

## Psychological Disintegration: Nihilist Self-Destruction in Can Xue's Fiction

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Reading Can Xue, the only female member admitted into the so-called avant-garde writers of experimental fiction that appeared around 1985 in mainland China, one inevitably is struck by the feeling of being immersed in a never-ending nightmare that prolongs through one tormenting image after another, each more unpleasant than the previous one. Moreover, these disquieting images are piled on top of one another without sufficient articulation that leads toward coherence in meaning. Indeed, absurdity seems to have thoroughly devoured Can Xue's fictive world. Can Xue herself confesses one time that writing to her is an act of "taking revenge" against the rational world [Shi Shuqing, 1989].<sup>1)</sup> As reflected in many of her works, this passion for anything but the rational cumulates in an increasingly deteriorating living environment that ultimately deprives meaning of existence for its inhabitants.

Human beings' worthless existence is not only connected with absurdity in Can Xue's fiction; it is often manifested through a psychological state of disintegration. Perhaps more than the other avant-garde writers in the same group, and certainly contrary to the major of modern Chinese fiction writers, Can Xue is inclined to privilege the dark side of the human psyche, i.e., the unconscious rather than the conscious. Her probing into the unconscious mind of human existence is executed on two levels: through the personal unconscious mind and through the collective unconscious psyche. No forced divisions of these levels are maintained, for they are closely connected in a re-affirmative structure. At the personal level of consciousness, Can Xue especially draws our attention to how humans are saturated with paranoia, destructive impulses and repressed desires in their psyche and how their behaviors reflect a profound disturbance through the unconscious. Can Xue is particularly partial to the dream world and gives a lot of space in her writing to the narrative of dreams. Yet Can Xue's preference over the unconscious does not automatically transfer into an execution of psychoanalysis of the characters, as done in much of western modern fiction. In fact, it has never been her interest and intention to unveil any causal relations that will shed light onto the interpretation of her characters, because as thorough subversive at heart, her writings resist coherent analysis.

As paranoid beings Can Xue's characters tend to live their lives in a state of constant tension and engage in a psychological warfare with their environment, which is seen as full of danger and humiliating forces. Unable to comprehend the nature of the world, they are doomed to suffer through a pathetic existence, every minute drenched

in fear, an unspecifiable and self-referential kind of fear that imprisons the self with no hope of release.<sup>2)</sup> In her first major publication, the novella *Canglao de fuyun* [Old Floating Cloud], Geng Shanwu is Can Xue's archetype of such a paranoid being.<sup>3)</sup> He is constantly seeking evidence from the environment to re-confirm his fear that everyone surrounding him is spying on him. Every move he makes, everywhere he goes, he feels he is being watched by neighbors, colleagues, and even strangers. Paralyzed by this ever-present anxiety, yet incapable of confronting it, Geng Shanwu finds himself engaged in incomprehensible actions such as sawing off the legs of the bed, pissing on his wife's socks, and devouring snacks on the way to work. Many critics read this narrative from a psychoanalytic model and tend to interpret these actions as symptomatic of certain causes [Gao Shang, 1989].<sup>4)</sup> However, these actions remain separate incidents that do not lead toward understanding or insight. Therefore, instead of delving into specific causal relations, Can Xue presents Geng Shanwu's paranoia as a generalized state of meaningless impulse, which remains inconsequential and causeless.

As if to form a mocking balance to Geng Shanwu's anxiety, Can Xue gives his wife Mulan a contrasting trait of character so that she becomes a habitual spy. In order to watch her neighbor Xu Ruhua's family closely she puts up a big mirror on the back wall and from the inside of which she "can detect their every move." (180)<sup>5)</sup> She derives much satisfaction in pronouncing her various nonsensical verdicts from her close observations in the mirror, such as their being intentionally mysterious in order to create an air of arrogance which is a cover-up for their spiritual emptiness. (204) This perhaps reflects Mulan's own dissatisfaction with her own life, woven around a husband with a very limited range of capabilities and no feelings for her at all, a daughter that hates her guts. She is equally doomed to a life of meaningless misery. And yet if her open "peep show" offers a moment of vicious elation to release her frustration, Can Xue leaves it to the reader to draw conclusions.<sup>6)</sup> Within the text Can Xue refuses to offer any insight into her characters' interiority, a practice common in other avant-garde narratives as well.

