



## The Disenchantment of History and the Tragic Consciousness of Chinese Postmodernity

Alberto Castelli

*Hainan University, China*

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**Alberto Castelli,**

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**Abstract:** Magic Realism brings fantastic events into the frame of the narration. Yet it cannot quite be defined. At the very start of the process of definition, there is a question: Magic Realism is a mode of narration, or rather a post-colonial movement rising sociological issues alternative to the logic of power? The paper parallels and juxtaposes Latin American Magic Realism and the literary experience of Chinese literary Avant-garde in the 80s, similar apocalyptic thematic, but different narrative structures. Relating to the fictional universe of Can Xue and Yu Hua, the aim is to illuminate an exclusive mode to narrate history: far from being a negotiation of identities in a post-Weberian age, Chinese Avant-garde represents the implosion of Maoist discourse, thus the magic of realism is substituted with the horrifying abyss of a haunted fiction.

## Alberto CASTELLI

### The Disenchantment of History and the Tragic Consciousness of Chinese Postmodernity

#### The Answer to History

Elie Wiesel, A-7713, was sixteen in Auschwitz when he was forced to watch a child being hanged. Due to the lightness of the bodies, the torture lasted more than the time the German butchers had beforehand estimated. More than thirty minutes lingering between life and death, still breathing, the tongue still red, the eyes still burning. Bound to witness the atrocity, one of the numbered convicted was heard saying: "Now, where is God with his legions of angels?" Another nameless number whispered as an answer: "Where He is? This is where –hanging here from this gallows..." (Wiesel 65). For Western civilization, and not just for it, the Holocaust, point-blank, marks the failure of the project of Enlightenment, and if we want to see in the Eighteenth century the beginning of modernity, Auschwitz went down in history as the end of it. The death of God, rationally perpetuated in the hell of the concentration camps, is the historical push for a snowball of intellectual endings heading inexorably to postmodernity and its prophets: Barthes (the end of the author), Adorno (the end of art), Foucault (the end of man). If Postmodernism is post-Auschwitz, it is not unfair to say that, considering Maoism as the experience of Chinese modernity, post-Cultural Revolution is surely the first moment of Chinese postmodernity.<sup>1</sup>

Whether or not we are allowed to consider China a postmodern society is not matter for this paper, and perhaps already anachronistic. It seems to me that in these few past decades the terms of the debate are based on an equivocal issue, namely, whether or not China is capable of producing modernist or postmodernist aesthetic and whether or not it is equally worth the Western models. I believe we should shift the focus of discussion to the position of the subject within the crumbling display of history. What happens to the subject when it is secularized? We shall reason on the position man occupies once the smokes of ideology have dissipated, and as well on the function literature absolves the moment it is placed outside the political dialectic socialism-post-socialism. As far as China is concerned, it is the Cultural Revolution what undermined, annihilated, the Chinese project of modernity establishing a political reality whose excess went far beyond reason: "The most profound destruction lies not only in the physical victimization but also in psychic traumatization, which deprived the nation of its faith in historical truth and the ethical good" (Yang 230). Under these circumstances, the literary experiments produced by Magic Realism and Chinese Avant-garde, parallels the Great Refusal of the Frankfurt School. By questioning the very nature of reality they overturned centuries of sedimented, official, truth: of male society, patriarchal society, the violence of the past, the brutality of dictatorship, the white elite, the Western elite. History has to be reconsidered then proceeding from Frederic Jameson claims that "postmodernism is the attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place" (3). The state of alienation of modern man trapped in a global unhappy consciousness finds asylum in the fantastic world of Macondo, Comala, Haiti. On the other hand, the excesses of Maoism are somewhat resolved in the haunted visions of Can Xue and Yu Hua whose irreverence towards history is the first step for a re-centering of individuality. We shall then start with what came first.

At stake here is a question still left object of criticism: Is Magic Realism a mode of narration, where the dullness of realism is broken by the contradictory of magic, or is it a narrative movement within the post-colonial, post-dictatorship, post-war discourse, with a specific agenda willing to create a literary paradigm alternative to the dominant one? First of all, I shall clarify the origin of magic, for I do not believe being Magic Realism a Latin American possession or invention.<sup>2</sup> The term and the concept of Magic Realism is one of those that engaged literary theory for the past half-century. Rightly Peter Hulme noticed that it is today "a hyper-reality of international proportion" (qtd. in Franco 14). The dialectic between real and marvelous is already to be found in the European novel since the medieval epic in the chivalric romance *la chanson de geste*, where giants, magic, and monster appear beside Christians and Muslims, and after that in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (The Frenzy of Orlando), where Christians and Saracens soldiers are called to battle gigantic sea monsters and flying horses. Back to the Twentieth-century, German expressionism and French Surrealism might be pointed as literary progenitors. There is a general consensus among critics such as Bowers, Chanady, and

<sup>1</sup> Regarding the beginning of Chinese literary postmodernism, scholarships are endless and very much controversial. For details see: Ning; Dirlík and Zhang; Yang; Tang; Zhang and Berry.

<sup>2</sup> I will use the term "magic" rather than "magical" for I will discuss at large South American magic Realism which is the closest translation to the original Spanish *realismo mágico*.

Zamora et al., to set the origins of the term in Germany, in the 1920s. The German art historian, critic, and photographer Franz Roh so described in his 1925 essay the modern condition of art. Based on to the position of the object in Post-Expressionist painting in Europe, he refers to the enchanted materiality of the object where magic becomes an aesthetic expression, specifically, the synthesis of impressionist description and expressionist spirituality. Freud and Jung's explanation of the influence of subconscious and unconscious over people's actions are partly the source of the belief, from the side of the artists, in the inadequacy of a realistic representation of reality. Accordingly, Surrealism has, as artificial condition, elements of wonder whose overtones assist the exploration of hidden aspects of existence, offering an artistic juxtaposition between art and literature and an easy comparison. Hence, magic is not exclusively South American; rather, for a Europe that invented metaphysics, there is another Europe that celebrated reason as a shield from the invasion of the disciples of the imaginary.

Western society based on the concept of identity on the solid platform of truth. Truth has been simultaneously the platform for a religious understanding of human expectations, the ground of science able to explain man's position in the universe, and an artistic attempt to reconnect, through beauty, man to his original perfection. The Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the Industrial revolution stand in European history as the apology of reason. Socrates, Descartes, Marx are the pillars through which reality is translated, and those who refused to follow the beaten track were stained with the mark of Cain, labeled as pessimist (Schopenhauer), cosmic pessimist (Leopardi), insane (Nietzsche). Consequently, the Cartesian-Hegelian identification of reason with truth, the principle of sufficient cause stating the relation between cause and effect, shaped a society not so much fascinated by magic but eager to explain it. Hence, Latin American Magic Realism follows a line of thought that was already traced but suspended from time to time. The bravery of Marco Polo's chronicles, the afterworld of Dante, the improbability of Don Quixote battling the windmills, the romanticism of Hugo, the visionary images of Van Gogh, the tales of Poe, the labyrinthine worlds of Kafka, the metaphysics of De Chirico, those are just some expressions of Magic Realism *avant la lettre*. Latin America did not discover Magic Realism but rediscovered it, and the multicultural context of the Americas, especially South America, lent to the artistic imagination an infinity of details ready to be transformed into a mythic outlook. At first, in Central America with Alejo Carpentier who, in the prologue of *The Kingdom of this World* (1949), described the mythological nature of Latin America, and coined the lucky expression of *lo real maravilloso* (the marvelous reality), hence charging the concept with geographical significance:

