. How to treat this legacy with an unbiased perspective and enough care is still a difficult task faced by Chinese scholars in the post-revolutionary time. And this kind of challenge would also accompany the future growth of *shishi* since just like Fredric Jameson's evaluation of realism,<sup>104</sup> *shishi* has been and will always be a hybrid concept, in which an ideological claim masquerades as an aesthetic ideal.

As for the literature developed after the revolutionary era, they will be the major focus of this project. More specifically, this means the historical novels that were written from the 1980s to the present. There are other areas where *shishi* also plays an active role due to its intermedia and trans-genre nature as has been discussed before, but the goal here is to maintain a more focused view-point to yield more in-depth results. The term "historical novel" is used in a general sense, which not only refers to works depicting ancient history but any novel that integrates important historical events as an inseparable part into its narrative. Mo Yan 莫言, one of the most outstanding writers of Chinese historical novels, who also has been included in my study, has pointed out the broad indication of this term: "Strictly speaking, I feel that every writer is writing about history ... Even science fiction is still a memory of the past, an extension of imagination based on the past life."<sup>105</sup> By including various forms of historical narrative, some of which are unorthodox, this

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<sup>104</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (New York: Verso, 2015), 5.

<sup>105</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, "Xie lishi xiaoshuo shize sikao dangxia wenti" 写历史小说实则思考当下问题, *Cultural QQ*, November 30, 2021, <https://cul.qq.com/a/20141011/038452.htm>.

project wishes to challenge our normal conception and reveal the vigorous potential of *shishi*. Another related term that needs to be discussed here is “new historical novel,” which is a troublesome concept in the Chinese context. There are few systematic theoretical analyses of the term and it is more often than not used by literary critics out of convenience due to its vague nature and inclusiveness. In a general sense, it mainly refers to works that use personal perspective and new literary techniques to distinguish themselves from the revolutionary historical novels and their grand narrative.<sup>106</sup> Some of the authors discussed in this project are defined as representative writers of new historical novels while there are also authors that are not normally considered as belonging to this movement, but their works indeed possess certain traits of typical new historical novels. My project would focus on revealing the uniqueness, the innovative ideas, and the historical heritage carried by these works instead of letting itself be hindered by the fancy names that have been applied to them. Compared to traditional European historical novels like those composed by Walter Scott, even the works created during the Chinese revolutionary era could be considered as new historical novels according to Lukács’ vision of the future path for this kind of fiction.<sup>107</sup> It is much more important to contextualize “what is new” and untangle its intricate connotation than fixating on the superficial terminology.

All six authors included in this project, Lu Yao 路遥 (1949-1992), Chen Zhongshi 陈忠实 (1942-2016), Mo Yan 莫言 (1955—), Wang Anyi 王安忆 (1954—), Chi Zijian 迟子建 (1964—), and Liu Cixin 刘慈欣 (1963—) are established writers who have gained national and international

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<sup>106</sup> Some critics try to link these works with the new historicism theory but there is no evident connection between them and Chinese new historical novels are more of the result of a series of spontaneous literary movements than some well-organized experimental practice under the guidance of Western theories. For more information on this matter, see Zhou Qiong 周琼, “90 niandai yilai xinlishi xiaoshuo de xushi yanjiu” 90年代以来新历史小说的叙事研究, Master’s thesis, (Nanjing Normal University, 2013), 1-6.

<sup>107</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 332-350.

fame. From their representative works, we could see a variety of drastically different but equally fascinating depictions of human experience, from the tortuous path of a young peasant's self-discovery to the turbulent life struggle of a common family in rural China, from a hundred years of tenacious fighting for the survival of a tribe in the harshest environment of China to a thousand decades of humanity's epic failures and success of growth in the universe. Not all of them are "serious writers" in a traditional sense as Liu Cixin is a devoted science fiction author. But they all share certain characters that elevated their writing to a level beyond ordinary fiction, be it the ambition of scale, penetrating insight into the history and human nature, or the belief in salvation and utopia. After all, *shishi* is more about storytelling and the wide range of authors analyzed in this dissertation would hopefully provide a more comprehensive picture to reveal its plural inspiring natures.

## CHAPTER 2. LU YAO: THE ANTINOMY OF ORDINARY

This chapter analyzes Lu Yao 路遥 and his literary representation of contemporary Chinese society and history. His work serves as a bridge between revolutionary historical novels (often associated with *shishi* in the literary discussion) and new historical novels that would emerge later. In terms of the trait of *shishi*, it features a heroic protagonist on his modern odyssey as well as a panoramic social picture, but the dogmatic historical narration adopted from the official ideological propaganda lacks the strength and flexibility to mend the gap between personal experience and grand historical events.

### 2.1 The Poetics of Multiformity

In his essays featuring the creation process of the novel, Lu Yao 路遥 admitted that the impulse for writing *Pingfan de shijie* 平凡的世界 (Ordinary World) (3 volumes, 1986-1988) came from an idea when he was around twenty years old: “If I will be writing a book with the largest scale perceived by myself, or finishing the most important task in my life, it must be before my forties.”<sup>1</sup> *Pingfan de shijie* is indeed a great book for both its scale and content: more than a million words, encompassing a ten-year time frame when China was undergoing some of the most drastic changes. Being honored with Mao Dun Literature Prize the year after its publication also secured its position as a modern classic, not to mention the widespread and long-lasting popularity that is a rarity among works outside genre fictions. So much could be said about this book and this chapter will focus on its relationship with the concept of *shishi* 史诗.

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<sup>1</sup> Lu Yao 路遥, *Zaochen cong zhongwu kaishi* 早晨从中午开始 (Beijing: Beijing shiyue wenyi chubanshe, 2012), chap. 3, <https://www.99csw.com/book/7233/248804.htm>.

*Pingfan de shijie* has often been praised as *shishi*<sup>2</sup> and many scholars have also tried to analyze its “epic characters.”<sup>3</sup> Despite the difference in approaches and perspectives, it is generally agreed that the panoramic portrait of the society is an essential part contributing to its feel of *shishi*. According to Lu Yao, it was decided upon its initial conception that the work would involve the wide range of urban and rural life of China from 1975 to 1985,<sup>4</sup> which is not a trivial task. Before this book, Lu Yao’s biggest literary creation had been the novella *Rensheng* 人生 (Life) (1982) and he had no experience writing truly long narrative fictions. Not fazed by the challenge, Lu Yao devoted himself wholeheartedly to the preparation of the novel by reading all kinds of foreign and Chinese literary works, traveling around to gather materials and take notes from life, and drawing numerous drafts of the plotlines. The preparation alone took him three years<sup>5</sup> because he was determined to gather as much data as possible to get the complete picture of that time.

Lu Yao’s experience could easily remind us of many of the literature predecessors that he admired. For example, Tolstoy also spent several years collecting documents to prepare for his writing of *War and Peace*. Mao Dun 茅盾, one of the most active advocates of literary realism in China during the 1920s and 30s, was famous for the grand coverage of various aspects of social life in his novels, which also came from the accumulation and observation in his daily life. Liu Qing 柳青, who was recognized by Lu Yao as the most influential literary figure for him, lived in

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<sup>2</sup> Zhao Xueyong 赵学勇, “Du Lu Yao de *Pingfan de shijie*: huangtudi de zhuangli shishi” 读路遥的《平凡的世界》：黄土地的壮丽史诗, *Guangming ribao* 光明日报, March 15, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on this matter, see Zhang Wenzhe 张文哲, “On the Gain and Loss of Epic Pursuit of Lu Yao’s *Pingfan de shijie*” 从《平凡的世界》看路遥创作史诗性追求的得失, *Journal of China University of Petroleum*, no. 1 (February 2018): 68-72. And Wu Shenggang 吴圣刚 and Wu Chengxi 吴成熙, “The Historical and Poetic Writing and Characteristics of *The Pingfan de shijie*” 论《平凡的世界》的史诗性特征, *Journal of Xinyang Normal University*, no. 5 (September 2019): 103-108.

<sup>4</sup> Lu Yao 路遥, *Zaochen cong zhongwu kaishi* 早晨从中午开始 (Beijing: Beijing shiyue wenyi chubanshe, 2012), chap. 11, <https://www.99csw.com/book/7233/248812.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Lu Yao 路遥, *Zaochen*, chap. 16, <https://www.99csw.com/book/7233/248817.htm>.



the countryside for more than ten years to muster the necessary materials for his novel *Chuangye shi* 创业史 (The Builders) (1960), which was also praised as *shishi* despite never being finished.<sup>6</sup> There is a tangible spiritual connection between Lu Yao and all these writers mentioned above, not in the way how they depicted reality but in the way how they conceived the world and the scale of the depiction they attempted to reach. Their styles and themes vary a lot and could not be simply put under traditional terms such as realism,<sup>7</sup> but they all shared a strong complex that drove them to embrace society and time as a whole instead of focusing on isolated fragments.

Balzac, another of Lu Yao's literary models once made this famous claim in the preface of his *La Comédie Humaine*: "La société française allait être l'historien, je ne devais être que le secrétaire" (French society was going to be the historian, I was only to be the secretary).<sup>8</sup> If we replace the word "French" with "Chinese" then the same could also be applied to Lu Yao, although he was aware that a writer cannot be truly neutral towards life and has to make philosophical judgments (even incorrect ones). The important part is to be passionate and sincere, demonstrating one's life view and personality to the readers.<sup>9</sup> Lu Yao knew well that it is impossible to record everything and his writing is still different from history itself. His meticulous effort of studying the social background of the time he tried to portrait is to achieve the necessary knowledge to accurately depict people's life and spirit form. In this sense, gathering real-life materials does not

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<sup>6</sup> He Guimei 贺桂梅, "Zongtixing shijie de wenxue shuxie: chongdu *Chuangye shi*" 总体性世界的文学书写: 重读《创业史》, *Wenyi zhengming* 文艺争鸣, no. 1 (2018): 18.

<sup>7</sup> Realism is a frequently used term in the discussion of modern Chinese literature but at the same time a highly questionable one. The controversy surrounding it could in itself become the topic for another book. In my dissertation, if the usage of the term cannot be avoided, then effort will be made to clarify its specific meaning and intention within certain contexts. For an in-depth survey of this subject, see Marston Anderson, *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 27-75.

<sup>8</sup> Honoré De Balzac, "Avant-propos," *La Comédie humaine*, edited by Marcel Bouteron and Henri Longnon, 40 vols. (Paris: L. Conard, 1912-1940), 1: xxix.

<sup>9</sup> Lu Yao 路遥, *Zaochen cong zhongwu kaishi* 早晨从中午开始 (Beijing: Beijing shiyue wenyi chubanshe, 2012), chap. 11, <https://www.99csw.com/book/7233/248812.htm>.

mean showing them as they are, but a much-needed middle step of art creation based on such a belief: one cannot make convincing fictional representation without understanding the social-historical context in which the narrative takes place.

Writing literary fiction with great scale is not unprecedented and there were many examples before *Pingfan de shijie*, but Lu Yao's outstanding ambition is still worthy of respect and appreciation, especially when we compare it with the high standard set by other classic works in the modern Chinese literary history. Mao Dun's novels, especially his representative fiction *Ziye* 子夜 (Midnight: A Romance of China, 1930) were often announced for their "epic character" as he skillfully organized different scenarios to construct the whole picture of the society, which is also what Lu Yao attempted to accomplish. The difference is that Mao Dun's method is (as Průšek analyzed) "synchronic rather than diachronic" and he creates "a scene rather than tells a story, that his attention is centered more often upon a typical situation than upon some single happening or individual fate."<sup>10</sup> Unlike Mao Dun, Lu Yao paid much attention to the life of individuals and almost all the major characters have a complete "arch" in his novel. And just as the English subtitle indicates, *Ziye* focuses on the activities within one year while *Pingfan de shijie* tries to depict the changes of the society over the course of ten years. Furthermore, not all the scenes and episodes are treated equally. At the center of the stage is the intertwined fate of three families namely Sun, Tian, and Jin. It is clear that Lu Yao has inherited the tradition of family history, a prominent topic in modern Chinese literary narratives with numerous examples such as *Jiliu san buqu* 激流三部曲 (The Torrents Trilogy) (1931-1940) of Ba Jin 巴金 (1904-2005).<sup>11</sup> And this tradition can

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<sup>10</sup> Jaroslav Průšek, "Mao Tun and Yu Ta-fu" in *The Lyrical and the Epic: Studies of Modern Chinese Literature*, ed. Leo Ou-fan Lee (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 146.

<sup>11</sup> This is made up of the novels *Jia* 家 (The Family) (1931), *Chun* 春 (1938), and *Qiu* 秋 (Autumn) (1940). When it was first published in serial form, 1931-1932, the first novel was called *Jiliu* 激流 (Torrents), receiving its

ultimately be traced back to one of the greatest classical Chinese novels *Hongloumeng* 红楼梦 (Dream of the Red Chamber) (c. 1760), a book Lu Yao claimed to have read three times during his preparation for *Pingfan de shijie*.<sup>12</sup> The combination of detailed family history and panoramic view of society makes *Pingfan de shijie* a rare sight to see among its literary contemporaries and precursors. Even literature giants such as Balzac did not complete his portrait of social progression in one work and spent dozens of novels to realize his goal. The closest example would be Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, a masterpiece of daunting scale, also featuring the life of several families in the context of great historical events over a relatively long period. But for Lu Yao, the immediate literary model would be Liu Qing's *Chuangye shi*.

It will not be an overstatement to describe Liu Qing as Lu Yao's literature mentor. The similarities between the two writers are quite conspicuous: both came from Shaanxi, both devoted themselves to the representation of the rural area and the life of peasants in their homeland, and both left works that are often labeled with *shishi*. Liu Yao was always candid about the influence he received from Liu Qing and even wrote a touching piece featuring Liu Qing's tragic yet uplifting struggle in finishing *Chuangye shi*.<sup>13</sup> The spiritual connection between *Chuangye shi* and *Pingfan de shijie* has long been noticed and some even categorize them both as *Pingmin shishi* 平民史诗 (epic of commoners).<sup>14</sup> This concept was established by literary critics early on when commenting on Ba Jin's works: "This is not the *shishi* of heroes, but the *shishi* of common people, the real

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current title when first published as a single volume in 1933. The original title now refers collectively to all three novels.

<sup>12</sup> Lu Yao 路遥, *Zaochen cong zhongwu kaishi* 早晨从中午开始 (Beijing: Beijing shiyue wenyi chubanshe, 2012), chap. 10, <https://www.99csw.com/book/7233/248811.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> Lu Yao 路遥, "Bingwei zhong de Liu Qing" 病危中的柳青 in *Lu Yao wenji* 路遥文集 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2005), <https://www.99csw.com/book/2001/56595.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> Zong He 宗禾, "Pingmin de shishi cong Chuangye shi dao Pingfan de shijie" 平民的史诗: 从《创业史》到《平凡的世界》, *Qilu zhouban* 齐鲁周刊, July 22, 2019.

*shishi*.”<sup>15</sup> This indicates that compared to the *geming wenxue* 革命文学 (revolutionary literature) developing during the 1930s and 40s that centered around heroic characters and actions, Ba Jin’s fictions still kept telling the stories of ordinary people. With regard to *Chuangye shi*, the case is a little more complicated. Despite belonging to the group of novels described as *hongse jingdian* 红色经典 (Red classics),<sup>16</sup> it does not quite fit the normal framework of “heroic *shishi*” established by Feng Xuefeng 冯雪峰,<sup>17</sup> unlike other revolutionary historical novels such as *Baowei Yan’an* 保卫延安 or *Hongyan* 红岩. Liang Shengbao 梁生宝, the protagonist of the novel is not the typical revolutionary hero, but a grounded young peasant with a progressive mindset who is still growing within the plotline. Liu Qing did not make him a tool for propaganda but vividly portrayed him as a relatable person. The same could also be said about Sun Shaoping 孙少平 and Sun Shao’an 孙少安, two of the most central characters in *Pingfan de shijie*.

Further investigation could reveal that Lu Yao has developed the concept of ordinary protagonists and their growth to a higher level. In *Chuangye shi*, Liang Shengbao is still consistently enthusiastic and determined about his responsibility for the cause of socialism and rarely falters. Some critics have also pointed out that the image of Liang Shengbao is a bit too idealized and his father Liang san laohan 梁三老汉 is a better representation for the transformation of peasants during the socialist era due to his swaying attitudes and hesitation.<sup>18</sup> When compared with Liang Shengbao, it is clear that both Sun Shaoping and Sun Shao’an have gone through

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<sup>15</sup> Sima Changfeng 司马长风, *Zhongguo xinwenxue shi*, vol.2 中国新文学史下 (Hong Kong: Zhaoming chubanshe, 1978), 76.

<sup>16</sup> A group of literary works featuring revolutionary or socialist heroes and events, including aforementioned *sanhongyichuang* 三红一创.

<sup>17</sup> Feng Xuefeng 冯雪峰, “Lun Baowei Yanan” 论保卫延安, *Wenyibao* 文艺报, July 18, 1954.

<sup>18</sup> Hong Zicheng 洪子诚, *The History of Contemporary Chinese Literature* 中国当代文学史 (Beijing: Peking University Press, 1999), 102.

numerous periods of self-doubt and inner struggle and become more mature and seasoned over time. It has also been noted that part of *Pingfan de shijie* is autobiographical, reflecting Lu Yao's own experience from teenage to young adulthood.<sup>19</sup> Considering its extensive focus on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist, *Pingfan de shijie* could also be seen as a Bildungsroman.<sup>20</sup>

Social panorama, family history, and coming of age narration, the multilayered nature of *Pingfan de shijie* has contributed to its more complex structure. Lu Yao stressed the difficulty of arranging plotlines and realized that the traditional enclosed structure was not suitable.<sup>21</sup> The challenge is indeed palpable since even Balzac, who often indulged himself in detailed environment depiction or social commentary would only focus on a few main characters within any of his single novel, but Lu Yao has to deal with much more characters in a wider range. Some creative methods have been invented by Lu Yao to make the progress of narrative more organic. A famous example is that near the beginning of the novel. By implementing the plot in which Sun Shaoping's brother-in-law was publicly humiliated for illegally selling rat poison, the author successfully introduced all the important major characters in a natural manner.<sup>22</sup> This plot device might also remind us of Anna Scherer's party at the beginning of *War and Peace*, in which all the

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<sup>19</sup> Liao Xiaojun 廖晓军, "Heroes and Ordinary People in Revolutionary Classical Novels" 红色经典中的时代英雄与平凡世界的普通人, *Journal of Xinjiang University*, no. 4 (July 2007): 131.

<sup>20</sup> The term comes from German *Bildung* (education) and *Roman* (novel). It was coined in 1819 by philologist Karl Morgenstern in his university lectures, and was later famously reprised by Wilhelm Dilthey, who legitimized it in 1870 and popularized it in 1905. The birth of the Bildungsroman is normally dated to the publication of *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795-1796) by Goethe, or, sometimes, to Christoph Martin Wieland's *Geschichte des Agathon* of 1767. Although the genre arose in Germany, it has had extensive influence first in Europe and later throughout the world. For more information, see Manfred Engel, "Variants of the Romantic 'Bildungsroman' (with a Short Note on the 'Artist Novel')", in *Romantic Prose Fiction: A Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages*, eds. Gerald Gillespie Manfred Engel and Bernard Dieterle (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2008): 263-295.

<sup>21</sup> Lu Yao 路遥, *Zaochen cong zhongwu kaishi* 早晨从中午开始 (Beijing: Beijing shiyue wenyi chubanshe, 2012), chap. 13, <https://www.99csw.com/book/7233/248814.htm>.

<sup>22</sup> Lu Yao 路遥, *Pingfan de shijie* 平凡的世界 (Beijing: Beijing shiyue wenyi chubanshe, 2013), see chapters 4, 5, and 6, 22-37.

central characters are naturally involved.<sup>23</sup> The difference is that in the latter scenario we have a group of aristocrats debating over grand political matters that bear no immediate consequences, while in *Pingfan de shijie*, there are people from the lower class facing their immediate daily struggle. Lu Yao might have taken lessons from Tolstoy and Balzac, but there is no Pierre or Rastignac in his book. His true literature model is still Liu Qing.

When we compare *Pingfan de shijie* with *Chuangye shi*, we could have a better understanding of the similarities and differences between some of the protagonists. The character of Sun Shao'an could easily remind us of Liang Shengbao, both being young and promising peasants. Shao'an is the captain of the *shengchan dui* 生产队 (production team) while Shengbao is the leader of the *huzhuzu* 互助组 (mutual aid group). Coincidentally, despite being central characters, neither of them appeared directly at the very beginning of the book, but are only mentioned by others. Shao'an first showed up in the tenth chapter and Shengbao in the fifth one. They are temporarily pulled away from the main stage of the story due to their duties: Shao'an needs to take care of the sick cow while Shengbao travels to the county town to buy rice seeds. Moreover, both protagonists are faced with a love dilemma from the beginning of their journey. And by examining how their love stories play out, the inherent themes of these two novels might be revealed.

The female characters in their love relationships are the ones that appear first in both novels. Shao'an's lover Tian Runye 田润叶 offers help to his younger brother, Shaoping, in the hope that he might help her get closer to Shao'an. Similarly, Shengbao's admirer, Xu Gaixia 徐改霞, is troubled by how to talk about their relationship without them embarrassing each other. Female

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<sup>23</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, trans. Louise and Aylmer Maude (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), chap. 1 to chap. 5, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2600/2600-h/2600-h.htm>.

characters are the active pursuers in both stories but the reason behind their activity is not quite the same. For Shengbao, despite also being attracted to Gaixia, love is not so important to him when compared to his responsibility for the socialist mission. The same also goes for Gaixia as she thinks “having a romantic companion is not about having someone to rely on in life, and is even less about sensual enjoyment. It is for a brand-new desire: a couple building the ground for socialism together!”<sup>24</sup> Thus, they both put their socialist career before romance, and when the two conflict, they would choose the former over the latter without much hesitation. A common tendency is to point out that the characters’ social needs have suppressed their personal feelings. But as indicated by the thoughts cited above, for progressive youth such as Shengbao and Gaixia at the time, their personal feelings are consolidated with their ideal pursuit. Simply criticizing such thoughts as insincere is an act of ignoring the specific social context that produced them.

For Shao’an, he is also devoted to his duty, but that is hardly the major obstacle during his love trial. He has a very strong bond with Runye and they are indeed childhood sweethearts to each other. Lu Yao also went to great lengths to describe their past intimate relationship as an interposed narration. But Shao’an simply lacks the awareness and courage for his inner feelings and has a difficult time recognizing his love for Runye. Furthermore, he thinks their romance is impossible from the beginning since he has an inferiority complex about his own identity as a peasant and believes that Runye, a girl with college-level education deserves better. When Runye’s father Tian Futang 田福堂 (who is strongly against their relationship) framed him to damage his reputation, Shao’an even feels relieved as he believes that “his attitudes towards Runye’s courtship is completely correct. Tian Futang has proven to him with unbreakable logic that it is impossible

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<sup>24</sup> Liu Qing 柳青, *Chuangye shi* 创业史 (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 2009), 185.

between him and her.”<sup>25</sup> Shao'an's tragic love story with Runye is not just due to his insecure and passive personality, it is also a reflection of the historical background of the whole rural area. Just like Shengbao, Shao'an is a hardworking and upright young man. But the change of time makes it difficult for him to have confidence in the life path he chooses. Contributing to the cause of socialism is no longer a self-evident righteous goal and just like many peasants wandering in the dark, Shao'an does not possess the determination to seek his happiness yet.

The romance in these two novels could also be considered as the “ordinary” love story. It no longer bears the mark of resistance and liberation in the narrations of the May Fourth generation such as Ba Jin's *Jiliu san buku*, where the pursuit of freedom to love is a fight against traditional moral code. Neither is it romanticized and exaggerated to the point of being self-indulgent and delusional such as in the “revolution plus love” model established by Jiang Guangci 蒋光慈 (1901-1931) and other similar writers.<sup>26</sup> Romance becomes more realistic and natural in these stories, dealing with common issues that human beings are bound to face regardless of their conditions. Xu Gaixia's thought about her and Shengbao's relationship is a good example:

Gaixia thinks that she and Shengbao are both headstrong young people and are both enthusiastic about social activities. Would it really be ideal if they marry each other? This thought has taken root in her heart since that unpleasant date on the night of May and she just could not get rid of it. Shengbao must belong to the people. Then what about herself? She will not be satisfied by simply being a good wife in the courtyard. But after their marriage, the moment of euphoria will soon pass and the long domestic life will begin. She is the one who cooks, not Shengbao; She is the one who gives birth to children, not Shengbao. She is so enterprising and cannot stand such a life and the conflicts between them are inevitable. Gaixia could be quite emotional when driven by her inner energy, but when calming down, she could also see the far and wide picture.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Lu Yao 路遥, *Pingfan de shijie* 平凡的世界, 144-145.

<sup>26</sup> Xiong Quan 熊权, “Gemin jia lianai zaoqi puluo wenxue zhong de moshihua shuxie jiqi shanbian” 革命加恋爱：早期普罗文学中的模式化书写及其嬗变, *Wenyi lilun yu pipin* 文艺理论与批评, no. 1 (2006): 63-70.

<sup>27</sup> Liu Qing 柳青, *Chuangye shi* 创业史 (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 2009), 428.



As for Shao'an, we would not know if he will be happy were he to marry Runye, but Lu Yao obviously did not shy away from exposing the practical part of the marriage life. Even when Shao'an and his wife Xiulian 秀莲 live in relative harmony, friction still brews due to mundane matters such as the allotment of income. In fact, the influence of living conditions is more dominant here since Shao'an cannot proudly live a poor life while enjoying being selfless like Shengbao. Accumulating fortune is no longer a weakness of one's virtue but an encouraged act and the proof of one's ability in his time. In the end, it is through the successful management of his brick factory that Shao'an gains confidence and realizes his life value. His story is more suitable for the name *Chuangye shi* (the history of entrepreneurship) when viewed by today's Chinese readers.

But Shao'an is not the only protagonist of the novel and the story is not all about entrepreneurship. Sun Shaoping is the de facto first protagonist and no other character has reflected the theme of growth better than him. At the beginning of the story, he is just a middle school student who is troubled with poverty and self-abasement. The rare occasion of enjoyment comes from reading literary works, which turns into a consistent habit through his following life journey. His first love experience with one of his classmates is short-lived when the girl breaks up with him to pursue another richer boy, but he handles it quite maturely and does not let it leave a negative impact on him. After graduation, he is lucky to be able to teach at the village school to be spared from the farm work and he also appreciates this kind of lifestyle. It is not until the beginning of the second volume of the book when the new reform closes the school and he is forced to become a farmer, that he truly starts to contemplate what life path he should choose. For him, the real concern is not income or the hardship of the work, but being self-reliant:

As someone who is already aware of his dignity as a male, Sun Shaoping is tortured by a feeling deep within. It does not mean he wants to seize control of the family. In this big family, the father and the elder brother should be natural leaders. To be

honest, even if he is given the task of taking care of the family, he will not be able to do it. After all, he cannot break free from this reality. But he is eager to find his life independently. That is not to say that he wishes to change his status and condition: no, even being more difficult than a farmer, as long as he can live like a man for all his life, he will be satisfied. Regardless of happiness or torment, glory or humiliation, let him experience and endure all of it. And that is what he is hoping for ... It is unfortunate that you have known too much and thought too much. As a result, you have inflicted upon yourself the misery that others cannot understand.<sup>28</sup>

As a result, like many protagonists in Bildungsroman, Shaoping chooses to farewell his hometown and begin the journey of wandering. He does not have a clear goal, but he believes he cannot find the true value of life if he stays where he is.

Shaoping's departure from home is special in the sense that unlike many other young characters in modern Chinese literary works who also break free from their family, he does not do it out of the intention of fighting against traditional moral code or joining the advanced or revolutionary trend. Besides understanding himself and becoming independent, there is no clear predetermined goal set for him. Also, farmers and intellectuals have been two major groups featured in modern Chinese literature as early as Lu Xun 鲁迅<sup>29</sup> and Shaoping happens to be the conjunction of both, a unique type of character that is rarely portrayed. The way that he achieves self-realization is also special in so far as he combines hard physical work with elevated mental exercise: living as a coal mine worker yet still keeping on reading books to satisfy his spiritual needs. It is also this insistence of not giving up pursuing knowledge and thoughts even under the harshest situation that connects him with Tian Xiaoxia 田晓霞, his middle school classmate and the daughter of a senior cadre and a journalist. Despite the difference in social status, they keep constant communication in a relatively equal manner. When visiting the coal mine where Shaoping

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<sup>28</sup> Lu Yao 路遥, *Pingfan de shijie* 平凡的世界, 420.

<sup>29</sup> Wu Fuhui 吴福辉, Qian Liqun 钱理群, and Wen Rumin 温儒敏, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue sanshinian* 中国现代文学三十年 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1998), 52.

lives, Xiaoxia could treat him like an old friend without being patronizing and Shaoping also maintains a dignified attitude without being overly humble. Their relationship might be considered unrealistic and idealized, but idealization is the exact point here. Lu Yao admitted it and ended this seemingly impossible romance with Xiaoxia's abrupt death while reporting on a flood in the region. Even if all their interactions were an illusion, it will not damage the weight of Shaoping's feeling towards her for it is from the start a more platonic relationship that inspires and stimulates him spiritually than sensual pleasure, just like Dante and Beatrice. Or we could say that for Shaoping, Xiaoxia is like the blue flower for Heinrich von Ofterdingen,<sup>30</sup> a symbol for unreachable love and transcendental striving that is worth a lifelong pursuit.

As the protagonist, Shaoping truly deserves the description as ordinary. By the end of the story, he is still a worker faced with arduous life struggles and has not achieved anything remarkable by secular standards. But he is at the same time highly unordinary for someone with his social status. Some even criticize Shaoping's character as being too static and idealized, elevated to the point of being close to a heroic figure.<sup>31</sup> But such an assumption simply misses the point that Shaoping is a character in the middle of a search for his own life purpose in a coming-of-age setting. And unlike Gao Jialin 高加林, a similar character in another novel by Lu Yao, *Rensheng* 人生 (Life), who returns to the countryside and embraces the earth in the end, Shaoping digs deeper under the earth,<sup>32</sup> trying to find the value of life through hard work in the dark coal mine. It might just be a coincidence, but as mentioned above, Shaoping has a spiritual connection with protagonists in the classic Bildungsroman such as *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*. Many German

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<sup>30</sup> Novalis, *Hymnen an die Nacht. Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (München: W. Goldmann, 1958), 39-40.

<sup>31</sup> Gao Wen 高文, "Cong *Pinfan de shijie* kan Lu Yao xianshi zhuyi xiaoshuo chuanguo zhong de buzhu" 从《平凡的世界》看路遥现实主义小说创作中的不足, *Writer Magazine* 作家杂志, no. 10 (2008): 25.

<sup>32</sup> Lu Yao 路遥, "Rensheng" 人生 in *Lu Yao wenji* 路遥文集 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2005), chap. 23, <https://www.99csw.com/book/2001/56564.htm>.

writers including Novalis all have experience with mining and mining is a reoccurring theme in German literature: “die romantischen Erkunder des Bergwerks sahen in ihm nicht einfach ein kaltes, dunkles Loch im Erdboden; es war ein vitaler, pulsierender Ort, in den der Mensch hinabstieg wie in seine eigene Seele.”<sup>33</sup> When Shaoping gets to the deepest site of the coal mine, he might just confront his own soul. And just like the fact that Novalis never finished *Ofterdingen*, Shaoping’s story is also an incomplete Bildungsroman despite taking three volumes to develop. In the end, Shaoping is still trying to find his proper position in society and his journey feels just about to begin again. Maybe in a world without the guidance of traditional values and faith, wandering would become the new norm for modern people. Another interesting point is that in the recent TV series adapted from the novel, Shao’an turns into the first protagonist, and Shaoping’s plotline has been downplayed. The reason for it might be that it was thought difficult for today’s Chinese audience to understand Shaoping’s life choice and world view,<sup>34</sup> which is not surprising if we realize that Lu Yao tells a story akin to the German romantic coming-of-age novel under the guise of textbook realism.

Shao’an and Shaoping’s life experiences are the two major plotlines that run parallel throughout the whole book, but they are far from the only components and there are many other small stories or scenarios and they are all organized together with varied literary techniques. The narrative will constantly shift between the third person omniscient point of view and the characters’ subject thoughts and feelings, sometimes in between. For example, there are abundant free indirect speeches in the novel such as near the end of the first chapter: “But he knows nothing about her. Because there is a roll call once every day, now he only knows that her name is Hao Hongmei.

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<sup>33</sup> Heinz Schlaffer, *Die Kurze Geschichte der Deutschen Literatur* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2002), 88.

<sup>34</sup> Hao Qingjun 郝庆军, ed., “*Pingfan de shijie lishi yu xianshi*” 《平凡的世界》：历史与现实, *Wenyi lilun yu piping* 文艺理论与批评, no. 5 (2015): 53.

And she probably also only knows that his name is Sun Shaoping.”<sup>35</sup> This style maintains the objectivity of the narrative but also let us peek into the characters’ inner world, which reminds us of the similar techniques implemented by Tolstoy as he keeps changing the expression angles “as if lighting up through it the instruments of thought, perception and expression of the heroes described; thus it becomes semantically many-colored and, while preserving the syntactical unity of a single stylistic system, opens up at the same time perspectives of meaning of an unusual depth and complexity.”<sup>36</sup> Lu Yao pushes the boundary of narrative even further as he tends to insert memories and experiences from the past to expand the time frame of the story, which is already gigantic as it is. One example is that at the end of chapter ten, Shaoping delivers a message from Runye to Shao’an and it sinks him into the memory of childhood. A large portion of the next chapter is about his friendship with Runye when they were both classmates in the school, events that took place before the time of the current story.<sup>37</sup> There are many cases like this in the book where Lu Yao uses flashbacks and interposed narration to flesh out characters and supplement their backgrounds. Also, we should not ignore the number of lyrical scenarios in this “epic” work, where the narrative becomes highly personal and emotional, like fragments of idyllic melody inserted in an otherwise exhilarating symphony. A good example is Runye’s daydreaming of childhood life after it is confirmed that she and Shao’an can never be together:

She remembers that on the defrosted ground of Shuangshui village, she and Shao’an used their dirty little hands to dig wild grass as snacks. She remembers that during the summer in the Dongla river, the water was clear and blue. She and Shao’an were both naked, playing mud with each other. In autumn, the cliff of Shenxian mountain was covered with clusters of red dates and Shao’an brought her a lot of it with bare feet. Winter is cold and desolate, but they were both warm within, crossing the icy surface of Dongla river hand in hand. Going through the leafless forest in Miaoping, crossing the small bridge over the Kuyan river, looking for the

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<sup>35</sup> Lu Yao 路遥, *Pingfan de shijie*, 8.

<sup>36</sup> Jaroslav Průšek, “Mao Tun and Yu Ta-fu,” 140.

<sup>37</sup> Lu Yao 路遥, *Pingfan de shijie*, 67-72.

broken pieces of porcelain among the grass in Jinjia reach. Yes, broken, everything is broken ... Among all these loud sounds, she seems to once again hear the heartbreaking song in the *xingtianyou* 信天游<sup>38</sup> style:

The ice dissolves at the date of *Lichun* 立春<sup>39</sup> and soon the fish would swim in the river, which reminds me of my lover.  
Reminding me of my lover.  
Please wait for me, my lover.<sup>40</sup>

The shifting between different characters and narrative styles makes sure that the story will not be dominated by a single perspective or feeling for overly long, which is an important factor in terms of reducing aesthetic fatigue for a giant book like this.

Sometimes the author will also jump in to provide his comments on the events in the book. This kind of mixture of tones and voices expands the power of representation and “leads to a constant intermingling of inner monologue with narration, which implies a constant confrontation of ‘outer’ epic reality with the ‘inner’ spiritual world of the character.”<sup>41</sup> This is also the method through which Lu Yao connects the protagonists’ personal growth with the drastic change of the social context in which they live. At the end of chapter thirty-three, the debate between two political rivals was interrupted by the breaking news that prime minister Zhou Enlai has passed away. Instead of showing the detailed depiction of people’s reactions, the narrator who usually remains objective speaks directly to readers with deep emotion: “Zhou Enlai, people’s prime minister, people’s servant, people’s son. He is so great because he represents the will and hope of ordinary Chinese people. It’s a glorious name that cannot be described with words ... January 8<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Xingtianyou* 信天游 is a style of folk music originating in Shaanxi Province.