Paranoid beings such as these are certainly not the minority in Can Xue's fictive world. In fact, the entire populace that reside in her novella *Huangnijing* [Yellow Mud Street] are also such tormented beings who believe they are constantly in danger of being subjected to conspiracies.<sup>7)</sup> Residents on Yellow Mud Street "define" the meaning of their existence by constantly involving themselves in meaningless, pathetic, yet comic, actions such as installing in their homes various devices to keep burglars away (61), or spreading rumors such as "There has been a conspiracy", "pestilence will arrive again", or "Thousands of people will lose their heads." Can Xue's Yellow Mud Street is nothing but a massive garbage ground where maggots grow wild. Everyone on Yellow Mud Street believes a disaster of apocalyptic scale will soon arrive and everyone suspects the others to be part of the conspiratorial plan. Yet there is no conspiracy, no causal connections that might make sense of these disasters.

No resident is willing or capable of generating real changes in the situation, all

remain the passive, apprehensive and panicky onlookers they have always been, nervously watching Yellow Mud Street erode away with decay. So when they say to each other: "Yellow Mud Street is hopeless" (107) they say it as if it is yet another ready-made phrase like "How is it going?", without any concern or relevant effect on their own life. They seem to sense that something is wrong with their lives but it never seems to occur to them that it might have something to do with themselves, with their passivity, their lassitude, and their agitation. Having completely lost the ability to judge for themselves and any desire for autonomy, they wait for verdicts from "above". The world that impregnates Yellow Mud Street is a terrible world polluted by endless flood that threatens to drown the entire community in mud. The situation is so extremely devastating and absurdly annihilating that it seems pointless to look for explanations.

Authorities from above finally send some people to Yellow Mud Street to see what kind of problems are there and come up with applicable solutions. The first one to arrive is Wang Ziguang who finds Yellow Mud Street soaked in floodwater, with all the little houses half floating in water, look like a big swarm of black beetles. Corpses, dead animals afloat everywhere, and pestilence has killed all the chickens. Feared of being poisoned by snakes, the entire street residents have moved into the attic and refused to come down, not even when they have to excrete.

Wang Ziguang, of course, quickly retreats from this despairing situation. When the Head of the District finally makes his visit to Yellow Mud Street, however, he shuts himself up in a clerk's room and falls into a deep sleep. In the end nothing is to be done about the problems of Yellow Mud Street: The head of the District flees quickly after he develops some strange and painful disease in his left eye. The Yellow Mud Street residents, at the same time, begin to spread rumors about the identity of the Head of District:

He is nothing! A rumor, a conjecture. He is nothing but a fabrication! Dead fish have been falling on Yellow Mud Street. Dust falls all year round in four seasons. Now everywhere there grows phalloid. Moths are as big as bats. Who can explain the reasons? Presumptuous! Wishful thinking! (154)

Can Xue captures perfectly a kind of destructive force in human psyche which, when faced with extreme conditions that are beyond the range of interpretive capacity, turns onto itself. The unfitting rejoicing in the calamities and misfortunes only reflects the degree to which helplessness has reached in the human consciousness. The resistance to coherence thus escalates.

More and more Yellow Mud Street residents act in uniform, like a group of frantic dogs that have caught rabies locked together in one kennel, barking wildly at each other and the world outside, without realizing that their kennel will soon be taken by a swamp. Can Xue's merciless depiction of Yellow Mud Street and its residents as a collective body of beings deprived of any distinctive qualities that set humans apart from animals, who are given in to paranoia, anxiety, passivity, and lunacy, is perhaps

seldom matched by any other Chinese writer in modern history. Can Xue's peculiar partiality toward ugliness, deterioration, disfiguration, and disease is evident from the unpleasant images that dot the entire text.<sup>8)</sup> While the shock effect induced from these unbearable images is certainly a factor to be taken into account, the lack of articulation of connections and causal relations for the occurrences of these images and events seems most problematic.<sup>9)</sup> Moreover, the "unduly repetitive" nature of these images not only dissolves the shock effect, but also nullifies the senses so that callousness becomes the only response [McDougall and Kam, 1997].<sup>10)</sup> Again, when meaning and coherence are evacuated from life, humans are not even able to react in genuine anguish, emotion or compassion.