The marvelous begins to be unmistakably marvelous when it arises from an unexpected alteration of reality (the miracle), from a privileged revelation of reality, an unusual insight that particularly favors the unexpected richness of reality or an amplification of the scale and categories of reality, a reality thus is perceived with special intensity by virtue of an exaltation, of the spirit that leads it to a kind of extreme state. (2)

A combination of marvelous and ordinary, fantastic and real, is what produces a state of rapture, and to some degrees a subversion of Western rationality. Soon next, in the 60s, during the boom period of Latin American novel, the term developed into Magic Realism. Angel Flores, in his maiden essay "Magic Realism in Spanish American Fiction" (1955) (qtd. in Zamora and Faris 109), goes as far as pointing the departure date of this new phase of Latin American literature. According to him, that would be 1935, the year in which Borges's *Historia universal de la infamia* (A Universal History of Infamy) appeared, for it reflects the influence of Kafka, thus a new trend in the Hispanic American fiction. However, it is the work of Garcia Marquez that set the tone of "magic" for a literature that, in the everyday occurrences, introduces improbable happenings and the "extreme state" Carpentier had noticed some decades earlier. Realistic settings are invaded by something too strange to be believed, yet in a different way from what happens in Surrealism. Surrealism invades with its fantastic elements a world dominated by reason, creating a two-dimensional world with supernatural events and characters facing ordinariness as their counterpart. Magic Realism, in contrast, fuses the two worlds together, creating an alternative world whose elements are improbable, sometimes highly improbable, but not impossible, as in Borges's short stories the recital has remote chances of happening. Different is then the field of application, for Surrealism has recourse to psychological experience to decode reality, it deals with sub-conscious and unconscious to express the inexpressible, while Magic Realism consciously deals with the infinite cabinet of the imaginary. There is something artificial behind Surrealism. Already Carpentier accused it of being a narrative chosen for the purposes of literary experimentation, "trucos de prestidigitacion" (juggling tricks) as the sewing machine and the umbrella

disposed as art on the table, which so much had captivated Lautreamont. With the purpose to arouse feelings of marvel in the observer, Surrealism, due to the presence of elements that reason fails to connect, ends in forging an aesthetic of shock and at the end, it trades the artists for bureaucrats. In contradistinction to this artistic artificiality, Magic Realism is moved by an aesthetic of enchantment, an ordered, even if irrational, perspective.

As Moretti inspiringly noticed in *Modern Epic*, with *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) for the first time in modern history the gravity of literary creation abandons Europe. As a matter of fact, no post-war work has been more applauded by the Old World than Marquez's masterpiece. Why is that? Harold Bloom in his introduction to *Gabriel Garcia Marquez* defines the text as a literary miracle, as something that could only happen once (1). I, personally, cannot agree more. The success of the novel is due to the ability to integrate different genders, fantasy and reality, myth and history, national and familiar, comedy and tragedy. And yet, there is more to it than that. Magic Realism re-introduces enchantment in the post-Weberian world, after the modernist experiments and the technical abuses of postmodernism, it restores to literature what Kafka's fantasies and Joyce's generation had severed: the anthropological paradigm. Moretti briefly points out that after centuries of Weberian coldness, the colonial bloody conquest, military violence, Europe is ready to be re-enchanted, seemingly the Buendia's saga goes in and out from the Western tradition, making itself either understood or subject to wonder. Magic Realism is in this sense, the whirlpool of regrets stirring the flame of disenchantment.

Accordingly, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is set in a mythical Macondo, a miniature of the world, with gypsies, Arabs traders, Italian lovers, French whores. A microcosm filled with Christian faith and American myths where cultural belief is a blend of rural superstitions. Here, conceivable and inconceivable happen all at once far beyond the reader's capacity to absorb it, the exceptional becomes ordinary, time is timeless because temporal dimensions overlap on each other: the mythical time of the fathers founder, the historical time of the Colonel Aureliano Buendia and his wars, the cyclical time of everyone until the apocalyptic conclusion. But where does the general atmosphere of enchantment come from? At least from two different feelings. The immense solitude of the characters is the first. Stubborn, tenacious, reckless, abandoned to their dooms, the war, the goldfish, impossible love, unknown death, incapable of resisting the beauty of all their obsessions, set apart by the incommunicability of their destinies. The solitude of the Colonel Aureliano Buendia who did not love anyone, that of Assunta who loved the wrong man, that of Rebeca who has not loved enough, that of Ursula who loved alone. Afterward, is the moment of nostalgia to set scores against the merciless flowing of time. Common point of departure for a "magic narrative" is the past, the action is lodged in the past tense with the literary aim of placing a distance, spatial and temporal, between the present and the events narrated:

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. (Marquez 1)

Barabbas came by sea, the child Clara wrote in her delicate calligraphy. She was already in the habit of writing down important matters, and afterward, when she was mute, she also recorded trivialities, never suspecting that fifty years later I would use her notebooks to reclaim the past and overcome terrors of my own (Allende, *The House* 1).

I came to Comala because, I was told, my father lived here, Pedro Paramo. My mother told me so. I promised her to come and see him as soon as she had died. I held tight her hands as to comply with her request, for she was going to die and I was ready to promise it all (Rulfo 1)

Between the twenty stallions brought to the French boat by the captain who hung out as a Norman farmer, Ti Noel had chosen without hesitation that rounded stallion good for mounting, that bred colts increasingly smaller (Carpentier, *The Kingdom* 1)

Quintessential texts of Magic Realism all begin standing still facing the past. And between the temporal gaps flourishes nostalgia. Again *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is the trendsetter. The first sentence of the novel sets the tone of the whole narration. From an undefined present, the narrator evokes the future of a past moment, to immerse the reader into a labyrinthine mirror of time and space. Nostalgia in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is people clinging to the original disorder, it is the world of the gypsies where there are no cemeteries because people never die. What they really miss, are the miraculous invention of Melquiades whose imagination re-enchanted the technological discoveries of the Twentieth-century: a magnet turned into a device to extract gold, a daguerreotype

camera used to photograph God, a magnifying glass to be used in a hypothetical solar war, a pendulum machine to help people to fly. Eventually, not even the firing squad could kill the Colonel Aureliano Buendía, but nostalgia did it. As the circus passes by once more, memory plays on him one last trick, it calls back that afternoon, some decades before, his father had taken him to see the ice. Just then, he sees everything again, the impossible wars, the immensity of his solitude, the precipice of uncertainty, a sad dromedary. At last, that very same memory fails him, like Benjamin's angel of history, he looks at the debris of time and the ruins of the past, but in the efforts to redeem them he is pushed forward by the storm of progress. It is the void left by war, the senseless of a death what generates nostalgia for life, and he cannot but die under the same chestnut tree where his father did.