<sup>39</sup> The first solar term (two-week period) of the traditional Chinese solar calendar. Approximately the first half of February.

<sup>40</sup> Lu Yao 路遥, *Pingfan de shijie* 平凡的世界, 255.

<sup>41</sup> Jaroslav Průšek, “Mao Tun and Yu Ta-fu,” 132. Also, the similar discussion of “mixed speech” and polyphony technique can be seen in Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. And trans. Caryl Emerson, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 6-7.

of 1976 is the most depressing day in the history of China.”<sup>42</sup> There are also cases in which the characters are so overwhelmed by real-world occurrences that they temporarily forget their personal issues. In chapter thirty-six, Runye turns to her friends for help due to her lost relationship with Shao'an. But when she learns from others that people who join the assembly in Tiananmen Square to commemorate Zhou Enlai have been suppressed as if they were rebellions, she is totally shocked.<sup>43</sup> The narrator then says: “Runye has put her personal misfortune aside. Yes, as long as you are a citizen with a conscience, your own misfortune would become less prominent when your nation suffers ill fate.”<sup>44</sup> The constant insertion of the narrator's voice also adds to the “polyphonic” nature of the story.

As shown by the analysis above, the narrative style and structure of this novel are anything but simple. The story of ordinary protagonists with unordinary traits in an extraordinary time searching for self-realization. Multiple intertwined plotlines combined with short but vivid portraits of numerous minor characters, on top of the panoramic social picture as well as lyrical moments of serenity. The smooth-shifting narrative perspectives mixed with the narrator's own opinions; the list could go on. Although even Lu Yao himself has admitted that the way he wrote the novel might be old-fashioned or outdated,<sup>45</sup> its multifarious and somewhat disorderly nature possesses more depth and complexity than many of the so-called avant-garde literary works at the time. The overall experience of reading the work is not always consistent and riddles with

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<sup>42</sup> Lu Yao 路遥, *Pingfan de shijie* 平凡的世界, 215.

<sup>43</sup> A mass gathering which may have involved as many as two million people during the day took place in Tiananmen Square on April 5, 1976, which that year was the day of the *Qingmingjie* 清明節 (Tomb Sweeping Festival). Ostensibly intended to pay tribute to Zhou Enlai, the ceremonies turned to attacks on Zhou's political rivals, the *Si ren bang* 四人幫 (Gang of Four) led by Mao's wife, Jiang Qing 江青 (1914-1991), and even to attacks on the Chairman himself. The Party responded by having the Square forcibly and violently cleared.

<sup>44</sup> Lu Yao 路遥, *Pingfan de shijie* 平凡的世界 (Beijing: Beijing shiyue wenyi chubanshe, 2013), 230.

<sup>45</sup> Lu Yao 路遥, *Zaochen cong zhongwu kaishi* 早晨从中午开始 (Beijing: Beijing shiyue wenyi chubanshe, 2012), chap. 8, <https://www.99csw.com/book/7233/248809.htm>.

disconnected yet intriguing pieces, which is an important part of its charm but provides a great opportunity to examine the tension between the author's intention and the finished product. That is what we are going to explore in the next part.

## **2.2 Revolution Left, History Persists**

As mentioned before, a strong impulse for writing this book for Lu Yao was to record the whole picture of the time, which besides the individuals, the society, and the period of history in which the story took place might also be reflected in the main character. The author has read as many newspapers and real-life document as he could gather together in the hope of getting an accurate and in-depth understanding of that time. However, portraying history is not an easy task since nobody can truly describe everything that happened within even a small time-frame in a society that undergoes turbulence and rearrangement. Such ambition could also often be at odds with the primary focus on the individual stories.

The example of Zhou Enlai's passing away analyzed in the last part could also be used to demonstrate the underlying disconnection between individual experience and great social events (the same goes for the decease of chairman Mao Zedong 毛泽东 and its aftermath in a later chapter). Despite the unusual emotional commentary from the narrator, there is not much sincere direct reaction from ordinary people. It is not necessarily the author's negligence. Lu Yao might have thought that too much of such content would distract readers from the major plot points and intentionally have chosen to omit it. The result is that despite the narrator's emphasis on the significance of the event, it more or less just serves as an obscure piece of background dressing. Half of chapter thirty-six is devoted to the discussion of the incident and outbreak of protests surrounding the commemoration of Zhou Enlai. Everyone involved is filled with indignation,



including Tian Runye.<sup>46</sup> However, there is no follow-up to this event and we cannot tell if Runye's personal life has been influenced by it in any meaningful way. If such depiction aims to illustrate a common trend of social activities at the time, then it feels too succinct. If it somehow serves a part of Runye's life experience, then it also seems to be abrupt and unfocused. And this is not the only example. In the next chapter, we would once again witness the intrusion of social-political events into daily life:

Shaoping asked her immediately: "What is the matter? Is there something wrong with my family?" He feared that some disasters would once again befall his family. His family was prone to suffer from accidents. Xiaoxia answered while walking: "Nothing wrong with your family." "Then there is something wrong with your family?" Shaoping continued to ask her. Xiaoxia answered: "Neither your family nor mine. It is our nation ..."<sup>47</sup>

Nation, what is wrong with it? It is indeed a disastrous year for our nation! Prime minister Zhou passed away in January, then there is Tiananmen Incident on April fifth, leading to the revocation of Deng Xiaoping's 邓小平 post,<sup>48</sup> followed by the pass away of President Zhu De 朱德.<sup>49</sup> The sensational Tangshan earthquake also just happened a few days ago<sup>50</sup> ... Oh, China you suffered so much, making us worrisome and anxious.<sup>51</sup>

The touching tone of this statement is clearly provided by the narrator as a distant third party and is thus separated from the characters' own experience. In fact, the suffering of the nation and the anxiety of the in-book characters are in parallel positions and rarely intersect. What really troubles

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<sup>46</sup> Lu Yao 路遥, *Pingfan de shijie* 平凡的世界, 229-231.

<sup>47</sup> In standard Chinese both words family and nation end with the same character *jia* 家.

<sup>48</sup> On June 6, Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 (1904-1997) was stripped of all of his posts by Mao Zedong, although he was still allowed to retain his membership in the Communist Party. The *Si ren bang* saw Deng as their principal enemy and held him responsible for what had happened at Tiananmen Square the day before.

<sup>49</sup> Zhu De 朱德 (1886-1976) who had been Head of State (Chairman of the Standing Committee of the Central Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China, 中国共产党中央政治局常务委员会), 1959-1969, 1973-1976, died on July 6.

<sup>50</sup> On July 27 an earthquake measuring 7.6 on the Seismic Magnitude Scale, followed the next day by a second shock measuring 7.0 struck the Tangshan region of Hebei Province in the north-east of the country. This was one of the worst earthquakes in modern history, claiming at least 300,000 lives.

<sup>51</sup> Lu Yao 路遥, *Pingfan de shijie* 平凡的世界, 233-234.

our protagonists is not those incidents broadcasted as breaking news, but mundane matters such as the typical teenager identity issues and unfruitful love relationships. We often get to see that the last moment the character was shocked by the major social event and the next moment he or she just proceeds with their normal life as if nothing happened, creating a sense of disconnection.

The inclusion of “epic” historical events does not necessarily conflict with the development of individual protagonists. In great historical novels such as *War and Peace*, the main characters’ personal growth is deeply entangled with the social turbulence they are going through. Without the in-person confrontation with Napoleon, Andrei would not have seen through his illusion and had a new and deeper understanding of the meaning of life. Everyone’s fate would be completely different if their belief and ideology have not been tested and challenged during the ongoing war. While in *Pingfan de shijie*, characters are still clearly shaped and limited by the social context like any other stories with realistic settings, but those special incidents emphasized by the narrator have little de facto influence on the formation of protagonists’ growing identity. In other words, the author’s urge of recording important historical events to fulfill the vision of a grand social picture does not sit well with the story’s core narrative.

This might also be another symptom of the inner conflict within the author’s intention. Lu Yao stated that he wishes to write a great book in terms of both scale and theme, but this is also a novel about ordinary people in an ordinary world, and the majority of the story is accumulated mundane matters. A work about mundane life can also be great if certain circumstances are met, but Lu Yao might have been driven by the calling of greatness and opted to decorate his novel with certain elements that are normally (although superficially) associated with such a trait. This further shows in the pacing of the story for the author might have felt it would not be grand enough if he does not fit in as many twists, accidents, and turning points as possible. Critics have noticed

that *Pingfan de shijie* tends to sometimes rely a little too much on coincidence when fabricating plot,<sup>52</sup> which is at odds with the “ordinary” feel of the story since normal people’s life usually will not involve a large amount of extremely fortunate or unfortunate incidents.

To better understand the fissures within the narration and their indication, we could first trace back to Lu Yao’s explanation of his style choice. He admitted that he was not against modernism and other new trends of techniques, even admired writers such as Dostoevsky, Kafka, and the contemporary literature from Europe and Latin America. But he then acknowledged that at the moment, the masters of realism namely Tolstoy, Balzac, Stendhal, and Cao Xueqin have a deeper influence on him.<sup>53</sup> He also criticized many works from the past decades, that is, during the *Shiqi nian* 十七年 (Seventeen-Year) era and *Wuchan jieji wenhua dageming* 无产阶级文化大革命 (Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution),<sup>54</sup> stating that they took the name of realism but distort reality and truth and should be called “absurdism.”<sup>55</sup> It is conspicuous that Lu Yao’s preferred version of realism is more in line with the classical version of European “critical realism” in the nineteenth century, which is “to be found in Balzac, in Flaubert, in Turgenev and Tolstoy, in fact everywhere that there has been an effort to depict the workings of bourgeois society and to show its ugly and repressive aspects. Such writing, naturally, is a relic of a past when men knew no

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<sup>52</sup> Zhao Yanqiu 赵炎秋, “Lun xianshi zhuyi wenxue de gairanlu wenti” 论现实主义文学的概然律问题, *Xueshu yanjiu* 学术研究, no. 4 (2020): 148-151.

<sup>53</sup> Lu Yao 路遥, *Zaochen cong zhongwu kaishi* 早晨从中午开始 (Beijing: Beijing shiyue wenyi chubanshe, 2012), chap. 6, <https://www.99csw.com/book/7233/248807.htm>.

<sup>54</sup> The *Wuchan jieji wenhua dageming* 无产阶级文化大革命 (Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution), 1966-1976, was initiated by Mao Zedong 毛泽东 (1893-1976), in an attempt to preserve Chinese communism by ridding Chinese society of the remaining elements of capitalism and traditional practices and replacing them with *Mao Zedong sixiang* 毛泽东思想 (Mao Zedong Thought). The period was characterized by chaos and violence, immense individual suffering and cultural vandalism. Estimates of the number of deaths which occurred during this period range wildly from a low of 250,000 to to a high of 20 million people. Henceforth referred to as the Cultural Revolution.

<sup>55</sup> Lu Yao 路遥, *Zaochen*, chap. 8, <https://www.99csw.com/book/7233/248809.htm>.

better and their minds had not yet been freed of chains.”<sup>56</sup> Of course, this description does not fit all of Lu Yao’s literature models such as the *Hongloumeng* of Cao Xueqin (1715/1724-1763/1764), but if we replace “bourgeois society” with late imperial China, then it could still hold true to a certain degree. In that regard, Lu Yao is not unlike those classic writers of the May Fourth generation such as Mao Dun, who also openly advocated European critical realism. Furthermore, Lu Yao might also have faced a similar dilemma as Mao Dun did. Even the writers within the same school of literary movement would have varied styles and when Mao Dun discussed his literature ideal, he sometimes mixed realism with naturalism and leads to his swaying between Zola and Tolstoy:

Zola explored human conditions because he wanted to be a novelist, while Tolstoy started to write novels only after he experienced the vicissitudes of life. Despite the two masters’ different starting points, their works shocked the world equally. Zola’s attitude towards life can be summarized as cool detachment, which is in sharp contrast to Tolstoy’s warm embrace of it; but the works of both are criticisms of and reflections of reality. I like Zola, but I am also fond of Tolstoy. At one time I enthusiastically (though unsuccessfully, for I met with misunderstanding and opposition) propagated naturalism. But when I tried to write novels, it was Tolstoy I came closer to.<sup>57</sup>

Not satisfied for only being a cold observer (according to his understanding of Zola), Mao Dun wishes to look up to Tolstoy’s idealism as an example but replaced his religious tendency with the ideology of communism and revolution. Even as the most determined and strict realist writer in China at the time, he still left space for personal expression in his writing and realized that the pure objective reflection of the dark side of society would not be enough.<sup>58</sup> But Mao Dun’s central focus

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<sup>56</sup> George J. Becker, ed., “Introduction” in *Documents of Modern Literary Realism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 21.

<sup>57</sup> Mao Dun 茅盾, “Cong Guling dao Dongjing” 从牯岭到东京 in *Collected Works of Mao Dun*, Vol. 19 茅盾全集卷十九 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1991), 180.

<sup>58</sup> Marston Anderson, *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 27-75.

is still the representation and reconstruction of reality, not the genius creative power flaunted by romantic writers. It is not until the social condition has been extensively revealed and examined that the writer brings in his ideal to sublimate the motif of the work. As David Der-wei Wang formulated, for Mao Dun's literature practice, "both Zola's mechanical determinism and Tolstoy's visionary religiosity function as crucial themes."<sup>59</sup> The former is for his depiction of the prerevolutionary situation, the latter for the inevitable coming of communism.

However, Mao Dun's confidence in Tolstoy's vision might not be as strong upon further scrutiny. In the same book where Wang pointed out his "communist apocalypse descending," most of the text analysis fails to demonstrate such a phenomenon, and even his most representative work *Ziye* "threatens to demythologize, however tentatively, the values inherent in various forms of history, including Mao Dun's own."<sup>60</sup> There might be an incoming utopia in Mao Dun's literature plan, but he did not portray it successfully, despite trying hard to do so. In other words, even the writer might have faith and hope, the characters in his book are doomed to not be able to see it, but such hopelessness could also be the point if explained by someone with an optimistic attitude towards social revolution. "Mao Tun clearly showed the reader that the general situation was unbearable, that any attempt at individual escape was quite hopeless: and that only nation-wide effort could lead China out of a misery which had no parallel in history."<sup>61</sup> Deciding whether *Ziye* is a demythicization of social ideals or an obscure prophecy for future revolution is beyond the task of this project, but the above analysis could help us understand that for this ambitious novel that is often compared to *shishi*, the defining character is more of its effort to encompass the society as a whole than some vague belief in a higher ideology.

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<sup>59</sup> David Der-wei Wang, *Fictional Realism in Twentieth-Century China: Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 35.

<sup>60</sup> David Der-wei Wang, *Fictional Realism*, 66.

<sup>61</sup> Jaroslav Průšek, "Introduction to Studies in Modern Chinese Literature," 68.

Going back to Lu Yao, his writing philosophy puts him in a position similar to Mao Dun. Faithfully portraying social reality is his major concern and he would not let some predetermined principles control the direction of the narrative, thus his criticism towards certain works from the revolutionary that he deemed as twisted propaganda. But he is also not overly against expressing ideals since *Chuangye shi*, the work that influenced him the most is a representative of socialist realism. And such a genre believes “it is not enough to represent life as it is; it is necessary to show where it is going, and that is toward the inevitable future of the communist society.”<sup>62</sup> In Lu Yao’s time, that future is indefinitely suspended and our protagonists would need something as a replacement. But first and foremost, what directly connects *Pingfan de shijie* with *Ziye* and *Chuangye shi* is their common interest in the wide representation of social-historical content. Lu Yao does not need to rely on critical realism to reveal the decay and corruption of the society, for he believes that he is depicting a great time full of change and new opportunity, even the dark side is still meaningful and should be acknowledged like the shadow accompanies the light; nor does he wish to follow the socialist realism formula to pave way for an overly optimistic future, as his protagonists are eager to find their own path. But despite the difference in intentions and ideologies, the passion for recording and representing history, making it into a monument remains.

Among all three writers, Mao Dun (especially in *Ziye*) might be the purest in terms of portraying the varied social events: “If we compare the works of Mao Tun, for example, with the works of the masters of European realism (and naturalism), E. Zola and L. N. Tolstoy whom he considered his teachers, we see the main difference in the fact that Mao Tun turned from the detailed, psychological analysis of his heroes to expressing the general social connections.”<sup>63</sup> It is

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<sup>62</sup> George J. Becker, ed., “Introduction” in *Documents of Modern Literary Realism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 21.

<sup>63</sup> Jaroslav Průšek, “Introduction to Studies in Modern Chinese Literature,” 67-68.

not to say that Mao Dun ignores the inner activities of characters, but they tend to be overshadowed by external events. Lu Yao and Liu Qing both excel at psychological depiction as mentioned before, but Lu Yao has a much stronger awareness of demonstrating great social scale, which leads to an inconsistent tone of his work. Previously we analyzed the lyrical fragments in *Pingfan de shijie*, those parts stand out for their excellent emotional value but also due to their special position that creates a feeling of temporary tranquility in the otherwise quite eventful narrative. In many cases, even protagonists' major life experiences would be handled like a historical document with more explanation than in-depth description. For example, Sun Shaoping and Hao Hongmei go from getting closer to breaking up in a single chapter and we barely get a detailed impression of how their relationship developed in the daily situation.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, Sun Shao'an and Xiulian become a couple with surprising speed, which in itself is not a problem. But we only hear from the narrator that what a lovely wife Xiulian is and how Shao'an is so fond of her and we never get to see those features and reactions in a personal and detailed manner before they get married.<sup>65</sup> In classic European realism style, those scenarios could be enhanced and portrayed with much more. It is not that Lu Yao lacks the talent or skill as he already proved himself in other parts of the novel. It is his ambition of capturing a great time and its social content that pushes him to sprint forward and he dares not to linger in one place or moment for too long since there is still so much more ground to cover.

Thus, we could say that Lu Yao is driven by an impulse of creating *shishi*, something grand and monumental. The task he chose for himself is much more challenging than his literature predecessors as it is like the combination of Mao Dun's *Hong 虹* (Rainbow) and *Ziye*, mixing the

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<sup>64</sup> Lu Yao 路遥, *Pingfan de shijie* 平凡的世界, 108-112.

<sup>65</sup> Lu Yao 路遥, *Pingfan de shijie* 平凡的世界, 181-185.

tortuous growing journey of youth to search for her/his ideal and the panoramic social depiction. Tolstoy stated that his *War and Peace* is “not a novel, even less is it a poem, and still less a historical chronicle.”<sup>66</sup> From another perspective, the indication is that he wishes the book to become all those things and more, the same could also be said for *Pingfan de shijie*. Lu Yao truly wishes to make this novel a chronicle, for protagonists’ personal life as well as the whole society they live in, a mission he is also aware of its impossibility but still insists on trying regardless. *War and Peace* covers a longer historical period but chooses to focus on certain important moments with gaps and intermittence in between. *Pingfan de shijie* on the other hand seems to always be on a restless crusade to cover every inch and every minute, jumping from a heart-broken young man mourning his lost love to a political movement on its high peak hundreds of miles away in a heartbeat. The result is that despite being a giant book, the readers might sometimes feel that there should be more since not everything has been explored enough.

Trying to be so many things at once is a commendable intention and could indeed add to the richness and complexity of the narration, but also let the work face the danger of losing focus and turning into a jumbled structure. Lu Yao extensively talked about the trouble he went through to find the appropriate structure for the story<sup>67</sup> and the final product is nothing short of brilliant as so many elements have been arranged into a manner that is relatively easy to follow but still constantly keeps the reader intrigued. But oftentimes we could still find the disharmonious gap. In chapter forty-five we witness the consequence of the misfortunate marriage between Tian Runye and Li Xiangqian 李向前. Xiangqian is obsessed with Runye but she just does not feel a thing for him. No longer be able to bear such a marriage without love, Xiangqian attempts to rape Runye in

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<sup>66</sup> Leo Tolstoy, “Introduction” in *War and Peace*, trans. Louise and Aylmer Maude, (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth editions limited, 1993), x.

<sup>67</sup> Lu Yao 路遥, *Zaochen cong zhongwu kaishi* 早晨从中午开始 (Beijing: Beijing shiyue wenyi chubanshe, 2012), chap. 14, <https://www.99csz.com/book/7233/248815.htm>.



a desperate moment of frenzy, leading to more miserable aftermath.<sup>68</sup> So many thrilling incidents happen in this chapter and if handled by writers such as Tolstoy or Balzac, it could be expanded much more with detailed psychological analysis. But for Lu Yao, this part although important for the couple is just another interlude in a time full of great events and he cannot spare any more attention on this matter. At the beginning of the next chapter, we see an in-depth historical and scientific analysis of the formation of the Loess Plateau along with the narrator's commentary on the hardship of millions of people struggling to live in such a harsh condition. Many communities here are in extreme poverty and can barely sustain basic daily needs.<sup>69</sup> This kind of abrupt transition is not uncommon in the novel as mentioned before. In this case, we see the juxtaposition of the individual misfortune and the suffering of the mass. The author might want to remind us that there is more at stake and the domestic trouble of one or two persons pales when compared with the grand picture. Unfortunately, the abstract distress of a large group of featureless individuals simply does not possess the same amount of weight in readers' hearts. The significance of the social context that the author tried so hard to deliver once again becomes a relatively bland background. If these big pictures could somehow enhance the main characters' growth and transformation, the part that truly intrigues the readers, then the whole narration would become more coherent. But as it stands, the two parts rarely have interactions, just like David Der-wei Wang's comment on Mao Dun's novel: "History *does* take place around the girls, in terms of political and military events ... but fails to leave any trace on them."<sup>70</sup> Runye's miserable marriage has little to do with people's poor living conditions on the Loess Plateau and we do not get to see the former benefit from the depiction of the latter in any form or vice versa.

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<sup>68</sup> Lu Yao 路遥, *Pingfan de shijie* 平凡的世界, 283-289.

<sup>69</sup> Lu Yao 路遥, *Pingfan de shijie* 平凡的世界, 290.

<sup>70</sup> David Der-wei Wang, *Fictional Realism*, 37.

If we were to guess, then Lu Yao probably feels compelled to add the paragraphs of the Loess Plateau since it belongs to the environment where the story takes place and could contribute to world-building. But when the world building is separated from the major characters and plotline, its meaning becomes questionable. The incoherent relationship between individuals and history has never been fully resolved throughout the novel. Lu Yao might wish to flesh out both sides, but the current narrative is still largely structured around a few main characters with disconnected historical events cut in between like interludes. Instead of benefiting from each other, the latter often feels forced in and prevents the former from being fully developed. If the author's intention is to create a sense of disorder and contradiction, then *Pingfan de shijie* would be an ideal product. That is clearly not what Lu Yao plans to achieve if we take a moment to remind ourselves of his literature models. Just like Liu Qing, Lu Yao also has a strong sense of history and is determined to give it meaning. But in a time when the dominant ideology has just retreated and the new ones are still in a constant fight, showing the meaning of history is much more difficult and will lead the writer to face more ambiguity and unclarity than he would have expected. For Lu Yao, recording the movement of history is a crucial task but not the only one. He could not stand history as a combination of random and chaotic activities and makes constant effort to reveal its inherent logic and legitimacy even to the point of sacrificing subtlety:

China once again shows her greatness; her composure, confidence, maturity, and the irreversibility of the historical trend. This is people's victory. Cheers! A disastrous period in China's history has come to an end. October. On these joyful days, every Chinese people feel like living in the hospital for ten years; Recovering from the illness, they once again walk under the splendid sunshine.<sup>71</sup> Of course,

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<sup>71</sup> The reference here is to the end of the Cultural Revolution which had begun ten years earlier in 1966. Mao Zedong died on September 9, 1976, and to the surprise of many, Hua Guofeng 华国锋 (1921-2008) was named his successor. On October 6, the *Si ren bang* were arrested, and in July 22, 1977 Deng Shaoping was restored to his government positions. In September 19 of the same year he pronounced the *Boluan Fanzheng* 拨乱反正 (Eliminating chaos and returning to normal), which was the first step in his drive to modernize China economically and socially.

people cannot predict the future yet. But an unbearable epoch is ended we should cheer for it. Nobody would be so naïve to think that the garbage accumulated during the past decade can be cleared overnight. But people have faith that although the train will still slide on the rail for a while after it stops due to inertia, the steamer of Chinese history will once again set sail towards a turning point.<sup>72</sup>

Inserting the author's own commentary on social and historical issues is not unusual among writers aligned with realism, Tolstoy did it more extensively in *War and Peace*. The difference is, Tolstoy approaches his discussion in a philosophical manner that transcends the common understanding at the time while Lu Yao's enthusiastic statements often feel like paragraphs taken from an official history textbook. It is not to say Lu Yao simply copied that information. He could have absorbed it from external sources and then transformed it into his own way of thinking. For today's Chinese readers, his thoughts of history might seem to be kitsch, but at the time he indeed believes in them with sincerity and passion.

Lu Yao's commentary on the fate of China in his work could be seen as a form of a grand narrative that replaces but also inherits the revolution narration from the previous era. This kind of interpretation of history is more about drawing energy from the past to enhance certain ideology than simply elucidating it, a way of creating "myth" according to Cohen.<sup>73</sup> In Liu Qing's *Chuangye shi*, the historical narrative and individual experience are seamlessly combined as the protagonist is like a hero from a myth descending to the mundane ground to elevate the earthly life towards a promised paradise. While in *Pingfan de shijie*, the halo of the myth begins to fade away since the official historical narrative despite still being exhilarating, has detached from daily life and can no longer offer a clear direction for our protagonists. At the end of the first volume, the narrator uses an exciting voice to announce that the earth is about to defrost, heralding the coming of a great

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<sup>72</sup> Lu Yao 路遥, *Pingfan de shijie* 平凡的世界, 244.

<sup>73</sup> Paul Cohen, *History in Three Keys the Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), xiii.

epoch.<sup>74</sup> But in the second and third volumes, we still get to see both Shao'an and Shaoping struggle most of the time with their mundane life and trivial matters. The great new epoch might have provided them with more freedom, but also left them completely alone with little true support and consolation.

Lu Yao might have also realized the strong contrast between his emphasis on great history and the word “ordinary” in the title and therefore made a specific explanation to try to avoid the possible confusion: “Everyone’s life is also a world. Even the most ordinary person has to fight for surviving in that world. In that sense, there is not a single quiet day in these ordinary worlds.”<sup>75</sup> But this still does not solve the disconnection within the whole story. These so-called normal people’s “ordinary worlds” are just like unbreakable bubbles floating in a grander world full of exciting events and changes. That is also the reason that the novel gradually divides into two separate narrative systems. Starting with the second volume, the book begins to devote more portion to high-level leaders such as Qiao Bonian 乔伯年 and Tian Fujun 田福军 and their involvement in the ongoing reform. When compared with the vivid narrations namely the domestic drama of Shao'an, the coming-of-age story of Shaoping, and the real-life struggle of other minor characters, this part appears to resemble a testament of political theology, a myth of the great Reform, which is understandable since Lu Yao did not have enough knowledge and experience to properly portrait the political life. Even a writer so ambitious and talented as Mao Dun has to repeatedly reduce the scale of his working plan partially due to the lack of necessary first-hand experience.<sup>76</sup> Lu Yao realized the difficulty of representing this complex and unfamiliar area and

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<sup>74</sup> Lu Yao 路遥, *Pingfan de shijie* 平凡的世界, 351.

<sup>75</sup> Lu Yao 路遥, *Pingfan de shijie* 平凡的世界, 569.

<sup>76</sup> Liu Yong 刘勇, “Introduction,” in “On the Construction of Epic Ideology in Modern Chinese Literature” 论中国现代文学史诗意识的构建, (PhD diss., Wuhan University, 2005), 120.

admitted the limitation of his writing within the novel itself: “Interpreting the deep historical meaning of this change might be beyond the ability of the novel. When depicting the people who live with this grand historical context, we cannot help but exclaim: our generation has gone through such a meaningful and dramatic journey!”<sup>77</sup> However, the only riveting journey readers would relate to are the life paths of fleshed-out protagonists such as Shao’an and Shaoping, not the abstract progress of reform emphasized by the narrator.

The gap between the author’s intention and the finished narrative also reveals itself when an effort has been made to rationalize the event under the name of history. One good example is when the conflict between two groups of villagers breaks out, the writer inserts a comment on the tragedy of war in human history. But the following part is an extensive description of the fight among villagers, which soon turns into a total farce and chaos, dissolving the serious attempt of establishing meaning by the narrator a moment ago.<sup>78</sup> Also, when Runye gets into her misfortunate marriage, the narrator comments that it is not the result of fate but caused by social conflicts. But this laconic and abstract statement simply pales before Runye’s dismay and has never been explored again.<sup>79</sup> The author’s ideal to arrange all the unique events and personal experiences under a consistent historical system of value and meaning just cannot be realized due to the varied nature and grand scale of his writing practice. In other words, Lu Yao tried to organize a group of polyphonic narratives into a homophonic narrative, resulting in disharmony within the novel.

When revolution and its related ideology faded away, individuals can only rely on themselves and the gap between personal experience and formal historical narrative inevitably begins to grow. An individual can change her/his fate through personal struggle might be an

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<sup>77</sup> Lu Yao 路遥, *Pingfan de shijie* 平凡的世界, 684.

<sup>78</sup> Lu Yao 路遥, *Pingfan de shijie* 平凡的世界, 320-323.

<sup>79</sup> Lu Yao 路遥, *Pingfan de shijie* 平凡的世界, 251.

important reason that *Pingfan de shijie* is so popular among people of the lower class despite the indifferent attitude from professional critics,<sup>80</sup> but the true moral revealed by Shaoping's story is that one should never stop trying even when nothing has been achieved, the character that belongs to an epic hero. In the end, *Pingfan de shijie* is a brilliant work that suffers from inner friction and disorder, a literary attempt so ambitious that is doomed to fail. It sits on a transient position between classic socialist realism works such as *Chuangye shi* and later modernism works with more avant-garde techniques. If Lu Yao gives up on his insistence on a coherent historical perspective, then the multifarious and jumbled nature might even push the work towards the boundary of magic realism, a style the author wishes to steer clear of. As for a novel associated with *shishi*, it has a heroic protagonist on his modern odyssey as well as a grand sense of the social picture, but its frail and naïve historical narration just cannot firmly connect the two together.

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<sup>80</sup> Shao Yanjun 邵燕君, "Pingfan de shijie bu pingfan" 《平凡的世界》不平凡, *Xiaoshuo pinglun*, no. 1 (2003): 64.

### CHAPTER 3. CHEN ZHONGSHI AND MO YAN: RISE OF ALTERNATIVE HISTORY

This chapter focuses on Chen Zhongshi 陈忠实 and Mo Yan 莫言, whose works have explored alternative ways of reconstructing the past incidents other than the orthodox historical narrative. Both of them created literary fiction featuring a long, turbulent, and eventful period in the history of modern China. While Chen Zhongshi still tried to cling to the traditional value and to use it as a remedy for the issues brought by modernity, Mo Yan embraced the ridiculous and meaningless nature of history and attempted a form of salvation through primitive life force. Their pursuit for higher meaning and transcendence of mundane life brought a certain quality of shishi to their works.

#### 3.1 The Ambiguity of White Deer

There are quite a few similarities between Lu Yao and Chen Zhongshi 陈忠实: both from Shaanxi province and rural area; both became famous around the same time; and most importantly, both have devoted themselves to creating a great work that they wish could last after death (both achieved this goal in the end). We already talked about Lu Yao's determination of writing *Pingfan de shijie* in the last chapter. Coincidentally, Chen Zhongshi began writing *Bailuyuan* 白鹿原 (White Deer Plain)<sup>1</sup> in 1988, the same year Lu Yao finished his life's work, with the same kind of determination. Chen once stated that he was planning to write a work that can be used as a pillow in the coffin after death.<sup>2</sup> He thought that those short stories and novellas he wrote in the past were

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<sup>1</sup> In the following discussion, the novel will be referred to as *Bailuyuan*, but the geographical entity from which it takes its name, a 260 square kilometers loess field, 40 kilometers to the south east of Xi'an, the capital of Shaanxi Province, will be called White Deer Plain.

<sup>2</sup> Chen Zhongshi 陈忠实, *Xunzhao shuyu ziji de juzi* 寻找属于自己的句子 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2009), 21.

not heavy and enduring enough for that task. Instead of seeking fame, prize, and others' praise, he decided to construct something as his own literature monument. In the end, it was a success. Just like *Pingfan de shijie*, *Bailuyuan* won a *Mao Dun Wenxue Jiang* 茅盾文学奖 (Mao Dun Literature Prize) in 1997 and was commended by many critics as work with the spirit of *shishi* 史诗.<sup>3</sup>

When compared with *Pingfan de shijie*, it is not hard to that *Bailuyuan* has a different intention or focus. Both are works with grand scale, but just as names indicate, the former is preoccupied with representing a wide social picture (hence the “world”) while the latter is more fixed in one specific location with interests in its rich history. The structure of *Bailuyuan* is closer to detailed family history with its depiction of three generations of two families over fifty years. Novels covering such a long period of modern Chinese history used to be a rare sight because for writers who were active between the May Fourth Movement and 1949, they were more invested in capturing the great social changes happening around them. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, many writers' freedom of expression was constantly interrupted with ideology-infused literary agenda and they often could not portrait history the way they wanted. For example, Mao Dun stopped literary writing altogether and Lao She's biographical novel based on his family (his most ambitious project) was never finished due to the disruption of political movements. Since the late 1980s and especially in the 1990s, historical novels featuring a series of social events and changes throughout the twentieth century began to thrive as a result of writers at the time possessing enough accumulated material as well as creative freedom. *Bailuyuan* is one of these works and a great representative of them.

Most of the story in the novel takes place before the author's birth and it means that unlike

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<sup>3</sup> Shao Nan 邵楠, “*Pingfan de shijie* yu *Bailuyuan* shishi wenxue yihan bijiao” 《平凡的世界》与《白鹿原》史诗文学意涵比较, *Beifang wenxue* 北方文学, no. 10 (2017): 34-35.



Liu Qing's *Chuangye shi* and Lu Yao's *Pingfan de shijie*, Chen Zhongshi has very little to rely on his personal experience. Initially, he was planning to write a book akin to *Chuangyeshi* since he was confident in his familiarity with life in the countryside.<sup>4</sup> After an unexpected visit to an old traditional house in the rural part of Shaanxi, Chen was suddenly filled with a strong sense of intrigue and responsibility to recover the clouded stories of the past, especially before they were being forgotten. Thus, he spent two years collecting documents, interviewing living witnesses from that era, and making other preparations to have a deeper understanding of the history he wished to understand and to reconstruct in his writing. The central protagonist of the novel, the patriarch of the Bai family Bai Jiaxuan 白嘉轩, is based on a villager's memory of Chen's great grandfather.<sup>5</sup> Despite all the effort of gathering facts and knowledge, Chen was aware that his role is not a historian nor a folklorist, but a fellow descendent who lived on this land and tried to experience and comprehend the world around him in his own way. He was not satisfied with the traditional idea of "realism" that aims to describe reality as it is but instead opted to examine various psychological structures and their interaction with the politic, economy, and moral rules.<sup>6</sup> It is not to say that Chen is a believer in structuralism, his intention was more about finding a better alternative for the contrived "typical character"<sup>7</sup> at the time.

When Chen Zhongshi stated that he was not intended to be a historian, he might not be

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<sup>4</sup> Chen Zhongshi 陈忠实, *Xunzhao shuyu ziji de juzi* 寻找属于自己的句子 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2009), 11.

<sup>5</sup> Chen Zhongshi 陈忠实, *Xunzhao*, 16.

<sup>6</sup> Chen Zhongshi 陈忠实, *Xunzhao*, 16-17.

