

## Chinese Postmodernism: A Decadent Nostalgia

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### **Abstract**

*The transaction from fragmentation, which is man's identity exploited by the experience of impersonal collectivism, to individualism, which is the post-Mao discourse over history and self of de-construction and reconstruction, generates a tale of sorrows and disenchantment, desperate characters seeking for definition. Narrative produces protagonist looking for the inner-self, what they were or what they had before chaos took the shape of modernity, but more often than not, it's the dramatic awareness of man's loneliness what accompanies their journey through life and once more shorten the distance between Chinese contemporary literature and Western modernist production. Decadence and nostalgia are the overwhelming feelings wrapping the tale for a time never existed.*

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**Key words:** *De-constructivism, Nostalgia, Decadence, Absurd*

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### **Historical Nostalgia**

The modernization of the 90s threatened Chinese identity to various degrees. The old dichotomy China versus the other turn to be and internal struggle between opposing factions, the blank despondency of the old generation born in the twentieth-thirtieth failing to understand the euphoria of the disciples of modernity. Not necessarily the generational gap is the reason of conflict, narrative shows signs of malaise in any social stratification. There is somewhat of a veiled anxiety before the dissolving reality, deconstruction is not just a postmodern technique of understanding but a physical landscape made of tall crane and bourgeois public space. The past is revisited through the lens of the narrative in a process that is at times political, realistic, tragic, ironic, but no matter what the tone of the narration is, Chinese postmodern literature is stifled by memories of Maoist's revolution, a firm condemn is entangled with the spectrum of a lingering nostalgia accusing the present. The majority of the writers that today represent China within and outside domestic walls have found themselves actively participating to the Red Guard Movement and the Rustication Movement. Moved by the fanaticism of the revolution they were taught to be good student of Chairman Mao and drilled with fantastic plan of political reform. As the violence of the movement took an unpredicted turn and China moved to the edge of a civil war, Mao called the experiment to a halt, now, 'the little revolutionary generals have committed a mistake', he said. Out of the blue the Red Guards were suddenly discharged and transformed into *zhiqing*, educated youth who had to be re-educated by the peasant and together modernize the rural China. Moved by rebellious spirit, curiosity, ideology, millions of youth joined military farms in border provinces or remote villages in the inland provinces. Volunteers or victims of the rustication movement, they faced years of hunger, hardship, and poverty; roused by

dreams of adventures, need for a change 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 discrimination, the waste of time, energies and resources, behind impractical plans. Eventually, one, two, ten years later some of them returned to the place they came from as stranger in a strange city. Just then, disillusioned and somewhat defeated, they realized to have been sacrificed for the sake of power struggles, ruthlessly used as tool of propaganda, abandoned once destruction was completed:

Now most of the former Red Guards survive at the bottom of Chinese society. They have lost everything: they have lost their youth, education and love. When it should have been time for education, they didn't get the education they deserved, and when it should have been time for love, they didn't get the opportunity to love<sup>1</sup>

The drama of the revolution is the mark of Cain of the whole literary production that came after the revolution. And before that was the time of the civil war, and the Japanese war and further back the bloodstained dynastic empire. Yet the plot is fused with nostalgia, they long for a past when the grass was greener and the sun warmer, they recall another beauty, another peace in another age. But when was it? The history of People's Republic is impressed by tragedy, political extremism, economical disasters, famine, fear, where does nostalgia come from? Wang Anyi's *Lapse of time* is embedded in the storm of the Cultural Revolution (hereafter CR), Shanghai in the 60s is an image of decadence. Political indoctrination has revealed love as too fragile, human relation have been upset resulting in lack of spontaneity and regrets, hint of social concern is fused with the unfathomable inner world of those who came back some ten years later. In *And the Rain Patterns On*, Wenwen is one of those educated students going back to the city after having spent her youth in the countryside. But the world as she knew it has been transformed by modernity, neither she is the same person as before, the CR has erased humanism while pulling down curtain of suspicions and prejudices. In *The Wall* the city is protagonist. At night, Shanghai, out of fear, turned the light off, at day time the monotony of the red shop windows is interrupted by house raids and the ferocity of criticism session. The world has lost beauty and plunged into chaos. Kids learn to sigh before learning how to play, parents are put under house arrest, adolescent are denied formal education, women are asked to eliminate signs of femininity -make up, skirts, long hair- banned as petit bourgeois, to an extent that every single man existed as revolutionary being but not as human concept. Meanwhile the Red Guards ransacked the houses taking away everything, clothes, furniture, silk, youth and beauty:

But all we're allowed to wear are grays, blues and dark greens, and our hair can't come below our ears, just like country girls<sup>2</sup>

Nostalgia is what emerges to compensate the lack of beauty in the historical present, an aesthetic of loss in the face of progress, more a vague feeling of loss than a real lack, nostalgia in the postmodern production is an illusion. Wang Anyi's *Sadness for the Pacific* traces back her family origins in a melancholic journey that reminds closely that of Marguerite Duras in *The Lover*. At the beginning of Anyi's story the narrator is on a ship crossing the Strait of Malacca on her way to the Malaysian city of Binang, as the