Magic Realism does not copy reality as Realism does, nor invents imagined world as Surrealism does, but places magic behind the world: "the mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it" (Zamora et al. 16). If I were to visualize the difference between Magic Realism and Surrealism, my choice would be Salvador Dali and Frida Kahlo. Dali's painting *The Persistence of Memory* holds the disturbing world of Surrealism since such a landscape of melting pocket watches does not exist, on the other hand Kalo's disturbing self-portrait and the strange juxtaposition of object out of their context can be rightly placed within the matter of fact discourse of Magic Realism for, as she said, "I do not paint my dreams. I paint my reality" ("Frida"). Thus, to answer the initial question regarding the nature of Magic Realism, there is an undeniable postmodern impulse in the aim: the technical influence of Freud is shouldered by the conceptual influence of the Marxist idea of conflict between ruling and ruled classes and feminist theories of Simone de Beauvoir. In Allende's *The House of the Spirits*, the female magic spell of realism is broken by the brutality of the regime where the men of Pinochet manipulate the spiritual world of the previous generation with the horror of the torture inflicted on the last. Magic Realism, as Zamora et al. already summarized, plays out for some as a literary means of resisting political and cultural structures, specifically political hegemony, a feature that has made the mode particularly useful to writers in postcolonial cultures battling against the influence of previous colonial rulers. Writers wish to express a practice of living that does not coincide with the dominant paradigm which is the logic of previous European colonial and, in second stance, that of American neo-colonialism. However, this is just one aspect of the matter. As the political agenda is joined with an aesthetic style, it is my suggestion to see in this narrative an attitude towards society through which the author is able to intuit the multiform colors of the world we live in, at times beauty and tragedy. So goes Cortazar in the short story *Las Armas Secretas* (The Secret Weapons 1958):<sup>3</sup>

Strange how people are under the impression that making a bed is exactly the same as making a bed, that to shake hands is always the same as shaking hands, that opening a can of sardines is to open the same can of sardines ad infinitum. But if everything's an exception, Pierre is thinking (...) (65)

Magic Realism precisely sees the exceptionality of living behind the banality of life, so that the initial shock produced by surrealist art is replaced by the art of surprise designed to fascinate in response to an unusual event. From the very beginning, the reader is swept into a familiar dimension where the unreal happens as part of reality, and time repeats itself in a Spenglerian cyclicity of birth, growth, maturity, and death. In Allende's *Of Love and Shadow*, the senseless of history is all laid down in the fate of Francisco leading Irene into exile: the destination is Spain, from which a half-century before his parents had escaped since they were persecuted by another dictatorship. In *The House of the Spirits* time acts as a personal retribution, as Alba explains at the end, though never complete:

The day my grandfather tumbled Pancha García among the rushes of the riverbank, he added another link to the chain of events that had to complete itself. Afterward the grandson of the woman who was raped repeats the gesture with the granddaughter of the rapist, and perhaps forty years from now my grandson will knock García's granddaughter down among the rushes, and so on down through the centuries in an unending tale of sorrow, blood, and love. (259)

There is the repetition of names from one generation to another to stir the sense of astonishment. In addition, however, there are unaware protagonists, who, painstakingly sticking to their obsessions, try to keep the axle moving, just as Aureliano Buendía does in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* with his little golden fish: he makes them, melt them, only to make them once again (53). For Ursula at the dawn of each new generation, well decoded the secret: "it is like time turned around and we had

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<sup>3</sup> Translation is mine.

returned at the beginning" (155). And when the system comes close to its natural exhaustion, death intervenes to interrupt the magic of realism and restart the engine of life: "The family was a machine with unavoidable repetitions, a turning wheel that would have gone on spilling into eternity were it not for the progressive and irremediable wearing of the axle" (428). The cyclical structure of time is broken, and so is the promise of continuity, and thus Macondo is swept away from the face of the earth, magic reduced once more to reality.

### **The Unhappy Consciousness of Chinese Avant-garde**

After having introduced the experience of Latin American Magic Realism, and having described it from the side of the writers, as an attitude, and, from the side of the readers, as a willingness to re-enchant the iron cage of the Western civilization, I will now analyze the fiction of Chinese Avant-garde. Due to the limited space at my disposal, I will narrow down the discussion to the narrative of Can Xue and Yu Hua, whose texts, because of their unconventionality with regard the Chinese artistic landscape, have been hastily labeled as reminiscent of Latin American Magic Realism.<sup>4</sup> My argument is that Chinese literary production in the 1980s-90s far from being a negotiation of identities in a post-Weberian age, represents the implosion of Maoist discourse. Thus the magic of realism is substituted with the horrifying abyss of a haunted fiction, which is as well the literary translation of Hegel's conception of unhappy consciousness. In this sense the experimental writing of Can Xue and the first Yu Hua represent at best the unimaginable of history, their obsession with the nightmarish and the brutal. It is a clear deviation from the enchanted shores of magic, and together a shipwreck on the bay of tragedy.

The starting point of any discussion about the status of Chinese literature, and more generally the features of Post-Maoist China, postmodern China has to be located within Maoism. The legacy of Maoism marks the whole of contemporary Chinese literature with not just a scar, but a ceaseless burning flame. Maoism by breaking with the secularism of China went down in history as the experience of Chinese modernity. Mao embodies for China a breaking through with the feudal past, the technological and scientific developments testify the transition from an agrarian economy to an industrial one. In this sense, Mao pushed China towards the modern path. In some cases bridging the gap between rural and urban, between workers and intellectuals. It included the collectivization of the land, and the nationalization of the economy through the People's Commune (steel production, water project, communal dining-hall). All this was socialist modernization standing as an alternative to capitalist modernization. Maoism believed that the revolutionary ideology—the hegemony of proletariat—could transform a semi-feudal society into pure socialism marked by asceticism, based on property-less system, and egalitarianism which provided equality of property guaranteed by the Party-State supplying basic needs, such as housing, food, job security, and social insurance. But the gamble did not pay out. Volunteers or victims of the rustication movement, millions of people faced years of hunger, hardship, and poverty. Roused by dreams of adventures or the authentic need to change China, they had to cope with a land where life, safety, and love were disregarded, the ideals of the revolution betrayed by the corruption of local cadres, daily discriminations, the waste of time, energies and resources, evident behind impractical plans. China sank into a pre-revolution caste system that ranked society according to their family origins, the Great Leap Forward generated a devastating famine, the Cultural Revolution, ideologically conceived as an experiment in collective democracy, an alternative way to both capitalism and Soviet Socialism, eventually ended up being an ideological delirium, a political witch-hunt that turned the Chinese clock of history backward. At the death of Mao, the deconstruction of history began. Throughout a distressing process of understanding people realized that the egalitarian approaching between intellectuals and masses never really happened, the collectivization had been a waste of land, the Cultural Revolution a waste of youth, the idealization of peasant life was, by all means, an excuse hiding poverty and ignorance. Suddenly, the fictional revolutionary masses discover false what they believed to be true, and in a moment of fine realism the rebel against history.