<sup>7</sup> In a letter which Friedrich Engels wrote to the radical English writer, Margaret Harkness (1854-1923) in April 1888 he says: "Realism, to my mind, implies, beside truth of detail, the truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances." This adage has been adapted as the major principle of literary realism for modern Chinese writers for a long time. After the literary reform in the 1980s, many writers began to seek other methods and deviated from the orthodox realism approach. See Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, edited by Solomea W. Ryazanskaya, 3<sup>rd</sup> rev. ed. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), 379.

completely honest. In the original version of the book, there is a quotation claimed to be from Balzac: “Novel is the secret history of a nation.”<sup>8</sup> For Chen, a novel is an alternative form or possibility of representing history, being able to reveal the secret truth that has been covered or repressed in the official historical narrative. This perspective also leads to the relatively organic connection between individual lives and social-historical existence in his works, for those characters are not helpless modern people wandering alone in a world devoid of higher values. Their actions and thoughts are strongly regulated by the tradition and all its cultural heritage passed down from ancestors on this land for thousands of years. The collision between the pre-modern psychological (or cultural) structure and the drastic changes brought by modernization is the major force and conflict that drives the story forward, separating it from works that happen within the dominance of modernity. The mode of secret history also means the official historical ideology, either integrated into the narrative as in *Chuangyeshi* or tagged on as decoration and remain as in *Pingfan de shijie*, will not be present in the novel. However, unlike some scholars’ claim that *Bailuyuan* is a perfect combination of history and poetry,<sup>9</sup> the presence of ideology, although not the official one, is just as conspicuous as in revolutionary historical novels. Chen has emphasized that he intentionally avoided interpreting the ideas behind his writing or analyzing characters.<sup>10</sup> But even without explicit explanation, the intention and preference could still be revealed through

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<sup>8</sup> Chen Zhongshi 陈忠实, *Bailuyuan* 白鹿原 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1993), 2. This quotation is taken, probably second or third hand, from the section on Adolphe de Chodoreille in Balzac’s *Petites misères de la vie conjugale* which appeared 1830-1846. It is given in the manner of an aside: “Qu’il faut avoit fouillé toute la vie sociale pour être un vrai romancier, vu que le roman est l’histoire privée des nations” (That one must have burrowed into all social life in order to be a true historian, seeing that the novel is the secret history of nations). Honoré de Balzac, *Petites misères de la vie conjugale, La Comédie humaine*, edited by Marcel Bouteron et Henri Longnon, 40 vols. (Paris: L. Conard, 1912-1940), 33: 114.

<sup>9</sup> Zhu Shuchao 朱述超, “Cong geming zhengshi dao minjian mishi” 从革命正史到民间秘史, *Chongqing shifan daxue xuebao* 重庆师范大学学报, no. 1 (2011): 46-51.

<sup>10</sup> Chen Zhongshi 陈忠实, *Xunzhao shuyu ziji de juzi* 寻找属于自己的句子 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2009), 152-153.

the way how the story is written and what is or is not included in the narrative. And by implementing this method, it becomes clear that certain characters are favored by the author (or narrator) more than others.

At the center of these positive characters are Bai Jiaxuan and his sister's husband Mr. Zhu 朱先生. Bai Jiaxuan is still a youth at the beginning of the novel, but he soon becomes the patriarch of the family and we barely see any significant growth in his character. He is more of an embodiment of the moral values of traditional Chinese society, especially *ren* 仁 (benevolence) and *yi* 义 (righteousness). We also see him repeatedly stressing the importance of being upright and straightforward. Heiwa 黑娃, a child of a servant in Jiaxuan's family, even states that he is afraid of him for his back is too straight (it indicates that he is a man of integrity).<sup>11</sup> He resolves disputes, helps refugees, relieves people suffering from natural disasters, and fight against unreasonable requests from governors. He lives through numerous torments and even gets betrayed by his kinsman, but he never gives up and always sticks to the ancestor's principle and uses it to encourage others. Mr. Zhu, on the other hand, is an idealized prototype of traditional Chinese intellectuals and is often commended by other characters in the book as *shengren* 圣人 (saint). He prevents conflicts between villagers by showing the value of virtues, stops the planting of opium poppy because of its harmful products, builds the *Bailu shuyuan* 白鹿书院 (White Deer Academy) to promote education, and generously guides a strayed young man to become a better person. Both Bai Jiaxuan and Mr. Zhu could be seen as representatives of charismatic leadership,<sup>12</sup> the personification of the essence of traditional Chinese culture.

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<sup>11</sup> Chen Zhongshi 陈忠实, *Bailuyuan* 白鹿原 (Beijing: Zuoja chubanshe, 2012), 105.

<sup>12</sup> Max Weber, "Merkmale der charismatischen Herrschaft" in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1956), <https://www.textlog.de/7415.html>.

When it comes to groups and ideas representing modern value and historical progress, the novel's attitude is much more ambivalent. The success of the *Xinhai geming* 辛亥 Revolution (the Revolution of 1911)<sup>13</sup> and the overthrow of the Qing 清 dynasty (1644-1912) does not leave any strong mark on White Deer Plain and most people still live their normal life as usual. As the story goes on, the conflict between *Guomindang* 国民党 (Chinese Nationalist Party)<sup>14</sup> and *Zhongguo gongchandang* 中国共产党 (Communist Party of China) gradually becomes the central plot device that drives many major characters' development and deeply influences the fate of the plain. The narrator deliberately avoids picking a side between the two parties and restrains himself from making any direct comment and judgment on their ideologies. We could only see the characters' preferences and evaluations in this matter. The following dialogue between Bai Ling 白灵 and Lu Zhaohai 鹿兆海 serves as the best example:

“How about this.” Lu Zhaohai brings up a copper coin<sup>15</sup> and says: “The side with the dragon is Guo 国,<sup>16</sup> and the side with the letter is Gong 共.<sup>17</sup> You can pick the one you guessed.” ... Bai Ling finds out a loophole in this game: “What if we both guess the same side?” Lu Zhaohai says: “Then it is fate that we will join the same party.” Bai Ling earnestly strokes the coin and tosses it towards the ground lit by the light. Lu Zhaohai says: “it is the letter.” Bai Ling says: “I think it is the dragon.” ... The coin shows the image of a dragon, the two jump up with laughter.

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<sup>13</sup> *Ganzhi* (干支) is a term used in the traditional Chinese calendar to designate a cycle of 60-years. Each year is assigned a *tiangan* 天干 (Heavenly or celestial stem), which is a special ordinal number counting 1-10, and a *dizhi* 地支 (earthly branch) of which there are 12, each *dizhi* corresponding to one of the signs of the Chinese Zodiac. In modern times the *ganzhi* have begun in 1804, 1864, 1924, 1984. The Revolution occurred in the Western year of 1911. This was the 48<sup>th</sup> year of the sexagenary cycle, when the *tiangan* was *xin* (= “8”) and the *dizhi* was *hai*, the twelfth sign of the Chinese Zodiac, that is, *zhu* 猪 (pig). Therefore the *ganzhi* name for the year was *Xinhai* 辛亥. As a result, the Revolution is identified in Chinese by the *ganzhi* year in which it occurred.

<sup>14</sup> Usually referred to as “Kuomintang” or KMT which reflects the pre-pinyin spelling.

<sup>15</sup> In the currency reform of 1889, a new currency was introduced based on the *yuan* 圆/元 which was equal to 1000 cash (*wen* 文). Beginning in 1903 the government began to introduce copper and silver coins. Many of the coins, including the copper 10 cash and 20 cash, had a dragon (*long* 龙) on one side and numbers on the other.

<sup>16</sup> “Nation,” “nationalist,” here the *Kuomintang*.

<sup>17</sup> Literally “common” or “general,” but here the Communist Party from *gongchandang* 共产党.

Lu Zhaohai says: “I am Gong and you are Guo. The one who joins the party first will keep the coin.”<sup>18</sup>

The big decision of choosing which party to join is made through a child’s play of tossing coins and both Guo and Gong are deemed as two sides of the same coin, with no fundamental difference. If we further examine other traits of a coin, then it could be said that it is physically flat and since it is not made of gold or silver, it is basically a token for exchange. These features when used as a metaphor might reflect the author’s perspective of viewing the two most prominent political parties at the time: lacking depth and inherent value. Another similar analogy in the book made by Mr. Zhu could further shed light on this kind of perspective: “The White Deer Plain is like an *aozi* 熬子.”<sup>19</sup> An *aozi* is a traditional piece of Chinese kitchenware similar to a large frying pan and is used to make pancakes. The indication here is the community on the plain is like a pancake and when one party is ruling, its supporters would suppress and torture people on the other side. But once the other party comes on top, the pancake will be turned over and it is time the previous torturers be fried on the pan. Through these analogies, the righteousness and legitimacy of both the KMT and CCP have mostly been delegitimized. They become no more than power-hungry groups fighting for dominance and the harbingers of violence, cruelty, destruction, and death.

The contrast between outstanding figures such as Bai Jiaxuan and Mr. Zhu and the gloomy images of political parties might lead to the conclusion that the author is trying to restore traditional society in order to resist the disturbances caused by modernization. But the actual ideas revealed by the narrative are far more complicated. The representation of contradictions is indeed one of

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<sup>18</sup> Chen Zhongshi 陈忠实, *Bailuyuan* 白鹿原, 164-165.

<sup>19</sup> Chen Zhongshi 陈忠实, *Bailuyuan* 白鹿原, 210.

the major strengths of this historical novel.<sup>20</sup> One of the most significant central contradictions is the attitude towards *xiangyue* 乡约 (community compact).<sup>21</sup> The *xiangyue* of White Deer Plain is not wholly fictional but rather based on the real-world counterpart in the author's homeland. Chen Zhongshi has admitted that Bai Jiaxuan's psychological structure is informed by the principles from *xiangyue* and he even deleted certain narratives that he considered unrelated to such a structure.<sup>22</sup> But he also realized the negative effects of *xiangyue* and the way it constrains people's minds and behavior, lamenting that how many free spirits seeking love have been crushed by it.<sup>23</sup> The author's sympathy for those failed free spirits leads to the creation of the most memorable female character in the novel, Tian Xiao'e 田小娥. Xiao'e is originally the concubine of a wealthy landlord and her adultery with Heiwa, who is working for the landlord at the time results in her exile. Heiwa refuses to abandon Xiao'e even though she is not accepted by his family, and insists on living with her outside the village as an outcast. Despite being dismissed by most of the villagers, Heiwa's action is praised by Lu Zhaopeng 鹿兆鹏, the eldest son of the Lu family, as the realization of the goal of freedom of marriage since Zhaopeng suffers from a marriage forced upon him and is still fighting against it. But we should remember that even the relationship between Heiwa and Tian Xiao'e is the result of free love, neither of them can be considered as progressive youth that follows modern social principles and values. Their fight against traditional restrictions is more out of primitive and instinctive desire than being rooted in any affirmative ideals of

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<sup>20</sup> Wang Yonglei 王永磊, "The Evolution from 'Epic Novel' to 'Secret History Novel'" 从“史诗”到“秘史,” Master's thesis, (Guangxi Teacher's Education University, 2013), 32.

<sup>21</sup> These were public contracts on social conduct and mutual control and support agreed to by members of village communities. The aim of *xiangyue* was to regulate the behavior of each community member and violations could be punished by the regular conventions. The *xiangyue* was the effective legal authority at the sub-district level.

<sup>22</sup> Chen Zhongshi 陈忠实, *Xunzhao shuyu ziji de juzi* 寻找属于自己的句子 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2009), 77-78.

<sup>23</sup> Chen Zhongshi 陈忠实, *Xunzhao*, 17.

liberation. Furthermore, when praising the courage and openness of Xiao'e, her image is highly or over-sexualized in the narrative.

Tian Xiao'e is deemed as a whore by her contemporaries and she is indeed lascivious and unsatiable even by today's standard. She seduces Heiwa when he is a virgin and voluntarily blackmails the eldest son of the Bai family, Bai Xiaowen 白孝文 into having sex with her to help Lu Zilin 鹿子霖 complete his plan. Lu Zilin is the patriarch of the Lu family and plots to damage the reputation of the Bai family by corrupting their son and he uses Xiao'e as a tool to achieve it. He also himself forms an immoral relationship with Xiao'e. There is a scene at the end of chapter seventeen in which Xiao'e pisses on Lu Zilin's face while having sex with him. Since Lu Zilin is a governor of the village and his official title happens to be *Xiangyue*,<sup>24</sup> Xiao'e shouts at him: "I piss on the face of *xiangyue*!"<sup>25</sup> This line is provocative not just because it is an obvious challenge to traditional values on the part of Xiao'e, but because Lu Zilin, a person who is portrayed as the antithesis of Bai Jiaxuan, and who is despised by many upright villagers for his debauchery, but ironically holding the position of promoting *xiangyue*, is the one on the receiving end. The author wishes to demonstrate the rebellious spirit of Xiao'e, but he cannot let the real defender of *xiangyue*, the righteous moral model Bai Jiaxuan take the blame. As a compromise, Lu Zilin becomes the scapegoat.

This is not the end of the revolt on the part of Tian Xiao'e. The true climax comes after she is being killed by Heiwa's father Lu San 鹿三. She then turns into a ghost and starts an unprecedented plague on White Deer Plain. Confucianism (or Ruism), an integral part of the traditional value the author tries to revitalize, is known for its belief in the power of reason and it

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<sup>24</sup> The local official in charge of the monthly Confucian lectures that were part of the government's monthly Confucian lectures under the *xiangyue* system.

<sup>25</sup> Chen Zhongshi 陈忠实, *Bailuyuan* 白鹿原, 256.

is recorded that Confucius did not talk about “*guai, li, luan, shen* 怪力乱神 (extraordinary things, feats of strength, disorder, and spiritual beings).”<sup>26</sup> But the spirit of Xiao’e is material and causes actual harm to the real world. The way the narrative handles her image in this situation is quite ambivalent. When her spirit possesses Lu San, the one who murders her, she speaks through him: “I never stole a cotton flower from others, nor any wheat or wood. I never insulted the elderly and never hurt a baby, why would White Deer Village not tolerate me?”<sup>27</sup> It reminds us that she is also a victim of the system and the author’s sympathy is palpable. On the other hand, Xiao’e is not the typical angel of vengeance since she indeed contributes to the death and suffering of numerous innocent people, and her action is deemed as evil by the most upright representatives of the village. In the end, her remains are burned to ash and buried under a tower (in Chinese folklore religion, doing so will forever suppress the evil spirit) and this plan is suggested by Mr. Zhu and carried out by Bai Jiaxuan. The rebellion of Tian Xiao’e is bound to fail since her success would mean that the author would have to overturn the cultural and moral models he is so invested in establishing. Bai Jiaxuan and Mr. Zhu are the core characters guarding the value system that inflicts misfortune on Xiao’e and there is no way the author could portrait them as the villains. By exaggerating the disastrous consequences caused by the spirit of Xiao’e, the narrative increases the legitimacy of suppressing her and avoids touching on the more practical issues within the traditional value system.

In the original version of the novel, there are more explicit depictions of sexual activity, many of which involve Tian Xiao’e.<sup>28</sup> Although the author deleted these parts in exchange for

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<sup>26</sup> Kongzi 孔子 (Confucius), *Lunyu* 论语 (Analects), *Shu Er* 述而 (= Book 7), chapter 20. See *The Chinese Classics*, ed. and trans. James Legge, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed., 5 vols. in 8 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1893-1895), 1: 201.

<sup>27</sup> Chen Zhongshi 陈忠实, *Bailuyuan* 白鹿原, 392.

<sup>28</sup> Che Baoren 车保仁, “Comparative Studies on the Revised and the Original Edition of *Bai Lu Yuan*” 《白鹿原》修订版与原版删改比较研究, *Tangdu Journal* 唐都学刊, no. 5 (2004): 11-17.



being nominated for the Mao Dun Literature Prize, they still remain important as they provide insights into this intriguing female character and the contradictions surrounding her. Chen Zhongshi has emphasized that the sexual descriptions in his book are not intended to appeal to readers' desire but intended to serve the purpose of the story and its character development.<sup>29</sup> The question is, if depicting sex is to expose the repression enforced upon victims by traditional moral principles and to justify the fight for liberation, then the character building of Tian Xiao'e has already crossed the boundary and slipped over into the area of over-sexualization. The deliberate demonstration of her licentious nature ultimately opens space for a conservative position in the gender narrative and obscures the need for the liberation of ordinary women. Those female characters who live within this system seem to only have two fates: Either be the model wife who has to restrain her inner desire or be the infamous whore who disturbs the stability of the moral structure and deserves to be exiled. There is still no room for women to live a truly free life independent from the judgment and dominance of the existing tradition. Behind the humiliated and insulted soul of Tian Xiao'e, there "always lingers the specter of the patriarchal clan and its male power."<sup>30</sup> The irony is that for a male character, the abundance of libido does not necessarily equal negativity but can become praise-worthy. The famous opening of the book makes it very straightforward: Bai Jiaxuan is proud that he has had seven wives in his life (in pursuit of a male heir).<sup>31</sup> In this case, women are just tools to brag about what a vigorous man he is and their death barely leaves any trace on his heart. And since all these wives are gained through normal marriage and died of natural causes, his glorious image of an upholder of the traditional moral value is never

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<sup>29</sup> Chen Zhongshi 陈忠实, *Xunzhao shuyu ziji de juzi* 寻找属于自己的句子, 68-70.

<sup>30</sup> Zhang Gaoling 张高领, "Xingbie jieji yu rujia lunli: zailun *Bailuyuan* zhong de Tian Xiao'e xingxiang" 性别, 阶级与儒家伦理: 再论《白鹿原》中的田小娥形象, *Wenyi lilun yu piping* 文艺理论与批评, no. 7 (2017): 60.

<sup>31</sup> Chen Zhongshi 陈忠实, *Bailuyuan* 白鹿原, 1.

stained. But females in the novel can never reconcile personal desires and social roles, thus none of them become the ideal moral model and they could not even resist the current system without turning into a whore or a ghost.

The only female character in the book that leaves White Deer Plain to pursue a progressive life path is Bai Ling, a highly idealized figure combining an innocent nature and the radical belief in revolution. She ends up being a victim of the *Yan'an Zhengfeng Yundong* 延安整风运动 (Yan'an Rectification Movement),<sup>32</sup> and executed by her once trusted comrade although she is eventually honored as a martyr after her death. By contrast, another major character, Heiwa, chooses to redeem himself after being a bandit and changes his life path with the guidance of Confucianism. Despite being accepted by Bai Jiaxuan as a good example of the credo to start a new era, or to “begin again,” he is still executed for his past sins after the establishment of the PRC. Two characters with drastic different life paths, one pro-revolution, one anti-revolution; one white, one black (*bai* and *hei* mean white and black in mandarin), ultimately cannot escape each of their tragic endings in the movements of social change brought forth by the communist party, the organization associated with progress and liberation in the official narrative. It has been pointed out that this kind of arrangement is indeed close to historical nihilism, a term used by the CCP to refer to interpretations of history that criticize its authority and ideology.<sup>33</sup> The author admitted the progress of history but kept questioning its positivity in the long term. Mr. Zhu used to describe the communist forces as *fei* 匪 (bandits) in the regional chorography and later refers to them as *jun*

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<sup>32</sup> This was the first ideological mass movement started by the CCP and it lasted from 1942 to 1945 at the communist base at Yan'an. The campaign was designed to strengthen the authority of the party and the leadership of Mao Zedong but it also caused the death of many innocent people through a quasi witch hunt. For more information on this matter see Gao Hua 高华, *How Did the Sun Rise over Yan'an: A History of the Rectification Movement* 红太阳是怎样升起的: 延安整风运动的来龙去脉 (Hong Kong: CUHK Press, 2000).

<sup>33</sup> Fang Wei 房伟, “Chuantong de faming yu xiandaixing jiaolu” 传统的发明与现代性焦虑, *Tianjin shehui kexue* 天津社会科学, no. 4 (2016): 122.

军 (army) but keeps the previous record of *fei* unchanged.<sup>34</sup> This inconsistency in the historical writing reflects the author's inner contradiction and indecisiveness. It also has an ominous indication: if the legitimacy of the ruling party is not inherent but gradually acquired since it suits the current historical trend, then there is the possibility that the relevance of the traditional cultural resource as viable guidance could as well fade away through time once it loses its adaptability. In the original version of the novel, when the Red Guards destroy Mr. Zhu's tomb during the Cultural Revolution, they find a line of inscription on it: "When will people stop messing around?"<sup>35</sup> As a saint, Mr. Zhu might be able to predict the turbulent future, but even he could not provide ideal solutions to the problems in an ever-changing time.

The story comes to an end shortly after the CCP takes over the regime. We do not get to see the final moment of Bai Jiaxuan and the novel finishes with the death of already deranged Lu Zilin. Since Lu Zilin is portrayed as an antagonist that deviates from the traditional value-system and Bai Jiaxuan is an assertive defender of that tradition, the survival of the latter could be seen as the author's faith in it. But such faith is highly fragile since one of the major reasons the story does not continue under the new regime is the author's realization of the impossibility of reconciling his preferred value system with the new official ideology. This incompatibility does not mean that the novel tries to promote outdated conventions and ancient ideas. The protagonists' actions and thoughts are not entirely guided by the principles of Confucian ritual and religion. Chen Zongshi did not simply wish to revive the old tradition, but rather to borrow elements from the various forms of traditional culture to create a vigorous new value-system. For example, the central symbol

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<sup>34</sup> Chen Zhongshi 陈忠实, *Bailuyuan* 白鹿原, 476.

<sup>35</sup> Che Baoren 车保仁, "Comparative Studies on the Revised and the Original Edition of *Bai Lu Yuan*" 《白鹿原》修订版与原版删改比较研究, *Tangdu Journal* 唐都学刊, no. 5 (2004): 13.

of the book, the white deer that brings good fortune to the Bai family is more like a primitive totem and a mystic spirit that does not belong to the official belief system of imperial China:

Long long ago (legends do not pay attention to the exact time), there was once a white deer on the plain with white fur, white legs, white hooves, and crystal white antlers. The white deer jumped and ran in a manner like floating, moving from the east plain to the west plain and disappearing suddenly. Farmers found out that crops grew higher after the white deer passed by, turning from a weak yellow to a healthy green. The whole plain and river are covered with green ... People found dead wolves, dying foxes, a pile of corpses of toads in the ditch, all the pests and bugs were eliminated ... the bald man regrew his hair and an ugly girl became unbelievably beautiful ... this is the White Deer Plain.<sup>36</sup>

The origin of the White Deer Plain begins with a myth or a folklore narrative and is filled with miracles performed by supernatural powers. The white deer only appears within legends or in people's dreams and imagination and is never visualized as a living entity. The author also intentionally leaves its true identity unexplained. Bai Ling's impression of the white deer further proves that it transcends the limit of the rational and material world: "When she attends the Christian girl's school and for the first time hears about this strange name: god, she thinks about the white deer. God is in fact the white deer."<sup>37</sup> But it does not mean that the white deer is completely mysterious and beyond understanding. Before his death, Mr. Zhu's hair has all turned white and he is described as looking like a white deer. Despite being a saint, Mr. Zhu deeply cares about the mundane world and believes in the power of rational thinking. If there is a so-called "white deer spirit," then it should be the combination of both the mystic folklore spiritual being and the living human being that carries the essence of the traditional moral and wisdom like Mr. Zhu.

Just like Bai Jiaxuan is not the faithful portrait of a real-life patriarch but a prototype character created to represent the psychological structure shaped by *xiangyue* or the classic cultural

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<sup>36</sup> Chen Zhongshi 陈忠实, *Bailuyuan*, 22-23.

<sup>37</sup> Chen Zhongshi 陈忠实, *Bailuyuan*, 348.

values, Mr. Zhu is also not a simple disciple of Confucianism. He does not wish to be involved in politics but decides to join the army when the nation is faced with foreign invasions. He upholds the traditional moral code and uses it to punish rebels such as Tian Xiao'e, but when the age of the imperial regime ends, he helps revoke foot binding and promotes other social reforms. Instead of strictly following the guidance of the classic books of Confucianism, his behaviors and thoughts are nowhere near orthodox by the standard of a Confucian. His character is an idealized creation that takes elements from the spirit of *xia* 侠 (chivalry) and even modern values that are deemed necessary and compatible with the traditional culture by the author.<sup>38</sup> But such a saint-like character with his humanism and conservative stance is doomed to be unsuitable for the incoming radical revolutionary trends. His commentary on the social-political matter is worth pondering:

From my perspective, the *san min zhu yi* 三民主义 (Three Principles of the People)<sup>39</sup> and Communism<sup>40</sup> are very similar. One proposes *tianxia wei gong* 天下为公 (the world is for the people)<sup>41</sup> and the other proposes *tianxia wei gong* 天下为共 (the world is for the party). Since both uphold the principle of saving the country and helping the people, they could be merged as *tianxia wei gonggong* 天下为公共 (the world is for everyone). They refuse to work together and try to destroy each other instead. The division between *gong* 公 and *gong* 共<sup>42</sup> means that they both want to seize the power of making the only dictionary, just like those merchants selling different food who all want to take control of the whole market. Since that is the case, I would no longer care about the ending.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Mao Chongjie 毛崇杰, "Guanzhong daru fei ru ye" 关中大儒非儒也, *Wenxue pinglun* 文学评论, no. 1 (1999): 20-27.

<sup>39</sup> *The Three Principles of the People*, is the name of the political philosophy developed by Sun Yat-sen 孙逸仙 (1866-1925), first provisional President of the Republic of China, as a way of modernizing China. The principles are: Nationalism, Democracy, and Socialism.

<sup>40</sup> The principles of the Communist Party are: upholding the socialist path; upholding the people's democratic dictatorship; upholding the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP); To these was added: upholding Mao Zedong Thought and Marxism-Leninism.

<sup>41</sup> This is a slogan coined by Sun Yat-sen 孙逸仙.

<sup>42</sup> *Gong* 公 means "the public" and *gong* 共 means "common" or "altogether," but also came to be an abbreviation for *gongchandang* 共产党 (the Communist Party).

<sup>43</sup> Chen Zhongshi 陈忠实, *Bailuyuan* 白鹿原, 277.

The detachment demonstrated by Mr. Zhu also indicates that he will not be able to provide constructive suggestions to those who are going to enter the inevitable modern era. The idealistic, progressive historical narrative has been deconstructed into a trivial dispute over letters. But the alternative provided by the author is not that much more viable or attractive either. Bai Jiaxuan has experienced numerous turbulences and drastic social changes and the secret strategy that helps him endure and survive is just *ren* 忍 (patience/restraint). He ignores the political conflicts and focuses on inner training. In other words, he wishes to face the challenge of shifting events by sticking to the fundamental principles. But maintaining the status quo cannot truly solve the constantly evolving issues. And in a time of disenchantment, the spirit of the white deer might no longer manifest itself.

As a central symbol of the story, the white deer does not show up as frequently as people might have thought, nor do other supernatural elements in the book. Chen Zhongshi stated that the biggest inspiration for the novel comes from reading *El reino de este mundo* (The Kingdom of This World) (1949) by the Cuban novelist, Alejo Carpentier (1904-1980). What truly interested him was not the writing, but an essay that introduces how the writer found his own literary path.<sup>44</sup> Chen realized that modernism is not suitable for all the writers and that one needs to understand the past and present of the land where one lives in order to create something unique. Thus, if Chen has been influenced by magic realism, then instead of the magic elements, the truly crucial part is to take root in one's own cultural traditions and not to blindly imitate others. The historical background of the conception of this book is also worth mentioning. From the late 1980s to the 1990s, many writers began to deviate from the classic mode of writing history with the guidance of revolutionary ideology and to set out to explore new ways of representing, or more accurately,

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<sup>44</sup> Chen Zhongshi 陈忠实, *Xunzhao shuyu ziji de juzi* 寻找属于自己的句子, 11-12.

reconstructing and reimagining the past. The literary works created from this trend are often referred to as “new historical novels”<sup>45</sup> in contrast to the revolutionary historical novels that once dominated the literature field. *Bailuyuan* is sometimes assigned to this category but as we analyzed before, but Chen’s view of literature and history is a complicated mixture that cannot be simply defined as new or old.

On a superficial level, *Bailuyuan* indeed has a lot of features that are common among other new historical novels, such as the explicit and detailed depictions of sex, violence, death, and the darkness of humanity.<sup>46</sup> However, unlike many other works that dwell in this kind of revelation or even celebrate it, *Bailuyuan* tends to provide stable values and which it believes may act as remedies or countermeasures. Sex is natural and should be enjoyed, but only within the proper moral boundaries. Violence and chaos caused by war and social movements are deemed as a disturbance to normal social life and will be overcome by new orders sooner or later. The evil and the immoral might gain the upper hand by random chance, but they will eventually make their own demise, and fate still favors upright human beings. Although the narrator does not make judgments or comments, the inclination is still manifested by the narrative itself and it becomes clear that not all characters and deeds are equal. Some are worth praising, while others worth condemning. You could feel that there is a mysterious but palpable higher being watching over White Deer Plain, rewarding those who follow its will and punishing those who defy it.

Another important feature of *Bailuyuan* that is often brought up is its narrative structure. More specifically, the nonlinear narration breaks the consistency of time and space and expands the possibility of storytelling. The main plotline still follows the historical order, but the interposed

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<sup>45</sup> See my detailed discussion on this term in the first chapter of this thesis. Here it refers to novels deviate from the orthodox ideology established in the revolutionary era when it comes to the historical interpretation.

<sup>46</sup> Zhou Qiong 周琼, “90 niandai yilai xinlishi xiaoshuo de xushi yanjiu” 90年代以来新历史小说的叙事研究, Master’s thesis, (Nanjing Normal University, 2013), 7-20.

narration tends to lead to the intertwining of events of future and past. The first line of the novel: “Looking back, Bai Jiaxuan was proud that he has had seven wives in his life”<sup>47</sup> is a clear homage to the famous opening of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.<sup>48</sup> There the present, the future, and the past are cleverly intertwined, not only connected in any obvious linear way. Jumping forwards to a future point is another strategy throughout the novel. The story officially ends with the establishment of the PRC, but when explaining the life and posthumous events of certain characters such as Bai Ling and Mr. Zhu, the narrative will temporarily extend to a period that is not included in the main plotline. Similarly, when Mr. Zhu’s attempt to forbid the planting of opium poppy fails, the narrator continues to talk about Edgar Snow’s visit to China along with his comment on the poppy fields.<sup>49</sup> The best example is how Bai Ling’s story is handled in chapter thirteen. Bai Jiaxuan keeps his composure as usual when Bai Xiaowen talks about chaotic social events. The narrative then moves back to review a smaller “chaotic event” that happened within the Bai family not long ago, namely the running away of Bai Ling and her refusal of an arranged marriage. After that, Bai Jiaxuan claimed that he would forever sever Bai Ling’s relationship with the family. We then get to see the scene in which Bai Jiaxuan is informed of Bai Ling’s sacrifice during the Yan’an Zhengfeng Yundong. The story then goes back to the moment when Bai Jiaxuan receives the message from Bai Xiaowen.<sup>50</sup> The above plotline seamlessly flows from the present to the past, then the future, and eventually back to the present. The interposed narrative creates the depth of

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<sup>47</sup> Chen Zhongshi 陈忠实, *Bailuyuan* 白鹿原, 1.

<sup>48</sup> “Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.” Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (New York: Avon Books, 1970), 8.

<sup>49</sup> The American Journalist, Edgar Snow (1905-1972), lived in China 1933-1941, visited the country frequently and wrote extensively about it. His most famous work is *Red Star over China* (1936) and in this work he notes that the farmers of Shaanxi are forced to grow opium poppies leading to a shortage of essential food grains, millet, wheat and maize (308).

<sup>50</sup> Chen Zhongshi 陈忠实, *Bailuyuan* 白鹿原, 171-175.



time that expands the dimension of the current time frame.

However, the unusual narrative structure and its rearrangement of time is more like the author's experiment with new literary techniques and does not transform into an innovative perspective of history. After all, the potential of the flexible time structure still has to be suppressed by the belief in stable historical order, just like the fact that all the chaos and turbulence are seen by the protagonists as a disruption of the social norm instead of an opportunity that could provide creative energy for the new epoch. The inner dilemma of the novel is this: The modernist organization and its value are diminished to a destructive point that does not know when to stop; on the other hand, the traditional culture and beliefs treasured by the narrator stagnate between the past and the present and are unable to point out any new direction. The official grand narrative has been exiled from the book and the author is incapable of coming up with a new one. He also realizes that there is no need for a replacement. But what distinguishes him from other postmodern writers is that he cannot accept a historical narration without a meaning or a concrete value system. Thus, we have characters like Bai Jiaxuan and Mr. Zhu who are mostly absent in other new historical novels. Chen Zhongshi's ambition is not just about deconstructing the meaning of history, he also wanted to rebuild it. *Bailuyuan* with all of its complexity and contradictions can be seen as a monument of his failed attempt.

The contradictory nature of *Bailuyuan* might also contribute to its controversial reception since its publication. As mentioned before, the novel needed to be revised to be qualified to receive the Mao Dun Literature Award.<sup>51</sup> But that is not uncommon in a time when official literary awards were more orthodox in their selection criteria and does not negatively reflect upon the work. What

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<sup>51</sup> Wu Xiuming 吴秀明 and Zhang Tao 章涛, "On the Self-regulation and Compromise Mechanism of Chinese Contemporary Literature" 获奖修订版生成与当代主流文学话语的规范/妥协机制, *Qinghua daxue xuebao* 清华大学学报, no. 1 (2015): 78-89.

is more intriguing is the debate about its “epic character” or whether it is on the level of *shishi*. Many critics agreed that this novel could be considered *shishi* in the sense of a significant literary masterpiece. For example, in a symposium on *Bailuyuan* the same year of its publication, it was celebrated as a significant literary product of Shaanxi writers and as a spiritual successor to Liu Qing’s *Chuangyeshi*. Its grand scale, imposing manner, and in-depth representation of history have also been praised.<sup>52</sup> However, some critics come up with opposite opinions, stating that Chen Zhongshi might have lost his own strength by adapting the new style and the novel is organized by an abstract underlying preconceived concept instead of the flow of real-life energy.<sup>53</sup> The aim of this project is not to decide the “correct” side of these discussions, but to examine the intentions when the term *shishi* is used and the different connotations assigned to it. If we stick to the classic meaning of *shishi* during the revolutionary era then *Bailuyuan* certainly does not belong to the category since it abandons the official historical narrative that centered upon the ideology of revolution and its inevitable victory. It is after all the writing of the secret history among the people.<sup>54</sup> Then the question is why would *shishi* still maintain its popularity in the literary field in a post-revolutionary era? It will not be difficult to assume that the term is now free from the constraint of the old ideology but it keeps its privilege as an aesthetic model. The ideal literature might have changed its standard, but the desire for *shishi*, something magnificent and monumental, remains.

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<sup>52</sup> Wang Jucai 王巨才, “Yibu keyi chengzhiwei shishi de dazuo ping” 一部可以称之为史诗的大作品, *Xiaoshuo pinglun* 小说评论, no. 10 (1993): 14-20.

<sup>53</sup> Zhu Wei 朱伟, “*Bailuyuan shishi de kongdong*” 《白鹿原》: 史诗的空洞, *Wenyi zhengming* 文艺争鸣, no. 12 (1993): 63-65.

<sup>54</sup> Wang Yonglei 王永磊, “The Evolution from ‘Epic Novel’ to ‘Secret History Novel’” 从“史诗”到“秘史,” Master’s thesis, (Guangxi Teacher’s Education University, 2013), 19-33.

What should be done next is to analyze the connotations related to this term when used by different critics and compare them with the literary text itself to test the compatibility. For those who confirm its *shishi* quality, the criterion is reasonably explained:

It uses the life experience of three generations of the Bai and Lu family on the White Deer Plain as its main plotline, reflecting the survival pursuit and cultural spirit that existed within Guanzhong 关中 farmers,<sup>55</sup> illustrating the modern historical development demonstrated by people's life path and inner activities, along with its numerous echoes of different sizes. It contains multiple historical meanings of family and nation in a polyphonic form, possessing the rich and deep quality of *shishi*, a rare example among contemporary novels.<sup>56</sup>

And from a formalist perspective, *Bailuyuan* indeed suits these descriptions. It is grand enough with its coverage of history and all the related events and characters. But for the dissident critics, the more important matter is how the history is depicted and what is the meaning delivered by such depiction. Chen Zhongshi admitted that his motivation is to discover and understand the past by utilizing the framework of cultural psychological structures and his characters are created with its guidance.<sup>57</sup> This could give his narrative a strong sense of representativeness, but the abstract concepts, such as the traditional ethos or zeitgeist, might have too prominent a presence as well. "For such a structure, Chen Zhongshi has to accept the reality that has become historical reality, accept symbols that have become symbols, the philosophy that has become philosophy ... everything has already been written by others."<sup>58</sup> Chen wished to find the sentence that belongs to him, but the irony is that he had to rely on existing theories and cultural resources to represent an imagined past that he did not have first-hand experience. Chen's dilemma might remind us of

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<sup>55</sup> That is, farmers on the Guanzhong Plain which includes the central part of Shaanxi Province and the northwestern tip of Henan Province.