Can Xue's sharp and extremely exaggerated critique of human nature, or perhaps Chinese national character in particular, is directed toward a collective psyche which seems to be infected with some incurable disease that has poisoned the entire immune system. Without a meaning system to make events cohere, there is no choice but a paranoia which, while searching desperately for meaning, in fact, destroys the ability to comprehend the nature of the environment, and the ability to differentiate the subjective self from the objective world. The floodwaters soak all things in the same way, covering them with yellow mud. As a result, the self becomes absorbent of all elements in its surroundings and becomes twisted and deformed. Since the surrounding environment, in Can Xue's view, is already deserted by the forces of civilization, by cultural discourse, by social development, and inundated with the watery sameness of incoherence, by mud, it is no surprise that the self is no longer able to maintain its center and becomes disintegrated and destabilized. The entire population of Yellow Mud Street is not aware of their hopelessly dehumanized state of existence and that they would soon be devoured by cancer, a cancer grown deep in their psyche.

Can Xue's feeling of devastation and despair toward humanity, no doubt, can be felt very strongly by readers of *Yellow Mud Street*. But her criticism of humanity in deterioration is veiled by a casualness in her delineation that is set against an abiding tune of black humor. Furthermore, because she does not posit her narrative against any paradigm involving the countering forces of good and evil, it is very difficult to determine her real intent. So when compared with May Fourth writers, especially Lu Xun whose powerful desire to seek truth, justice and spiritual freedom is always present in his upright denunciation of "Chinese national character", it is no surprise that she could be put in a position of dismissal for over-indulging herself in her hideously vivid imagination. For some critics her obsession with that which is non-rational is ultimately a "destructive self-desecration [Xiao Ying, 1990]."<sup>11)</sup>

Like "Yellow Mud Street" in which fragmented and unpleasant images frequently appear to disrupt the text, Can Xue often adopts recurrent images, motifs and references in a senseless manner. For example, she seems to be preoccupied with describing certain trees and their disturbingly fragrant smell, such as the paper mulberry in "Old Floating Cloud", the yellow chrysanthemum in "Guanyu huang juhua de xiaxiang" [Free Associations from the Yellow Chrysanthemum].<sup>12)</sup> All of these have a re-

current presence in the narrative, yet none of them are given any referential meaning to another context. Many possibilities are left open toward their signification: idealization? cure? nameless fear? repressed desire? confusion? disturbance in the mind? or nothing at all. Rather than providing a symbolic pattern, they tend toward disintegration of narrative meaning.

Similarly incoherent is the appearance of dreams in many of Can Xue's writings, which are never given clear scrutiny within the text in revealing deeper meanings helpful in understanding of the dreamers. They reveal no internal aspects of the unconscious mind, but only serve to raise questions about the causes for their presence. Critics in Mainland China, as well as in the West, have read Can Xue in light of Freudian psychoanalysis and observed that many Freudian concepts, such as repression, desire, are distinctly visible in many of Can Xue's writings [Wang Ning, 1989].<sup>13)</sup> However, if the purpose of psychoanalysis lies in coming to terms with unresolved tensions, or providing understandings and insights into the characters and their situations, then there is a strong element in Can Xue's text that resists this kind of reading. No fundamental changes are generated or insightful self-discovery is perceived through these dreams. Can Xue shows that it is not only impossible to comprehend the absurd world through looking for explanations externally, it is equally pointless to retreat into one's own psychology, for there is nothing substantial inside to support the self from being further disintegrated. In Can Xue's nihilist vision of psychology "there is no there there." Exteriority and interiority are equally devoid of meaning. Here the nihilism is not an ethical-humanistic, or patriotic, reaction to an amoral world, as May Fourth writers.

However, the consistency that certain dreams maintain its repeated appearance shows its importance in affecting the general structure of the narrative. In "Old Floating Cloud" there is a dream motif that occurs many times throughout the text, each time with slight variations. Early in the story, the reader is told that it is two main characters Xu Ruhua and Geng Shanwu have had an identical dream in which they both witness a turtle with bulging eyes crawling along the murky edge of a mud hole in their yard. As we know, Xu and Geng are neighbors sharing the same courtyard, who for a while are involved in an extra-marital affair. Their affair, actually, begins because of the dream, not because of any other commonly conceivable reasons for such a relationship. After the dream first occurs to Geng Shanwu, it leaves him intensely agitated. Driven by a desire to talk about the dream, Geng Shanwu goes to Xu Ruhua's room and thereby their affair begins. He is extremely confused by the dream and wants to know if it symbolizes anything or if it is a premonition of any sort. He seems to be scared that the mud hole is in fact in their yard.