Chinese Avant-garde, to be grasped in its contextual background, has to be decoded as a turning point in the development of Chinese modern fiction, a moment of Chinese postmodernism which is the whole of post-Mao cultural production. But while in the West, postmodernism is what happened after the Avant-garde, being a juncture of superficiality willing to forget the depth of the past, in China Avant-garde experimentation is what happened after postmodernism, specifically the first literary production after Tiananmen. By the end of the 80s, Chinese literary paradigm was chaos. Reality was a flux of genre, style, themes, emotion in readjustment mode. By pinning down the

<sup>4</sup> See Wedell-Wedellsborg; Ning; Zheng.

experimentation launched by the younger generation—the Misty Poetry—Avant-garde artists produced a dramatic break from the conventions of modern Chinese literature. It is a mutiny, as Xiaobin Yang inspiringly calls it(3), against the literary aim of Chinese modernity, grounded in the artist as a savior of the masses, and art as instrument of moral education. This is a generation that has to confront itself with the aggressiveness of Western modernist technique and the rhetoric of *zhiqing* writers, who, once the higher education was restored, had gone back to the city to finish their education. Confronting the bitterness of the latter, the likes of Can Xue, Ma Yuan, Yu Hua, Ge Fei, children or adolescents during the Cultural Revolution, had to find another way of communication. Here we assist to the coming of age of a literature disengaged from the political arena of Maoism, and irreverent to the temporal logic of Deng's China, a pure narrative that begins deconstructing the mainstream culture, presenting itself as a Chinese box in which one story's meaning is within the other, perspective and time sequence do not follow any order, characters step into each other's fantasies making of the novel a sort of dreamland, in which difficult is to tell whether the events described actually took place or rather are a mere production in the troubled minds of its characters.

As I have already said my choice falls on the literary aftershock of Can Xue (1953) and Yu Hua (1960). Alienated from the ideological discourse of the mainstream, indifferent to the emphasis the New Era/Post-New Era posed on economic reform and material interest, their writing becomes an attack on the shallow optimism of the 1980s. With no trace left of the secular concern over the nation or the atavistic call for the cultural origins, it constitutes the dawn of Chinese literary postmodernism. In particular, there is a new zone of writing, fertile for the growth of individualism, poetic imagination, disconnected tales and fragmented style because directly connected to the unknown creation of our subconscious. The labyrinth of Can Xue's and Ge Fei's narration, the first Yu Hua, disassembles the realism of the Chinese tradition and the epic of historical fiction, replacing them with perverted images of unbearable cruelty. Realist conventions are shattered, there is no plot construction, no clear setting, and symbology cannot be decoded. In addition, the narration shifts to and fro from the first to the third person narrator producing dizziness in the reader, and the dreamscape of the narration aids in constructing a Surrealist work, but it does not help in the construction of self; rather, it naturally dismembers it. If the reader has some difficulties in sympathizing with the protagonists that is because there is no protagonist. Avant-gardists' character do not go anywhere. They drift apart, submitted to the killing fields of their psyche. My guess is that Scar Literature, the first attempt of literature in post-Maoist China, had to deal only with the need to describe an individuality damaged by the logic of ideology. But what came after had to deal with an identity damaged by the horror of the past. Thus, the Avant-gardist experiment, due to the amplitude of the Maoist discourse and the tragic dimension of the Cultural Revolution, stands in Chinese history not so much as the attempt to re-enchanted a world that was traumatized by decades of ideology (Magic Realism), as it is the undertaking, on an artistic level, of the Hegelian unhappy consciousness. It is a literary space where the orthodoxy of a nation is scattered into pieces, the breakdown of the State-People symbiosis, and the complete collapse of the socialist foundation. For those who survived, this space designates the incapacity to identify themselves with the nation once more. Hegel writes: "The Unhappy Consciousness (...) is, conversely, the tragic fate of the certainty of self that aims to be absolute. It is the consciousness of the loss of all essential being in this certainty of itself, and of the loss even of this knowledge about itself ... It is the grief which expresses itself in the hard saying that 'God is dead'" (455).

On the one hand, the unhappy consciousness is the experience of fragility, a total loss. Using Hegel's suggestive words everything that was absolutely meaningful has disappeared, the eternal laws have vanished, the Oracles are dumb, the statues are empty stones from which the soul has flown away, hymns are words without belief (455). On the other hand, Hegel theorizes, consciousness has recognized the contradiction at the heart of its double nature, a natural-physical nature, and a spiritual-supernatural nature. Adam was first formed out of clay and then a spirit was breathed into him, Adam was first immortal and then died. Both natures are part of our essence, not as a contingent event but human condition, and they are in conflict. So is, for instance, Augustine in the *Confessions*, split between the utter contingency of his living and a self-reconciling truth. He wants to stop lusting after women and convert to Christianity, unconditionally love God, but not quite yet. He is torn in two directions, between the physical need for a mutable world and his longing for a transcendent reality. As soon as Augustine, a figure for all humans, becomes aware of this double nature he becomes an unhappy consciousness: every gain is a loss and every joy a suffering. Above all so is the Cross: "That God has died is the tragic fate of the self-confident individual, which had to be everything" (Hegel 455). The agony of Jesus that aims to be absolute, but suffers the tragic fate of dying tortured as an individual, Jesus who is God and yet forced to endure the despair of that separation "My God, my God,



why hast Thou forsaken me" (Psalms 22:2), the unhappy consciousness plays out in the image of the Cross as the experience of finitude before immortality. Adapting the Hegelian speculation to China, one can say that the unhappy consciousness of Chinese Avant-garde is a feeling of historical deception, an irremediable laceration. The unhappy dimension lies in the fact that the Chinese consciousness knows itself to be related to a social reality which at the same time withdraws from it.

Accordingly, Deng Xiaoping era begins by blaming the past, and those who participate in the socialist construction are now called to repudiate Mao's Cultural Revolution and what they worked for, the planned economy. The new policy not only widens the gap between the intellectual and the working class, but the very same working class is reduced to a substratum, a subaltern class, which on one hand did not see the promise of egalitarianism fulfilled, and on the other hand, has to survive the logic of marketization. The cultural background is confusing, based on the coexistence of overlapping cultural paradigms and historical cliché. Brought up with Confucian ideal of filial piety, all of a sudden the Chinese people found themselves living in a world that tolerates and recommends individualism, competitiveness, and auto-referential egoism. They are asked to fulfill duties that modernity denies, to have an identity in a world that changes every day, to be modern and traditional, conservative and liberal, to memorize Mao's speeches and embrace the opportunity offered by capitalism. A crisis of identity is the prize to be paid to step into modernity. It follows that, if one realizes the full meaning of Maoist's radicalism, which placed itself as an absolute ideology and the negation of any alternative reality, it becomes easy to see the fiction of Can Xue and Yu Hua as representative of Hegelian unhappy consciousness once Mao withdraws from the stage of history. China has been abandoned, perhaps betrayed, by her master, thus it is of extreme significance to comprehend the Promethean task of those confronting this historical emptiness. But while Hegel will postulate a supersensible beyond to solve the problem, so the impasse of the unhappy consciousness can dissolve in the universal and redeem itself, Chinese Avant-garde cannot. The synthesis fails to occur for there is no Absolute left. The nihilism of the characters, the violence of their hallucinations, attests the cultural collapse of an era; ultimately, the incommunicability of the experience, transforms the previous feeling of divine into a shattered carnival of symbolism.