<sup>56</sup> Bai Ye 白烨, "Shizhi yiyun shishi fengge ping Chen Zhongshi de changpian xiaoshuo *Bailuyuan*" 史志意蕴 • 史诗风格: 评陈忠实的长篇小说《白鹿原》, *Dangdai zuojia pinglun* 当代作家评论, no. 8 (1993): 4.

<sup>57</sup> Chen Zhongshi 陈忠实, *Xunzhao shuyu ziji de juzi* 寻找属于自己的句子 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2009), 37-38.

<sup>58</sup> Zhu Wei 朱伟, "*Bailuyuan* shishi de kongdong" 《白鹿原》: 史诗的空洞, *Wenyi zhengming* 文艺争鸣, no. 12 (1993): 64.

Marx's comment on the different modes of literary creation: "You would then have been automatically compelled to write more in *Shakespeare's* manner, , whereas I regard as your gravest shortcoming the fact that à la *Schiller*, you transform individuals into mere mouthpieces of the spirit of the times."<sup>59</sup> But the real situation is more complicated since according to the analysis just given, the central ideas of *Bailuyuan* are not the true spirit of that past. It is reconstructed by the author, combining both traditional culture and modern values while at the same time refusing to truly commit to either sides. Thus, if one holds the belief that *shishi* needs to have a coherent world view or self-explanatory historical philosophy, then *Bailuyuan* simply would not qualify due to its conflicted nature.

"The operation of a myth—both its construction from actual conflicts and its impact on audiences—always has to do with the time in which the myth is told, not with the time that it tells of."<sup>60</sup> The same could be said about the reception of *Bailuyuan*. For example, Ding Fan 丁帆 argued that the novel's attempt at creating *shishi* is in vain considering the inevitable coming of the postmodern society.<sup>61</sup> This argument is based on the theory that the grand narrative will collapse and be replaced by multiple smaller ones in the age of postmodernity,<sup>62</sup> which itself might also be considered as a grand narrative and not the faithful reflection of the complex reality. Decades later, after the death of Chen Zhongshi, Ding wrote a new essay to revise that conclusion, stating that *Bailuyuan* is worthy of being *shishi* and he could see its true value after overcoming

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<sup>59</sup> Karl Marx, "Marx to Ferdinand Lassalle in Berlin" (April 19, 1859), Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. *Selected Correspondence*, 110.

<sup>60</sup> Brian Henderson, "'The Searchers': An American Dilemma," *Film Quarterly*, no. 2 (winter, 1980-1981): 12.

<sup>61</sup> Ding Fan 丁帆, "Xiangtu xiaoshuo de duoyuan yu wuxu geju" 乡土小说的多元与无序格局, *Wenxue Pinglun* 文学评论, no. 3 (1994): 81-87.

<sup>62</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv–xxv.

the previous prejudice.<sup>63</sup> The content of the novel does not change over the years, what has changed are the scholar's perspectives and the cultural atmospheres in society, thus coloring the reception history. Ding's justification of the book's *shishi* characters includes an unbiased viewpoint and the principle of value freedom of narrating history as well as the consciousness of humanity that transcends ideology dispute.<sup>64</sup> According to the analysis above, we could see that these claims are not entirely accurate since the author has clearly demonstrated his preference and ideal through narratives and his characters are not the product of the belief in universal humanity but rather of cultural psychological formations bound by specific ideologies. But the aim here is not to oppose the reevaluation of *Bailuyuan*, because *shishi* or not, it is indeed a book with a long-lasting vitality and it has already secured its position among contemporary classics.<sup>65</sup> Its potential to evoke heated discussion and the possibility of being repeatedly interpreted from various perspectives throughout different times are part of its charm. Fredric Jameson's theory of national allegory<sup>66</sup> might not apply to all kinds of third-world literature, but it is especially suitable for *Bailuyuan* since it can not only be interpreted as a national allegory but is intentionally written as one. The moral lessons within the story might be lost, rejected, or misunderstood through interpretation, but as long as the challenge and predicament it tries to address persist (they very much are since the modernization of China is still in progress), it will always have attention from avid readers and critics who attempt to bring it new life.

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<sup>63</sup> Ding Fan 丁帆, "Bailuyuan pinglun de ziwo pipan yu xiuzheng" 《白鹿原》评论的自我批判与修正, *Wenyi zhengming* 文艺争鸣, no. 3 (2018): 6-7.

<sup>64</sup> Ding Fan 丁帆, "Bailuyuan," 10.

<sup>65</sup> The novel was made into a film in 2011 directed by Wang Quan'an 王全安 (born 1965), and made into a TV series which ran for 77 episodes in 2017 although it was first announced as comprising 85 episodes. The show was suspended after the airing of episode 1 in April 16, but it returned to screens on May 11.

<sup>66</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text*, no. 15 (autumn, 1986): 65-88.

It is difficult to concisely capture the essence of this complex literary endeavor. Terms such as “secret history” or “post-revolutionary *shishi*,”<sup>67</sup> although viable, still feel unsatisfying and more like a compromise. After all, categorizing something with the clearly defined concept is a betrayal of its intricate nature, making it tame and easy to digest, while experiencing and thinking about *Bailuyuan* is anything but. When talking about the conception of the novel, Chen Zhongshi mentioned that “my Bai Jiaxuan, Mr. Zhu, Lu Zilin, Tian Xiao’e, Heiwa, Bai Xiaowen, and other people live on this land. They have ups and downs, experience joy as well as immense pain. They stand up, moving swiftly then take another tumble ...”<sup>68</sup> This could also be seen as a vivid description of his struggle during the writing process: so many contradictory ideas and emotions are introduced that they are impossible to reconcile, all merging into the final product, filled with hope, anxiety, repentance, sympathy, and so much more that are too heavy of a burden for one person or one book to bear. When Bai Jiaxuan stands on the White Deer Plain at the end of the novel, it would not be unsuitable for him to utter such a line with the deepest feeling: “das ist ein zu weites Feld.”<sup>69</sup>

### 3.2 The Undying Struggle for Life

Before receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature, Mo Yan was already one of the most highly-esteemed writers in China. But despite creating numerous remarkable works, including several great novels since the 1980s, he did not win the Mao Dun Literature Prize until 2011 for his novel

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<sup>67</sup> Xu Gang 徐刚, “Hougeming de shishi *Bailuyuan* lun” 后革命的史诗: 《白鹿原》论, *Dangdai zuojia pinglun* 当代作家评论, no. 1 (2017): 56-64.

<sup>68</sup> Chen Zhongshi 陈忠实, *Xunzhao shuyu ziji de juzi* 寻找属于自己的句子, 17.

<sup>69</sup> Theodor Fontane, *Effi Briest* (Berlin: F. Fontane, 1895), 520, the last words of the novel. This sentence which occurs in various forms eight times in the book has been associated widely not only with Fontane and his hint that reality is more complex than can be told, but also with so-called Realism and Naturalism movements that are being negotiated and the borders of which are being challenged here.

*Wa* 蛙 (Frog) (2008). As the highest honor for Chinese novelists, the Mao Dun Prize is also known for its serious standard and favors works with a more traditional or realistic style. It is not unusual that certain books with content against the official ideology, such as *Bailuyuan* in the last part<sup>70</sup> need to be revised to receive it. In recent years, the Mao Dun Prize has begun to accept a more diverse group of potential recipients to become more inclusive. And Mo Yan, a writer who tends to operate outside the orthodox literary field with his focus on social and historical issues and the dark side of humanity, was finally given his belated acknowledgment.

An important feature of the Mao Dun Prize is that it is known for its preference for works with characteristics of *shishi* 史诗,<sup>71</sup> which is not so hard to conceive of, since as an aesthetic model derived from epic, it has a natural affinity for large scale literary creations with sufficient depth and expressive force. A literary prize selecting the most outstanding novels, many of which go on to become part of the modern canon, understandably may want to use *shishi* as a reference when reviewing the nominations. One thing we should be aware of is that the connotations of *shishi* are not static and can be transformed over time. Novels such as *Baowei Yan'an* 保卫延安 and *Chuangye shi* were praised as *shishi* during the revolutionary era but now even the most conservative writers are not able to stick to that formula in a post-revolutionary epoch. But the shifting of ideology should not necessarily remove other features from the equation and there are still stable principles that are unfazed by the changes. For example, *Pingfan de shijie* and *Bailuyuan* are quite different works from style to the motif, but they still share something in

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<sup>70</sup> Wu Xiuming 吴秀明 and Zhang Tao 章涛, “On the Self-regulation and Compromise Mechanism of Chinese Contemporary Literature” 获奖修订版生成与当代主流文学话语的规范/妥协机制, *Qinghua daxue xuebao* 清华大学学报, no. 1 (2015): 78-89.

<sup>71</sup> Xu Qichao 徐其超 and Wang Lu 王璐, “Chaoyue yu chaju zonglun Mao Dun wenxuejiang huojia zuopin de shishixing” 超越与差距: 纵论茅盾文学奖获奖作品的史诗性, *Xinan minzu daxue xuebao* 西南民族大学学报, no. 2 (2006): 112-120.

common: the panoramic representation of the time they try to depict. There needs to be enough exciting social and historical events combined with personal conflicts along with the portrait of a wide range of other minor characters. These features, as some scholars point out, could constrain an author's creative freedom, and lead their writing astray once become formulaic.<sup>72</sup> But on the other hand, many truly great works indeed meet those standards and it is more a matter of whether or not a writer is able to handle these complicated themes. For someone with ambition but lacking the capability, their obsession with creating *shishi* like works might end up in a sub-par imitation, but it could also contribute to something monumental in the hand of talented authors.

Mao Yan certainly belongs to the latter and some of his novels are indeed often compared with *shishi* by scholars and critics.<sup>73</sup> But if so, why would he not be accepted by the Mao Dun Prize for so long? One possible explanation is, those standards for *shishi* mentioned above are not purely formalist. Despite departing from the revolutionary ideology, the Mao Dun Prize still upholds certain values and for a proper recipient, it is not just about the topic you choose but also how you write about it. Mo Yan's historical novels, especially *Feng ru fei tun* 丰乳肥臀 (Big Breasts and Wide Hips) have even a grander scale than *Bailuyuan*, depicting events from the anti-Japanese war to the time after the reforms and the opening-up. It contains more than enough social conflicts and personal struggles to be considered as a *shishi* style book, but it also stirred up great controversy due to its theme, historical view, and narrative features, leading to its ambivalent relationship with the orthodox literary critics.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Wang Binbin 王彬彬, "Mao Dun Jiang shishi qingjie de yinhun busan" 茅盾奖: 史诗情结的阴魂不散, *Zhongshan* 钟山, no.2 (2001), <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/89546.html>.

<sup>73</sup> Guan Xiaoxiao 管笑笑, *Mo Yan xiaoshuo wenti yanjiu* 莫言小说文体研究 (Beijing: Beijing shifan daxue chubanshe, 2016), 112.

<sup>74</sup> This project will focus more on the aesthetic and social-cultural values and influences of this novel instead of its reception history. For more information on this matter, see Feng Wen 冯文, "A Research on the Reception History of *Feng ru fei tun*" 《丰乳肥臀》的接受史研究, Master's thesis, (Shandong University, 2019).



The narrator or the viewpoint is a crucial part of understanding the inner logic and inclination of historical novels. In *Bailuyuan*, the conflicts between the two major parties are deemed as the cause of violence and suffering, but the author still partially recognized the necessity of history. Furthermore, Bai Jiaxuan and Mr. Zhu conspicuously serve as conduits of representing certain values as a part of a bigger tradition that will help the survival of people and bring order to the chaotic reality. On the other hand, in *Feng ru fei tun*, such glorious and outstanding figures are absent, which means there is no higher ideology to organize the narrative and bring consolation. But it does not mean the novel's plot or structure is loose and disorderly. For the most part, *Feng ru fei tun* has a quite traditional plotline that follows the normal flow of time. What is missing is the constructive narrator who correctly assigns to all these events their relative significance, a significance that is determined by the historical content of economics and politics. Instead, the individual experiences and the allegorical fate of humanity that is represented by such experience have instead taken a prominent role in the narrative. In *Bailuyuan*, despite all the turbulence, the narrator still tries to rationalize the progress of history and its ridiculousness is often outshined by the idealized light emitted from the cultural tradition. On the contrary, in *Feng ru fei tun* the absurdity is not mitigated but ruthlessly exposed to the readers. Mo Yan has made a clear statement on his writing philosophy regarding this matter:

While depicting the tragedy of history, I also discovered its absurdity and allegorical nature. Sacred matters about life and death become a running joke when time changes. Gone are the days when we could be certain about who is on the right side in a conflict. If a writer has paid too much attention to the research of the history of economics and politics, his fictional writing will go astray. A writer should always care about the fate and the experience of human beings as well as the alienation of human feeling and the loss of human reason in a turbulent society. A novelist is not responsible for and is unable to represent history, the so-called historical events are just the products of novelists' effort at turning history into allegory and prophecy. Historians make thoughts based on historical events while novelists use their thoughts to choose and transform historical events. If there is no

such event, they will create one. Comparing the history in the fictional narrative with the real one is like Don Quixote fighting the windmill.<sup>75</sup>

Mo Yan is highly aware of the fictional nature of novels and embraces it to release its full potential. His view of the nature of fiction might seem normal in today's literary theory framework, but in the 1990s within a literary tradition deeply influenced by realism and its reflecting function, it was a rather bold and refreshing claim. "What can be considered as 'realistic' is what is believable. Far from being a mere replica in a mirror, the fictional reality is only validated by the readers' acceptance of artistic illusion."<sup>76</sup> The real-world incidents could sometimes be stranger and more alien than the wildest imagination of writers and sometimes the warmest spot in a cruel world might be the carefully cultivated illusion. And that might be why "hallucinatory realism"<sup>77</sup> is the term picked by the Nobel Prize committee when describing Mo Yan's literary style.

Regardless of what term we use, the complexity of Mo Yan's writing cannot be exhausted with a few abstract concepts and it is necessary to examine the text itself. One of the important traits of *Feng ru fei tun* is its unique narrative perspective, a large part of the story is told through the viewpoint of the protagonist Shangguan Jintong 上官金童. Jintong is not a normal child, he is obsessed with her mother's breasts and cannot quit drinking her milk even when he becomes an adolescent. His compulsive preoccupation with female breasts accompanies him throughout his life and leads to all kinds of farce and tragedy. As a man who never truly grows up and has an unusual fetish, Jintong is granted the right of saying things that are deemed as insane by ordinary people. We often get to see him expressing unbridled love for the breasts: "Millions and billions

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<sup>75</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, "Xiudingben houji" 修订本后记 in *Feng ru fei tun* 丰乳肥臀 (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 2012), 3.

<sup>76</sup> Jean-Pierre Durix, *Mimesis, Genres and Post-Colonial Discourse: Deconstructing Magic Realism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 45.

<sup>77</sup> Peter Englund, "The Nobel Prize in Literature 2012," Nobelprize, November 28, 2021, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2012/summary/>.

of stars swirled through the sky, round and round to form gigantic breasts: breasts on Sirius, the Dog Star; breasts on the Big Dipper; breasts on Orion the Hunter; breasts on Vega, the Girl Weaver; breasts on Altair, the Cowherd; breasts on Chang'e, the Beauty in the Moon, Mother's breasts ..."<sup>78</sup> On the other hand, his child-like innocence and outspokenness add to the credibility of his storytelling, no matter how absurd the situation may seem. Mo Yan has also mentioned this strategy of narrative in one of his interviews: "Once a narrative style is established, it will become convincing ... no matter how far from the reality the story is, readers will be interested in it ... The identity of the narrator is set and you already acknowledged it ... what matters is this person is telling a story to us and we will get enjoyment from it."<sup>79</sup> As a narrator, Shangguan Jintong might remind us of Oskar from *Die Blechtrommel*, a person who refuses to grow up, and that novel is also based on his narration. However, Oskar possesses a rather different nature as he has an adult's capacity for thought and perception but is trapped in a three-year-old child's body (as his conscious choice);<sup>80</sup> while Jintong is more of the opposite and ends up being an adult with the mentality of a child. Oskar is also more self-aware when telling his life story and deliberately weakens the illusionary effect of the fiction, "the self-reflectiveness thus functions as little pin-pricks puncturing the balloon of illusion at the same time as it keeps the story and the narrator in a perpetual process of self-correction."<sup>81</sup> Jintong's narrative style is more traditional and his immature mind does not allow him much self-reflection. The story would sometimes switch between first-person and third-person perspectives when it comes to events involving him, but it is more of an attempt to add to the diversity of narration instead of questioning its legitimacy.

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<sup>78</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, trans. Howard Goldblatt (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2004), 155; *Feng ru fei tun* 丰乳肥臀 (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 2012), 110.

<sup>79</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, *Mo Yan duihua xinlu* 莫言对话新录 (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 2010), 320.

<sup>80</sup> Günter Grass, *Die Blechtrommel* (Hamburg: Fischer, 1964), 27.

<sup>81</sup> Soren Frank, "The Migrant Vision in Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum*," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, no. 2 (2015): 169.

A more appropriate literary brother for Shangguan Jintong would be Jia Baoyu 贾宝玉 from *Honglou meng* 红楼梦 (*Dream of the Red Chamber*). Similar to Jintong, Jia Baoyu is sensitive and talented in artistic skills, but is considered useless according to the secular standards. He adores girls, stating that they are made of water and are refreshing (while males are repulsive to him).<sup>82</sup> His solicitude and cherishing attitude towards the girls in the Daguan Garden 大观园 (Grand View Garden) also remind us of Jintong's deep respect and appreciation for breasts. Jia Baoyu is portrayed as an attendant who reveres and protects flowers (a metaphor for girls) and Jintong also claims to be an admirer and expert of taking care of breasts: "I must treasure them, conserve and protect them, treat them with the care due to the exquisite containers they were."<sup>83</sup> "No person on earth understands, loves, or knows how to protect breasts the way I do."<sup>84</sup> However, the difference between Jintong and Baoyu is also conspicuous. Despite all his assertions, Jintong is not a competent protector of breasts as he can barely defend himself, let alone others. Unlike Baoyu who affirmatively leaves the secular world behind with no regret or nostalgia after fulfilling his responsibility to his family, Jintong never truly stands up for himself regardless of the hardships he has been through. He simply endures and lives, ignorantly and cowardly. Jintong never moves away from the "oral stage"<sup>85</sup> and his fixation for breasts eventually turns into a perverted desire. Jia Baoyu's admiration for female figures, although naïve, is a sincere and beautiful human emotion. Even Oskar with his child-like body is able to engage in sexual intercourse and becomes a father within the span of the book. But Jintong just lacks the capacity to love like an independent mature person and his only successful sex experience in the novel is

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<sup>82</sup> Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 and Gao E 高鹗, *Honglou meng* 红楼梦 vol.1 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2005), 28.

<sup>83</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, *Big Breasts*, 119; *Feng ru fei tun* 丰乳肥臀, 81.

<sup>84</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, *Big Breasts*, 233; *Feng ru fei tun* 丰乳肥臀, 179.

<sup>85</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie* (Leipzig : Franz Deuticke, 1922), 15.

with a dead body. Mo Yan admitted that the character of Shangguan is symbolic and agreed with other critics' comments that many Chinese people might have a Jintong living in their hearts. "Just like most people could discover an A Q deep in their souls, could most people also discover a Shangguan Jintong in their souls? Yes, I found the ugliness within the human soul, but I also found the beautiful feeling within it. The obsession with breasts is a perversion, but perversion might be the extreme form of beauty in another perspective."<sup>86</sup> When the author has a strong intention or wishes to convey certain ideas through a character, the result might not be very natural or convincing. Just like Bai Jiaxuan is the personification of *xiangyue* and the traditional culture, Jintong's identity is mostly defined by his unnatural obsession with breasts. He becomes an exaggerated symbol of cowardice, the overreliance on the mother, and the evasion of responsibility that some see as the failings of the Chinese male. More often than not, his actions do not feel like coming from his will but are being forced on him by the author.

It might be ironic since Shangguan Jintong is the major protagonist who lives through the entire book, but the narrative tends to be more compelling and attractive when the story is not centered around him. As the smallest child and the only son of his mother, he has eight sisters and their stories are the real highlight of the novel.<sup>87</sup> In contrast to *Bailuyuan* in which male characters play the most significant roles whereas the females tend to be silent and featureless, *Feng ru fei tun* can be seen as an anthem to female figures. But it does not mean that the novel is feminist by nature since the underlying male perspective is still very prominent. The central image of the novel,

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<sup>86</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, "Xiudingben houji" 修订本后记 in *Feng ru fei tun* 丰乳肥臀 (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 2012), 3.

<sup>87</sup> Their names are: Laidi 来弟 (Younger Brother Coming), Zhaodi 招弟 (Calling for a Younger Brother), Lingdi 领弟 (Leading the Way for a Younger Brother), Xiangdi 想弟 (Missing a Younger Brother), Pandi 盼弟 (Hoping for a Younger Brother), Niandi 念弟 (Thinking about a Younger Brother), and Qiudi 求弟 (Begging for a Younger Brother). When a younger brother does arrive, he is named Jintong 金童 (Golden Boy).

the female breast, is always under the avid male gaze and Jintong's perverted desire is justified by his immature character and he can dwell in his shameless fantasy of the female body without being blamed as an offender. The absence of a female perspective and female narrator is the biggest drawback to the story. Compared with Jintong's abundant and sometimes impudent narration, his mother Shangguan Lushi 上官鲁氏 is ignored and never given the opportunity to speak in her own voice. "For the author, she is a great mother figure. But when faced with her ill-fated family, she rarely gets the power to speak. The mother is always in a position of being spoken of, always quietly waiting for the praise from others."<sup>88</sup> The same could also be said about all her daughters, who bravely fight for their dreams, love, and freedom before being crushed by fate and time.

There is a palpable fissure between the narrator Shangguan Jintong and the life of his female family members. Mo Yan might have also realized that Jintong's timid character and his feeble mentality cannot do his mother and sisters justice. Thus, the novel is deliberately constructed in a frame structure or a time loop. It begins with the scene in which the mother gives birth to Jintong and at the end of the book, the narrative goes back through time to trace the history of the conception of all the sisters. Another important character, Pastor Malory, a Swedish missionary, and the father of Jintong only shows up during these two parts. The multiracial background of Jintong opens space for the various possibility of interpretation but is otherwise not emphasized or explored enough within the story to warrant too much attention. Pastor Malory is more of a symbol of the religious elements to add some sacred aura to the narrative of love and birth. Compared with other parts of the novel where things tend to get quite gloomy and desperate, the content involves Malory and the church is the rare occasion where the author attempts to idealize

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<sup>88</sup> Li Yang 李阳, "Mother's Epic in the Perspective of Gender" 性别视域下的母亲史诗, *Journal of Hainan Tropical Ocean University*, no. 4 (August, 2019): 97.

or romanticize the experience. “From where he lay quietly on the brick-and-tamped-earth sleeping platform, his *kang*, Pastor Malory saw a bright red beam of light shining down on the Virgin Mary’s pink breast and on the pudgy face of the bare-bottomed Blessed Infant in her arms.”<sup>89</sup> These first lines of the novel are also highly symbolic as we must assume that Malory must have seen the image of his lover from the portrait of the Virgin Mary. And when the final missing puzzle reveals itself in the last chapter when Mother comes to seek salvation from the church and consequently starts her relationship with Pastor Malory, the story comes full circle:

Basking in the approving words and gentle fondling of Pastor Malory, mother felt as light as goose down floating in the deep blue skies of Northeast Gaomi<sup>90</sup> and in Pastor Malory’s blue eyes, as the subtle perfume of red and white locust blossoms flowed over her like waves.<sup>91</sup> When Pastor Malory’s refreshing sperm shot into Mother’s womb like arrows, Mother’s eyes were filled with grateful tears. This pair of scarred lovers shouted with complicated feelings accompanied by the suffocating scent of locust blossoms:  
Immanuel! Immanuel ...  
Hallelujah! Hallelujah ...  
Amen! Amen.  
A ...men...<sup>92</sup>

This might be the most gentle and lovely moment in the novel and serves as a consolatory ending to Mother’s story. Sadly, it also creates a deceiving hallucination since happiness is like a transient shooting star in Mother’s life and it is filled with suffering most of the time. Shangguan Jintong’s love is just reliance and obsession, it cannot bring consolation and heartening power to Mother and all his sisters. Between the record of Jintong’s mental illness and the documentation of the female characters’ blood and tears, the light of hope can barely be seen. The religious belief also

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<sup>89</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, *Big Breasts*, 1; *Feng ru fei tun* 丰乳肥臀, 5. Note that *Feng ru fei tun* could also be translated as “Big Breasts and Plump Buttocks.”

<sup>90</sup> Gaomi 高密市 in eastern Shandong Province, is Mo Yan’s home district.

<sup>91</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, *Big Breasts*, 75; *Feng ru fei tun* 丰乳肥臀, 520.

<sup>92</sup> For some unknown reason the English version of the novel has relocated the ending of the original Chinese version to the second chapter and omits several lines. The part starting with “when Pastor ...” is translated by myself. Mo Yan 莫言, *Feng ru fei tun* 丰乳肥臀, 521.

cannot truly help the protagonists since a miracle never manifest itself when they pray to the Chinese “Heaven” or to the Western “Lord.” Mo Yan mentioned that he went to the church twice during the writing of the book. “I am not a Christian but I am concerned about the future of humanity and I hope my soul can be redeemed. I respect those who have beliefs and I despise those who force their beliefs on others ... Everyone is seeking their God. Someone’s God is in the heaven and others’ in their hearts.”<sup>93</sup> Ironically, the depiction of the religious experience in the novel also feels “forced” to some extent. It reflects the author’s feeling of powerlessness when faced with the atrocity and brutality he extensively portrayed in his work. Instead of coming up with a targeted/constructive answer or forming a deep meaning with the strength of the literary narrative itself, the author opts to borrow the existing idea and uses its contrived image as a placebo. The brief enjoyment of the moment described above cannot disguise the wicked journey the tormented characters need to go through and below the fainting light of redemption is an immense darkness. The existence of religion in the story does not provide a stable underlying value system and only serves as a superficial decoration on an otherwise grim picture.

The above criticism is not to deny Mo Yan’s effort of establishing values in his writing and such an attempt is highly commendable and distinguishes him from other avant-garde writers. “Avant-garde fiction, to a certain extent, is an uncovering or rereading of the heterogeneities expelled toward the margins, or suppressed under the surface, of the paradigmatic history of modern Chinese fiction.”<sup>94</sup> Mo Yan suits this criterion and as demonstrated before, the official paradigm of history is dissolved within his narrative. In *Bailuyuan*, although the narrator criticizes the conflict between the two major parties, the necessity of the war and the authority of the winner

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<sup>93</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, “Xiudingben houji” 修订本后记 in *Feng ru fei tun* 丰乳肥臀 (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 2012), 3.

<sup>94</sup> Yang Xiaobin 杨小滨, *The Chinese Postmodern: Trauma and Irony in Chinese Avant-garde Fiction* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 23.



is still reluctantly being acknowledged. The same conflict in Mo Yan's writing is completely overshadowed by violence and chaos with no room for any justification, as can be seen from the following narrative depicting the war between KMT and CCP:

There was so much happening that day that I'd have had to grow ten pairs of eyes to see it all and ten mouths to tell it. Helmeted soldiers charged in waves, the dead piling up like a wall; and still they couldn't break through. Then they brought over flamethrowers that spurted death and crystalized the sand on the ridge. And more airships came, dropping great flatcakes and meat-filled buns, as well as bundles of colorful paper money. Exhausted by nightfall, both sides stopped to rest, but only for a short while, before the battle recommenced, so heated that sky and earth turned red, the frozen ground softened, and wild rabbits died in droves, their lives ending not by weapons but from fright.

The rifle fire and artillery barrages were unending; flares lit up the sky so brilliantly we could barely open our eyes.<sup>95</sup>

There is no good and evil, no heroes and villains in this warfare. In fact, the two sides are indistinguishable and the only things we could feel are the irrational fear and terror incited by their insane activities. If we compare this scene with the escape sequence in *Hongyan* 红岩 (1961), the difference in theme and tone becomes evident. In the earlier novel, the protagonists are also faced with the deadly threat of flamethrowers. But instead of succumbing to fear, they march towards enemies with steel-like spirit and unwavering belief in victory. They are also surrounded by the bodies of their comrades and bathed in their own blood. What they see from the fire and blood is not despair, but the inspiring and stimulating red, the color of revolution and ideal. They shout "Long live the Chinese Communist Party!" with the most steadfast will and sincerity.<sup>96</sup> The narrator in Mo Yan's story does possess this kind of certainty and is just a witness to the atrocity, trying to survive.

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<sup>95</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, *Big Breasts*, 319-320; *Feng ru fei tun* 丰乳肥臀, 255.

<sup>96</sup> Luo Guangbin 罗广斌 and Yang Yiyan 杨益言, *Hongyan* 红岩 (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 2012), chap. 29, <http://quanben-xiaoshuo.com/n/hongyan/29.html>.

However, it does mean that deconstructing the stable historical subjectivity is the only goal of Mo Yan's writing. If the traditional critical realist like Lu Xun 鲁迅 "ultimately establishes another voice (through the narrator) that formulates a transcendental subject elevated from all the imperfect, 'quasi-modern' historical roles,"<sup>97</sup> then the narrator in Mo Yan's works indeed lacks this elevated status. But this difference will not sever the connection between Mo Yan and Lu Xun due to their common interest in social criticism. Mo Yan has stated that people "mostly focus on the unorthodox nature of the languages in my fiction, of its form and art style. They pay less attention to the concern for reality and the political criticism in my fiction."<sup>98</sup> This phenomenon is understandable since the more serious aspect of Mo Yan's writing is usually overshadowed by its absurdly extravagant style and comical play of words, an ironic contrast to his pen name (*moyan* 莫言 means "do not speak" in mandarin) and these maybe the most consistent features of his work throughout his career. This fascinating literary mode also reminds us of Bakhtin's analysis of "carnival," the unique style that attempts to subvert and liberate the assumptions of the dominant style or atmosphere through humor and chaos.<sup>99</sup> Mo Yan mentioned that he did not read Rabelais' books and Bakhtin's study on him until he had already established his style. But he felt that Bakhtin's theory strongly resonated with his own experience, regretting not having seen it sooner.<sup>100</sup> Thus, we could say that Mo Yan created the Chinese literary carnival without knowing the origin of the term. In *Feng ru fei tun*, this unbridled imagination and desire for description are most prominent in the paragraph involving Shangguan Jintong's inner activities:

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<sup>97</sup> Yang Xiaobin 杨小滨, *The Chinese Postmodern: Trauma and Irony in Chinese Avant-garde Fiction* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 17.

<sup>98</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, *Mo Yan duihua xinlu* 莫言对话新录, 271.

<sup>99</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world*, trans. Jacques LeClercq (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 60.

<sup>100</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, *Mo Yan duihua xinlu* 莫言对话新录, 280.

He thinks that kissing with the mouth is just not as great as kissing the breasts. Women in the future will have their breasts grow on the forehead for a male's kiss. The breasts on the forehead are a sign of courtesy. They should be painted with the most beautiful colors and there should be decorations made of gold and silk hanging from the nipples. The breasts on the chest are the organ for breeding but also have aesthetic values. He believes that the clothing created by his mother with holes and curtains on the chest should be popularized. Those chest holes should be made appropriate according to different people and times. The curtain has to be made of light silk. If it is too thin then there is little room for imagination; too thick then it will hinder the communication of emotion and scent. The holes have to be adorned with various laces.<sup>101</sup>

The ridiculous yet cheerful daydreaming of Jintong has blurred the line between sublime and grotesque, between seriousness and jocularly. The social norm is challenged in a solemn yet humorous manner that shakes the foundation of its credibility. Similar strategies have also been applied to the depiction of unexpected violence and chaos:

The men and women jumped into the river. Another bolt of lightning snaked through the sky, its crackle hanging in the air for a long time and darkening the beam of light from the projector. A dozen or so liquid objects flew in, giving the impression that the lightning had sent down a shower of turds. A violent explosion erupted from somewhere in the ranks of Sima Battalion soldiers.<sup>102</sup> A thunderous blast, flashes of green and yellow light, accompanied by the pungent smell of gunpowder at about the same time ... Screams and shouts erupted from panicky, blinded people. The beam of light shone on undulating backs, bloody heads, terrified faces. The man and woman frolicking in the American river had been blown to bits. Lightning. Thunder. Green blood. Pieces of flesh flying through the air. An American movie. A hand grenade. Golden flames snaking out of the barrel of a gun. Don't panic, brothers. Another series of explosions. Mother! Son! A living, severed arm. Intestines twisted around a leg. Raindrops bigger than silver coins. Eye-searing lights. A night of mystery.<sup>103</sup>

The montage of fast-shifting sound and images and the extensive juxtaposition of various peculiar

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<sup>101</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, *Feng ru fei tun* 丰乳肥臀, 420. This part is not included in the English version and is translated by myself. Many other parts containing Jintong's wild imagination have also been omitted in the English version. The translator might have done it due to aesthetic reasons for he may think that Mo Yan has let his uncontrollable descriptive impulse run too far in those parts.

<sup>102</sup> A Nationalist anti-Japanese Commando Battalion, commanded by Sima Ku 司马库, the husband of Second Sister, Shanguan Zhaodi 上官招弟.

<sup>103</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, *Big Breasts*, 247; *Feng ru fei tun* 丰乳肥臀, 189.

moments turn the accident that is supposed to be terrifying into a surreal experimental exhibition of art. The traumatic experience thus gains a strange sense of beauty. Sometimes, the author's extravagant habit of the writer might become distracting, leading the narrative off-topic. For example, in his another historical novel, *Shengsi pilao* 生死疲劳 (Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out), the protagonist, who is incarnated as an ox, has had one of his horns cut off during a heated conflict. Instead of continuing the depiction of the fight, the narrator suddenly starts talking about the medical value of the liquid produced from the wound of the horn in great detail:

This liquid was the ox's essence, what's known as "ox-horn essence," reputed to be an exceptional aid for male virility, as much as ten times more powerful than the palm tree extract found on Hainan Island. A particularly corrupt authority figure, a former member of the provincial Party Committee who was exposed by the Red Guards, had taken a girl in her twenties as his wife when he was already turning grey. Too old to perform in bed, he asked around for something to restore his virility, and this ox-horn essence is what the people recommended. He sent some of his thugs out to force all the farmers in the country and those belonging to the province to send their uncastrated and unmated young bulls to a secret location, where their horns were cut off and the liquid extracted; then the bones were crushed and delivered to their boss, the senior official. Sure enough, his gray hair was black again, his wrinkles disappeared, and his organ stood up like a machine gun with a crooked barrel, to mow down a phalanx of women like rolling up a mat.<sup>104</sup>

This kind of seemingly irrelevant narration interposed in the middle of the action could disturb the flow of the story and might be a side effect of the author's overflowing power and desire for storytelling. Mo Yan is known for his rapid writing speed as *Feng ru fei tun* took him around three months to finish and *Shengsi pilao* only forty days. With such a short production period and the author's superfluous writing style, these two gigantic novels would inevitably have some redundant and unpolished parts, the kind of parts that are not uncommon in Cervantes and Rabelais'

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<sup>104</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, trans. Howard Goldblatt (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2008), 177; *Shengsi pilao* 生死疲劳 (Beijing: Zuoja Chubanshe, 2012), 116.

works, as well as other writers with similar ambition and scale. Mo Yan could add more control to his narrative and trim it down a little but this might also result in the partial loss of his unique charm. His style might not appeal to the refined taste of academic intellectuals and his wild vigor of creation should not be tamed by that evaluation system.