Xu Ruhua, who seems not bothered by the dream at all, however, does not take Geng Shanwu's confusion of the dream with reality and wish to seek some positive answer to dispel his fear with any sympathy. In fact, she seems to be able to re-tell the dream in every detail: "That's right. The hot mud was bubbling like boiling porridge. When it crawled over it, it had blisters on its feet, and its eyeballs protruded as if they

would drop out.” (192)<sup>14)</sup> Every time the dream motif appears it is accompanied by increasingly violent images, suggesting a strong sense of pain and suffering. Eventually “something was crawling haltingly in the mud. Its back was cracked. Dark red bloodstains crimsoned the long path.” (257) By the time this dream appears some time has passed since their relationship starts, and both have experienced changes in their lives, which seem to have benefited nothing from their affair. Xu Ruhua’s husband has moved back to live with his own mother, who has always despised Xu Ruhua. Her own mother who has hated her since she was a little girl, now becomes obsessed with spying on her and openly cursing her, wishing for a disaster to befall her. Xu Ruhua herself, however, seems not perturbed by all of these, at least she enjoys laughing at the little tricks her mother plays. She is also merely amused by her husband’s surrender to an infantilizing impulse to be taken in by his mother.

As for her feelings for Geng Shanwu, they seem to be none existent. “Again with a blurry mind she remembers that man. She tries with difficulty to recall what happens when they lie in bed, always only able to obtain some broken, half-real pieces of images . . . ”. (219) She even starts to think that she might have been deceiving herself when she thought she had once had “some sort of thing that resembles desire” for him. (219) Indeed her mind is not occupied by his existence, nor anyone else’s existence at all but by her own self, a self that is increasingly arrested by the danger of a self-destructive impulse. On Geng Shanwu’s part, he finally comes to terms with himself, with the fact that he’s a loser and a failure. If this affair with Xu Ruhua has had any impact on his life at all, it seems to provide him with a chance to become accepting of his worthless existence, for Xu has repeatedly re-confirmed the truth to him that it is useless to struggle with life, to hope, or to strive for something.

When the dream motif occurs in the last section of the narrative, it has become somewhat apparent to the reader by then that the conscious of the narrative is taken over by Xu Ruhua’s perfectly concealed madness which finally drives her toward her own destiny through literal self-imprisonment and dislocation. Through her supernatural mind the dream motif appears: “All the broken pieces have been burnt to a crisp . . . . Its patterned back gives out the strange smell of sunflowers, the sandy mud has scratched open the protruding eyeballs. Suddenly, red light spreads in the sky, the mud bubbles with foam, as if that is the real finality.” (289) Just as Xu Ruhua herself, the turtle seems finally to be approaching its destiny, torn and broken, pain and suffering all merge into bubbling mud now dyed with blood, life, desire, suffering all within ready of an eternal ending, as if that is exactly what Xu Ruhua has hope for and has known from the very beginning: destruction is the ultimate form of life. Yet to the others like Geng Shanwu, in Xu Ruhua’s vicious and condescending mind, such a realization will never come, for them life will remain an endless journey of torture in which they will never find out where the turtle is headed, nor know how long before it reaches its destiny. Only in dreams can they seek real rest: “At night he dreams of thorn bushes. With naked body he falls onto the thorn brushes, his entire body twitches, slowly he falls into sleep.” (291) The text ends with the image of Geng Shanwu’s torment in Xu

Ruhua's mind.

Different from modern Western analysis of the functions of dreams based on Freudian theories of dreams, the functions of the turtle dream does not seem to be that of revealing any psychological state of its dreamer in light of delving deeper into the being.<sup>15)</sup> As the usual case with Chinese avant-garde writers, characters in their narrative almost never obtain qualitative changes. Instead of developmental, they are drawn intentionally flat and one-dimensional, usually devoid of any psychological input [Chang Qie, 1994; Nan Fan, 1993;]. Rather than using dreams as a gateway to reach into the darkness of the individual subconsciousness, Can Xue's dream seems less concerned with releasing tensions or reaching for deeper understanding through probing the individual experience or state of mind. Rather she seems to be more interested in the collective human experience or condition. Just as Geng Shanwu and Xu Ruhua dream the identical dream, Lao Kuang and his mother, also in "Old Floating Cloud", share the same dream, as well as the narrator "I" and Rushu in "Free Associations from the Yellow Chrysanthemum".