### **The Haunted Fiction of Can Xue and Yu Hua**

Can Xue, Ge Fei, and Yu Hua admitted being influenced by Marquez and Borges. But the labyrinths of Can Xue recall those of Kafka and the violence of the first Yu Hua (*The Past and Punishment*) does not side with the spell of magic. It is more an overlapping of tendencies and style that sometimes make it impossible to recognize China. Premodern and Avant-garde exigencies walk together in this case, and the outcome is as confusing and heterogeneous as European continental modernism was. The breaking of the chronological order between the past and the present is the breaking of the order of things and the rationality of life. Contemporaneity is chaos. Within the frame of literary prose, Can Xue's work is the Copernican revolution of Chinese literature. For the first time since Lu Xun, narrative fails to end on an upbeat note. The compass of the existence goes mad, the objective correlative is imperfect, unable to match emotions and fact: "I am dying for love of the color yellow. It simply increases my appetite" (Xue 39). Or: "The ceiling is flashing with red light. A story remains in the ashes. I know how hard it is and I know the eternal dread" (177). Relating to the Western tradition of the irrational, Can Xue somewhat renews the tradition of Magic Realism, in which the two dimensions of dream and reality are no longer divided, but rather constitute one matter-of-fact territory logically conceived. It transcends quotidian practice to explore the hallucination of the abyss. As a result, the fences of magic are derailed too. With reason, scholarship has defined her writing as expression of madness, but there is more to it than that.<sup>5</sup> Judith Herman's observation on victims of traumatic stress helps decode the Avant-garde writing style: "People who have survived atrocities often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner that undermines their credibility and thereby serves the twin imperatives of truth-telling and secrecy" (1). Can Xue's narrative is a case in point. Her memoirs, included in the foreword to her first short story collection *Dialogues in Paradise* (1989), provide the historical background for the hunger, fatigue, hallucination, swelling of her literature, much more a naturalist description than an exercise of experimental fiction:

In 1957 my father, as head of the 'anti-Party clique' at the New Hunan Daily, was condemned as an ultra-rightist and transferred to Hunan Teachers 'College to reform through labor, and my mother was sent to Hengshan Mountain for labor reform. In 1959 the whole family of nine was moved from the newspaper residential area to a tiny hut of about ten squares meters at the foot of Yuelushan Mountain. We lived on an

<sup>5</sup> See Wedell-Wedellsborg; Solomon; Posborg.

income of less the ten yuan per person. That was the time of nationwide natural disaster. Since my father had neither savings nor help from outside, the whole family struggled along on the verge of death. (3)

The intentional fragmentation of the narration elucidates the loss of meaning of history or at least the awareness of unreasonable forces, simultaneously it acts as a challenge to the judgment of the reader and the hierarchies of the literary establishment. Charlotte Innes in her introduction to *Old Floating Clouds* acutely noticed that the lack of readability from the side of the reader it is a sign of literary health from the side of post-socialist China, meaning for that that writing and understanding become both a creative enterprise (Xue, *Old XI*). Fair enough. Every single piece of relevant literature produced post-1976 bears the ghost of the Great Cultural Revolution. Can Xue, more than anybody else, reflects post-Maoist despair through the disintegration of order and reality along with it:

I can't deal with realism, and may not even in the future. I have to enter a kind of supernatural state to write anything creative. I have to raise my spirit to a certain indulgence in the wildest fantasy. All my characters and happening are my creation. They don't need to coincide with the reality ordinary people can understand. I deliberately make them run counter to that reality. I'll gather all my emotion and ideals to fight iron-strong reality. (164)

As a consequence, entering Can Xue's episode is comparable to entering a haunted cabinet in which very little space is left to narrative plot and the action is entirely taken by anarchic hallucinations. Similarly, Xun Lu's *The Madmen Diary*, all in all, the story of a madman who was not really mad after all, but became the scapegoat of a sick society, so is in Can Xue. Who the madman is, or where madness is, are the questions we should be ready to answer. In addition, Can Xue's writing does not have a socio-moral connotation. The aim is not that of reforming society, narrative starts as inner discourse and there it ends without pretending to be allegory for some other agenda. The dialectic object-subject is absolutely defeated in a sense that the subject becomes the object, and because the plot is not questionable anymore, for there is no plot, what is left is the nudity of a confession. Literature enters now a different dimension, directly cutting into the state of the subject, a psychological self-exploration in vitro. The language is lyrical and traumatic, magic and realist. The realism of the inner experience which moves among different levels of suspicions and discoveries is absorbed into an atmosphere of vagueness, the delicacy of a memory blanketed into a layer of dust, the characters recall the past, but they do not remember it. Bits and pieces cannot be assembled together.

"The Date" (1989), a short story in her first collection *Dialogues in Paradise*, is a condensation of all that Can Xue stands for. As it often happens, the story is told by a first-person narrator, and it opens in medias res. The female narrator "I" is married, and her husband invites her for a date to a deserted island which she recalls as a long distant memory. In fact, we are about to discover that many years before they used to date in this very same island, already back then a buffer zone between the city and a fantasy. The husband seems to regret the invitation, for he hastens to say that her coming along is not necessary. She decides to go anyway, and the realistic sense is soon shattered by her questioning how a car could traverse the sea. Her pocket watch is not working anymore. To follow one direct line of interpretation, one might deduce that time has stopped. My suggestion is that this is the moment the narration switches from reality to dream. As they meet he does not seem pleased. He ignores her by turning his back to her, "Why have you come?" he asks, "I wanted to see the sunrise she lies" (96). Again his answer seems to confirm the oneiric dimension of the story: "You will disappear at sunrise." The reader is now given some piece of concrete information: on the island there is a house with a pocket watch hanging down from the wall. For the past twenty years, at five in the morning, he went there to see her, but he never looked at her: "He kept his back to me and never turned his head" and for twenty years he repeated the same compulsive sentence "if the sun appears now, the beetles will change into helicopters" (97). If she cannot see him perhaps he is a product of her imagination. All the same, she kept awake at night fearing he will come while she is asleep. Touched by her memories, he recalls a walk into the wild. His memories are fragmented, it was dark outside and she was light as a wisp of smoke. Before dawn he abandoned her, he left the island for the city, and she may have done the same, for the narrator "I" uses now the past tense to place them in the future in a different dimension: "I wanted to ask in detail about past decades, how he had searched for me, about that house, how he pushed open the door and entered, whether he had noticed the pocket watch on the wall. However, I had already forgotten what I wanted to say" (99). Here the logic of the narrative irremediably breaks. Time is squashed stretching from the past (his footsteps were very light) to the present (afraid I might miss your date) to the past of a past moment (I wanted to ask...how he had searched for me), back to the present (Everything will

disappear at sunrise) and space displaced (the city is so large). Where are they now, on the island or in the city? And when? Now or in the past? The reader's effort to localize them is vain. As the sun rises we find them in the city while the city is awakening, they sleep in separate rooms, hinting an intimate separation more than physical, both dealing with the respective fantasies. Magic Realism is not very much the issue here since everyone shares the same dream, the distorted subjectivity is transformed into the objective existence of the hallucinatory images, Surrealism enters the room of literature through the door of Avant-garde.