A significant part of composing the life force of Mo Yan's writing is his use of folk narrative.<sup>105</sup> He might use satirical tones to describe his characters, but he always treats them with deep compassion and never adapts a righteous and didactic style. You can feel the narrator is an equal member of the group of characters in the story and would not hesitate to question the legitimacy of suppressive actions carried out in the name of progress by the ruling class. The powerless individual who struggles at the bottom of society is the one who gets the most attention and respect in the story. Their behaviors and thoughts might not be aligned with the official standards and ideology, but their sincere emotion and tenacious spirit always earn the narrator's praise. In *Feng ru fei tun*, when Jiang Liren 蒋立人, a communist official tries to persuade Shangguan Laidi 上官来弟, the eldest sister of the family to abandon her husband who is an apostate who works for the Japanese, she refuses to comply and states that she does not understand the big talk of the nation and moral principles.<sup>106</sup> Between nation and her love, this delicate female has the courage to not betray her love. Later in the novel, Mother encounters a similar situation. Her communist daughter Shangguan Pandi 上官盼弟 has taken control of the region, at the cost of the death of one of her sisters and the arrest of another sister and her husband (they belong to the opposite party). The victory of the communist party is a sign of liberation and worth celebrating in the official historical narrative, but it is no salvation for Mother for she has witnessed enough

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<sup>105</sup> Chen Zhuo 陈卓 and Wang Yongbing 王永兵, "Lun Mo Yan xinlishi xiaoshuo de minjian xushi" 论莫言新历史小说的民间叙事, *Dangdai wentan* 当代文坛, no. 2 (2016): 47-51.

<sup>106</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, *Feng ru fei tun* 丰乳肥臀, 137.

suffering by her children and the new government will only bring more in the following age. “Look at the mud on your feet when you step out of the water” is the line used by Pandi when she tries to persuade her Mother.<sup>107</sup> It is the same line used by Zhu Laozhong 朱老忠 as a pet phrase to encourage himself and his comrades in the classic revolutionary historical novel *Hongqi pu* 红旗谱 (1957).<sup>108</sup> Roughly translated it means “who laughs last laughs best,” and it is a motto that strengthens the belief in the inevitable victory of revolution for the loyal fighters. In Mo Yan’s narrative, the coming of the revolutionary era does not end the torment of weathered protagonists, maybe even exacerbates it. A good example is the return of Shangguan Xiangdi 上官想弟, one of the sisters who chooses to become a prostitute in order to save her starving family members. After missing for many years, she finally reunites with her family. But during the Cultural Revolution, her past identity makes her the target of public humiliation and torture. And the treasures she accumulated over the years are also been taken away. For such a poor girl, fate has never shown her any mercy regardless of her social condition. Red Guards brand the compound of the Shangguan family as a whore’s house, but as Jintong “listened to his dying sister, he had the urge to change the word ‘Whore’s’ to ‘Filial Daughter’s’ or ‘Martyr’s.’”<sup>109</sup> His thought here is not an advocacy for traditional moral values, but the simple yet sincere expression of feeling for his ill-fated sister, a prayer for her soul.

Mo Yan also implements folk languages with lively expressive force in his writing, but such a feature might be hard to preserve through translation. What can be universally perceived is his creative borrowing of folklore elements. We have already seen similar usages earlier such as

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<sup>107</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, *Big Breasts*, 262; *Feng ru fei tun* 丰乳肥臀, 202. The Chinese phrase is “出腿才看两脚泥.”

<sup>108</sup> Liang Bin 梁斌, *Hongqi pu* 红旗谱 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2005), 24.

<sup>109</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, *Big Breasts*, 444; *Feng ru fei tun* 丰乳肥臀, 381.

in the spirit of the white deer and the ghost of Tian Xiao'e in *Bailuyuan*. The presence of supernatural or fantasy elements is more pervasive and prominent in Mo Yan's narrative. In *Feng ru fei tun*, one of the sisters, Shangguan Lingdi 上官领弟, is in love with a man that can speak with birds. After her lover is taken away by the Japanese she becomes a *niao xian* 鸟仙 (Bird Fairy), capable of commanding birds and making prophecies. She has one of the most brutal but maybe also the most romantic deaths in the novel, jumping off a cliff like a bird that tries to fly.<sup>110</sup> The Bird Fairy ironically has no wings, but her attempt of breaking away from this bleak world is like a dark fairy tale, cruel yet still heartwarming. The fantasy elements are not just used as decorations but more of an integral part of the story to expand the depth and possibility of literary narrative, which is best demonstrated in *Shengsi pilao*, a historical novel that adapts the folklore setting as its basic framework. It tells the story of a Chinese landlord who is incarnated many times as various animals over fifty years. Although the concept of incarnation is borrowed from Buddhism, the fantasy narrative is largely influenced by Chinese folk religion as can be seen from the depiction of hell and its related characters and events at the beginning of the novel:

I know I earned the unspoken respect of many of Yama's underworld attendants, but I also know that Lord Yama<sup>111</sup> was sick and tired of me. So to force me to admit defeat, they subjected me to the most sinister form of torture hell had to offer: they flung me into a vat of boiling oil, in which I tumbled and turned and sizzled like a fried chicken for about an hour. Words cannot do justice to the agony I experienced until an attendant speared me with a trident and, holding me high, carried me up to the palace steps ... "All right, Ximen Nao 西门闹, we accept your claim of innocence. Many people in that world who deserve to die somehow live on while those who deserve to live die off. Those are facts about which this throne can do nothing. So I will be merciful and send you back." Unanticipated joy fell on me like a millstone, seemingly shattering my body into shards. Lord Yama threw down

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<sup>110</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, *Big Breasts*, 232; *Feng ru fei tun* 丰乳肥臀, 169.

<sup>111</sup> Yanwang 阎王 (King Yan = Yama) is god of death and ruler of the Realm of the Dead in Daoist mythology.

his triangular vermilion symbol of office and, with what sounded like impatience, commanded: “Ox Head and Horse Face,<sup>112</sup> send him back!”<sup>113</sup>

Lord Yama, Ox Head, and Horse Face, along with the punishment of boiling in the oil and the act of pleading for innocence to the Lord are all typical elements that can be found in Chinese folklore. Even the titles of each chapter are formulated as those of *zhanghui xiaoshuo* 章回小说, (the novel in chapters), the genre of classic Chinese prose fiction that can be traced back to *pingshu* 评书, the traditional Han Chinese art of storytelling performed without musical accompaniment.. The mixture of human’s and animals’ perspectives in the *Shengsi pilao* also creates a state of anarchy, where the boundary between seriousness and comedy is dissolved. The conflict between the primitive impulse of animals such as donkeys and pigs and the human consciousness of morality and discipline heads to some hilarious yet thought-provoking scenarios, which remind us of Bakhtin’s discussion of carnival in literature.<sup>114</sup> But as mentioned before, instead of being under the influence of foreign resources, Mo Yan has developed this vigorous narrative style on his own from the rich tradition of indigenous folk art.

The folk standpoint of narrative in *Shengsi pilao* has been further backed up by the flexible and self-reflective nature of its narrator. There is a character named Mo Yan in the novel, a parody of his real-world counterpart. He is vain and loves showing off and a lot of his absurd writing segments have been interposed during the normal narration. The narrator and the characters in the story also tend to take a disparaging attitude towards him. At the beginning of chapter nine, the narrator (which is a donkey at the time) states: “My friend, I shall now relate events of 1958 for

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<sup>112</sup> *Niutou* 牛头 (Ox head) and *Mamian* 马面 (Horse Face) are guardians of the Realm of the Dead, and the first beings the dead soul meets when entering the underworld. They also bring the dead before the Courts of Hell to face judgment for their deeds and act as messengers for Yanwang.

<sup>113</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, *Life and Death*, 3-5; *Shengsi pilao* 生死疲劳, 6-7.

<sup>114</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 122-125.



you. Mo Yan did that in many of his stories, but he was spinning nonsense, not to be believed. What I am going to reveal is my own personal experience, a valuable window on history.”<sup>115</sup> This could be seen as the author’s humorous self-mockery, but it also has deeper indications. The credibility of the writer’s fictional writing has been denied, but the one who makes such a claim is himself a character in the fiction. And this character, an animal, declares that it could provide a better narrative of human history. Thus, literature’s function to reveal the poetic truth, a trait that makes it superior to the historical narration as argued by Aristotle,<sup>116</sup> has been confirmed again. It also indicates that a human being with preoccupied serious intentions may not be able to understand his/her experience and history with clarity, whereas a simple-minded animal with its primitive yet sharp perception and untainted nature can do so. The animals in the story indeed tend to be more sincere and honorable than people, even pigs that are usually considered lazy and dirty live a more exciting and glorious life than most of the human characters. The Cultural Revolution era is depicted as the golden age for pigs. Their gluttonous, licentious, and belligerent nature results in a series of dramatic events of constant fighting, conquering, and even rebellion. The political movement that devastated so many people’s life has unexpectedly opened new opportunities for pigs to release their repressed inner energy. But it does mean that pigs can only cause chaos and disorder. The protagonist, who is incarnated as a pig at the time and even at one time becomes their king once, gives up its life in a noble move to save drowning children:

At the moment I was a human, not a pig; by no stretch of the imagination was I a born hero, but I was basically good and willing to do anything for a just cause ... To me the water felt warm, not cold, and as the blood coursed through my veins I swam like a champion. I was not intent on saving the three children who were carrying on my line; I just swam for the nearest ones. I bit down on the pants of one of the boys and flung him back onto the ice. One after the other I tossed the children

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<sup>115</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, *Life and Death*, 82; *Shengsi pilao* 生死疲劳, 58.

<sup>116</sup> Aristotle, *Aristotle’s Theory of Poetry and the Fine Arts*, trans. S. H. Butcher, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., intro. John Gasner (New York: Dover Books, 1951), Part IX, 45.

back on to the ice. They quickly crawled to safety. I took the foot of the fattest of the children in my mouth and brought him up out of the water; icy bubbles shot from his mouth as he hit the surface, just like a fish. The boy landed on the ice, which cracked under the weight, so this time I rammed my snout into his soft belly, moved all four of my legs as fast as I could — even with four legs treading water, I was still human — and flung him far off onto the ice ... I was deeply moved, though I couldn't say why. I felt hot all over; the water around me was getting warmer. I felt so good as I sank slowly to the bottom.<sup>117</sup>

In the original Chinese version of the novel, there is a description of the inner activities of the protagonist during his final moment in a hyperbolic tone. He states that he has thought as much as Anna Karenina before she commits suicide and as much as Ouyang Hai 欧阳海, the hero of a famous novel during the revolutionary era before he is hit by a train while trying to save a horse.<sup>118</sup> These thoughts could be seen as a parody of more serious literary examples, but they also shows the author's comical representation of the ridiculous nature of that time when a lot of people lost their humanity. It is a pig's self-sacrifice that reminds us of what it truly means to be a human.

Mo Yan's narrative style is vibrant and sometimes can even be flamboyant, but his interest in history has always been clear. Just like David Der-wei Wang commented: "I feel that in Mo Yan's fictional world, history is the basic force that drives his creation and it is also the target he wishes to replace with fiction and imagination."<sup>119</sup> But how history is handled in Mo Yan's writing is a more complicated matter. We have already analyzed works such as *Pingfan de shijie*, in which the official ideology, the historical myth, is still adapted by the author, and when the gap between

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<sup>117</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, *Life and Death*, 376-378; *Shengsi pilao* 生死疲劳, 276-277.

<sup>118</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, *Shengsi pilao* 生死疲劳, 276. The novel is *Ouyang hai zhi ge* 欧阳海之歌 (The Song of Ouyang Hai) (1965) by Jin Jingmai 金敬迈 (1930-2020). Ouyang Hai (1940-1963) from Guiyang County, Hunan Province, a soldier in the *Zhongguo Renmin Jiefangjun* 中国人民解放军 (People's Liberation Army), died when hit by the engine of a train whose derailment he was trying to prevent by removing a horse laden with ammunition from the rails. This episode from the novel was included in a widely used elementary school book and so was familiar to generations of students.

<sup>119</sup> David Der-wei Wang 王德威, *Dangdai xiaoshuo ershi jia* 当代小说二十家 (Shanghai: Sanlian shudian, 2006), 229.

it and the individual experience becomes conspicuous. Sun Shaoping's personal quest of seeking independence and the value of life overshadows the imposing yet empty preaching of the righteousness of historical progress. In *Bailuyuan*, we witness one of the early formal attempts of constructing an alternative narrative of history that could compete with the official one. By combining traditional culture with selected contemporary elements, Chen Zhongshi hopes to criticize the violent and irrational parts of modernization but still keep certain degrees of order and meaning of his historical narrative. In both these cases, a large portion of the central period of twentieth-century Chinese history (from the establishment of the PRC to the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976) has been unintentionally or strategically omitted or avoided. *Pingfan de shijie* tries to face forwards with an optimistic attitude by overcoming the past trauma through its faith in the future while *Bailuyuan* hesitates before the coming radical epoch as it has foreseen the bleak fate of the traditional values it holds dear. But for Mo Yan, the turbulent revolutionary era has become the core of his historical narrative in both *Feng ru fei tun* and *Shengsi pilao*. The way he depicts or reconstructs that period is the key to understanding his notion of history.

As mentioned before, the victory of the communist party does not bring much joy and excitement to the protagonists in *Feng ru fei tun* as it is supposed to do in the orthodox revolutionary narrative. For Mother and Shangguan Jintong, they have witnessed and experienced too much hardship and human tragedy and unlike Bai Jiaxuan or Mr. Zhu in *Bailuyuan*, they do not have a strong belief in certain moral and value systems to help them cope with the situation. The suffering of the individual is at the center of the stage regardless of the change of social context, which is best exemplified in this following paragraph summarizing the fate of the family members:

We were, however, more concerned about the fate of Sixth Sister, Niandi, and her American husband, Babbitt. During those days, as the flooded river continued to roar along, Mother went outside every night to pace the yard and sigh, the sound

seeming to drown out even the roar of the river. Mother has given birth to eight daughters: Laidi had gone mad, Zhaodi and Lingdi were dead, Xiangdi had gone into prostitution and might as well be dead; Pandi had taken up with Lu Liren and, with bullets constantly flying around her, could die in a minute; Qiudi had been sold to a White Russian, which wasn't much better than being dead. Only Yunü remained at her side, but, unhappily, she was blind. Maybe her blindness was the only reason she remained at Mother's side. Now, if something were to happen to Niandi, nearly all the eight young beauties of the Shangguan family would be nothing but a memory.<sup>120</sup>

Such is the heart-wrenching fate of the female characters in the Shangguan family. And the situation does not get better with the establishment of New China. We have already mentioned the miserable ending of Xiangdi who becomes a prostitute in order to save her family. A more dramatic story involves the relationship between the big sister Laidi and Niaoer Han 鸟儿韩, the original lover of the third sister, Lingdi. Sun Buyan 孙不言, whose name means "do not speak," and who is a mute who has become a well-respected soldier after joining the communist army. His marriage to Laidi is considered an honor by officials, but it also contributes to the misfortune of Laidi, who is already half-crazy at the time. She ends up in a heated relationship with Niaoer Han. The scene in which they make love has been beautifully portrayed: "And so, every coupling was accompanied by hot tears and snobs, with no hint of lewdness, filled with human dignity and tragedy. When they made love, their hearts overflowed with unspoken words."<sup>121</sup> But such pure love cannot be tolerated in this grim world and is bound to be destroyed. When Sun Buyan finds out about the adultery of his wife, he tries to strangle Niaoer Han to death. Laidi kills him to save her lover and is eventually executed for murdering a revolutionary hero. The plot here is like a cruel joke made by fate. In that sense, Mo Yan is similar to other writers of new historical novels such as Yu Hua 余华 and Su Tong 苏童 that deliberately accumulate atrocity and brutality in their narrative worlds.

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<sup>120</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, *Big Breasts*, 281; *Feng ru fei tun* 丰乳肥臀, 217.

<sup>121</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, *Big Breasts*, 404; *Feng ru fei tun* 丰乳肥臀, 345.

Kinkley argues that their writings “conjure up broadly dystopian visions of a society that never literally existed in the past, even in China’s cruel and bloody twentieth century, but can be taken as portents of a dark human future.”<sup>122</sup> That is not to say that there did not once exist such tragedies in the real world. The real incidents might be even darker, but the scenarios depicted in these historical novels are so consistently brutal and in such a concentrated form that they transcend the normal human experience and turn into something different and unique.

As we mentioned before, Mo Yan admits that he wishes to turn “history into allegory and prophecy.”<sup>123</sup> The more important question is, what kind of allegory and prophecy are is he referring to? The Red Classics such as *Hongqi pu* and *Chuangye shi* can also be read as an allegory for their eminent ideological preferences and their reflection on the fate of a nation. Mo Yan’s writing has inherited certain themes and traits from the Seventeen-year Literature,<sup>124</sup> the adaptation of the folk language and narrative, the representation of the violent revolution processes, are all notable examples to prove the point. But we should also notice that the heroic narrative in Seventeen-year Literature is largely replaced in Mo Yan’s fiction by the focus on the individual and personal experience. He acknowledges the influence but also states the significant difference: “I take the folk perspective, start from the emotion then lead to politics and economy. I use the folk narrative to supplement or negate the official one or use it to fill the blank space left by the official historical narrative ... Trying one’s best to de-emphasize the class concept and stand on a detached point then humanizing both sides through your expression.”<sup>125</sup> Thus, we could see that

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<sup>122</sup> Jeffrey Kinkley, *Visions of Dystopia in China's New Historical Novels* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 2.

<sup>123</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, “Xiudingben houji” 修订本后记 in *Feng ru fei tun* 丰乳肥臀, 4.

<sup>124</sup> Zhou Wenhui 周文慧, “The Influence of ‘Seventeen-year Literature’ on Mo Yan’s Novel Creation” 十七年文学对莫言小说创作的影响, *Qilu Journal* 齐鲁学刊, no. 5 (2017): 150-154.

<sup>125</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, “Xie lishi xiaoshuo shize sikao dangxia wenti” 写历史小说实则思考当下问题, *Cultural QQ*, November 30, 2021, <https://cul.qq.com/a/20141011/038452.htm>.

Mo Yan's motivation is to reveal the story of individuals that have been obscured by the official grand narrative. He understands that the writers of the classic revolutionary historical novels have their limitations and have done commendable jobs despite them. He attempts to approach similar topics from a different angle, to blur the boundary between heroes and villains, and to question the traditional concept of justice and progress. "Mo Yan is a poet who tears down stereotypical propaganda posters, elevating the individual from an anonymous human mass. Using ridicule and sarcasm Mo Yan attacks history and its falsifications as well as deprivation and political hypocrisy."<sup>126</sup> The Nobel Prize speech is appropriate for pointing out his focus on specific persons instead of the abstract ideology.

Back to the allegorical nature of the fiction, as Mo Yan states, the history in his novel is always entangled with contemporality. "When we write about yesterday, yesterday has become the past, and the past is history. In this sense, the literature about history almost includes all the forms of literature."<sup>127</sup> The fictional historical representation could be seen as a reminder of the potential of human atrocity that sleeps within each of us. The intention is more of a reflection on the darkness of human nature than specific social-political criticism. The tragedies unleashed by the *Da yue jin* 大跃进 (Great Leap Forward)<sup>128</sup> or the Cultural Revolution could also happen somewhere else at another time if we do not have enough awareness of its origin rooted in ourselves. Thus, despite always being set in the same location (his hometown Gaomi in the Shandong province) just like Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, Mo Yan's writing is transnational and transhistorical. "Gaomi

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<sup>126</sup> Per Wästberg, "The Nobel Prize in Literature 2012 – Award Ceremony Speech," Nobelprize, November 30, 2021, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2012/ceremony-speech/>.

<sup>127</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, "Xie lishi xiaoshuo shize sikao dangxia wenti" 写历史小说实则思考当下问题, Cultural QQ, November 30, 2021, <https://cul.qq.com/a/20141011/038452.htm>.

<sup>128</sup> The Second Five-Year Plan (1958-1968), an ambitious attempt to turn China to a modern industrial communist nation, through collectivization of agriculture and industrializing the countryside. It was an economic and social disaster leading to widespread famine in which according to various estimates anywhere from 15 to 55 million people starved to death.

is just a literary concept. Things that happened in Hong Kong, Taiwan, France, America, and even in dreams can all be described in Gaomi. They could be set in Beijing as well, but I have already formed the habit and get so used to set them in Gaomi.”<sup>129</sup> These stories with similar historical settings also tend to have varied tones and themes throughout the author’s career. The earlier creations such as *Hong gaoliang* 红高粱 (Red Sorghum) still have some connections with the heroism from the revolutionary historical novels. *Feng ru fei tun* has a much bleaker tone and is not the typical national allegory that focuses on the identity of China and its place in the world. Rather, it concentrates on the common human anxiety in the struggle of life and the fear of a utopia turning horribly wrong, and just as we analyzed before and as has been articulated by Kinkley, the stories “fruitlessly yearn for transcendental justice and righteousness from above: from Heaven, God, the gods, or sage officials. They are nowhere to be found.”<sup>130</sup> In this world that lacks justice, ordinary people can only hold on to the most basic instinct for survival, just like Mother’s sincere advice to Jintong: “Remember that the tougher the job, the harder you have to work at living. Pastor Malory used to say he’d read the Bible from cover to cover, and that’s what it all came to.”<sup>131</sup> This is a Chinese peasant female’s “filtered” version of the tenet and unlike the Christian ideas in Tolstoy or Dostoevsky’s works, the religious elements here are decorative and do not serve as evidence for the narrator’s belief in cosmic sources of meaning and cannot bring true consolation to the characters suffering in the story. The issue with the theme and the tone of *Feng ru fei tun* is that they are all too familiar with Chinese readers, even those who have not experienced the events and have known about them from various sources in historical narratives. It is an

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<sup>129</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, “Meinian dou hui Gaomi guonian” 每年都回高密过年, Dazhong, November 30, 2021, [http://www.dzwww.com/synr/dzft/200606/t20060617\\_1570378.htm](http://www.dzwww.com/synr/dzft/200606/t20060617_1570378.htm).

<sup>130</sup> Jeffrey Kinkley, *Visions of Dystopia*, 207.

<sup>131</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, *Big Breasts*, 416; *Feng ru fei tun* 丰乳肥臀, 356.

excellent demonstration of the possibility of dystopia near us and a monument to the heavy past that should not be forgotten. However, for those who are already well-saturated (sometimes oversaturated) in the knowledge of that period of history, it fails to challenge their established perception and understanding of the time. In other words, it is sometimes overshadowed by the reality it tries to allegorize.

The idea about *shishi* is ambiguous when it comes to Mo Yan's novels. *Feng ru fei tun* is indeed his most ambitious work in terms of scale, but if we take the classic revolutionary historical novels as the model for *shishi*, then it is almost their antithesis. The one is about the collective ideology, heroism, the righteousness of history, the road to the utopia, and the other is about domestic struggle, the suffering of the individual, the brutal and ridiculous social movements, and the birth of a hopeless dystopia. Simply calling it *shishi* would be misleading and does not represent its most prominent features. On the other hand, *Shengsi pilao* is created with the concept of *shishi* in the author's mind as confirmed by Mo Yan: "I wrote this work with great ambition, the ambition of writing a *shishi*. I wanted to summarize the history of Chinese peasants over fifty years, starting with creating a group of typical characters."<sup>132</sup> In that sense, his writing has become closer to the tradition initiated by Balzac, but he does not stop there and retains many of his signature literary traits in order to make an all-embracing reflection on Chinese society. This has also been acknowledged by Zhang Xudong in his analysis of the novel, which compares it with *Honglou meng*, the masterpiece of the classic Chinese literature: "When I refer to the writing style as similar to *Honglou meng*, it means the writer uses a wide range of conception, design, name, narrative, metaphor, and feeling to make a panoramic description of the Chinese world."<sup>133</sup> If in *Feng ru fei*

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<sup>132</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, "Meinian dou hui Gaomi guonian" 每年都回高密过年, Dazhong, November 30, 2021, [http://www.dzwww.com/synr/dzft/200606/t20060617\\_1570378.htm](http://www.dzwww.com/synr/dzft/200606/t20060617_1570378.htm).

<sup>133</sup> Zhang Xudong 张旭东, "Zuowei lishi yiwang zhi zaiti de shengming he tudi" 作为历史遗忘之载体的生命和土地, *Journal of Modern Chinese Studies*, no. 6 (2012): 4.



then *Shengsi pilao* has directly projected personal experience into the social context to form a more comprehensive picture. The elements of politics and economy are often not insinuated but overtly woven into the plot. And we could also find heroic and idealized figures in the narrative such as the pig we mentioned before, the third incarnation of the protagonist who sacrifices himself to save the drowning children. There is a stubborn farmer called Lanlian 蓝脸 (blue face) who is the master of the ox, the protagonist's second incarnation. He refuses to join the people's commune and insists on working alone on his own land. He is unfazed when facing the threat from the revolutionary activists who try to force him into joining the commune and claims: "If they want to kill me, there's nothing I can do about it, but it's wishful thinking to expect me to die on my own. I'm going to live, and live well. China's going to have to get used to this black spot!"<sup>134</sup> Lanlian has been built into a romanticized hero, but not the kind of hero who helps to advance the socialist ideology in revolutionary literature. On the contrary, he is a small farmer with simple yet strong and obstinate love for the land who tries to fight against the national will in order to defend his version of peasantry utopia. The novel subverts the normal expectation of an ideal time through its depiction of the degeneration of people's spirits. During the Cultural Revolution and other social movements, despite the presence of brutality and chaos, the vitality of humanity is still prominent. With the improvement of the living standard in recent decades, people have gradually lost their spiritual pursuits and are dominated by cynicism and hedonism. "In the first twenty-five years of the new society, although we had become the means of production, our humanity remained. In the second twenty-five years, we have got money and private life, but we also become more like animals and

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<sup>134</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, *Life and Death*, 205; *Shengsi pilao* 生死疲劳, 134.

less like humans.”<sup>135</sup> For readers, *Shengsi pilao* does not provide a concrete solution but stimulates them to come up with their answers to our relationship with history and the present as multifaceted as it can be.

The appeal and major achievement of *Shengsi pilao* may also be traced back to Mo Yan’s creative usage of fantasy and mythical elements to reconstruct history. We could label his style as magic realism or hallucinatory realism, but its complex connotations and powerful expressive potential can only be experienced through in-depth reading. Regardless, his writing indeed “successfully deconstructs the grand narrative of socialist or revolutionary realism becoming a new development in the territory of Chinese culture.”<sup>136</sup> And when it comes to the concept of *shishi* and epic, we should realize they are not always obsessed with the faithful portrait of reality. Mythology and imagination have long accompanied it since the early age from Homer to Dante and Milton. Mo Yan admitted that *Feng ru fei tun* was conceived with great ambition and even wanted to make Gaomi a miniature of modern China, but the result was not that satisfying.<sup>137</sup> *Shengsi pilao* demonstrates the maturity of his signature literary style. If it were to be called *shishi* then it would be a *shishi* about the never-ending struggle for life. The persistence of the life force has been elevated by his signature fantasy elements to the level of greatness. It reminds us that for great works, it might not be enough to simply replicate reality (or suggest that one can do so), but it is more important to transcend it and to show the boundaries and complexities of such an attempt by drawing attention to the apparent “magic” of literary forms. Such works draw from the power

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<sup>135</sup> Zhang Xudong 张旭东, “Zuowei lishi yiwang zhi zaiti de shengming he tudi” 作为历史遗忘之载体的生命和土地, *Journal of Modern Chinese Studies*, no. 6 (2012): 17.

<sup>136</sup> Dong Guojun 董国俊, “Hallucinatory Realism: Mo Yan’s Fictional World” 莫言小说的虚拟现实主义, PhD diss., (Lanzhou University, 2014), 158.

<sup>137</sup> Mo Yan 莫言 and Zhang Xudong 张旭东, “Shenme shi haode wenxue shenme shi women zhege shidai” 什么是好的文学, 什么是我们这个时代, *Aisixiang*, November 30, 2021, <http://m.aisixiang.com/data/80174-4.html>.

of symbols and readers' imagination that have long been at the core of literature and culture studies. Just like the Chinese meaning of *shishi* 史诗 indicates: it starts with history but ends with poetry. And it is through poetry that we find the alternative form to history that can be appreciated with renewable memory.

## CHAPTER 4. WANG ANYI AND CHI ZIJIAN: FEMALE VOICES AND MORE

This chapter dives into the writing of Wang Anyi 王安忆 (1954—) and Chi Zijian (1964—), two representative female Chinese writers. Wang Anyi strove to write the history of a city through the lens of a female character's individual life, but her method of imitating the grand narrative and *shishi* style does not sit well with the abundance of daily life depicted in her narrative. Chi Zijian chose to explore the dimension of nature and spiritual beings, which elevated her narrative above ordinary trivial matters, revealing a sublime feeling of *shishi*.

### 4.1 The Paradox of Little Tradition

Wang Anyi 王安忆 is one of the most prominent female writers in contemporary Chinese literature. Before receiving a *Mao Dun Wenxue Jiang* 茅盾文学奖 (Mao Dun Literature Prize) in 2000, she had already had a writing career of more than 20 years. *Changheng* 长恨歌 (The Song of Everlasting Sorrow) (1995) not only helped her win the award but is also often considered as her most important representative work. Similar to her previous novels, this book features the lives of ordinary people instead of distinctive historical figures but it also attempts to provide something more than that. The English version of the book has the subtitle “a novel of Shanghai,”<sup>1</sup> which is a suitable way to summarize its theme. Since the 1980s, Wang Anyi began to search for the “roots” of Shanghai, gathering old stories, chorography, and other related materials.<sup>2</sup> From *Haishang fanhua meng* 海上繁华梦 (A Dream of Prosperity at Sea) (1986) to *Mini* 米尼 (Mini) (1992), she

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<sup>1</sup> Wang Anyi 王安忆, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow: A Novel of Shanghai*, trans. Michael Berry and Susan Chan Egan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Wang Anyi 王安忆, *Meitou* 妹头 (Haikou: Nanhai chuban gongsi, 2000), 174-189.

has continued her pursuit to explore the essence of Shanghai culture. *Changhenge* marked a new milestone in her journey of understanding and capturing the spirit of this city. According to the author, this work is “very realistic.” She comments: “I wrote about the fate of a woman, but in fact, she is just the mouthpiece of the city. What I tried to write is the story of a city.”<sup>3</sup> Such an intention is immediately felt by the readers once they start reading the novel: Most of the first chapter (four out of five parts) is devoted to the sophisticated description of the environment and overall atmosphere of Shanghai. Despite the abundance of details to the point of being intricate, the description here is by no means objective or naturalistic but saturated with the writer’s own perception and empathy. Take the following paragraph about *longtang* 弄堂 (lane)<sup>4</sup> and gossip as an example:

What moves you about the *longtang* of Shanghai stems from the most mundane scenes: not the surging rush of clouds and rain, but something steadily accumulated over time. It is the excitement of cooking smoke and human vitality. Something is flowing through the *longtang* that is unpredictable yet entirely rational, small, not large, and trivial – but then even a castle can be made out of sand. It has nothing to do with things like “history,” not even “unofficial history”: we can only call it gossip ... These rumors cling to the skin and stick to the flesh; they are not cold and stiff, like a pile of musty old books. Though marred by untruths, there are falsehoods that have feelings. When the city’s streetlights are ablaze, its *longtang* remain in darkness, save the lonely street lamps hanging on the alley corners. The lamps, enclosed in crude frames of rusty iron covered with dust, emit a murky yellow glow. On the ground, a shroud of thick mist forms and begins to spread out – this is the time when rumors and gossip start to brew. It is a gloomy hour, when nothing is clear, yet it is enough to break the heart.<sup>5</sup>

This part could be seen as a statement of the central motif of the novel, the desire to build a narrative opposite to the official history: something mundane, small, trivial, yet tangible, warm,

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<sup>3</sup> Wang Anyi 王安忆, *Chongjian Xiangyata* 重建象牙塔 (Shanghai: Shanghai yuandong chubanshe, 2007), 191-192.

<sup>4</sup> In Shanghai a *longtang* 弄堂 is not just a lane but also the community centered on it.

<sup>5</sup> Wang Anyi 王安忆, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, 7; *Changhenge* 长恨歌 (Haikou: Nanhai chubangongsi, 2000), 4-5.

and full of vigor, unlike those abstract grand talks about progress and higher meaning. Just like Chen Zhongshi and Mo Yan, many of Wang Anyi's works are also often categorized under new historical novels, demonstrating traits that challenge the orthodox narration of history. The difference is that instead of focusing on the rural area, her interest has always been urban life and its depiction from a female perspective.

The “gossip” mentioned above could be seen as the “collective unconscious” of Shanghai's *longtang*,<sup>6</sup> a key concept to understand the culture and psychology of the local civil society, of its heart. “That heart is born of gossip, and gossip is born of the Shanghai *longtang*. Magnificent tales of the Far East can be heard all over this Paris of the Orient; but peel away the outer shell and you will discover that gossip lied at its core. Like the center of a pearl.”<sup>7</sup> Ironically, despite the vivid description of gossip in the first chapter, the following narrative lacks concrete examples to back up its existence. It is not an isolated case revealing the gap between the interpretation of the theme and the actual story, which will be discussed later. Near the end of the first chapter, we finally get to see the protagonist of the novel, Wang Qiyao 王琦瑶. Her introduction in the book clearly proves the author's statement that the heroine is a representative of the city:

Behind every doorway in the Shanghai *longtang* a Wang Qiyao is studying, embroidering, whispering secrets to her sisters, or throwing a teary-eyed tantrum at her parents. The *longtang* neighborhoods of Shanghai are filled with a girlish spirit – the name of this spirit is Wang Qiyao ... The moonbeam writes Wang Qiyao's name on the *longtang* walls; the pink leaves of the oleander spell out Wang Qiyao as they fall to the ground; the lamplight behind the screened window also inscribes her name; now and again a soft voice whispers in Shanghai dialect with a Suzhou inflection, and what it utters is the name of Wang Qiyao. When the peddler of osmanthus porridge sounds his clapper to attract customers, he seems to be counting off the hours of the night for Wang Qiyao ... The dewdrops on the parasol tree are the traces of Wang Qiyao's tears. By the time the maidservant slips out the back

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<sup>6</sup> Cui Zhiyuan 崔志远, “Xunzhao Shanghai” 寻找上海, *Journal of Hebei Normal University*, no. 1 (2012): 92.

<sup>7</sup> Wang Anyi 王安忆, *The Song*, 10; *Changhenge* 长恨歌, 8.

door to meet her lover, Wang Qiyao is lost somewhere faraway in her dream. If there were no Wang Qiyao, the Shanghai *longtang* would lose all their passion.<sup>8</sup>

It is conspicuous that the writer wishes to create a typical character, a symbol for the beauty of ordinary people's lives in the Shanghai *longtang*. Thus, the following narrative is not just about the protagonist and her relationship with others; it also serves the purpose of showcasing the spirit of the city. Upon further investigation, we might discover that Wang Qiyao is not that ordinary after all and the image of Shanghai in the story is not a loyal depiction, but distorted through an idealized lens.

It is worth mentioning that similar to other works featured in this project, *Changhenge* has depicted quite a long period of events and the main plotline expands for about forty years (from the 1940s to the 1980s). This provides the novel an opportunity to explore the development of both the characters and the city and make the setting seem grander when compared to the author's previous works handling similar topics. Leo Ou-fan Lee has highly praised this book: "Wang Anyi's *Changhenge* did not simply depict a city. It created a perspective that is hard to find in terms of historical study and personal experience. It could be seen as *shishi* 史诗."<sup>9</sup> He used *shishi* to describe its feature not just due to its length and scale, but taking its special narrative style into account. It is a combination of both the panoramic depiction of the social picture and the in-depth revelation of individual feelings. David Der-wei Wang has argued that *Changhenge* filled in the blank left by *Haipai* 海派 (Shanghai style) literature<sup>10</sup> and its principal representative Eileen

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<sup>8</sup> Wang Anyi 王安忆, *The Song*, 25-26; *Changhenge* 长恨歌, 24.