The entire populace of Yellow Mud Street has also once woken up to the same dream. As is more often the case, Can Xue's dreams are nightmares, and are filled with uncomfortable and ugly images, such is the one bestowed upon Yellow Mud Street. In this dream there is an old man with eight legs whose "whole body is covered by a shell, and whose stomach is green. He crawls onto the middle of the street like a crab, spreading out the eight thin legs he 'hua-la, hua-la' drops a big load of shit." (188) While it is bewildering to Yellow Mud Street populace as to the reasons why they have dreamed the same dream, the readers might easily associate this dream image with the actual picture of Yellow Mud Street itself: the people there have already descended into the animal-like state and that they have been dehumanized to such an extent and for so long that they are thoroughly unaware of their own metamorphosis, that they are, in essence, not that different from the strange crab-man in their dreams. The disturbing thing is that the narrative resists to make such connections, and therefore does not move toward cohesion and understanding.

It is therefore feasible to "interpret" the dream as "symbolic" of a hopelessly degenerated human condition in which humanity has lost its distinctive human characteristics such as its moral faculty and intelligence and feeling, as well as its individual subjectivity. Humanity has become one selfless empty entity with everyone resembling everyone else. The symbolic function of dream is applied similarly to Geng Shanwu and Xu Ruhua's dream, which is quite a condensed reflection of human existence as prescribed in "Old Floating Cloud": life is a tedious and senseless journey, full of torturing pain and without hope of a final ending, which is the predicament of the whole human race.

For Can Xue, dreams are not signifiers that connect to signified internal conflicts. For her characters, the exteriority interpolates into the interiority, and vice versa, so that they become moebius like: they appear as though different but in fact the same. Can Xue subverts the normal process of symbolism by having everyone dream the

same dream. Difference disappears and meaning is lost. The signifier disconnects with the signified.

And for those of Can Xue's characters who have come to an understanding of the nature of their existence as completely devoid of meaning, and who have thus submitted their being to such an understanding, it is no surprise that they may act out their reactions toward this conclusive view in extreme manners. That is what happens to Xu Ruhua when she decides to cut herself off from the outside world and literally wastes her life away. She does not exactly take her own life, but relinquishes her desire for life to the impulse of self-destruction, as if she rejoices in witnessing her self-decay through a long process, which has lasted for more than three years! It is fair to say that most of Can Xue's characters suffer from some degree of mental disturbance and that they exhibit different levels of moments of insanity. Yet none of them is compatible in scale to Xu Ruhua's deceptive calm, nonchalant outer appearance which perfectly conceals her true state of mind, a state of absolute insanity.<sup>16)</sup>

When she first appears in *Old Floating Cloud*, she seems very normal. In fact, her behavior is much less anxious or paranoid than those around her. She seems not so upset at things and does not pay much attention to anything, despite the fact that her mother is out to destroy her, her husband has abandoned her, and has put up a mirror in order to spy on her. She sits in her room chewing on her pickled cucumbers and walks around the room slapping her own stomach and loudly announcing "there really is nothing inside here!" Before her husband moves out she asks him to put iron bars on all her windows. This kind of inverted self-directed masochism lies at the center of Can Xue's expression of the overwhelming power of nameless fear. Nothing will stop her from carrying out her plan — not her parents, her husband, her lover — or more precisely that man whose appearance she vaguely remembers. When she feels ready she shuts herself in the room and refuses to come out. She deteriorates together with the house and lies in her bed calmly waiting for the final ending. Yet all the way to the end the reader is never allowed an explanation of her decision to take such an extreme course of action. Again Can Xue problematizes the usual practice of rationalizing the causal relations of events, and resists providing connections in her text. As a result, the narrative remains inchoate even though Xu Ruhua's dramatic action has potential for a climatic ending for the story.