Xue's *Old Floating Clouds* (1991) embodies a web of anxieties and violation. Center stage is again a female protagonist, Xu Ru-hua who has an illicit affair with her neighbor Geng Shanwu, and that is pretty much all about the plot. The novel appears from the start as a waltz of compulsive disorders. Ru-hua spends her life spraying insecticide and raising goldfish. Old Kuang, her husband, has to eat roasted beans every night at midnight as a remedy against dreaming, and he finds a meaning to his otherwise meaningless life by quoting other's people's saying. Her lover's daughter is obsessed with the cat's tail which she cuts off. Her lover's wife has a mirror on a tree in the backyard she uses to spy on people, and as her lover is getting on in years he discovered himself doing unreasonable actions such as sawing the legs off the bed, peeing on his wife's socks. None of the characters is spared from strange behaviors. Shan-wu's colleagues become overexcited at the sight of a butterfly, they jump, they cheer, they yell "crazy as drunkards," "acting like madman" (192). At last Xu Ruhua, in fear of the world outside, confines herself inside her room, allegedly for a period of three years and four months. The walls are plastered with newspaper, the doors locked, and the windows are iron-barred. Her slow mental and physical disintegration can begin. The legs are rotting, the belly dries up, the clothes stuck to her skin, the brain vessel breaking. And point-blank, at the expense of the reader's comprehension, the novel ends. Nonetheless, the disconnected actions and dialogues add frustration to the vagueness of the sequence. See the draft of conversation between Geng Shanwu and his wife Mulan:

Geng Shan-wu glared at his wife as he concentrated on picking the gristle from his bone.  
'My stomach is full of these splinters of bones that prick me at the slightest movement'  
'The weather is getting hot?' Mu-lan wiped the sweat from her armpit. 'My hair turns sour if I don't wash it every day. I can't even stand the smell myself. (203)

As I said before, in Can Xue's text reality has lost its reason. We might gain a better understanding if it if we place it within the logic of Hegelian unhappy consciousness. *Old Floating Clouds* is one of those few stories where is evident that Can Xue's nightmares take shape from the political persecution her family had suffered not long before. Xu Ru-hua hides in her room to avoid being assaulted by the notes thrown by her mother: "Her mother stuck to her door a slip of paper which said with big letters, "Lazy bones, vain hoper, it's bound to lead to deterioration of will, and finally to end in your becoming the garbage of society" (201). Naturally, the note with big letters is a reference to the big poster characters (dazibiao) prevalent during the Cultural Revolution to whom a large category of people (landlord, righties, revisionist, intellectual, etc.) was compelled. Old Kuang's mother likes quoting political sentences: "The distracting thoughts in one's soul are the blasting fuse leading to detonation", "I am undergoing a thorough cleansing of the soul" (223) which are a clear parody, from the side of the author, of the propaganda discourse. Always on a symbolic level, Xiaobin Yang notices that the sun "blood-red sun, horribly red" epitomizing Mao or The Party, implies violence and ferocity, as to say that the meaning of the text is outside the text. A recurrent expression in Can Xue's texts is that of seeing through someone, prying into someone else thoughts, violence here, unlike in other Avant-gardist works, is psychological. Characters live in fear of being violated, the reader is left with the awkward feeling that something had been violated, the narrator's intimacy, childhood, past. There is a constant moving, hiding, sneaking of people, Ru-hua sees women and thieves squeezing their heads in through the window, people peeking, peeping through a crack in the door, spying through the wall, a window, a curtain, overhearing in the next room. The dialogues carry menaces, a chosen and repetitive terminology, contributes to elaborate the nightmarish atmosphere. The word "crack" appears twenty-five times involving the door, the floor, the windows, the branches of the trees, the voice, the curtains, the wall, the sky, legs. The word "creaking" appears eight times referring to the bed, bones, door, the tree, the roof; "swollen" appears nine times, the bed legs, Old Kuang's heart is swollen with arrogance, the eyes, eyelids, fingers, the wound, the body. The word "spy" appears twelve times: the father-in-law spies on Shang-Wu and so does his wife Mu-Lan, Shang Wu spies on Xu Ru-hua, Xu Ru-hua spies on her neighbors. Everyone is watched, everyone is somewhat violated by the other, danger is a possibility ever present: the ceiling might break open, the tree might crash

down. Fear then is a general thread linking events and characters. The house seems to be haunted, at night when conscience is guilty, the world outside starts creaking, the house collapsing, people turn into animals, (Ru-hua on her wedding night turned into a rat or a vampire) or assume absurd proportion: "In her eyes is a steel needle more than two inches long. I saw her shoot it at a child who cried out painfully" (219).

Visual images of animals threatening people's lives can be found throughout the text: there are scorpions under the bed, invasions of insect, bugs, crickets, termites eating whole chairs, sparrows sneaking in, shark's skeleton, leeches, caterpillars, mosquitos singing stuffy songs, flies rolling together to mate, the house is infested by rats, turtle, moth lay eggs everywhere, ants make nests along the foot of the wall. The world has become a labyrinth of horrors. Haunted by a persecution complex, Can Xue's characters are the survival of Maoist age. After the establishment of the Peoples Republic, they were told to remold themselves to the task of communism and at this very same moment, the ideological reform started. Study meeting lasting hours set to disseminate doctrine, slogans repeated *ad nauseam*. Public sessions of self-criticism took place, privacy was abolished for the sake of public life, and people would not dare to write or publish anything fearing to say something wrong. People would keep a distance between them in case they would be forced to accuse each other once they would commit an error. Maoism until the end kept alive its beliefs, kept alive its political suppression, the fear of revisionism, the need for mass mobilization, and while so doing, it slowly washed away the family unit, the affection of one individual toward the others. In short, if one could avoid being an enemy of society, one was left to be eaten by loneliness. Scar Literature soberly describes the dissolution of any privacy, the guilt behind intimacy, the danger of a personal thought in a world where the private becomes public and the public is a political arena occupied by those who criticize on one side, and those who are criticized on the other. Hence, not surprisingly, Can Xue's argument, and more in general post-1976 female literature, is grounded in the horror of the social context resulting in the disintegration of family relationships. The fictional landscape is neither the countryside nor the city, but the inner soul, the display of a human being wholly naked. The historical space is colonized by nothing but the subject, self-expression. Individual voice appears in a world perceived as hostile and insecure. Naturally, everything threatens to fall apart: the whole structure is fragile, houses shaking and creaking, buildings about to collapse, the ocean threatens the mountain, people are suddenly beaten, violence emerges unexpected, insignificant details, as a glance or a word, become antechamber of ceaseless fear, a primitive fear that has no shape and comes from the beginning of time.