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<sup>1</sup>In Laifong Leung (1994, 58)

<sup>2</sup>Wang Anyi (1988, 153)

destination comes closer so does the specter of the past and a penetrating sudden sorrow for the desolation of humanity is what links them both. Duras's tale opens with the child crossing the Mekong River and ends with the child crossing back the same river with the excruciating sensation of those who *share the same tragedy of betraying the destiny they realize was theirs just as they lose it*. Both the protagonists suffer their contemporaneity, the inconsequentiality of today compared to what they had before, out of sadness they both miss the past but the past became a ghost, blurred, hunted image of long gone generations, they look toward what they no longer see. If in *Lapse of Time* Wang Anyi described a decadent Shanghai in the 60s, in *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* Shanghai is decadent in the 90s, slowly losing charm and uniqueness:

This is now an entirely different city, he thought to himself, the street names have changed, the buildings and streetlights are but the shell of their former selves, their core melted away and replaced. In the past even the breeze whispered of romantic longings, and the parasol trees told stories as they waved in the wind; now the breeze is nothing but dead air and the trees mere bark and leaves, all their magical charm overthrown. He had tried to keep up with the times, but his heart was still trapped in the past, leaving him hollowed out and empty. But Wang Qiyao was a true relic of the past: she would be able to help him steal his heart back from yesterday<sup>3</sup>

Everlasting sorrow is the thread linking Chinese history. Anyi borrows the title of her novel from the most famous literary work of the Tang Dynasty *Chang hen ge* narrating the legendary beauty of Yang Guifei and the historical love of the Tang emperor Xuanzong, Wang Qiyao like Yang Guifei, iconic of beauty, found herself as ill-fated concubine, they both suffer the same violent fate. History seems indeed taking pity on its heroes transforming a victim into a martyr. The novel spans over forty years embracing the entire Chinese modernity project, it goes from 1946 to 1986, from the Civil War to the Open Door Policy, from Mao to Deng, from the Great Leap Forward to The Great Cultural Revolution, but as it happens in Post-New Era novels history is passed in silence, the happenings of Chinese modernity play out in the shadow of the main narration which is a tale of time rather than politics, individual experience rather than mass movement. The fleeting atmosphere is mastered by the protagonist incapacity to hold on to stable relationship: Wang Qiyao is violently departed from Director Li, socially incompatible with Kang Mingxun, antagonist for temper to her mother and daughter, her sorrow is the sorrow of modern China, changing faster than the protagonist's capacity for comprehension. Regardless what history was in practice, the dissipation of idealistic passion in a post- revolutionary contemporaneity stands in striking agreement with the shallowness of the present. The oblivion of purest ideals spoiled by leftist movements and the seduction of the new market liaison is the acknowledgment of an historical failure, it is the entire Maoist age that has been betrayed. And when people visualize how individualism has swept away the matrix of a civilization and the euphoria of postmodern damaged group identity, nostalgia stares them back as the other side of the dialectical process. Nostalgia is an illusion for, between the aging of time and the beauty of the past, the time they so desperately miss never really existed. Searching for roots therefore, one own self, one own past, one own family origins is the psychological countermove they apply to crack their puzzling, vulgar, somehow unbearable, reality. In Chen Ran's A

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<sup>3</sup> Wang Anyi (1995, Kang Mingxun)

*Private Life* nostalgia runs in proportion to the cruelty of death. The premature departure of her mother and that even more offensive of the widow Hu cut off her sense of belonging creating an unbridgeable gap with her past. There is no need here for any experiment of roots searching, the origins were well marked then and now extinguished. The present is a routine of absence and the only way to prevent it from collapsing is remembering. But memory is fragmented, shattered into pieces of nonsense, nostalgia emerges not so much as longing for the past as it is the awareness for an identity lost forever.

Humanity thus seems to be rootless, Shanghai forgets its colors, globalization takes over tradition, nostalgia enters another dimension, it stands as a notion of national identity. The road to modernization pointed by Deng Xiaoping meant a transformation of ideology as well as infrastructure. The cities are the most visible site of this drastic and unexpected turn, audacious engineering projects match with the ruins of the past egalitarian conformity, powerless people are trapped within a land in the making, unaware that the relentless urban demolition and transformation is forever altering the spiritual and material typography of Socialist China. Those who moved back from the countryside to the city, as we said above, are the *zhiqing*, their nostalgia doesn't come from hometown memories to which they are returning to, but from their exhaustive rustic experience. For some of them the scenes of a mass of people coming together, united by the same effort to build socialism was the heart of the revolution. And the countryside gave them an alternative view and a refuge from the politically-stricken city. Back to the city they had to adjust themselves to the shift from Maoist asceticism to Dengist materialism, a world they no longer belong to. Highways meant to shorten the space between people, truly they have stretched the distance between living places, modernity built walls between brother and sisters who once lived together, new apartments meant to offer comfort to its inhabitants, now they live so closely yet they live as strangers, concrete, steel and bricks are the active background shaping post-Mao landscape. Bewilderment and wonderment at first are the feelings of the urban experience, coffee shops, bars, supermarkets pop up where before was a cowshed, but soon enough the glasses windows will contribute to increase a sense of alienation and marginality. On a larger scale the Chinese city has become the protagonist of Chinese postmodernity functioning as the natural habit for anonymous protagonists whose re-adaptation has to face sociological issues such as unemployment, housing, marriage, lack of skills, lack of education.