At the same time, there seems to be an element of secret triumphant feeling in Xu Ruhua's mental visualization of the world. It's as if she has succeeded in taking revenge against some unspecified enemy, some oppressive force, or the crazy absurd world itself. For those critics who are eager to detect Can Xue's own image from her characters, Xu Ruhua's vengeful action might be revealing [Sha Shui, 1989].<sup>17)</sup> And for others who identify Can Xue with the "madwoman in the attic" image in Western feminist readings, it is possible to envisage a protesting feminist at work [Chen Xiaoming 1992].<sup>18)</sup> While it is certainly permissible to read Can Xue in a feminist model, it is also true that she maintains a rather neutral position in regard to the inequality between the two sexes. For often she treats her characters of both sexes as equally ab-



surd, ugly, vicious, oppressed, or stupid. Hers is a voice more androgynous, and perhaps asexual, than feminist.

The self-imprisonment motif appears in several of Can Xue's works other than this short novel. In "Apple Tree in the Corridor" a girl shuts herself up in the closet. In "Zai chunjing de qiliu zhong tuihua" [Exuviation in Pure Air] Lao locks herself inside her own house in order to leave the impression that she has gone on a trip. In *Breakthrough Performance X nushi* [Lady X] draws all her curtains and disconnects herself with the neighborhood. The reasons for these female characters to take such dramatic effort to disengage themselves with the world are not clearly articulated, and thus there is much room for speculation. For Xu Ruhua it's a self-destructive impulse mixed with an unspecified desire to punish the world. For the girl living in the closet, it seems a most natural thing to do despite the fact that the damp air has made her abandon herself to dissipated life with no hope at all. For Lao, it's an important gesture she can make about life, though the real essence is lost to her. For Lady X, it's a defiant move of protesting against the world of Wuxiangjie, a spiteful place filled with nosy and morally pretentious neighbors. The female psyche, as shown from these characters, yearns to escape from the repression of the world.

Yet the way they choose to escape is one illusive in nature. Their disengagement with the world provides no real meaning. It's an act of self-imprisonment that is self-destructive in essence. It might provide a deceptive form to contain the already disintegrated self. But what it epitomizes is the static state of the alienated and distanced existence. Moreover, it is interesting to see how, unlike the other avant-garde writers, especially Yu Hua, Can Xue is reluctant to rely on death as the final, inevitable resort. In a very strong way her texts seem to resist finality.

#### Notes

- 1) For an interview of Can Xue by Taiwanese writer Shi Shuqing, see Shi, *Wentan fancy yu qianzhan* [Literary Arena: Retrospection and Perspective], 234–47.
- 2) For a further discussion of the central position of fear in Can Xue's works, see Zhang Xinying "Kongju he kongju jiazhi de xiaojie — Can Xue xiaoshuo lun," 恐懼和恐懼價值的消解——殘雪小說論 [Fear and the Dispelling of the Value of Fear: On Can Xue's Fiction], *Qiju yu youmu zhi di*, 62–68. It is also interesting to note that Lu Xun used fear as both critique and analysis of Chinese character.
- 3) The edition of this novella used in this paper is from *Huangnijie* (Taipei: Yuanshen, 1987). All English translations are mine.
- 4) In an attempt at categorizing post-Mao fiction in terms of narrative mode Gao Shang treats Can Xue's writings as belonging to the psychoanalytic mode. For details see Gao, "Lun xin shiqi xiaoshuo chuanguo de shendu moshi," 61–69.
- 5) Critics have shown their interest in various recurrent images, such as the mirror image, in Can Xue's writings. A most recent study is Chen Jianguo, "The Aesthetics of the Transposition of Reality, Dream and Mirror: A Comparative Perspective on Can Xue," *Comparative Literature Studies* 4 (1997): 348–75. Also see Bath Ling 林白芷, "Yige shuqing biaoda de zhengti — Can Xue duanpian chanshi," 一個抒情表達的整體——殘雪短篇闡釋 [An Entity of Lyrical Expressions — Interpretations of Can Xue's Short Stories] Xiao Yuan, *Shengdian de qingpi*, 310–61. Lin concentrates on the short stories appeared in Janssen and Zhang, *Dialogues in Paradise*.
- 6) Critics have used "kuishikuang" 窺視狂 [scopophilia] to describe many of Can Xue's charac-