In Yu Hua, Can Xue's oneiric visions are replaced by scenes of gratuitous cruelty. Evident is the idea of an attempt of Bildungsroman, though interrupted. The excess of Maoism and the contradictions of the market economy have shaped a generation of writers whose future expectations do not match with their recollections of the past. And the past becomes a ghost. Chinese traditional sense of belonging fades away, family ties are dismissed, children are abandoned. The protagonists are dissatisfied, deceived, alienated from those they love, yearning for love: the anti-hero of the revolution is never fully engaged in the present nor fully aware of their past. Forever drifting towards a would-be identity. The Bildungsroman is stained by violence and death as a decoration of the "revolutionary carnival," sex experienced as a sin, family heritage as decadence, the logic of human behavior unfolds as a constitutive instinct of cruelty and savagery.

I will now refer to some short stories collected in *The Past and the Punishment* (1996), which represents Yu Hua's experimentalist writing at its best. Without doubt, violence is the other face of the Avant-garde literary revolt at the end of the 80s. It vaguely reminds the Romantic alienation of the self, the literary agony implicit in the imagination of Sade or Apollinaire. Chinese writers also reverted the mutation of human values into sexual fantasies, bloodshed, and a sadist creativity.

The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice endures one more variant in Yu Hua's "Classical Love" (appearing in *The Past and the Punishment*). Liu Sheng, the male protagonist, on his way to the capital for the imperial examination, is struck by luxurious mansions and the beauty of a young lady called Hui. But this is not a knight-errant tale. The splendor and the glory of the past are met by crumbling buildings, empty wasteland and little piles of roof tiles. The beauty of love is not celebrated here, but the violation of the body. Corpses are scattered all along the road, a little girl dismembered, the squeak of an ax being repeatedly wrenched from human bones, the beautiful maiden Hui is butchered on the floor before turning into a ghost. We carry through a tormenting aesthetization of violence in which the incapacity of the narrator to redeem the initial harmony and the extreme horrors of the happenings suggest a ghost China unable to shake its past off. Kafkaesque absurdity is juxtaposed with random brutality which cut short the voyage of self-discovery and establishes an unsettling relation between people and the world.

In another story in the collection, "On the Road at Age Eighteen," the narrator "I," as he turns eighteen, is given by his dad a red backpack with inside the necessary tools for the journey. And the journey is life. He is going on a trip alone. Yu Hua offers the Bildungsroman of a young man as an existential allegory. In fact, he does not know where he is headed. It is almost dusk, he is looking for an inn to spend the night, but there is none—just one hill after another. The journey soon takes a strange turn, when he gets a ride on a truck headed in the direction from which he had just come, hinting perhaps at the regressive nature of history. The driver who picked him up is not concerned about the destination: "I just keep driving and see when I get there" (6). Might the journey Yu Hua is referring to be a national allegory over the future of China in the coming years? After a peaceful interlude, the equilibrium is shattered. The truck, carrying apples, breaks and it is soon assaulted in an escalation of violence without words. First five people on bicycles, then another group on bicycles, and few minutes later a group on motorized tractor carts, and finally another wave of bicycles and tractors, all of them rolling down the hill with systematic order. Easy to see in this horde of thieves the crushing experience of the Maoist revolution falling on China as an avalanche of disasters. The unnamed protagonist is beaten, the apples are stolen, and the truck destroyed: "I saw them remove the window glass, strip the tires, pry away the planks that covered the truck bed" (9). Striking is the indifferent glance of the driver which is not to be interpreted as a reminder of the irrationality of history, as it is the final admission of a collective guilt, and thus no one can disclaim responsibility. The truck looks miserable and battered, the red backpack is taken away. Both function as metaphors of Chinese identity, plundered, ransacked, emptied as the houses during the Cultural Revolution. The existential process of homecoming begins here without reaching any destination. We will have to wait for the female writer to see where it leads. Avant-garde fiction is numb before the contemporary logic of China because it is still haunted by history, as in one of Goya's sketches, history and reason generate monsters. Yu Hua's texts, more than Can Xue's, are obviously connected to the political. The focus is on the body scheduled for physical destruction, and the body acting as metaphor for the cultural nihilism China went through in the Maoist age. Recalling his early childhood Yu Hua describes one of the most discussed visual images of the Communist Revolution, the big-character poster:

As a little boy in primary school I was terrified of big-character posters. Every morning as I headed off to class with my satchel on my back I would nervously scan the walls on either side of the street, checking to see if my father's name appeared in the headlines of the latest batch of posters. My father was a surgeon and a low-level functionary in the Communist Party. In the early stages of the Cultural Revolution I had personally witnessed the disgrace of several of my classmates' fathers who were officials; they were denounced for being "power holders following the capitalist road." Activists in the revolutionary rebel faction beat them till their faces were black-and-blue, and they were forced to wear wooden signs over their chests and tall dunce caps on their heads. I would see them every day with brooms in their hands, trembling with fear as they swept the streets. Passersby would give them a kick if they felt like it, or spit in their faces. Their children naturally shared the ignominy, being constant butts of their classmates' insults and targets of their discrimination. I lived on tenterhooks, anxious that my father might suddenly suffer a similarly awful fate, bringing me down with him. (...) And one morning Hua Xu and I finally saw on the way to school the big-character poster that I had most been dreading. (*China* 37)

A few decades later the reality of the revolution comes back disguised in haunted nightmares of death: trucks carrying armed soldiers, summary shooting, and bloodshed replay themselves endlessly as an old vinyl:

From 1986 to 1989 was my peak period for writing about blood and violence (...) During the day as I worked on my stories, there were bound to be gruesome slayings and people dying in pools of blood. At night as I slept, I would dream I was being hunted down and killed. In those nightmares I would find myself friendless and alone, and when I wasn't searching frantically for a hiding place, I'd be desperately fleeing down a highway. Typically, just as I was about to come to a bad end—as an axe was about to sever my neck, for example—I would awake with a start, dripping with sweat, my heart pounding, and it would take me a minute to pull myself together. (...) Life in those three years was so frenzied and so hideous: by day I would kill people in fiction, and by night I would be hunted down in dreams. (*China* 50)

In another story in the same collection, titled "1986," Yu Hua sets his short story in a postmodern or post-revolutionary landscape, in which the welfare produced by the economic reforms plunged China into a blissful historical amnesia:

The disastrous years of the Cultural Revolution have faded into mists of time. The political slogans pasted again and again on the walls have all been painted over, obscured from the view of the pedestrians strolling through the spring night, invisible to those for whom only the present can be seen. Crowds surge excitedly

down the street. Bicycle bells sound out across the avenues. Cars leave clouds of dust in their wake. A minivan with loudspeakers mounted on its roof drives slowly by, broadcasting information about family planning and contraception. (143)