<sup>9</sup> Leo Ou-fan Lee 李欧梵, "Jiedu Wang Anyi" 解读王安忆, *Zhongguo wenhuabao* 中国文化报, August 5, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> In a general sense, the term *Haipai* refers to the avant-garde but unique "East Meets West" culture from Shanghai that was formed during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. David Der-wei Wang used the term more strictly, referring to a literary style derived from it that focused on depicting the mundane yet sophisticated daily life of civil society from the 1920s to the 1940s. This trend has been interrupted by the communist rule after 1949, thus Wang's statement of "filling in the blank." For more information, see Wu Fuhui 吴福辉, Qian

Chang 张爱玲 (1920-1995) can be seen as the predecessor to Wang Anyi.<sup>11</sup> However, the connections between the two writers might not be as strong as he suggests. In Eileen Chang's writing, the grand picture of the society was more used as a backdrop for the story and characters instead of being the primary focus. For example, at the end of her representative work *Qingcheng zhilian* 倾城之恋 (Love in a Fallen City) (1943), Chang demonstrated her understanding of the relationship between individuals and the historical context they live in: "The fall of Hong Kong has fulfilled her wish for love. But in this unreasonable world, who knows what is the cause and what is the result? Who knows, maybe the fall of a metropolis is just to fulfill her."<sup>12</sup> As we can see here, the death of thousands of people, the turbulence of the time, and the world-altering social events just serve as the backstage setting for a love story. On the contrary, Wang Anyi devoted as much effort to the characters as to the world in *Changheng* and tried to build a strong bond between the two (though the result is not that ideal, as will be analyzed later). Furthermore, the underpaintings of the two writers' works are also quite different. David Der-wei Wang stated that "Wang did not learn her style from Chang, but her words are filled with Chang's essence. The key is that she carried the realistic spirit to portray the nihilist life scenarios."<sup>13</sup> That last sentence might be applied to Chang but not to Wang. For Eileen Chang, despite the romantic elements involved, the ultimate feel delivered through her writing is bleak. The ending of *Qingcheng zhilian* is a good example: "The legends are everywhere, but they do not always have a happy ending ... The sad

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Liqun 钱理群, and Wen Rumin 温儒敏, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue sanshinian* 中国现代文学三十年 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1998), 357-375.

<sup>11</sup> David Der-wei Wang 王德威, *Dangdai xiaoshuo ershi jia*, 41.

<sup>12</sup> Eileen Chang 张爱玲, *Qingcheng zhilian* 倾城之恋 (Guangzhou: Huacheng chubanshe, 1997), chap. 10, <https://www.99csw.com/book/2527/76254.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> David Der-wei Wang 王德威, *Dangdai xiaoshuo ershi jia*, 42.



and desolate stories are too many to tell, better not ask.”<sup>14</sup> This kind of description could also remind us of Fitzgerald’s vision of Gatsby and the passing time represented by him: “He had come a long way to this blue lawn and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.”<sup>15</sup> Despite all the glamour and panache, her stories are more like an elegy to a magnificent time that is inevitably lost and she will not let it indulge itself in its transient glory. But for Wang Anyi, that dreamy glamour might as well be seen as the essence of *Changhenge* and will this be analyzed in the following part.

The first part of the novel portrays the mundane life of ordinary people in Shanghai during the 1940s, which is a common theme in the aforementioned *Haipai* literature. We see the protagonist Wang Qiyao living a rather normal life, going to school, hanging out with her closest friend, participating in a film audition, taking photoshoots, etc. What is intriguing is that we can discern the hidden fissure within this main character’s self-expectation. She does pass the audition since the director realizes that she “was not an artistic beauty, but quite ordinary. It was the kind of beauty to be admired by close friends and relatives in her own living room, like the shifting moods of everyday life; a retained beauty, it was not the kind that made waves. It was real, not dramatic.”<sup>16</sup> And this trait is further demonstrated through her photoshoots taken later in the plot: “the girl in the picture was not beautiful, but she was pretty. Beauty is something that inspires awe; it implies rejection and has the power to hurt. Prettiness, on the other hand, is a warm, sincere

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<sup>14</sup> Eileen Chang 张爱玲, *Qingcheng zhilian* 倾城之恋 (Guangzhou: Huacheng chubanshe, 1997), chap. 10, <https://www.99csw.com/book/2527/76254.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribner, 2004), 193.

<sup>16</sup> Wang Anyi 王安忆, *The Song*, 38; *Changhenge* 长恨歌, 36.

quality, and even hints at a kind of intimate understanding.”<sup>17</sup> Wang Qiyao is aware of her type of her attractiveness and will not hesitate to take advantage of it, but she cannot be satisfied with it and wishes for more:

The Wang Qiyao who appeared on the inside front cover of *Shanghai Life* had been an everyday kind of proper young lady, while the Wang Qiyao who appeared in the shop window was a fantasy version of a proper young lady. Both were quite real. The latter captured your eyes, the former your heart; each had its proper place. The Wang Qiyao displayed in the shop window had taken the “good girl” side of her and buried it deep in her heart, replacing it with an expression of restraint on her face – and she seemed to stand taller than common people. Her face bore a detached coldness, but one knew better there was an earnest warmth in her that yearned to be liked. This was the image of herself that Wang Qiyao most adored – it suited her taste perfectly and, moreover, provided her with confidence.<sup>18</sup>

Although the author states that both images are quite real, the tension between the two is still obvious: one represents the ordinary charm that dwells in domestic life, the other is eager to stand above the common crowd and reach higher. This paralleled structure might unintentionally become a metaphor for the novel itself: despite its focus on mundane material, it is guided by a strong desire to make something splendid and awestruck out of it, which will be explored further later.

As mentioned before, the narrative style of *Changhenge* is not so realistic, that is, in other words, trying to objectively portray its story and characters. To start with, most of the events that happened in the novel are not based on the author’s personal experience, but her imagination and reconstruction of an idealized past. Wang Anyi also tends to put a lot of direct statements and judgments into the narration, the meaning of which sometimes is not necessarily carried by the actual plot. For example, the failed film audition, according to the text, has a lingering impact on Wang Qiyao’s mind. “Wang Qiyao was sixteen years old at the time, but that one day’s experience

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<sup>17</sup> Wang Anyi 王安忆, *The Song*, 42-43; *Changhenge* 长恨歌, 42.

<sup>18</sup> Wang Anyi 王安忆, *The Song*, 46; *Changhenge* 长恨歌, 45.

left her with the feeling that she had already been through a lot – she felt much older than sixteen.”<sup>19</sup> The problem is, it is just not very convincing that a single failed film audition could stir such a feeling in a young girl’s heart. The original Chinese text for “been through a lot” is *cangsang* 沧桑, a quite strong word to describe the drastic changes that happened to a person or society, similar to “vicissitude,” something Wang Qiyao should not have experienced so far as the actual story goes. Therefore, her sudden character growth could come off as forced and unnatural to some readers. The author continues to emphasize that Wang Qiyao acts differently than her peers do due to her experience, her “heart-rending vicissitudes.”<sup>20</sup> But as analyzed above, this somewhat exaggerated claim is not supported by the story itself. It is one of those occasions in which the author’s intention to elevate the protagonist beyond an ordinary status does not match the basic narrative. The situation does get better when other more relatable virtues of the character have been stressed:

Something about Wang Qiyao caused her to rise above the other girls – had made her, indeed, into the exemplar of proper young ladies. Quiet and reserved, she used to behave like this against her will, but now her reticence was held up hope. But, both before and after, the same patience was always at work. Patience – indeed, that certain “something” about Wang Qiyao was patience. Patience is a quality that holds fast no matter what setbacks may await; whether you face gains or losses, it always comes in handy. For someone as delicate and soft as Wang Qiyao, what weapon is more formidable than patience? Whatever the outcome, be it success or failure, one cannot go wrong with patience; it is the last to go to the wall.<sup>21</sup>

This kind of quality indeed helps Wang Qiyao live through the series of life changes and social events in the coming years. The first part of *Changhenge* can be seen as a coming-of-age novel, recording Wang Qiyao’s growth from a girl to a young adult. She becomes more aware of her own

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<sup>19</sup> Wang Anyi 王安忆, *The Song*, 38; *Changhenge* 长恨歌, 37.

<sup>20</sup> Wang Anyi 王安忆, *The Song*, 56; *Changhenge* 长恨歌, 55.

<sup>21</sup> Wang Anyi 王安忆, *The Song*, 47; *Changhenge* 长恨歌, 46.

traits and gets to know how to behave in front of her admirers. Most important, she decides to pursue a higher goal to change the ordinary color of her life, in this case, it means participating in the competition for Miss Shanghai. But all growth comes with its price and Wang Qiyao also has to accept the loss of friendship and a fading innocence. “They didn’t know what they were crying for ... but deep down both were overcome by a sadness for what they had once had and what was now irretrievably lost ... It was as if their girlhood, so carefree and pure, were gone forever, and from that point on their lives would become much more complicated.”<sup>22</sup> This scene in which Wang Qiyao mourns the loss of their girlhood with her previous close but now estranged friend is quite touching. It is kind of a shame that we do not get to see more of the direct expression of feelings from her. Wang Anyi tended to abstractly describe her (as well as other characters’) personalities instead of letting themselves showcase those traits. Wang Qiyao transforms from a naïve girl to a sensitive lady within less than one chapter, her maturity comes so soon that it to some degree cheapens her character development. She obtains her representative persona at a relatively young age and mostly stays that way throughout her life, which makes her more like an idealized symbol than a real character at times.

A feature of the first part of the book worth mentioning is that it depicts a time when Shanghai was still in its original glorious age before the wave of socialist revolution washes over it. The city itself is understandably complicated and multifaced, with shinning attractions and dark secrets all cramped together. The way Shanghai is represented in a literary work tends to be largely influenced by the writer’s aesthetic preference and their choice of different motifs. The image of Shanghai is not an uncommon sight in modern Chinese literature. For example, Mao Dun’s famous

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<sup>22</sup> Wang Anyi 王安忆, *The Song*, 65; *Changhenge* 长恨歌, 63.

work *Ziye* 子夜 (Midnight) (1933) opens with an impressive portrait of the night in this glamorous metropolis:

Under a sunset-mottled sky, the towering framework of Garden Bridge was mantled in a gathering mist. Whenever a tram passed over the bridge, the overhead cable suspended below the top of the steel threw off bright, greenish sparks. Looking east, one could see the warehouses of foreign firms on the waterfront of Pootung like huge monsters crouching in the gloom, their lights twinkling like countless tiny eyes. To the west, one saw with a shock of wonder on the roof of a building a gigantic neon sign in flaming red and phosphorescent green: LIGHT, HEAT, POWER! ... The towering skyscrapers, their countless lighted windows gleaming like the eyes of devils, seemed to be rushing down on him like an avalanche at one moment and vanishing at the next. The smooth road stretched before him, and street lamps flashed past on either side, springing up and vanishing in endless succession. A snake-like stream of black monsters, each with a pair of blinding lights for eyes, their horns blaring, bore down upon him, nearer and nearer!<sup>23</sup>

The picture here is quite stimulating, full of montages of color, sound, and movements. Part of it is observed by a traditionalist who has entered a modern city for the first time, which naturally appears to be shocking and even terrifying. For Mao Dun, this Shanghai is part of the contemporary social panorama and he had no intention to romanticize it. Revealing its bizarre and alien nature has become a necessary step for further social criticism in his work. In comparison, the night of Shanghai in *Changhenge* almost feels like being written by a lover of the city:

The party – what the Shanghainese call *paitui* – is the very life of the Shanghai night. Neon lights and dance halls form the outer shell of this sleepless city, but its soul is the party. Parties lie at the innermost core of the city, behind quiet shady boulevards in the parlors of Western-style residences; The pleasure they impart is wrapped in people's hearts. The lights at these parties are always dim, casting shadows that whisper the language of the heart. But this language of the heart speaks with a European accent, in classical and romantic styles. And the life of the Shanghai party is always the proper young lady; she is the center. Myriad passions play out in silence; romance lies deep under the skin. Forty years hence, no one will

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<sup>23</sup> Mao Dun 茅盾, *Ziye* 子夜 (*Midnight*), trans. Hsu Meng-hsiung and A. C. Barnes (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1979), 1-8. Mao Dun 茅盾, *Ziye* 子夜 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2002), 3-10.

remember these passions and this romance; in fact, no one will be able even to imagine what it had been like. The passion and romance of that era was a dynasty; splendid and glorious, it was a heavenly kingdom. The Shanghai skies mourn; they bemoan the loss of that passion and romance. The Shanghai wind tantalizes, and the waters surrounding her were a washed-out carmine.<sup>24</sup>

The tone of this part is quite warm and gentle, like reciting a loving memory. You might have the impression that the author used the filter to purify the complex reality and only left those soft and charming elements. The choice of perspective is also intriguing since it is not how the protagonist perceives her current situation, but how the narrator looks back at a lost golden age, thus the “forty years” time gap. At the core of this highly romanticized depiction (as well as the whole novel) is a strong sense of nostalgia.

As mentioned before, despite the superficial similarity, Wang Anyi’s writing, especially *Changhenge* is different from Eileen Chang’s at its core. What essentially distinguishes Wang from Chang is this sense of nostalgia. For Eileen Chang, behind the veil of all the glory and flamboyance are the ever-lasting cruel and bleak facts of life. She will not indulge herself in a dream that is inevitably going to end. But for Wang Anyi, or more accurately, for the characters created by her, that splendid dream, despite being vapory and transient, is worth pursuing and holding on to. “How truly marvelous! The scent of the carnations would linger as they lay in slumber for the next forty years.”<sup>25</sup> The rest of life of Wang Qiyao has been painted with this layer of dreamy glory that she (as well as the narrator) refuses to get rid of. Ironically, unlike Eileen Chang or Fitzgerald (or even Cao Xueqin if we expand our sight) who have had first-hand experience with that marvelous age or the lost magnificence, Wang Anyi never witnessed that sort of splendor in person and the nostalgia in her work ends up being purely based on cultural

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<sup>24</sup> Wang Anyi 王安忆, *The Song*, 54; *Changhenge* 长恨歌, 52-53.

<sup>25</sup> Wang Anyi 王安忆, *The Song*, 74; *Changhenge* 长恨歌, 71.

imagination. Sometimes Wang also attempts to replicate Chang's piercing insight into the transiency of life, so we get to see sentences like "with the splendor of the moment came the pain of loss – tomorrow she would see the withered flowers carried away down the flowing rapids"<sup>26</sup> or "perhaps one always came out empty-handed after putting on a wedding dress – perhaps a wedding dress is actually a gown of mourning."<sup>27</sup> But these depictions simply feel jarring and out of place with all the dreamy talk of attachment to that wonderful past. They are more like the result of the author's urge to deepen the theme of her work instead of something that would naturally grow within the characters in the story.

As we can see, the author has meticulously introduced both the protagonist and the city she lives in while trying to form a close relationship between them. The side effect is that Wang Qiyao might have carried a little too much expectation. She is an intriguing character, but not always a believable character since she is filled with too many ideas the author wanted to convey, some of which tend to contradict each other. Sometimes the narrator wishes to emphasize her affinity to everyday life. When she wins third place in the Miss Shanghai competition, the narrator says: "Miss Third Place therefore best expresses the will of the people. The beauty queen and the first runner-up are both idols, representing our ideals and beliefs. But Miss Third Place is connected to our everyday lives: she is a figure that reminds us of concepts like marriage, life, and family."<sup>28</sup> At the same time, the narrator never ceases the attempt to idealize her character to the point of making her the central element of the city's charm: "supposing there was no Wang Qiyao, the parties would become nothing but hollow, heartless affairs, perfunctory displays of splendor. She was the most meaningful part of this passion and romance. She was that desire that lurks in the

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<sup>26</sup> Wang Anyi 王安忆, *The Song*, 75; *Changhenge* 长恨歌, 72.

<sup>27</sup> Wang Anyi 王安忆, *The Song*, 75; *Changhenge* 长恨歌, 73.

<sup>28</sup> Wang Anyi 王安忆, *The Song*, 77; *Changhenge* 长恨歌, 74.

soul.”<sup>29</sup> As a result, she is conveniently described as different figures according to the need of the narrative. Su Tong has compared Wang Qiyao to a lamp in his commentary on the novel: “In the long period from 1946 to 1985, this lamp switches between light and dark mode. The changeable social reality is like the unsteady voltage that causes the instability of the light source.”<sup>30</sup> But the change of the social context might not be the only reason that affects the light mode of Wang Qiyao, the multiple intentions of the narrative also play an important role here. After winning the competition, Wang Qiyao has had a short romance with Mr. Cheng, the photographer who invites her to join the beauty pageant in the first place. She eventually chooses to become the mistress of director Li, an influential political figure, and settles in an apartment prepared for her. The name of the apartment is Alice and the narrator has tirelessly articulated the underlying meaning of this place its residents:

Like a woman’s heart, Alice Apartments is made up of countless silken filaments: on the walls, the windows, the beds, the floors, the tables and chairs; in sewing boxes, in makeup cases, in the clothes hanging up in the closet, threading in and out of golden and silvery beads ... The women in Alice Apartments are not born, nor have they been brought up by their parents: free spirits, their bodies are the essence of heaven and earth. They are wind-borne seeds, disseminated from the sky, that grow into wild, rambling plants. They spread in all directions, putting down roots wherever there is soil; they do not adhere to principles, nor do they fit any mold; they have an irrepressible urge to live, and dying they have no regrets ... These women spend their entire lives trying to display their beauty for a brief season, like flowers that blossom only once every hundred years. What a splendid sight when these flowers bloom! They have made themselves beauty’s emissaries – beauty is glorious, even if the glory is as fleeting as passing clouds, gorgeous dusk clouds that enfold the entire earth.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Wang Anyi 王安忆, *The Song*, 54; *Changhenge* 长恨歌, 53

<sup>30</sup> Su Tong 苏童, “Wang Qiyao de guangmang” 王琦瑶的光芒, *Yangzijiang pinglun* 扬子江评论, no. 5 (2016), 13.

<sup>31</sup> Wang Anyi 王安忆, *The Song*, 112; *Changhenge* 长恨歌, 112.



From here we could sense the tension between the two different modes the narrative establishes to conceive the character of Wang Qiyao. The narrator repeatedly reminds us of her capability of representing the concept of every life, of marriage and family. But on the other hand, she is also portrayed as this free spirit that is brave enough to break from the social norm and embrace the fleeting glory. The two different images of Wang Qiyao could be reconciled with each other if the theme of the novel is a normal girl pursuing unordinary goals in her life. But according to the story so far and what would come in the following part, she is not that ordinary to begin with. The narrator wishes to emphasize the everyday aesthetic in her character while elevating her to the level of representing the central attractiveness of the splendor of old Shanghai. The fissure caused by these contradictory intentions would persist through the rest of the plotlines.

The second part of the novel features the life after the establishment of the socialist regime. David Der-wei Wang considered this part as the essence of the book, praising its combination of appealing daily life and a hidden sense of crisis.<sup>32</sup> Upon further scrutiny, we might find that there is a bit too much idealization of everyday life and not enough depiction of the crisis when taking the historical background into account. The detailed representation of ordinary life scenarios is indeed the most memorable and charming part here especially since the narrator restrains herself from the abundant abstract statements of the character's special traits and turns to the demonstration of the small but plausible fragments found in the mundane city life. Compared to Mao Dun's naturalistic obsession with details in his depiction of Shanghai, *Changheng* has too many analyses and assertions about its social context and it is in this part that we get to experience the atmosphere the city possesses according to the narrator's claim, such as the following lovely scene:

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<sup>32</sup> David Der-wei Wang 王德威, *Dangdai xiaoshuo ershi jia*, 42.

This was the winter of 1957. The large world outside was undergoing shattering upheavals, but the small world around the stove existed in a remote corner, or perhaps a crack, of the large world, forgotten and, for this reason, safe. What a lovely scene it was – the snow drifting outside, the stove burning inside. They thought up all kinds of delightful things they could do with the stove, roasting Korean dried fish, baking pastries, scalding thinly sliced mutton in a pot of water, boiling noodles, and so forth. Gathered around the stove, they chatted, ate, and drank. Lunch, afternoon snacks, and dinner rolled into one long meal. The sun on those snowy days was of little consequence, the hours no longer mattered, time became infinite ... Only the fire in the stove flared up to warm them with a sudden intensity. At this moment, all desires converged into a longing to nuzzle up to each other; nothing else seemed to matter. The firmament itself might collapse, the earth swallows them up, but what of that? Tomorrow ceased to matter and so did yesterday.<sup>33</sup>

These vivid words reveal a core feature of the attitude toward life of Shanghai, which seeks consolation and salvation in mundane enjoyment.<sup>34</sup> Regardless of the turbulence that is taking place in the current world, people could still find hope and joy in domestic life, which shelters them from the cold and dark outside and provides them with small but tangible comfort. “All they talked about was the sweetness of the chestnuts, the aroma of the melon seeds, the richness of the dumplings, the smoothness of the fermented rice, and the tenderness of the eggs; then conveniently neglected to mention the bitterness of the ginkgo nuts.”<sup>35</sup> It is these lovely small things that give the characters in the book the way to forget sorrow and anxiety and seize the bright side of life. The author has revealed her intention of revolting against the grand historical scheme with these tiny yet vigorous elements: “But do not look down on even the most minute of things; for with the coming of daybreak, even the tiniest particles of dust in this world sing and dance in the sunlight.”<sup>36</sup> The issue is, the demonstration of the power of resistance of small things could be a compelling

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<sup>33</sup> Wang Anyi 王安忆, *The Song*, 193-198; *Changheng* 长恨歌, 199-205.

<sup>34</sup> Cui Zhiyuan 崔志远, “Xunzhao Shanghai” 寻找上海, *Journal of Hebei Normal University*, no. 1 (2012): 96-97.

<sup>35</sup> Wang Anyi 王安忆, *The Song*, 198; *Changheng* 长恨歌, 205.

<sup>36</sup> Wang Anyi 王安忆, *The Song*, 199; *Changheng* 长恨歌, 206.

narrative device, but it requires a convincing context in which the aesthetic of daily life is tested and challenged by the grand history and its ideology. In this case, we do not get to the confrontation between the two, and this kind of comforting lifestyle seems to exist in a bubble, separating it from the chaotic reality. If writers like Mo Yan and Yu Hua created a dystopia of human atrocity in their writings of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Chinese history, Wang Anyi on the other hand built a utopia based on mundane aesthetics in *Changhenge* by excluding the historical context.

The trace of several influential historical events can still be found in the novel, but their effect on the main characters have been greatly reduced. Take, for example, the disastrous consequence of the three years of great famine.<sup>37</sup> Granted, the residents in the big cities did not suffer as much misery as those who lived in rural areas, but in the story, we see the characters simply treat it as some kind of minor inconvenience and even joke about it. For example, Wang Qiyao's lover Kang Mingxun 康明逊 explains to her that in the past few months he has been waiting in line all day to get into various restaurants and holding a place in line for the rest of his family. "Everyone talks about there not being enough to eat, but I feel like all I do all day long is eat!"<sup>38</sup> As for Wang Qiyao herself, she always seems to be able to get help from other male companions regardless of the situation. After breaking up with Kang Mingxun due to his family's rejection of her, she runs into her old friend Mr. Cheng and he begins to move in with her to take care of her life. It is quite a contrast with the beginning of the novel where Wang Qiyao is described as a normal girl, a representative of the ordinary female characters in the city but now she is someone who is a source of jealousy on the part of her neighbors, the real ordinary people of Shanghai:

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<sup>37</sup> It was a period between 1959 and 1961 in the history of the People's Republic of China, characterized by widespread famine. The main causes for the famine were human errors instead of natural ones, including the policies of the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962) and the establishment of people's communes.

<sup>38</sup> Wang Anyi 王安忆, *The Song*, 252; *Changhenge* 长恨歌, 260.

Wang Qiyao had long been relegated to the category of “one of *those* women,” and that was enough to satisfy the curiosity of the people who lived there. Every street in Shanghai like Peace Lane had at least one of *those* women. They used to all be concentrated in the Alice Apartments, but had had to disperse due to changing circumstances. When couples who lived on Peace Lane got into squabbles over everyday things, one could often hear the wife protest, “I might just as well go off and live like that woman Wang Qiyao over in no. 39!” Whereupon the husband would sneer: “Really? Have you got what it takes?” That would always shut the wife up.<sup>39</sup>

From this quotation, we could see that Wang Qiyao is no longer an ordinary Shanghai girl but a social butterfly envied by other residents. But this transformation is given little setup and explanation in the story. She just seems to suddenly to possess all the charm and fortune that attract an endless stream of admirers. When she claims that “all my life I’ve had no one to rely on but myself,”<sup>40</sup> it sounds even more ironic since we have already witnessed her constant reliance on her male companions. She chooses to become a mistress (more than once) when she is still young and beautiful and has a relatively good living standard, which is not a typical phenomenon among normal Shanghai girls. They might not have a very high moral standards, but they would seldom sell their bodies unless out of despair.<sup>41</sup> We rarely get to see Wang Qiyao’s inner struggles or conflicts; she just accepts her life path with satisfaction and embraces all the sensual enjoyment. It would be understandable if she were conceived of as a material and superficial figure, but she is portrayed as the heart of the good old times by the narrator and perceived as such by other characters. Kang Mingxun’s feeling towards her is a good example:

The real Wang Qiyao finally rose up from behind all of those secrets; her face, her smile, all came to life for him ... He felt the joy and excitement of having something restored to him. *This is now an entirely different city, he thought to himself, the street names have changed, the buildings and streetlights are but the shell of their*

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<sup>39</sup> Wang Anyi 王安忆, *The Song*, 239; *Changhenge* 长恨歌, 248.

<sup>40</sup> Wang Anyi 王安忆, *The Song*, 254; *Changhenge* 长恨歌, 262.

<sup>41</sup> Xu Xiuming 徐秀明, “Wenhua chongtu yu xushi cuowei” 文化冲突与叙事错位, *Academic Monthly*, no. 7 (2017): 128.

*former selves, their core melted away and replace.* In the past even the breeze whispered of romantic longings, and the parasol trees told stories as they waved in the wind; now the breeze is nothing but dead air and the trees mere bark and leaves, all their magical charm overthrown. He had tried to keep up with the times, but his heart was still trapped in the past, leaving him hollowed out and empty. But Wang Qiyao was a true relic of the past; she would be able to help him steal his heart back from yesterday.<sup>42</sup>

If the former romantic essence is represented by Wang Qiyao, then it simply lacks depth and weight, like a romanticized dream covering up the shallow truth. She never experiences real torment in her life and the so-called vicissitudes felt by herself are just flimsy grief for the loss of an idealized past mixed with frivolous self-pity.

If the story is just about a character that detaches from mundane life, then the absence of certain historical elements could be justified. But *Changheng* has made a great effort to reveal the value of everyday life and tried to connect the fate of the protagonist with the city and the time. The disturbance caused by the Cultural Revolution is mentioned in the novel, but it is severely downplayed and ends abruptly with Mr. Cheng's suicide. Like all the other places at the time, there is no convincing reason that Shanghai should remain a safe heaven.<sup>43</sup> Considering Wang Qiyao's background (a former mistress of a political figure of the enemy party who has an illegitimate daughter by an unknown father), it is puzzling that she could stay unaffected throughout this ubiquitous political storm since even people with a spotless past would easily be framed. As mentioned before, the author has transformed Shanghai into a utopia even during the revolutionary era, which not only harms the character development of the protagonist but also undermines the book's goal of providing a faithful portrait of the city. The drastic changes the city and its residents' lifestyle underwent after the establishment of the socialist regime have been largely ignored in

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<sup>42</sup> Wang Anyi 王安忆, *The Song*, 204-205;

<sup>43</sup> Xu Xiuming 徐秀明, "Wenhua chongtu yu xushi cuowei" 文化冲突与叙事错位, *Academic Monthly*, no. 7 (2017): 131.

favor of “the private nostalgic fantasy.”<sup>44</sup> The narrow scope of the narrative contradicts the novel’s ambition of showcasing the history of the city. Despite the praise for its “unrelenting socioeconomic analysis worthy of Balzac,”<sup>45</sup> we rarely get to see the specific details of real social life. Wang Qiyao is after all only a working-class woman, but most of the time she lives like a worry-free noble female, oblivious of the grand historical changes taking place around her. The issue would not be so conspicuous if the narrator does not try to exaggerate the sorrow and suffering in her life out of proportion and elevate them to an unsuitable degree:

The exultations and lamentations of 1965 were all like this, grand in an insignificant way. Tempests in a teacup, they yet had a beginning and an end, and were enough to take up a whole lifetime. The noises they made were petty and weak; even exerting their greatest effort, they were unable to make the sound carry. Only when holding one’s breath could one hear the faint buzzing and droning, but each sound was enough to last a lifetime. Gaining strength in numbers, they converge into a large mass hovering over the city sky. They form what is known as a “silent sound,” which sings its melody above the raucous noises of the city. One calls it a “silent sound” because it is tremendously dense and enormously large, its size and density equal to if not exceeding its “silence.” The same method is found in traditional Chinese landscape paintings, where shading and texture in rocks and mountains are created by using light strokes of ink. And so, this “silent sound” is, in truth, the greatest of all sounds, because it is where sound itself begins.<sup>46</sup>

Readers might find that this paragraph, along with many other statements in the book, have created an all-compassing picture and serves as a detailed representation of the author’s comprehension of the spirit of the time. However, it often fails to match what the actual story content could deliver. The narrator wishes to capture the essence of the changing society while the narrative itself focuses too much on creating a beautiful illusion of the past golden age.

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<sup>44</sup> Mou Xianfeng 牟仙凤, “One Hundred Years of Solitary Light: Rites of Passage for Modern American and Chinese Women Writers, 1899-1996,” PhD diss., (Purdue University, 2009), 409.

<sup>45</sup> Xudong Zhang 张旭东, “Praise for the Book” in *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow: A Novel of Shanghai*, trans. Michael Berry and Susan Chan Egan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), back cover.

<sup>46</sup> Wang Anyi 王安忆, *The Song*, 279-280; *Changhenge* 长恨歌, 286.

The third part of the novel features the time after the revolutionary era and the return of bourgeois aesthetics, but the basic theme is still nostalgia and melancholy. Despite the resurrection of fashion and commodity, Wang Qiyao is troubled by the vulgarity of this time, even feels that “people were much better off during the Cultural Revolution, when they had to wear the same blue cloth jackets rather than these outlandish outfits that did not fit them. At least back then they had the elegance of simplicity.”<sup>47</sup> The messy and disgraceful aspects of the new era listed in the book are exaggerated by her nostalgia for the good old days and hostility towards the rapid advancement of the present. The same issues also existed in the past, but they have been filtered out by her memory, just like all the real turbulence and cruelty of history has been deflected from her by the plot armor given by the narrator. The absence of true crises in a story involving the lengthy life experience of an individual also lets the narrative eschew the difficult yet worthwhile challenge of exploring the intense struggle and potential growth of the character. If you would like the readers to sympathize with the protagonist, you need to convincingly show her sorrow and loss. Otherwise, her constant lamentation for trivial matters will just become a form of self-pity. The narrative keeps emphasizing the valuable quality that enables her to transcend the mundane realm: “Don’t belittle the fact that they put their hearts into a few articles of clothing ... To them, clothing is life itself. You might accuse them of vanity, but if they were not supported by an inner strength, they would not be able to sustain the external beauty.”<sup>48</sup> Sadly, since Wang Qiyao is spared from most of the hardship that would befall a normal person during her forty years of life experience as portrayed in the book, her inner strength barely gets an opportunity to shine. As a result, her external beauty might seem superficial and fragile as she never truly fights for the right to deserve it. And her

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<sup>47</sup> Wang Anyi 王安忆, *The Song*, 302; *Changhenge* 长恨歌, 305-306.

<sup>48</sup> Wang Anyi 王安忆, *The Song*, 311; *Changhenge* 长恨歌, 315.

continuous indulgence in the romantic imagination of the past, although sincere, ends up being a little fussy and melodramatic. The story finishes with Wang Qiyao's sudden death; she is murdered by a friend of her daughter. As Su Tong pointed out, the ending could be seen as a metaphor for the vanishing of the bourgeois dream under the siege of the proletarian crowd.<sup>49</sup> But the rarefied social-political background and the idealized setting that detaches itself from the real historical context up until the very end have rendered it not so believable. Unlike the suicide of madame Bovary<sup>50</sup> which naturally reveals her disillusionment and the cruel truth of life, the murder of Wang Qiyao is more like an accident, an abrupt plot device to force a sense of tragedy into her otherwise smooth and ostentatious life.

*Changhenge* is a beautiful and sophisticated portrait of the life of a woman, the problems with it stem from the novel's ambition to want to become more than that. Works like James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) have proven that a modern everyday setting can also deliver the greatness of an epic theme, one just needs to find a way to go beyond the triviality and construct a consistent tone and style. In that regard, *Changhenge* has achieved a partial success. Its attempt to find higher value in mundane aesthetics and to transcend the ordinary existence by capturing the spirit of a splendid past is what grants it a certain quality of *shishi*. On the other hand, it tries to establish a monument for the little tradition<sup>51</sup> consisting of personal and everyday experience to challenge the great tradition of historical advancement and the ideology of progress. However, the boundary between personal and official history, between individual and social space is not always that clear. By concentrating too much on the little details and pleasures of the private sphere, the story evades

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<sup>49</sup> Su Tong 苏童, "Wang Qiyao de guangmang" 王琦瑶的光芒, *Yangzijiang pinglun* 扬子江评论, no. 5 (2016), 15.

<sup>50</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: A Study of Provincial Life*, trans. Rosemary Lloyd (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 331-333.

<sup>51</sup> Vincenzo Petrucci, "Review of *Peasant Society and Culture: An Anthropological Approach to Civilization* by Robert Redfield," *American Anthropologist*, no. 2 (April 1957): 352-353.



the important confrontation between the individual persistence and historical turbulence, missing the potential to deepen the connotation of the narrative. The abundant historical judgments and serious social analyses throughout the book, ironically similar to the grand narrative they apparently fight against, lack an organic connection with the frivolous daily matters that compose the majority of the story. Despite these flaws, the author indeed managed to pave the way for an alternative narrative of history based on the female protagonist's desire and determination to build and preserve her own life aesthetics. Striving for something unique and monumental might not always lead to the ideal result, Wang Anyi's determination to create a novel for Shanghai is still commendable. After all, instead of focusing on failure, "it is much more important to discover the truth and the genius which lie beneath the false form and within the artificial connections."<sup>52</sup>

#### 4.2 A Touch of God

One of the difficulties faced by female writers who try to deal with grand themes and topics is how to maintain their unique traits and perspective and avoid overly relying on the dominant model established by male writers. As shown in the analysis of *Changheng* in the last part, Wang Anyi attempted to write an ode for the little tradition composed of personal and everyday experiences in contrast to the orthodox historical narration focusing on progress and great social events. But the way she built this little tradition was by imitating the rhetoric of the great tradition, borrowing its oversimplified and idealized method of turning reality into an ideological scheme. As a result, she transformed the mundane life sphere into an aesthetic utopia, which is not unlike the socialist myth promised by revolutionary discourse, both to a certain degree ignore the real-life dark elements and imperfections in favor of an optimistic belief in either past glory or future

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<sup>52</sup> Friedrich Engels, "Engels to Conrad Schmidt in Zurich" (November 1, 1891). Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, 414.

prosperity. Her writing practice demonstrates the tension created from the act of integrating everyday narrative into a grander historical setting. Combining the individual female experience with the public or collective life experience indeed appears to be an ideal way of expanding the female writers' artistic field,<sup>53</sup> however, it runs the risk of their losing their own colors when trying to implement social-historical interpretations.

A possible solution to this dilemma is to confront the orthodox narration of history with a sarcastic and light-hearted attitude, as showcased by Yan Geling 严歌苓 (1958—) and her novel *Yige nüren de shishi* 一个女人的史诗 (A Woman's Epic). Despite its title, there is no intention on the part of the author to adopt the elevated style and solemn themes that are common for traditional epic literature, nor does the work assimilate to the genre to gain reverence and recognition. Instead, it reverses the readers' expectation by making fun of such a concept, questioning its legitimacy, and in deconstructing its serious nature by audaciously promoting values that are usually considered as its antithesis. On the title page of the book, Yan Geling stated that "a woman's love history is her epic. The fate of the nation often serves as a foil to her epic, especially for an emotional person like Tian Sufei. Her longing for love is so strong that other things become vague in her eyes. She has no idea what has happened in history outside her."<sup>54</sup> It would be reasonable to assume that the author has taken the revolutionary historical novels during the 1950s and 60s as the target of her homage and parody. As mentioned in the previous chapters, those literary works are often compared to *shishi* for their focus on the heroic characters and great social movements. Romance and love relationships are also featured in their stories but they are

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<sup>53</sup> Zhao Yanfang 赵彦芳, "Lun nuxing zuojia de shishixing shuxie" 论女性作家的史诗性书写, *Yangzijiang pinglun* 扬子江评论, no. 5 (2016): 84.