- ters' madness. See Cheng Depei 程德培, "Zhemo zhe Can Xue de meng," 折磨著殘雪的夢 [The Dream That Torments Can Xue] *Shanghai wenxue* 6 (1987), 71.
- 7) Page numbers refer to the edition of *Huangniji*, ed. Chen Juntao (Wuhan: Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 1996). All English translations are mine.
  - 8) Within a larger framework this intentional display of ugliness is concurrent with a new sense and understanding of the aesthetics which, instead of aggrandizing beauty, ponders over ugliness. Some critics see various new aesthetic concerns appeared in post-1985 Chinese literature as under the influence of contemporary Latin American writers. See Lu Fang, "Xinshiqi Zhongguo wenxue yu La Mei 'baozha' wenxue yingxiang". Lu relates Can Xue's nightmarish world to Gabriel Garcia Marquez. For an extensive study dedicated to this subject in light of aesthetics, see Li Xingwu 李興武, *Chou e lun — Meixue wenti de nixiang tansuo* 丑惡論——美學問題的逆向探索 [On Ugliness — Explorations of Aesthetic Problems in Reverse] (Shenyang: Liaoning renmin chubanshe, 1994).
  - 9) David Der-Wei Wang offers an insightful critique on the frequent occurrences of uncomfortable images in post-1985 Chinese fiction as a practice of "refamiliarization of the trivial or a creative deformation of the unbearable." See Wang, "Afterword: Chinese Fiction for the Nineties," *Running Wild: New Chinese Writers*, 244.
  - 10) This phrase is taken from Bonnie S. McDougall and Kam Louie, *The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century*, 410. Many critics would agree with this "verdict". Xiao Ying, for example, regards Can Xue's works after "Yellow Mud Street" as merely "processing" the "old goods" from that same work. See Xiao, "Jin nian feilixing zhuyi xiaoshuo pipan," 12.
  - 11) Xiao Ying, "Jin nian feilixing zhuyi xiaoshuo," 13.
  - 12) This story was first published in *Zhongwai wenxue* 中外文學 1 (1988). An English translation of the story under "Dream of the Yellow Chrysanthemum" appears in Janssen and Zhang, *Dialogues in Paradise*, 54–69.
  - 13) Wang Ning offers a study of Can Xue's *Old Floating Cloud* by applying Freudian theories on dreams to the dream motif in this work. See "Zhongguo dangdai wenxue zhong de Fuluoyide zhuyi bianti," 中國當代文學中的弗洛伊德主義變體 [Derivatives of Freudianism in Contemporary Chinese Literature] *Renmin wenxue* 2 (1989), 106–112.
  - 14) In his psychoanalytic study of this text, Wang Ning only mentions this dream in passing. He seems also to recognize that the text does not give enough information to "decipher" this dream. See Wang, "Zhongguo dangdai wenxue zhong de Fuluoyide zhuyi bianti," 111.
  - 15) While many critics read Can Xue in light of psychoanalytic theories, Wang Fei sees her writings as more fitting to neo-Freudian model of Karen Horney, who contributes modern man's psychological state of constant fear and anxiety to the lack of feeling secure and content. See Wang, "Zai meng de renshen zhong tongku jingluan," 95–97.
  - 16) In an extensive study on contemporary Chinese aesthetics, Xiao Ying analyzes this text in regard to a general sentiment of anti-rationalism. Xiao points out that in Can Xue's works there is a complete identification with the "madwoman in the attic" kind of claustrophobia and masochism. See Xiao, *Xingxiang yu shengcun*, 49–50. The phrase "madwoman in the attic" apparently refers to the title of the feminist study of Western women writers of the last century written by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic — The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).
  - 17) Sha Shui 沙水, for example, identifies all of Can Xue's female characters with Can Xue herself, especially Lady X from *Breakthrough Performance*, and hence reads her works as an unified attempt at blurring the lines between life and art. See "Biaoyan rensheng — Lun Can Xue de Tuwei biaoyan," 表演人生——論殘雪的突圍表演 [Performances of Life — On Can Xue's *Breakthrough Performances*] *Wenxue pinglun* 5 (1989), 125–131.
  - 18) An insightful critique of Can Xue from feminist point of view is Tonglin Lu, "Can Xue: What Is So Paranoid in Her Writings?" Chen Xiaoming also regards Can Xue's writings as protest against the male world. See Chen, "Shuqing de shidai," 74.

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