The surface of the Cultural Revolution has been whitewashed, but the efforts are to no avail. The past is the present. A school history teacher, who had disappeared during the political upheaval leaving behind his wife and a three years old daughter, reappears some twelve years later as a madman in the street of a peaceful town sawing his own body. The nameless protagonist is the Avant-gardist answer to Zijun in Chen Guokai's "What should I do" (Link 73).<sup>6</sup> In this "scar-story" written at the end of the 70s, the protagonist's husband comes back home eight years later wearing on his face the scars of the Cultural Revolution, "His face was covered with terrifying scars, and his upper lip was horribly split" (Link 94). This story of a broken family revolves around the main happenings of the socialist tragedy, political struggle, persecution, proletarian dictatorship. "What should I do?" is the piece's last stirring line. But at the end of the 1980s, the dramatic implications of the revolution are on the table, the Cultural Revolution has been re-elaborated, condemned, understood in its epilogue. In the Taiwanese edition of his first novel, *Diren* (The Enemy 1991), Ge Fei condenses everyone's thoughts by confessing that he is "shrouded by a shadow from long ago, which spanned my all childhood and left indelible traces in my memory" (5). The trauma of the revolution establishes a logic of madness over the logic of memory, no reconciliation between characters and events, subject and object, history and reason is ever possible. Thus in Yu Hua, the wounds inflicted by decades of political hysteria, assume the shape of distorted pictures and grotesque complexions. The teacher going back home after years of hardship sees a good giant crossing an old town ready for the spring festival:

His hair tumbled from his head like a waterfall and dangled about his waist. His beard cascaded down to his chest, obscuring most of his face. His eyes were swollen and cloudy. That was how he limped into town. His pants were tattered, and from the knees down, all that remained were some dangling strips of torn cloth. His upper body was naked save for a piece of burlap thrown over his shoulders. His unshod feet were crisscrossed with deep, callused cracks. The cracks were filled with black grit and the feet were usually large, so that each footstep rang out like a hand claps against the pavement. (141)

But for the good giant, there is no adjustment, individual or domestic. Just as it happens in many of wound-retrospective literature, the self-mutilation, the dismembering of the body (nose-cutting, leg chopping and so on) corresponds to the impossibility of going back home for those who outlived the political persecution of recent history. There is nothing left to do, is the answer Yu Hua offers the initial scar-question. Truth makes people free and mortal. And that is the first moment of Chinese postmodernism. Or better yet, Chinese postmodernism starts with a piercing historical awareness, that life disintegrates and human beings lose their freedom once they are about to grasp it. Immediately, Chinese political consciousness, until then soaring on the spell of ideology, becomes unhappy. The veil of Maoism is finally ripped open, to reveal that the logic behind the master discourse, which justified the political persecution, was not based on rationality, but on its deformation as the violence of the mutilation, the nonsensical memories, attest. The nauseating details of the scenes, the graphic accounts of the severing of the body, the horrifying tortures lasting pages of descriptions, subvert the linearity of realism. There are no heroes, time is smashed, space deconstructed. The cruelty of death denies rationality tout court, hope is completely vanished, and as a consequence life cannot be comprehended. As it happens in Can Xue, there is no space here for the hyperbolic tendencies of Marquez, the spirituality of Allende, the marvelous elements of Carpentier. Magic Realism is crushed by the emptiness of an ideological deception, hence the protagonists suffer the excruciating sensation of their contemporaneity, the inconsequentiality of today compared to what they had before. Yet "before" is not what they really had. The conclusion is the same reached by Western modernism, the labyrinth the readers face is reminiscent of Kafka and Borges metaphysical narrative, the language experimentation evocative of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* though Chinese Avant-garde does it through a nightmarish atmosphere, a display of human catastrophe that incapacitates any coherent representation. Death overcomes not just as the end of earthly life but a cunning allegory describing the crucial notion of man's existence: the selfishness of human nature and the hopelessness of human condition. The notion of Bildungsroman from a journey that is about to start is turned into a journey that has been interrupted, life has been denied.

<sup>6</sup> Published in 1979, controversial and extremely popular, the story provides an outlet for personal and collective feelings over the socialist tragedy.

In conclusion, Latin American Magic Realism and Chinese Avant-garde share the same dilapidated spectacle of history. Independence from Spain meant for Latin America the handing of power over politically unaware landowners, *caudillos*, who divided themselves into Conservatives and Liberals. The sequence of conflicts with none of the contending actors able to gain political control ended in a lasting condition of disorder. The exuberant immigration of African slaves, mixed with that of the pre-Columbian natives, which added to the Andalusian taste for fantasy and the Galician cult of the supernatural, has produced an ability to see reality in a certain magic way. But there is a humanist reading in Latin American Magic Realism that is nowhere to be seen in Can Xue and Yu Hua. Solitude, nostalgia, fate are not much of a theme for Chinese Avant-garde. In Can Xue and Yu Hua modernity maintains an equation between truth and violence, and those who outlived Maoism are witnesses driving back the monsters of their imagination.

To my knowledge, they are the Chinese authors whose texts more effectively illustrate the final words of Orwell's *Animal Farm*: "No question, now, what had happened to the faces of the pigs. The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which" (59). Describing what happened in Chinese literature in the mid-1980s as reminiscence of Magic Realism would not be appropriate then. Reality is certainly shattered, the fragments take different forms: dreamy in Ge Fei, violent in Yu Yua, hallucinatory in Cun Xue, fantastic in Ma Yuan, historical in Su Tong. However, there is no magic in it. From Scar Literature spanning the last four decades of Chinese production right down to the Private Female writing, the reader, alike the actor, is muted by the bittersweet symphony of singular-universal fate. They photograph the darkness of their memories, accordingly Avant-garde experiment turns into violence the scars of the Cultural Revolution: on the ruins of history and the deception of the present time, it offers images of desolation and abandonment. The drama of human condition is what emerges at last, alike in Malraux's novel it is the need to be intoxicated by an idea, in the case of China that of national salvation, Communism, and at last the desperate clash between the lightness of an ideal and the impossible weight of a historical betrayal. At stake there is a process of deconstruction, as for China, history is the structure to be dismantled, piece by piece, to be questioned and overcome. Untouchable idols are eroded, were the Red Guards victims or victimizers? Was the Rustication Movement a waste of youth or idealism? Why the Cultural Revolution? What was it, a trauma or an aborted utopia? The case of Can Xue and Yu Hua is symptomatic: there is a sense of unease, half-hinted revelations, that permeates through almost the entire collection largely ineffable. The linearity of history is illegible, suppressed, disrupted by the unidentifiable happenings, incoherent expressions which do not allow narration, and the protagonists, to reach the surface of consciousness. Yet, it is the chaos mining the empire of realism what helps the writers to disintegrate the Socialist rhetoric of the great narrative. The madness of many of the protagonists, their actions shifting between paranoia and schizophrenia, indicates not much the evil of the past, but the incapacity, from the side of the authors, to redeem it through rationality. And once the boundaries between real and unreal come loose, the text, literature itself, is released from the determinism of history which is ideology when it comes to China. History is dismounted, derided, reduced to madness, ignored, what is left is a fragment of man in redemption.

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Author's profile: Alberto Castelli is Associate Professor of Literature at Hainan University, China. Chiefly, he is engaged with modern and comparative literature. Castelli's interests in scholarship include comparative studies between China and the West over Modernism and Postmodernism. Castelli's publications include "American and Chinese Literature. Behind the mask of Postmodernism: A National Failure." His book *A Step Beyond Ideology: The Modernity of Chinese Postmodern Literature* is about to be released. Email: <[182034@hainu.edu.cn](mailto:182034@hainu.edu.cn)>