<sup>54</sup> Yan Geling 严歌苓, *Yige nüren de shishi* 一个女人的史诗 (Xi'an: Shaanxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2011), 3.

always secondary to the main plot. The characters involved in the romance would never claim the right for their emotional needs and would consider devotion to the socialist cause to be their top priority, terminating the relationship without hesitation when it is at odds with that higher purpose. In *Yige nüren de shishi*, the love story of the female protagonist moves to the center of the stage with the whole narrative centering around her decades-long persistent and resolute effort at gaining the love of her aloof husband, whom she blindly and unrepentantly fell in love with from the beginning. A large portion of the novel takes place in the revolutionary era, featuring a lot of important social movements and their turbulent and complex influences on people's life. They ultimately serve as the background to the main characters' personal drama since the heroine is unable to comprehend the officially claimed ideology, being only obsessed with her own quest to pursue emotional consolation and satisfaction. To some degree, this book could be appreciated within the literary tradition of mock-epic.<sup>55</sup> It is a humorous deconstruction and reimagination of the classic revolutionary historical novel. And unlike many Chinese new historical novels that tend to deny the meaning of historical narrative and hold a somewhat nihilistic perspective towards life, *Yige nüren de shishi* still confirms the value of human emotion (even if it may seem like obsession or blind impulse at times) and points to a way that might lead to the potential salvation through mutual understanding and love, despite all the hardship we have to endure in life.

In comparison to both Wang Anyi and Yan Geling, Chi Zijian 迟子建, another famous Chinese female writer has provided something unique in terms of handling the literary recreation of collective experience and memory in her novel *Eerguna he you'an* 额尔古纳河右岸 (The

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<sup>55</sup> Mock-epic or mock-heroic works are typically satires or parodies that mock common Classical stereotypes of heroes and heroic literature. One of its literary devices is to put a fool in the role of the hero. In the case of *Yige nüren de shishi*, the usual enthusiasm for furthering the cause of revolution and socialism is replaced by heroine's equal zeal for impressing and caring for her loved one. For more information on the genre itself, see Encyclopedia Britannica Editors, "Mock-Epic," *Britannica*, January 6, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/art/mock-epic>.

Right Bank of the Argun River(2005).<sup>56</sup> This book (it has won a *Mao Dun Wenxue Jiang* 茅盾文学奖 [Mao Dun Literature Prize] in 2008) tells the legend-like story of a group of *Ewenkezu* 鄂温克族 (Evenki people) over the past century. In China, the Evenki form one of the 56 ethnic groups officially recognized by the PRC, with a small population of a bit more than 30 thousand in China, another 30 thousand or so in Russia, and a tiny population in Mongolia. In the past few decades, like many other ethnic minorities that used to live a primitive life, they are faced with increased pressure brought upon them by modern civilization. Many of the Evenki people could not get used to living in the new settlements built by the government and choose to return to their old lifestyle of migrating through the forests. Chi Zijian visited these indigenous people, listened to their tales, and spent three months reading related research materials about their history and customs before writing the novel.<sup>57</sup> Unlike other literary works featured in this thesis so far, *Eerguna he you'an* provides us with the opportunity to dive into a field that has been long ignored by the mainstream narratives of modern Chinese history. The discourses of enlightenment, revolution, and the pursuit for a modernized strong nation have mostly defined the landscape of the historical imagination of 20<sup>th</sup> century China. They have become a form of the collective unconscious for intellectuals and writers of both rural and urban origins and even those who seek alternative routes need to tackle them and cannot escape their basic framework. The Evenki are outsider of that framework; they exist in their own realm and have little awareness of the major social progress that has taken place in the civilized world beyond the mountains and forests where they have dwelt for thousands of years. From a geographical standpoint, they are indeed Chinese.

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<sup>56</sup> Originally the English translator Bruce Humes translated the title of Chi Zijian's novel literally as *The Right Bank of the Argun River*, but the Harvill Secker Press changed it into *The Last Quarter of the Moon*. This thesis uses my own translations from the Chinese version and will keep its original title since it summarizes the theme of the whole book better.

<sup>57</sup> Chi Zijian 迟子建, "Cong shanluan dao haiyang" 从山峦到海洋, Shutxt, January 6, 2022, <https://www.shutxt.com/sw/9227/522713.html>.

But their culture and way of living are so unique and so different from the major part of the nation that our awareness of their situation may challenge our stagnated understanding of this nation's history and open our eyes to new possibilities in terms of both literature and ethnography.

As shown in the first chapter, efforts have been made to analyze the cultural factors contributing to the lack of the epic in the Chinese literary tradition. The ancient Chinese tended to focus on practical social matters and the underdeveloped religious system led to the absence of tension between humans and gods.<sup>58</sup> The advocacy of rational thinking and the repression of religious and mystical tendencies, as summarized by Li Zehou 李泽厚 (1930-2021) as “Pragmatic Reason,”<sup>59</sup> has been the central trait of Chinese culture since a very early age. Thus, legends and myths were largely cast aside in favor of the faithful recording and moral interpretation of historical events. This might also explain why epic-like literature was preserved in many ethnic minority groups that were deemed as *manyi* 蛮夷 (barbarians) by the orthodox Chinese nation at the time since they were less subjective to the influence of that kind of cultural model. The Evenki are not known to have full-scale epic poems like the Tibetans or the Mongols, but they have their own pantheistic religion and the strong connection with nature and spiritual beings is an integral part of their cultural identity. Classic Chinese literature has its unique view of nature and reaching harmony between the natural and human worlds is one of its important motifs. Modern Chinese literature since the May Fourth movement, however, has had an increasing focus on social-political issues at the cost of the shrinkage of any natural dimension in literary representation.<sup>60</sup> The

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<sup>58</sup> Zhu Guangqian 朱光潜, *Collected Works of Zhu Guangqian* 朱光潜全集, Vol 8 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008), 125.

<sup>59</sup> Li Zehou 李泽厚, *Pragmatic Reason & A Culture of Optimism* 实用理性与乐感文化 (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2005), 3-54.

<sup>60</sup> Liu Zaifu 刘再复 and Lin Gang 林岗, *Sin and Literature* 罪与文学 (Beijing: Zhongxin chubanshe, 2011), 272-278.

exploration of this natural dimension in literature may elevate the motifs of the narrative, making it transcend the mundane life and question the meaning of the existence of human beings. The concern of the fate of the whole of humanity is way of showing the pursuit for totality in *shishi*, as has already been shown in the first chapter.

In *Eerguna he you'an*, we can feel the prominent presence of nature from the very beginning: “I am an old friend of rain and snow and I am over ninety years old. Rain and snow have witnessed my aging just as I have watched them grow old.”<sup>61</sup> The narrator of the story, “I”, is the wife of the last chieftain of the Evenki tribe, who has lived in the forest for all of her life. She is one of the few people who insist on staying at the tribe’s old campsite when all the other members have moved to the new settlement beneath the mountain. “I” continues to talk about her affinity with the natural environment and the unaccustomed feeling invoked by a modern lifestyle:

I am not willing to sleep in a house where you cannot see stars. All my life I have been accompanied by stars during the dark night. If I wake up at midnight and stare at the pitch-black ceiling, I will go blind. My reindeer have made no mistakes and I do not wish to see them live in the “prison.” The deer bell sounds like a flowing stream and without hearing it I will go deaf. My legs are so used to the uneven path in the mountain and if I walk on the flat town road every day, they will degenerate and no longer be able to carry my body, rendering me paralyzed. I always breathe the fresh air of the wild and I will suffocate when taking in the “fart” from those cars in Busu<sup>62</sup>. My body is granted by gods and I have to live in the mountain to return it to them ... Life without fire is cold and dark and I am truly concerned for their well-being. But they tell me that every house in Busu has fire in it and the kindling is no longer needed. But I believe that the fire in Busu is not made from the collision between sickle and rock as those in the forest. There is no sunlight and moonlight in that fire and how could it brighten people’s eyes and hearts?<sup>63</sup>

This paragraph introduces a new perspective that almost seems alien to people living in the civilized world. A lot of poetry and prose has been dedicated to the ideal of living in seclusion

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<sup>61</sup> Chi Zijian 迟子建, *Eerguna he you'an* 额尔古纳河右岸 (Beijing: Beijing shiyue wenyi chubanshe, 2005), 3

<sup>62</sup> Busu 布苏, name of the fictional settlement her tribe moves to.

<sup>63</sup> Chi Zijian 迟子建 *Eerguna he you'an* 额尔古纳河右岸, 3-4.

among the mountains and forests in ancient China, but even then, the concept of returning to nature was more like a way of deliverance for those who were faced with real-life difficulty and who could not achieve their secular goals. For those intellectuals, nature was never meant to be the primal purpose that one should wholeheartedly and unconditionally embrace. But for these Evenki people, living within nature used to be the only feasible and righteous choice and any alternative would have been unimaginable or even profane. They are hunters and migrants whose livelihood heavily depended upon the natural environment, only getting a few essentials through trading with outsiders. They could traverse the wild forests with ease and are familiar with the habit of all the creatures and the subtle signs in their surroundings, which are crucial to their long-term survival. Reindeer are the most valuable animals to them. They completely respect these animal's natural behavior instead of treating them like normal livestock. Following the reindeer's seasonal migration for better food sources is a decisive factor that that meant they would never settle in one spot for too long. They see reindeer as trustworthy companions and this kind of affection is also elaborated on by the narrator:

I have never seen any other animals that are as gentle and tenacious as reindeer. They are big but very flexible. Carrying heavy stuff while traversing forests and swamps seems so easy for them. They are full of valuable parts ... Their milk is the sweetest spring that quenches our thirst in the morning. They are hunters' good helpers and if you put the prey on their back, they will safely transfer it to the camping ground. During migration, they carry all our food and tools while women, children, and the elder also need to ride them. They do not require too much attention from humans and always look for food on their own for the forest is their granary ... They cherish their food. They gently bite the grass while walking through them and that is why the grassland seems unharmed and remains green as before. They eat the leaves of birch and willow with only a few snaps and those trees continue to flourish. They would drink from the river when they feel thirsty in the summer and eat snow in the winter. As long as you tie the bell around their necks, you will be worry-free wherever you go since wolves would be scared away

by the ringing sound. And you can tell where they are by hearing the bell ring in the wind.<sup>64</sup>

Compared with the depiction above, the many plants and animals that have been integrated into classic Chinese literature and art for a long time, are used differently, for they often serve as symbol or metaphor for certain moral qualities or spirit. Bamboo represents adamancy and strong will, Orchids represent elegance and integrity, etc. Rarely do we get to see detailed observation and sincere appreciation for what the creatures simply are. Even in modern Chinese literature, the pure endearment for natural beings is still not that common. This form of unreserved empathy demonstrated in the paragraph above also leads to a deeper spiritual bond: “Reindeer must be granted to us by gods. Without them there will be no us ... Not seeing their eyes is like not seeing the sun during the day and not seeing stars during the night, which will make you sigh from the deep of your heart.”<sup>65</sup> Later in the novel, when government officials try to persuade the Evenki people to settle beneath the mountain and compare the reindeer to pigs and other livestock, they feel offended: “Our reindeer walk on the dew in the summer and are accompanied by flowers and butterflies while eating and can see the fish when drinking; they can spot the buried red beans when removing the snow to eat moss in the winter and hear birds’ twitter. How can you compare them to pigs?”<sup>66</sup>

This precious interconnectedness between humans and nature is a scarce and refreshing sight to see among contemporary literary practices in China. We could often find in historical fiction the exposition of the dire consequence of radical social campaigns such as the Great Leap Forward during the revolutionary era or uncontrolled economic development since the 1980s. But

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<sup>64</sup> Chi Zijian 迟子建, *Eerguna he you'an* 额尔古纳河右岸, 14.

<sup>65</sup> Chi Zijian 迟子建, *Eerguna he you'an* 额尔古纳河右岸, 15.

<sup>66</sup> Chi Zijian 迟子建, *Eerguna he you'an* 额尔古纳河右岸, 158.



such expositions tend to focus on the suffering of individuals and do not treat the land and the ecosystem as an equally important part that needs care and respect. While in this novel the reminder of the significance of preserving natural resources is constant: “We never chop down healthy trees as firewood ... We are not like those Han people that settled in the mountain after us, they love to fell those living trees and cut them into pieces, piled up around their houses. It hurts us to see such a scene.”<sup>67</sup> The conflict here is less about the different lifestyles between nationalities and more about the inevitable incompatibility between pre-modern and modern civilizations. Chi Zijian is a Han Chinese herself, but she makes a great effort to sympathize with the Evenki people. She has been concerned about the challenges of adopting modern life faced by indigenous people around the world for a long time and is openly against the act of judging them with a condescending superiority: “We always play the charitarian while ripping a vivacious life apart, feeling sorry for their misfortune ... we cut through their hearts and complain that the heart is not warm enough and is full of outdated ideas. Isn’t this pervasive apathy among global civilizations the cause for the deepest misery in the world?”<sup>68</sup> Born to a small village located in the Mohe district of Heilongjiang Province in the north-east most part of China not far from the Russian border, Chi Zijian has grown a strong affinity with the surrounding wildland since her childhood. The northeast part of China was deemed as a sacred land during the Qing dynasty by the ruling Manchu people, who originated from there. As a result, the immigration to the northeast was restricted and the land there was not fully developed (or exploited) as it was in central China, leaving its natural environment mostly intact. That also explains why ethnic minorities such as the *Elunchunzu* 鄂伦春族 (Oroqen people) of the region (just like the Evenki far to the south-west)

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<sup>67</sup> Chi Zijian 迟子建, *Eerguna he you'an* 额尔古纳河右岸, 51-52.

<sup>68</sup> Chi Zijian 迟子建, “Cong shanluan dao haiyang” 从山峦到海洋, Shutxt, January 6, 2022, <https://www.shutxt.com/sw/9227/522712.html>.

could keep their nomadic lifestyle until the twentieth century. But the invasion of modern civilization, despite being late and slow when compared to the cases in other regions, eventually arrived.

And it is always difficult to reconcile those two drastically different modes of life. The former chieftain Evan chooses to return to his tribe after living in the army for a long time. His reason is that he cannot bear sleeping in an enclosed house with no way to hear the sound of the wind. And the women others tried to introduce to him as girlfriends all looked too artificial to him. The narrator “I” also disagrees with her husband Varoga about whether they should send their children to school:

In terms of attending school, I and Varoga have different opinions. He thinks that children should learn in the classroom. But I think that children should know how to identify various plants and animals in the mountain and understand how to live with them in harmony, how to read the signs formed by the changing weather. That is also a way of learning. I always cannot believe that we could learn to build a bright and happy world from the textbook, whereas Varoga says that only those who are knowledgeable would be able to see the light of the world. But I think the light is on the petroglyphs near the river, in those trees stand right next to each other, in the dew on a flower, among the stars above the tent, and hanging from the reindeer’s horn. If this kind of light is not light, then what is light?<sup>69</sup>

For someone like “I” that has lived in the forest from the beginning, the civilized way of living just seems strange and confusing. And the issue gets more complicated for the younger generations since they often find themselves in an awkward position where they are tempted by both life paths but have difficulty committing to either of them. The tragic story of the Evenki artist Irina is not entirely fictional but based on the fate of a real-world painter who was a member of the *Aoerguya Ewenke* 敖尔古雅鄂温克(Aoluguya *Evenki*) of Inner Mongolia, named Liu Ba 柳芭 (1963-2003).

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<sup>69</sup> Chi Zijian 迟子建, *Eerguna he you'an* 额尔古纳河右岸, 142.

She was talented and showed great promise, but was constantly tormented by her inner struggles, which led to her quitting the job, returning to her birthplace, and being accidentally drowned in a river. Providing a literary representation of her life story is one of the major motivations behind this novel.<sup>70</sup> In the book, Irina is also trapped in a dilemma like her real-world counterpart:

When Irina grows bored in the mountain, she will return to the city with her paintings. But before long she will come back again. She is quite excited every time she returns, claiming that there are too many people in the city and wherever you go, you will run into houses, cars, and dust. That is too boring. She says that getting back to the mountain is great. You can live with the reindeer, see stars while sleeping at night, hear the wind, and all you can see are mountains, streams, flowers, and birds. It is so refreshing. But with life like this for less than one month, she will complain that there is no bar, no telephone, no cinema, nor any bookstore. She will become an alcoholic and gets angry at her painting while being drunk, saying that they are garbage and throwing them into the fire.<sup>71</sup>

Irina's suffering arises from the tension between her old ethnic beliefs and the pursuit of modern material enjoyment. Her tragedy indicates the inevitable decline of the Evenki tradition under the pressure of modernization. Despite a few idealizations in the novel, such as the narrator's distrust of modern medicines, claiming that she is healthy all her life and her doctors are "clear wind and stream, the sun, the moon, and stars,"<sup>72</sup> the author did not attempt to provide a utopian method to magically resolve the persisting conundrums. The sincerity of revealing the problems instead of writing them off for aesthetic purposes adds to the depth and the thought-provoking quality of the narrative. The novel "clearly points out the idea that woman and nature have a distinct mystical bond, the science and technology disturb nature, which is directly proportional to the disturbance

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<sup>70</sup> Chi Zijian 迟子建, "Cong shanluan dao haiyang" 从山峦到海洋, Shutxt, January 6, 2022, <https://www.shutxt.com/sw/9227/522712.html>.

<sup>71</sup> Chi Zijian 迟子建, *Eerguna he you'an* 额尔古纳河右岸, 184.

<sup>72</sup> Chi Zijian 迟子建, *Eerguna he you'an* 额尔古纳河右岸, 159.

of woman.”<sup>73</sup> But it would be too hasty to conclude whether the author takes the anti-technology viewpoint or if she thinks the ideal way is to return to the tradition. After all, it is not literary works’ goal to create solutions, but to make us aware of the complex existence.

Historical novels featuring the fate of ethnic minorities are not exactly rare since the 1990s. For example, *Chenai luoding* 尘埃落定 (The Dust Settles, aka. Red Poppies) by Alai 阿来 (1959—) is based on Tibetan custom and traditions and it also depicts the collapse of those traditions in the modern age. The difference is that *Chenai luoding*, like many other similar themed works, is still narrated from the male perspective. It explores the castration anxiety of the men in charge when they are faced with unprecedented social changes and they treat women as the cause of their dismay.<sup>74</sup> *Eerguna he you’an*, on the other hand, not only employs a female narrator but also strengthens the feminist motif with the help of the Oriental wisdom and “transcends the hierarchical binary thinking by putting more emphasis on ethnic women’s affinity with nature and a harmonious gender relationship.”<sup>75</sup> And from the story, we learn that the male and female members in the Evenki tribe have largely formed an equal partnership. This relationship is no longer maintained by the masculine power rooted in the patriarchal culture but instead strengthened by the mutual emotional attraction and responsibility between the two genders. For example, “I” the narrator, meets her first husband Rajda while being naked and hiding away from a bear in a treehouse. The two of them fall in love at the first sight and Rajda even chooses to leave his own tribe to live with his wife. He also takes her with him when hunting in the forest to spend

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<sup>73</sup> Nazir Muhammad, Lubna Hussain, and Iqbal Khan Ahmadzai, “Woman as embodiment of nature: A cultural ecofeminist analysis of *The Last Quarter of the Moon*,” *Liberal Arts & Social Sciences International Journal*, no. 1 (2021): 579.

<sup>74</sup> Qiao Yigang 乔以钢 and Jing Xinyue 景欣悦, “Gender Narration in the Conflict between National Tradition and Modern Civilization” 民族传统与现代文明纠葛下的现代叙事, *Seeking Truth*, no. 5 (2014): 128-130.

<sup>75</sup> Du Lanlan, “Nature and Ethnic Women: An Ecofeminist Reading of Chi Zijian’s *The Last Quarter of the Moon* and Linda Hogan’s *Solar Storms*,” *Comparative Literature Studies*, no. 4 (2018): 797.

more time with her, despite the tradition that women are usually considered as bad luck for hunters.<sup>76</sup> In this case, women are not deemed as being dependent on men anymore. Both genders respect each other and work together to create their ideal lives. The male-female relationships are depicted in the book in such a way that it is clear that as long as the two sides are able to form this harmonious cooperation, they will be able to conquer obstacles and gain love, trust, and happiness. And if this collaborative pattern is violated, misfortune and regret will befall the couples. In *Eerguna he you'an*, the marriage between Evelyn and Kunde is not based on love and the two of them are constantly torturing each other throughout their lives, leading to their tragic endings. But the freedom of love still has its limitations. After her husband passes away, the mother of the narrator falls in love with Nidu, the shaman of the tribe. Their love is not permitted by the tribal rules and as a result, “they are bound to go mad out of misery.”<sup>77</sup> The cooperative and interdependent relationship is not just an idealization of the author but derives from the history and tradition of the Evenki. Unlike the Tibetan people who once built a powerful dynasty and formed a patriarchal hierarchy just as rigid as that of the Han Chinese, the Evenki retain their nomadic tribal lifestyle and thus need the collaboration of every member to survive the harsh living conditions. Although they are constantly faced with the challenge of the unforgiving environment and unpredictable historical changes, a sense of belongingness to the tribal community provides them with spiritual guidance and hope for salvation, enabling them to bravely fight against disasters and hardship.

As mentioned in previous chapters, similarities between many contemporary Chinese historical novels and Latin American literary works implemented with magical realism have

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<sup>76</sup> Chi Zijian 迟子建, *Eerguna he you'an* 额尔古纳河右岸, 64.

<sup>77</sup> Chi Zijian 迟子建, *Eerguna he you'an* 额尔古纳河右岸, 47.

already been drawn.<sup>78</sup> The former could have been influenced by the latter, but we should also not ignore the unique artistic contribution of Chinese writers. *Eerguna he you'an* does not have too many signs of experimental or avant-garde literary devices and its narrative is in fact quite traditional. The whole novel is formatted as a memoir told by the narrator “I,” a nameless old Evenki woman within the span of a day. Thus, different parts of the book are titled according to the time of a day, from “dusk” to “noon” and “dawn.” Taking advantage of the memoir form, the narrator can sometimes break the linear timeline and insert future events that are yet to befall the characters at a certain points in the story. For example, when the narrator talks about the scene in which she first begins to paint a the rock, she suddenly mentions that if she has not done it, her granddaughter might not have lost her life in the river at such a young age. At that part of the narration, her granddaughter is yet to be born. But this kind of interposed narrative often serves as a diversion to enrich the expressive power of the book while its main structure still follows the temporal order and the narrator’s perspective is still bound by physical rules. She could not experience events before her birth and is unable to remember things clearly when she was too young. Therefore, the scenario of her birth was “told to me by my mother when I grew up.”<sup>79</sup> In works with a more surreal tone, such as *Die Blechtrommel*, the normal rule might not always apply and the protagonist Oscar could vividly describe his thoughts and what he has witnessed during his own birth.<sup>80</sup> Despite the relatively realistic approach, there are still quite a few elements that could be considered as supernatural in the novel, of which the most prominent are linked to shamanism, the religious belief and practice of the Evenki people.

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<sup>78</sup> Jeffrey Kinkley, *Visions of Dystopia in China's New Historical Novels* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 7-8.

<sup>79</sup> Chi Zijian 迟子建, *Eerguna he you'an* 额尔古纳河右岸, 5.

<sup>80</sup> Günter Grass, *Die Blechtrommel*, 16-21.

Throughout the book, we get to see several occasions in which the shaman of the tribe demonstrates their mystical power. One such occasion is when Nidu shaman performs his last ritual dance to convince a Japanese military officer of his ability to perform miracles. The old shaman becomes surprisingly agile and vigorous while dancing and successfully heals the wound in the officer's leg at the cost of the life of his horse. That officer is so impressed by this experience that his farewell words to one of the Evenki people who accompanies him during the retreat of the Japanese army are: "You people are great. Your dance can kill the horse and your music can heal the wound."<sup>81</sup> The shamanic ritual follows the principle of "equal exchange," which means that all the positive effects (healing, resurrection) are achieved through paying price elsewhere. This leads to the tragedy of Nihao, the young female shaman who has to constantly perform rituals to save others (some of them are strangers to the tribe), which always results in the death of her own children. Nihao is devoted to her shamanic duty and sees all lives as equal. She is even willing to contain her sorrow to save someone who has been deemed as irredeemable, knowing that her child will die. Her touching self-sacrifice reveals a dimension of love and forgiveness that has been overshadowed for a long time by the abundant emphasis on the theme of hate, struggle, and fighting back during the revolutionary era. The feminine focus on love and its function of resolving conflicts and building trust, a motif that was explored by female writers like Bing Xin 冰心 (1900-1999) during the May Fourth era<sup>82</sup> was revived through more detailed expositions in this novel. The representation of shamanic culture has become an important part of Chi Zijian's writing since her early works.<sup>83</sup> She is interested in spiritual beings since her childhood due to her familiarity

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<sup>81</sup> Chi Zijian 迟子建, *Eerguna he you'an* 额尔古纳河右岸, 109.

<sup>82</sup> Wu Fuhui 吴福辉, Qian Liqun 钱理群, and Wen Rumin 温儒敏, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue sanshinian* 中国现代文学三十年 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1998), 77-78.

<sup>83</sup> Xiu Lei 修磊, "Lun Chi Zijian xiaoshuo de saman wenhua yinsu" 论迟子建小说的萨满文化因素, *Fujian luntan* 福建论坛, no. 7 (2013): 128-129.

with the beautiful untainted natural environment and the marvelous legends and folklore in her homeland. This pantheistic belief also works wonders with her ecofeminist perspective of striving for a harmonious relationship between humans and nature as well as between different genders and cultural groups.

The added supernatural elements are not just artistic decorations for the story but an integral part of the book's narrative and central theme. The world is viewed through the eyes of the narrator with a layer of animistic glaze. The existence of soul and spirit is considered as common-sense for the Evenki and they believe that there is a higher place where people would go after death. This belief brings consolation to the narrator when she stares at the moon and its reflection in water while remembering her deceased sister: "At that moment I understand that what truly immortal are things in the sky. The reflection in the water, no matter how beautiful it is, is short-lived. Nidu shaman says Lena is with birds in the sky, so she should be in a good place. And I am not afraid of thinking of her anymore."<sup>84</sup> Not only do humans have souls, but all the creatures and even objects and environments also have spiritual essence in their eyes. After being chased by a bear and lost in the wild, the narrator regains the courage of continuing to live while watching the touching moment of a doe tenderly licking the face of her baby deer. She even has a moment of epiphany when drawing her most proud painting on a rock near the river, feeling that she is one with nature and divine beings. "During that moment, I believe that two moons are shining upon the river. One is in the sky, lifted by the god; one is on the rock, lifted by my dream."<sup>85</sup> Moments like this are sprinkled across the whole book, creating a sacred glow that becomes the distinctive bottom color of the narrative, which makes it stand out among other historical novels. The field of

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<sup>84</sup> Chi Zijian 迟子建, *Eerguna he you'an* 额尔古纳河右岸, 31.

<sup>85</sup> Chi Zijian 迟子建, *Eerguna he you'an* 额尔古纳河右岸, 126.



modern Chinese literature is often overshadowed by the discourse of revolution and enlightenment, with ideological infighting and superfluous attention on social-political issues.<sup>86</sup> The in-depth exploration of the spiritual dimension and the human-nature relationship in *Eerguna he you'an* is a valuable supplement to a literary scene oversaturated with ideas of modernization and disenchantment.<sup>87</sup> Borrowing the cultural resources from the Evenki people, a community that largely exists outside the historical progress and calamity in modern China, the book opens a possibility of re-enchantment,<sup>88</sup> conjuring supernatural forces to sustain a way of poetic living in a world dominated by rational thinking and cruel calculation.

The Publisher of the English version of the novel has likened it to the *One Hundred Years of Solitude* of the ethnic minorities in northeast China.<sup>89</sup> This comparison does not indicate a direct literary influence since it would be ridiculous to assume that any contemporary fictional works featuring the fate of a big family over decades are inspired by *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The two works do share thematic similarities in terms of vividly depicting the life of a community isolated from the mainstream civilization across a century. The difference is that in *Eerguna he you'an*, the isolation is not treated as a curse by the author and more like a blessing that has sheltered the Evenki from the invasion of materialist culture. The inevitable withering of the tribal traditions along with its harmonious way of living with nature adds a lot of sentimental value to the beautiful narrative. But this novel is not just an elegy for a fading ethnic minority. Critics often find Chi Zijian's writing difficult to categorize in terms of the popular trends of contemporary

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<sup>86</sup> Liu Zaifu 刘再复 and Lin Gang 林岗, *Sin and Literature* 罪与文学 (Beijing: Zhongxin chubanshe, 2011), 245-248.

<sup>87</sup> Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993): 207-245.

<sup>88</sup> Qiao Yigang 乔以钢 and Jing Xinyue 景欣悦, "Gender Narration in the Conflict between National Tradition and Modern Civilization" 民族传统与现代文明纠葛下的现代叙事, *Seeking Truth*, no. 5 (2014): 127.

<sup>89</sup> Lu Xiaofei 吕晓菲 and Dai Guiyu 戴桂玉, "Chi Zijian zuopin shengtai sixiang de kuawenhua chuanbo" 迟子建作品生态思想的跨文化传播, *Chinese Translators Journal*, no. 4 (2015): 83-87.

Chinese literature.<sup>90</sup> An important reason is that her work provides a new alternative to both ideology-infused and individual-oriented historical narratives. She deals with history, but focuses on the marginal groups and events instead of following the orthodox framework; She loves depicting ordinary people and their lives but avoids falling into the trap of being mundane and trivial by exploring the spiritual realm and the meaning of existence. Her work proves that even without heroic ideals or the belief in historical progress, we can still transcend the status of prosaic life and achieve poetic redemption through rebuilding our lost bonds with nature and its mysterious power.

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<sup>90</sup> Chi Zijian 迟子建 and Guo Li 郭立, “Xiandai wenming de shanghuaizhe” 现代文明的伤怀者, *Nanfang wentan*, no. 1 (2008): 63.

## CHAPTER 5. LIU CIXIN: HISTORIAN OF THE FUTURE

This chapter deals with contemporary Chinese science fiction, a genre that does not seem to relate to historical novels at first glance. Further analysis reveals that Liu Cixin's science-fiction writing of Liu Cixin 刘慈欣 (1963—) enables the reimagination of the historical narrative in a way grander than any traditional novel with realistic settings could ever achieve. It tells the epic story of the struggle and survival of human beings in the space age, building the foundation for a form of *shishi* that transcends the boundaries of nation and civilization.

Although not always prominent, science fiction has been an integral part of the literary history of modern China since the very beginning, even before the May Fourth movement took place. The rudimentary science fiction of the late Qing era tends to blend Western influence with traditional literary genres such as *zhiguai* 志怪<sup>1</sup> and *chuanqi* 传奇,<sup>2</sup> blurring its boundary with that of fantasy writings.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the strong social-political concern that remains a staple of modern Chinese literature had already begun to demonstrate itself in works such as *Xin Zhongguo weilai ji* 新中国未来记 (*The Future of New China*, 1902). Written by Liang Qichao 梁启超 (1873-1829), one of the most influential social activists and intellectuals of his age, this unfinished novel could be seen as a political allegory that aims to build a utopian future for China.<sup>4</sup> The optimistic belief

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<sup>1</sup> That is *Zhiguai xiaoshuo* 志怪小说 (tales of the supernatural), stories of the supernatural, rebirth and reincarnation, gods, ghosts, and spirits which first appear during the Han Dynasty (202 BC – 220 AD and which continue to be popular down to the present. See Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen, eds., *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1: 202).

<sup>2</sup> *Chuanqi* 传奇 (Transmitting the Unusual) was originally the title of a collection of stories about love and the supernatural told in a mixture of prose and rhymed prose called *pianliju* 骈俪句 or *pianwen* 骈文 (couplet texts) compiled by Pei Xing (fl. 878). Chang and Owen, *Cambridge History*, 1: 362. Subsequently the term had just come to mean tales of this type.

<sup>3</sup> David Der-wei Wang, *Fin-de-Siècle Splendor Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1848-1911* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997): 252-258.

<sup>4</sup> David Der-wei Wang, *Fin-de-Siècle*, 301-303.

in positive power and scientific and social progress is reminiscent of the vibes that could be felt by reading the works of Jules Verne (1828-1905). Within the genealogy of Western science fiction, Verne is “the last SF writer who believes in industrialist euphoria,”<sup>5</sup> an ideal that would still be pursued by Chinese intellectuals for generations to come in the twentieth century. The development of Chinese science fiction has experienced some turbulences and been overshadowed by various literary and social movements throughout most of the twentieth century. It is not until the post-revolutionary era that the writing of science fiction has been gradually revived and eventually thrived.<sup>6</sup> Liu Cixin 刘慈欣, the leading figure in contemporary Chinese science fiction writing, is known for his realistic features and his focus on social-historical issues that have distinguished him from other avant-garde or experimental Chinese sci-fi writers. Some describe his style as “neo-classical.”<sup>7</sup> To some degree, he could indeed be deemed as an inheritor of Verne and other great figures from the golden age of Western science fiction due to the optimistic and heroic sentiments contained in his writing. On the other hand, we could also find the representation of the unique Chinese experience in his works just as Luo Yalin has pointed out: “Liu Cixin not only preaches the rationality of science, but has also absorbed the culture of 1950s–70s China and the third-world experience, as well as brand-new scientific elements. He wrote in the method of fable on the relation of science and society and the relation of China and the world, and has thus created a unique style of literature.”<sup>8</sup> As a whole, however, Liu Cixin keeps a distance from the state

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<sup>5</sup> Marc Angenot, “Jules Verne: the Last Happy Utopianist,” in *Science Fiction: A Critical Guide*, ed. Patrick Parrinder (New York: Longman, 1979), 31.

<sup>6</sup> For a concise and comprehensive summary of the history of Chinese science fiction, see Li Guangyi 李广益, “China Turns Outward: On the Literary Significance of Liu Cixin’s Science Fiction,” *Science Fiction Studies*, no. 1 (2019): 1-6., and Gwennaël Gaffric, “Liu Cixin’s *THREE-BODY TRILOGY* and the Status of Science Fiction in Contemporary China,” *Science Fiction Studies*, no. 1 (2019): 22-25.

<sup>7</sup> Wu Yan 吴岩 and Fang Xiaoqing 方晓庆, “Liu Cixin and Neo-classical Science Fiction” 刘慈欣与新古典主义科幻小说, *Journal of Hunan University of Science and Engineering*, no. 2 (2006): 36-39.

<sup>8</sup> Luo Yalin 罗雅琳, “The New Liu Cixin Literature: Science Fiction and the Third World Experience,” *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China*, no. 14 (2020): 255.

ideology and emphasizes the universality of his fiction instead of national identity. This chapter will take Liu Cixin and especially his representative work the trilogy of *Diqiu wangshi* 地球往事 (the remembrance of Earth's past), three novels that are however usually known in Chinese as *San ti* 三体 (three body) and in English as *The Three-Body Problem* (2006-2010)<sup>9</sup> as an example to explore the possible relationship between science fiction and *shishi* in modern China.

One thing that people might wonder about is that since science fiction belongs to genre fiction or popular fiction as opposed to more serious literary fiction, to what extent could the concepts such as *shishi* or “epic” be applied to it? As analyzed in previous chapters, *shishi* is most commonly used as an aesthetic model in the discussion of modern Chinese literature by critics to judge whether a work possesses certain traits. It has less to do with the specific literary form. Just as Luke Arnott argued, the concept could be trans-genre or even transmedia, as long as the object meets the abstract idea of “epicness.”<sup>10</sup> And in the Chinese context, the word *shishi* is often utilized as an adjective to praise works with outstanding characters, be it literature, film, or other art forms. On another note, Liu Cixin's works might lack certain qualities of “serious literature” that are expected by some critics, but criticizing them in that regard would miss the point since challenging the traditional model of literary writing and exploring social and philosophical thoughts have been a staple of his style.<sup>11</sup> This important criterium should be, as I argue herewith, recognized and analyzed accordingly. We should also remember that the underlying meaning and cultural values carried by different genres are not necessarily inherent, nor immutable. On the contrary, they are

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<sup>9</sup> The three novels are: *San ti* 三体 (Three Body), 2006, English translation as *The Three Body Problem* by Ken Liu (New York: Tor Books, 2014); *Hei'an senlin* 黑暗森林 (Dark Forest), 2008. English translation by Joel Martinsen (New York: Tor Books, 2015); *Sisen yongshen* 死神永生 (Death is Immortal), (2010), English translation as *Death's End* by Ken Liu (New York: Tor Books, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> Luke Arnott, “Epic and Genre: Beyond the Boundaries of Media,” *Comparative Literature* 68, no. 4 (December 2016): 361.

<sup>11</sup> Li Yang 李杨, “*Santi yu wenxue*” 《三体》与文学, *Dangdai wentan* 当代文坛, no. 2 (2020): 42.

constantly shifting and are reshaped and reevaluated by both professional scholars as well as public opinions. Lukács hoped that novel could carry the spirit of epic in modern time,<sup>12</sup> but the novel itself was not completely accepted as a serious genre until its peak development in the nineteenth century. Not to mention that in ancient times people might not even have had a strict distinction between popular and high literature. Hence those oral epic poems were supposed to be appreciated and cherished by every member of the tribe or the community. They would have been confused if they were to have seen us putting the concept of epic on a pedestal and considering it to be too sophisticated for any popular taste. In terms of the potential of historical representation, it could be argued that even the imagination of the future has to find its roots in current and past events in order to maintain its relevance. Fredric Jameson spoke highly of the possible significance of science fiction: “The historical novel of the future (which is to say of our own present) will necessarily be science-fictional inasmuch as it will have to include questions about the fate of our social system.”<sup>13</sup> And as will be shown in the following analysis, this kind of reflection upon social existence is a prominent trait that defines Liu Cixin’s sci-fi writing.

Liu Cixin’s writing style is sometimes described as showing certain features of *shishi* by scholars and critics.<sup>14</sup> And the most arresting one among those features is his fixation with “grand narrative.” This term is not to be confused with Lyotard’s theory about the shifting mode of historical perception from the modern to the postmodern era.<sup>15</sup> It is a concept used by Liu Cixin to express his understanding of the duty of science fiction and what makes this genre so unique for him:

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<sup>12</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Theory of The Novel*, 56.

<sup>13</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, 298.

<sup>14</sup> Zhang Yan 章颜, “Jintie dimian de shishixing xiezu” 紧贴地面的史诗性写作, *Journal of Modern Chinese Studies*, no. 5 (2016): 89-95, and Yang Qiong 杨琼, “Kehuan wenxue shishixing de chengxian” 科幻文学史诗性的呈现, *Zhongguo dangdai wenxue yanjiu* 中国当代文学研究, no. 3 (2019): 210-219.

<sup>15</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* xxiv–xxv.

The reason that a literary form could exist is that it has something that other forms could not replace. For science fiction, its expressive method of grand narrative could not be replaced by the literature of realism. For the latter, there is a limit for the narrative on the macro level. If there is a short story that tries to depict the whole historical frame of the Second World War within ten thousand words (which technically could be done), the final product would no longer be considered as ordinary fiction. But science fiction is different since it can create its own historical background. This creation itself is an important part of the writing process of science fiction and one of the biggest appeals of this genre. It enables science fiction to contain a gigantic temporal and spatial span with a relatively small amount of words, creating a grandness that could not be duplicated in other literary forms.<sup>16</sup>

And this grand narrative is what Liu Cixin keeps implementing in his science fiction works, many of which have huge and expansive settings that are not common among normal literary fiction. For example, one of his short stories *Liulang diqiu* 流浪地球 (*The Wandering Earth*), which has been adapted into a blockbuster film with one of the highest box office receipts in China recently, tells the epic journey of human beings transforming the planet earth into a spaceship to escape the unstable sun that is going to explode. The story is narrated from the first-person perspective and includes what the narrator has experienced in about seventy and eighty years of his life. The narrator tends to use flashbacks, interposed narration, and events from history books and documentaries, which he could not have witnessed himself to enrich his tale, creating a more well-rounded picture of his time. The whole migration project of Earth would take 2500 years and the narrator has witnessed the most eventful part of it: from leaving Earth's orbit to departing the solar system. The environment description of the story, from the huge underground city to the harsh surface world, from the Eastern to the Western Hemisphere, reveals a sense of variety and magnificence. Another literary device that contributes to the feeling of *shishi* of Liu Cixin's work is what he called *hongxi jie* 宏细节 (macro detail):

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<sup>16</sup> Liu Cixin 刘慈欣, "Cong *Siniao* kan kehuan de zongjiao ganqing he hongda xushi" 从《死鸟》看科幻的宗教感情和宏大叙事, *Shijie kehuan bolan* 世界科幻博览, no. 6 (2007): 60.

Science fiction is different, it can take the macro depiction of history as its theme ... It is still fiction, the literary creation of the writer. The history here is the one created by the writer and it comes from his imagination. The mainstream literature depicts the world that is already created by God while science fiction creates its own world like God and then depicts it ... The emergence of macro detail has a deep impact on the structure of science fiction. The sci-fi work that prioritizes macro detail would build a world according to the rule established by itself and then fill it out with concrete examples. This process is the opposite of the mainstream literature, for which the upper structure is already built and its mission is to depict the micro part of the structure. Science fiction has greatly expanded the field of the depiction of literature, enabling us to make deeper and more vivid demonstrations of Earth and human beings, of the traditional world that existed for thousands of years in mainstream literature from the description of the whole universe ... Science fiction enables us to see a drop of water from the ocean.<sup>17</sup>

Liu Cixin is not a theorist and his word choice might not always be accurate from an academic perspective. However, his basic idea is still expressed quite clearly: the traditional literature is too human-centric and science fiction provides us with the opportunity to perceive our existence in a much larger context. In *Liulang diqiu*, most of the human characters are mere observers and they are powerless when faced with the astonishing natural wonders, as well as the terrifying disasters of their new reality. When the protagonist travels across the frozen Pacific Ocean by himself, he is overwhelmed by a dreadful feeling of loneliness. Surrounded by the starry sky and icy plain that seems to stretch to the end of the universe, individuals feel so tiny and insignificant. The infinite existence of the universe creates a sublime feeling that overcomes the self-centered life attitude.

If a short story of Liu Cixin can already contain so many grand events and exhilarating details, imagine what he could accomplish in a novel or something bigger. *San Ti* is his most ambitious and largest project to date. It is composed of about 880,000 Chinese characters, “narrating an epic that begins in the Chinese Cultural Revolution and ends with the heat death of

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<sup>17</sup> Liu Cixin 刘慈欣, “Chaoyue zilian” 超越自恋, Douban, January 15, 2022, [https://www.douban.com/note/55584222/?\\_i=2527259TvMTwFM](https://www.douban.com/note/55584222/?_i=2527259TvMTwFM).



the universe.”<sup>18</sup> The length and the huge detail of the plots in the trilogy make it difficult to summarize the story in a few sentences. A succinct version might still help comprehend its basic setting: during the Cultural Revolution, Ye Wenjie 叶文洁, a young astrophysicist is sent to a “reeducation labor” camp in the remote desert of Inner Mongolia. She discovers that the base where she works is in fact a secret headquarters for a research program that aims to look for extraterrestrial intelligence. Coincidentally, she is able to get in touch contact with an extraterrestrial civilization which lives in a system that has three suns. There is a famous problem in celestial mechanics that involves finding possible mathematical solutions to describe the movements of three celestial bodies attracting each other gravitationally. That is also where the trilogy gets its name. Such a system would be extremely unstable and unpredictable. Thus, the alien civilization’s world is tormented by frequent and disastrous turbulence caused by climatic changes and gravitational collapse and they are searching for alternative solutions, including interstellar immigration. Disappointed with humanity due to her traumatic experience during the Cultural Revolution, Ye Wenjie willingly gives away the location of Earth, giving the alien civilization the opportunity to invade Earth, a planet that has a far more stable environment for their survival. The invasion will also mean the total annihilation of human civilization. The first book of the trilogy ends with human society receiving the message of the coming Trisolaran (the name of that alien race) invasion. It would take the Trisolaran fleet four centuries to travel from Proxima Centauri to Earth and the human race decides to prepare itself for this inevitable confrontation. The second and third volumes of the trilogy deal with this interstellar conflict and its series of long-lasting consequences that change the fate of both humanity and Trisolarans.

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<sup>18</sup> Gwennaëlle Gaffric, “Liu Cixin’s *THREE-BODY TRILOGY*,” 26.

The formal name of the trilogy is *Diqiu wangshi* 地球往事 (*Remembrance of Earth's Past*), the name of a book written by one of the protagonists in the final volume.<sup>19</sup> The intriguing indication here is that the trilogy fabricates a story within an imaginative future, but it attempts to treat the narrative material as something that happened in the past, just like what historical novels and epic tend to do. Furthermore, the narrative of the book not only follows the linear time progress but is also organized in a way similar to a chronicle, marking important historical events and even assigning new calendar eras. Common Era is replaced by the “Crisis Era” in the year 2007 when humans are aware of the Trisolaran invasion. It will later again be replaced by the “Deterrence Era” when humans find a way to maintain a temporary truce with the Trisolaran civilization. This method shows the influence of classic science fiction. Arthur C. Clarke (1917-2008), Liu Cixin’s inspiration to start his sci-fi career, had implemented this historical recording style in his representative work *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Liu admitted that he is a great fan of Golden Age Anglo-American sci-fi and considered Clarke to be the model of his writing, even stating that all his novels are but clumsy imitations of Clarke’s classic works.<sup>20</sup> The influence from the sci-fi masters of the Golden Age distinguishes Liu Cixin’s writing from contemporary trends in Chinese literature, which turn on the examination and exposition of personal, micro matters, and the deconstruction of established traditions and values.<sup>21</sup> The historical narrative that features thousands or even millions of years of progress and intergalactic events across multiple celestial systems is rarely used outside of a few sci-fi works. Liu’s seemingly outdated style choice helps

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<sup>19</sup> Liu Cixin 刘慈欣, *Death's End*, translated by Ken Liu (New York: Tor Books, 2016), 620. Liu Cixin 刘慈欣, *San ti san buqu* 三体三部曲 (Chongqing: Chongqing chubanshe, 2010), 824. This is a one volume edition of the three novels.

<sup>20</sup> Stephen Dougherty, “Liu Cixin, Arthur C. Clarke, and ‘Repositioning,’” *Science Fiction Studies*, no. 1 (2019): 40.

<sup>21</sup> Yang Qiong 杨琼, “Kehuan wenxue shishixing de chengxian” 科幻文学史诗性的呈现, *Zhongguo dangdai wenxue yanjiu* 中国当代文学研究, no. 3 (2019): 216.

his work to maintain a sense of holistic thinking and to project a transcendent vision since it is not the life of an individual but the fate of human beings altogether and even the whole universe that is reflected upon.

One of the reasons brought up by theorists like Lukács that might have lead to the decline of epic literature in the modern age is the loss of totality,<sup>22</sup> since with the expansion of modernization and globalization the conflict and mixture between different cultures and beliefs have become inevitable. It is more and more difficult for individuals to perceive the rapidly changing world in which they live as if it constituted any kind of unity. With the imaginative power provided by science fiction, we might yet have another opportunity to recover the sense of totality on a global scale. The disagreement and infighting among different human groups would appear negligible when facing the overwhelming cosmic threat and the vast unknown. Human beings as a whole could get a new understanding of themselves in the context of the universe and strive for a common goal, leading to the rebirth of epic in the space age. In *Liulang diqiu*, the idea of human unity could be conceived of as a planetary humanism, a political philosophy that emphasizes the importance of universal values and “calls for a new sense and organization of human totality truly inclusive of all and against neoliberal division, exclusion, repression, and egocentric consumption.”<sup>23</sup> Human beings work together to fight for their survival against the challenge of celestial disaster, and they embark upon a space odyssey that takes them trillions of miles, and will demand from them the sacrifice of comfort and amenity of generations. This kind of scenario could indeed provide the same kind of solemn and stirring feeling that tends to be found in classic tragedies. The undertone, however, is still optimistic, trusting in humanity’s willpower and

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<sup>22</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Theory of The Novel*, 56-57.

<sup>23</sup> Wang Zhuoyi, “Between the World Ship and the Spaceship Planetarianism, Hollywood, Nationalism, and the Iceberg-Shaped Story of *The Wandering Earth* (2019),” *PRISM: Theory and Modern Chinese Literature*, no. 3 (2021): 210.

potential to thrive against all odds. In *San ti san buqu*, the struggle of human beings in the universe continues to be the central theme, but the underlying message will take a much darker turn, as will be analyzed later.

The English translation of the first volume of the trilogy won the Hugo Award (the highest award for science fiction in the West) as the best novel in 2015, the first time it had been awarded to an author who does not write in English. The book also received relatively good reviews from Western readers, but it is worth noticing that many readers and critics claimed that what attracted them most to the novel is its depiction of the Chinese Cultural Revolution.<sup>24</sup> As mentioned before, the protagonist of the first book Ye Wenjie contacted the extraterrestrial intelligence because she is disillusioned by her experience during the Cultural Revolution and hopes that a higher civilization from outer space could bring about humanity's redemption. The Cultural Revolution is not an uncommon setting in contemporary Chinese historical novels and it is often used to explore the evil of humanity or to enhance the dystopian vision of the work.<sup>25</sup> Unlike these contemporary works, this disastrous social movement that caused the torment and trauma of numerous people is only perceived of as a convenient plot device in Liu Cixin's novel in order to reveal human beings' naivety and ignorance when compared with the cruel truth of the universe. The reconstruction and interpretation of excruciating historical events might be the central concern of many writers, but for Liu Cixin it only serves as a prelude to his grand cosmic narrative. Other details related to Chinese history and society in the book should also be understood in a broader

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<sup>24</sup> Liu Ge 刘舸 and Li Yun 李云, "Cong xifang Jiedu pianhao kan zhongguo kehuan zuopin de haiwai chuanbo" 从西方解读偏好看中国科幻作品的海外传播, *Chinese Comparative Literature*, no. 2 (2018): 146-147.

<sup>25</sup> Jeffrey Kinkley, *Visions of Dystopia in China's New Historical Novels* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 1-5.

context, such as the following part featuring a fictional meeting between Einstein and a Chinese physicist:

He and Einstein had only one very brief conversation. The morning of November 13, 1922, he accompanied Einstein on a walk along Nanjing Road<sup>26</sup> ... When they passed a maintenance site in the road bed, Einstein stopped next to a worker who was smashing stones and silently observed this boy with torn clothes and dirty face and hands. He asked your father how much the boy earned each day. After asking the boy, he told Einstein: five cents. This was the only time he spoke with the great scientist who changed the world. There was no discussion of physics, of relativity, only cold, harsh reality. According to your father, Einstein stood there for a long time after hearing the answer, watching the boy's mechanical movements, not even bothering to smoke his pipe as the embers went out. After your father recounted this memory to me, he sighed and said, "In China, any idea that dared to take flight would only crash back to the ground. The gravity of reality is too strong."<sup>27</sup>

This paragraph depicts the harsh social conditions of China in that era and when extracted from its context, could be interpreted as some form of social criticism (especially the last sentence) and a call for reform and improvement. However, when we view the trilogy as a whole, we will begin to realize that the impediment to advanced ideas caused by traditional beliefs and inflexible social structure is a worldwide problem and it is the whole human race that needs to abandon their outdated moral systems to gain a chance of survival when facing an unprecedented cosmic threat. The central characters of each book in the trilogy are all Chinese, but they could have been replaced by people from other nations and cultures and each of their roles in the story would not have been drastically affected. Chinese protagonists are just a convenient choice since the book was initially targeted at Chinese readers, just like Mo Yan sets most of his stories in his hometown of Gaomi out of habit while he claims that in reality it could be set anywhere.<sup>28</sup> *San ti san buqu* is a story about

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<sup>26</sup> *Nanjing Lu* 南京路, one of the main thoroughfares in central Shanghai.

<sup>27</sup> Liu Cixin 刘慈欣, *The Three-Body Problem*, trans. Ken Liu (New York: Tor Books, 2014), 16; Liu Cixin 刘慈欣, *San ti san buqu* 三体三部曲, 18-19.

<sup>28</sup> Mo Yan 莫言, "Meinian dou hui Gaomi guonian" 每年都回高密过年, Dazhong, November 30, 2021, <http://www.dzwww.com/synr/dzft/200606/t200606171570378.htm>.

human beings and their existence in the universe instead of a narrow-minded argument about which current political and cultural system is superior.

It is ironic that after winning the Hugo Award and after receiving worldwide attention, both Chinese and Western media and critics tried to address the book's Chinese identity due to different reasons. Within China, the success of the book tended to be deemed as a sign indicating the rise of China's cultural influence.<sup>29</sup> The phenomenal success achieved by Liu Cixin's work is considered to have ramifications beyond literature, something that could be attributed to "the improvement of China's comprehensive national strength and international influence to a large extent."<sup>30</sup> In the West, critics and columnists tended to address the nationality of the author, even claiming that the whole deal was a sci-fi invasion launched by China (similar to the alien invasion featured in the novel).<sup>31</sup> The complex plot and various themes explored in the trilogy certainly have created possibilities for different interpretations, including political ones. However, reducing it to a mouthpiece of the official ideology of the state would be at least an oversimplification or even worse, a distortion. Those who are familiar with Liu Cixin's works would know that he is known to keep a distance from the state's ideology, which can be found reflected in the critical utopia he created in *Zhongguo 2185* 中国 2185 (China 2185) (1989), in which a republic built in cyberspace led by a virtual version of the former chairman Mao Zedong challenges the regime of the Chinese government in reality.<sup>32</sup> In his alternate history fiction *Xiyang* 西洋 (Western Ocean) (1998), in which an alternate history of China (it becomes the dominant civilization of the modern era instead

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<sup>29</sup> Li Guangyi 李广益, "China Turns Outward: On the Literary Significance of Liu Cixin's Science Fiction," *Science Fiction Studies*, no. 1 (2019): 6-9.

<sup>30</sup> Wu You, "Globalization, Science Fiction and the China Story: Translation, Dissemination and Reception of Liu Cixin's Works across the Globe," *South-North Cultural and Media Studies*, no. 6 (2020): 68.

<sup>31</sup> Gwennaël Gaffric, "Liu Cixin's *THREE-BODY TRILOGY*," *Science Fiction Studies*, no. 1 (2019): 32.

<sup>32</sup> Li Hua, "The Political Imagination in Liu Cixin's Critical Utopia: *China 2185*," *Science Fiction Studies*, no. 3 (2015): 536-537.

of the West) from the fifteenth century to the present is presented, he also expressed his concern about the consequences of China's rise as a global power and the heated nationalism that comes along with it.<sup>33</sup> In short, Liu Cixin has never taken a China-centric stance and is more fixated on questions and motifs that are related to and could inspire all human beings. As he stated in an interview with National Public Radio, he hoped "that one day American readers will buy and read Chinese science fiction because it's science fiction, not because it's Chinese."<sup>34</sup> Admittedly, literary works are always entangled with their cultural contexts, and communication between cultures can be difficult. Among different genres, science fiction might have the most potential to help us break out of our egocentric bubble and reach a mutual understanding of our fragile position within the mysterious universe that transcends human comprehension.

Back to the plot of the trilogy. At the end of the first volume, faced with the threat of the Trisolaran's extremely superior technology (they will also manage to prevent the advancement of human research in physics), Earth's scientists feel defeated and hopeless. Shi Qiang 史强, an experienced police officer, reminds the scientists that the technology gap between humans and bugs is larger than that between the Trisolaran and humans, but "the bugs have never been truly defeated."<sup>35</sup> The second volume, *Hei'an senlin* 黑暗森林 (Dark Forest), focuses on Earth's preparation for the fight against the Trisolaran invasion. Even though humans have four hundred years to develop their technical skills, they still cannot make any fundamental breakthrough due to the disruption caused by the Trisolaran's surveillance device. As a result, the entire Earth fleet

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<sup>33</sup> Li Hua, "A Cautionary View of Rhetoric about China's Imagined Future in Liu Cixin's Alternate History 'The Western Ocean,'" *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China*, no. 10 (2016): 201.

<sup>34</sup> Anthony Kuhn, "Cultural Revolution-Meets-Aliens: Chinese Writer Takes On Sci-Fi," NPR, January 15, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/04/09/398519222/cultural-revolution-meets-aliens-chinese-writer-takes-on-sci-fi>.

<sup>35</sup> Liu Cixin 刘慈欣, *The Three-Body Problem*, 388. Liu Cixin 刘慈欣, *San ti san bu qu* 三体三部曲, 318.

is almost wiped out by a single probe sent by the Trisolarans. However, Luo Ji 罗辑 (whose name has the same pronunciation as *luoji* 逻辑, “logic” in Chinese), with the help of the clue left by Ye Wenjie, finds a crucial fact that may help human beings turn the tables against the invaders. What Luo Ji has discovered is named by him as “the theory of dark forest” (which gives this second volume its title): although the universe is enormous, its total resources are still limited and with lives everywhere growing exponentially, the conflicts between them are inevitable. Furthermore, owing to the extreme distance between civilizations, clear and immediate communication becomes impossible, which makes the universe look like a dark forest. There is a very high incentive for each galactic civilization to preemptively eliminate any others that have exposed their locations to ensure their own safety. At the end of this volume, Luo Ji has successfully forced the Trisolarans into a truce by threatening to broadcast their location. It indicates that even when being at an extreme disadvantage, a weak civilization may still secure its survival by understanding and utilizing the rules of the universe.

Starting with the second volume, heroism, another important trait of *shishi* becomes a prominent theme. Unlike the heroes in revolutionary historical novels, who are the embodiment of the progressive ideology and are well respected by the people, the heroes in *San ti san buqu* are often faced with distrust and loneliness. Luo Ji, the protagonist mentioned above is one of the four Wallfacers. They have been granted access to the resources of the UN and have the right to develop plans and strategies only known to themselves in order to keep them secret from both the enemy and the rest of the human world. These Wallfacers are supposed to be humanity’s last hope against the threat of the Trisolaran invasion, but since they can only execute their plan secretly, it is difficult for them to earn the trust of ordinary people. Even worse, they are often portrayed as tyrants and conspirators. As the last Wallfacer, Luo Ji needs to endure the misunderstanding and contempt



from others before he can finally finish his plan of stopping the Trisolarans. Even then, his burden is far from over. After the Trisolaran invasion is averted by his threat of Mutually Assured Destruction, which involves exposing the location of both the planet Trisolaris and Earth across the universe, Luo Ji is assigned as the first Swordholder, the person who is responsible for broadcasting the location in case of any further threat from the Trisolarans. He has to part from his wife and daughter and abandon his secular life in order to fulfill this ultra-important task. Being in charge of the fate of two worlds, Luo Ji carries out his duty with strong will and extreme caution, ensuring the safety and prosperity of humanity for more than half-century. However, his efforts and contributions are not widely recognized by the people whom he is devoted to protecting. They see him as a terrifying person, a monster. The public assumes that anyone that has been given so much power will become distorted inside and can no longer be trusted. Despite his great accomplishments, “humankind did not feel grateful to Luo Ji.”<sup>36</sup>

Not all of Liu Cixin’s works feature heroic characters, and when they do, only a part of those heroes could receive the esteem they deserve. On many occasions, they are lonely pursuers, determinately fighting against their fate, seeking the ultimate truth and self-transcendence. Only a few other people could understand their choice and truly appreciate their contribution and sacrifice.<sup>37</sup> In *Liulang diqiu*, People grow tired of the arduous interstellar migration and begin to believe that it is the scientists’ and governors’ miscalculations and erroneous decisions that have lead to their current miserable situation. After a successful rebellion, five thousand supporters of the Earth Escape Project are executed for their “antihuman crimes.” Albeit too late, the explosion of the sun indeed happens shortly after the execution, which proves their correctness and innocence.

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<sup>36</sup> Liu Cixin 刘慈欣, *Death’s End*, 179. Liu Cixin 刘慈欣, *San ti san buqu* 三体三部曲, 958.

<sup>37</sup> For a general review of heroic characters in Liu Cixin’s work, see Li Guangyi 李广益, “Luo Ji de jue duan Santi de cunzai zhuyi yiyun jiqi wenhua qishi” 罗辑的决断: 《三体》的存在主义意蕴及其文化启示, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue yanjiu congkan* 中国现代文学研究丛刊, no. 12 (2018): 8-11.

From *Liulang diqiu* to *San ti san buqu*, the estrangement between heroes and ordinary people has always been an important theme for Liu Cixin. The masses doubt the credibility of heroic figures to the point of trying to isolate and even to persecute them. This does not mean that the author simply treats the masses as the stereotypical ignorant and ungrateful crowd. Their hostility towards the heroes, despite being portrayed negatively, is still understandable or even relatable. For a higher purpose and more significant tasks, the heroes in Liu's works can no longer stick to the moral and ethical values of peaceful times. They realize that they must secure humanity's survival at any cost, which leads to their controversial actions that would challenge any normal person's moral compass. It is a natural phenomenon for people to condemn those who have questionable beliefs and who deviate from social norms and established values. They will be labeled as dissidents and traitors, even though their deeds would benefit the human race in the long term.

Liu Cixin has mentioned his concern about human beings' superfluous enthusiasm for making moral judgments, stating that it is terrifying that human society could so easily condemn an individual if their behavior does not meet the recognized moral standard. "We should praise the strength of science fiction. Although the true meaning of a lot of things in real life is still hidden under the mist of moral judgment, science fiction provides us with a laboratory of thoughts."<sup>38</sup> In his writing, the relationship between ordinary people and heroes is complex and prone to change. When humankind is helpless, they are longing for heroes to save them; when they are temporarily out of danger, heroes will again become normal humans and even need to take responsibility for the crimes they may have committed to saving humankind. He also envisions the possible return of heroism in modern society under certain circumstances:

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<sup>38</sup> Zhang Yan 章颜, "Jintie dimian de shishixing xiezuo" 紧贴地面的史诗性写作, *Journal of Modern Chinese Studies*, no. 5 (2016): 93.

With the advancement of civilization, democracy and the concept of human rights are recognized all over the world and heroism is fading away. Literature mocks the hero, it is a call for humanity when perceived from another angle, the progress of history to some extent. We could imagine that if the development of human society follows the current track, heroism will eventually become something alien. Now the question is, will it follow the track? ... When viewed from the perspective of science fiction, our race is very fragile. In this cruel universe, human beings must bravely sacrifice a part of it in exchange for the continuation of civilization and then we will need heroism. Current human civilization is in an unprecedented period of smooth development and heroism is indeed not so important, but it does not mean that it will be unimportant in the future envisioned by science fiction.<sup>39</sup>

From the above statement, we could see that Liu Cixin does not deny the fundamental rationality of modern civilization. He acknowledges its progressive value but is also concerned about its fragility. This concern may result from a combination of his experience of past historical events<sup>40</sup> and his scientific view of the mysterious nature and unpredictability of the universe. His solution, the call for the return of heroism might seem nostalgic but is at its core a radical strategy that is deeply rooted in a modern society shaped by science and technology. Li Guangyi has argued that some of Liu Cixin's works, especially *San ti san buqu* have an existentialist vibe,<sup>41</sup> which is not intangible. Heroes like Luo Ji in the book are all by themselves and cannot be understood by or rely upon others, but they still choose to bravely face their existence and carry the burden of their fate. They are not traditional heroic figures from ancient mythology or legend, but lonely pilgrims who persist in walking the hazardous path towards truth and self-realization after the collapse of

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<sup>39</sup> Liu Cixin 刘慈欣, "Cong dahai jian yidishui dui kehuan xiaoshuo zhong mouxie chuantong wenxue yaosu de fansi" 从大海见一滴水: 对科幻小说中某些传统文学要素的反思, *Science Popularization*, no. 6 (2011): 68.

<sup>40</sup> Liu Cixin mentioned in his essay that he is anxious about the possibility of accidents, claiming that the biggest interrupter for the development of science fiction in China is social turbulence and chaos, which have happened before more than once. See Liu Cixin 刘慈欣, *Zuizao de yuzhou zuihao de diqiu* 最糟的宇宙, 最好的地球 (Chengdu: Sichuan kexue jishu chubanshe, 2015), 204.

<sup>41</sup> Li Guangyi 李广益, "Luo Ji de jueguan *Santi* de cunzai zhuyi yiyun jiqi wenhua qishi" 罗辑的决断: 《三体》的存在主义意蕴及其文化启示, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue yanjiu congkan* 中国现代文学研究丛刊, no. 12 (2018): 10.

belief in the sacred. They may remind us of the concept of the *Übermensch* invented by Nietzsche,<sup>42</sup> amoral figures that transcend the old value systems. Through the strength of science fiction, Liu Cixin manages to demonstrate the feasibility of an imaginary situation where this kind of unorthodox heroes could emerge and thrive.

Besides heroism, *San ti san buqu* also explores another theme that is common in *shishi* or epic: illustrating the progress and destiny of the whole community. In this case, that community is not a single tribe or nation, but the entire human civilization. Its final status in the trilogy could be interpreted as a new form of utopia, which might come off as a surprise to some readers since the ending of the human race seems to be quite bleak according to the depiction in the third volume, *Sisen yongshen* 死神永生 (Death is Immortal). After all, the entire solar system has been destroyed by the weapons of the advanced alien civilization and all the residents killed along with it. The only two who have escaped are Cheng Xin 程心 the protagonist and her friend. On the other hand, the human race persists outside the solar system with the population on two spaceships, which eventually develop into an intergalactic civilization. The book does not give detailed information about the social structure and cultural mode of this new human civilization, but it would not be unreasonable to assume that it must be something suitable for life in the space age, something that does not resemble any current human social system. If we accept Fredric Jameson's explanation of the "anti-utopian," which he defines as the "universal belief that the historic alternatives to capitalism have been proven unviable and impossible, and that no other socioeconomic system is conceivable, let alone practically available,"<sup>43</sup> then *San ti san buqu* presents us with an opposite

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<sup>42</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, ed. Volker Gerhardt (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000): 301-325.

<sup>43</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: Utopia and other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), xii.

mindset. It believes in humanity's tenacity and ability to endure and adapt against all odds. The limited horizon of the current world system that enables the dominance of Neoliberalism is crushed by the infinite possibilities and challenges brought about by the universe itself in this fictional future. Scholars such as Thomas Moran gave pessimistic interpretations of the book, stating that it revels in the destruction of humankind.<sup>44</sup> They have only addressed part of the narrative and failed to notice the underlying optimistic tone beneath the seemingly dark surface of the trilogy. The extinction of human beings on Earth and in the solar system does not equal their end, but rather opens the opportunity for humankind to evolve from a planetary life form into an intergalactic one. The new human race has left its mark among the magnificent stars of outer space and they even survive to the end of the universe. Despite all the turmoil and despair, the trilogy gives human beings a utopian ending. "The universe had remembered their light."<sup>45</sup>

To sum it up, *San ti san buqu* can be seen as a major contribution to the concept of *shishi* in modern Chinese literature not just due to its expansion of the potential of the historical novel, depicting striking events from the Cultural Revolution to the end of the universe, but also because it has renewed our expectation of the possibility of history through critical thinking and scientific imagination. The traditional tropes and themes of epic literature are not simply revived but have been reimagined and reconceptualized within and beyond the modern framework. In this fictional future, human beings have to cease their trivial inner conflicts to form an international and transcultural unity to face the great cosmic threat; heroes that bravely defy the old social norms and moral values rise and take the lonely path or even make the ultimate sacrifice to save their compatriots who neither understand nor trust them; and despite the destruction of their home-world,

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<sup>44</sup> Thomas Moran, "The Perverse Utopianism of Willed Human Extinction: Writing Extinction in Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem*," in *Ethical Futures and Global Science Fiction*, ed. Zachary Kendal (Chur: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 135.

<sup>45</sup> Liu Cixin 刘慈欣, *Death's End*, 621. Liu Cixin 刘慈欣, *San ti san buqu* 三体三部曲, 1348.

the human race will eventually be transformed into a higher existence and spreads the spark of civilization across multiple galaxies while the memory of Earth would become an ancient myth. As has been neatly summarized by Mingwei Song, Liu Cixin “speaks to infinity as well as to China’s immediate reality, which he aims to transcend through a science-fictional imagination that challenges conventional moral and epistemological ideas about the self and society.”<sup>46</sup> And what could be a better defining character of the attraction of epic literature than this strong impulse to transcend the familiar reality and to reach something sublime and exciting?

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<sup>46</sup> Mingwei Song, “Liu Cixin’s *Three-Body Trilogy*: Between the Sublime Cosmos and the Micro Era,” in *Lingua Cosmica Science Fiction from around the World*, ed. Dale Knickerbocker (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 111.

## CONCLUSION

Upon its initial arrival in the Chinese language, *shishi* 史诗 was regarded just as a translation for the Western term “epic,” a genre that has never been fully developed in the Chinese literary tradition. It eventually attained new relevance in the criticism and practice of contemporary literature, becoming transformed into an aesthetic model, an ideal worth pursuing. And it is in the form of the historical novel that the concept of *shishi* is most frequently revived, revised, and reimagined.

During the revolutionary era (which began in the region controlled by the communist party in the 1940s), *shishi* as a literary concept gradually participated in the construction of modern Chinese literature. Unlike the opposition between two modernities (social and aesthetic) categorized by Călinescu,<sup>1</sup> literary modernity in China is often entangled with the optimistic belief in the idea of progress that can be traced back to the Enlightenment. Movements similar to Western modernism that rebel against the consequences of modernization and industrialization, and pursue the independent and innovative value of art have never really become an influential trend. Literature was expected by intellectuals to join forces with the people’s efforts to advance social progress, which in this case meant the formation and prosperity of a modern China. Motivated by the craving for building a unified identity for the newborn nation as well as envisioning a socialist utopia within literary fiction, the development of revolutionary historical novels culminated in the “Seventeen-Year” period (1949-1966). The novels become the embodiment of the classic connotation of *shishi*: a hybrid cultural product combining both aesthetic ideals and political ideology. *Shishi* promoted heroism and strengthen the faith in the intrinsic meaning of history.

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<sup>1</sup> Matei Călinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 41.

Although this ambitious vision was shattered with the end of the revolutionary era, *shishi* as an idea would persist.

The renewed presences (or attempts) of *shishi* in the works of various writers since the 1980s are truly diverse and distinctive. Lu Yao inherited the panoramic depiction of changing society from Mao Dun while also exploring the potential heroic traits in an ordinary individual. His view of history is still in accord with the official version when compared with others who strove for alternative historical narratives. Chen Zhongshi tried to cling to the traditional value system and to use it as a remedy for the issues brought on by modernity, and the result is an isolated monument that cannot connect with either the past or the future. Mo Yan perceived the ridiculousness and the lack of fundamental meaning of history, but he still managed to leave space for salvation through primitive impulses and the obsession with life, regardless of the hardship one has to endure to experience it. Female writers also contributed their unique voices. Wang Anyi aimed to write the history of a city through the lens of a female character's daily life. Despite the unresolvable tension between the intention to generalize and elevate and the abundant focus on mundane objects, her resolution is still commendable. Chi Zijian chose to explore the dimension of nature and spiritual beings, which elevated her narrative above ordinary trivial matters, revealing a sublime feeling that is rare in modern Chinese literature especially the female writings. Liu Cixin's science-fiction writing enables the reimagination of the historical narrative in a way grander than any traditional novel with realistic settings could ever achieve, building the foundation for a form of literature that transcends the boundaries of nation and civilization.

A common tendency when it comes to the study of *shishi* is to address its inherent nature,



its *shishixing* 史诗性 (epicness),<sup>2</sup> in the hope that it might be possible to find a universally applicable definition to capture its essence. However, as has been demonstrated in this dissertation, the most prominent trait of *shishi* as an idea (or more accurately, a group of ideas) is its ability to survive and transform through adaptation and innovation. If we dogmatically stick to the connotations it acquired during the revolutionary era, then none of the writers featured in this project would qualify as practicing *shishi*. Instead of conceiving *shishi* as something static and definitive, it is better to recognize and embrace its dynamic, shifting, and plural natures. And if we must define something that all these variations have in common, that would be the desire to challenge the status quo and to transcend ordinary existence.

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<sup>2</sup> Zhao Yanfang, 赵彦芳 “Shishixing fanchou de meixue yiyun ji jingshen xunzong” 史诗性范畴的美学意蕴及精神寻踪, *Wenxue pinglun* 文学评论, no. 1 (2017): 96-102.

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