In Wang Anyi's short story *The Destination* Chen Xin goes back to Shanghai, ten years later after having left for Xinjiang on account of the Rustication Movement. Rewarded at first by the warm of his family, he learns not before long how to cope with a deeper understanding. There is no room left for him, a bed must be arranged for him in the hut they had constructed in the courtyard; already white haired he has passed the marriageable age, and when he could, years back in the countryside, he let her go thousands of time for his mind was set on going back to Shanghai. Regardless private affection and sentimental connection the countryside represents a moment, more or less protracted, of transaction, the city is the place where everyone has to return to. Now that he finally reached the destination, the city, he is overtaken by the feeling that in his destination something is missing, the river is not blue as he remembered it but muddy and

stinking, the landscape is oppressive with its department stores, the latest fashion, the big cinemas where everyone is compressed inside, the bus where he has to fight his way to squeeze in, inevitably he revives the immensity of the grassland, the silence of the town, the songs of the minorities. Not necessarily his destination was a place in the future, perhaps he missed it already. There is a touching sense of detachment all along, detached from their contemporaneity, as a realistic novel of decadence where all has to change for nothing will, the protagonists float apart from the realist scene cause they don't really belong to it, not anymore. In Yu Hua we see them at the verge of a human disaster, the famine, the CR, have stripped them off of every material possession. Holding to that feeble dignity they have left, as time turns benevolent they make it back to the city, it is here where the process of modernization is moving to. But they are not part of it, we see them living quite apart from the main spot, leaning on the windowsill while gazing at the crowd, without never understanding the mechanism which lays behind the changes in act. Recalling Ferdinand Tonnies dichotomy between *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft* simplified to the modern sociological relation between city and country side, we can't but notice as the main characters are trapped between definitions unable to describe them either as *Gesellschaft* or as *Gemeinschaft*. They left the country for the city, *zhiqing* going back home, workers summoned up some thirty years before to build the second, third line cities, brave peasants stirred by economic prospect, they bring with them the traditional codes they were taught, but postmodern China, holds different values, the logic of a ferocious market. The city becomes maker and witness of an ideological collapse. Not only they live outside, in a periphery not involved in the mainstream of life, but in order to survive the daily stifling competition they embrace illegal activity and immoral business. Mian Mian's *Candy*, her journey through alcohol, heroin, prostitution and gangs, even though without any artistic value, represent in its rudimentary a common experience. We are not told about the bankruptcy of State own factory or the raise of private enterprises, but we are shown laid off workers and floating population standing motionless on the pathway of Shenzhen. Where do they come from? The historical message behind the narrative is lost forever to a degree of literary worthlessness. Hong, Saining and similar idlers, broken figures of a pulp fiction, arriving to Shenzhen to become movie star, singer, artist but ending up as criminals, dancing girl or prostitute, archetype of that floating population searching for equilibrium, they become transitional people in a transitional zone. None of them is able to find a proper dimension, in the demanding structure of the urban landscape, in details, once the socialist model was sided by that of ruthless capitalist practices (accumulation, commodity exchange, impersonal relation) the cultural symbols previously shared were emptied of their significance before new significance could be found. China was left alone to face an immense ideological vacuum secured by the death of Mao. The characters in Wei Hui's *Shanghai Baby*, pretending-to-be artist whose main concern is where to waste themselves away on Saturday night, having ignored the past led them to misjudge the present and miss the future. The discovery of the body therefore is not the inner journey of a troubled consciousness but the dissolution of a gift. Sooner than later, competitive individualism, anxiety, neurosis will close on them, the struggle to survive has started all over again, but now that history has come full circle, there is no place left to return to for they already played that card. As China rushes to catch up with the West, they offer themselves as sacrificial victim to accelerate the process of modernization, unwarned that the city



strangles them: Baldy Li and the uncle Wang Er in 2015 wound up impotent, Song Gang dies, Dongliang banned from the land, Wang Qiyao<sup>4</sup> is killed, at last they find themselves physically and spiritually homeless, existentialist condition of those who don't really belong anywhere, anymore. Inevitably that so called freedom the market economy had opened up turns being a motionless gaze into nothing. Nostalgia is that awkward feeling of homelessness for the home they saw smooth away once and once again, no more an illusion than a cultural need. Nostalgia at this stage is not rooted into the past, it is not about longing for mythical bygone ages but a cultural resistance to the present as a sharp critique, a literary condemn, to remind them who they were. The objective correlative plays out his magic in the old wooden bridge in *Cries in the Drizzle* where Sun Guanglin spent years alone observing people's life enrolling according the whims of the history. Years later he goes back there, alone again, the wooden bridge has become a concrete structure, yet his nostalgic gaze slowly obliterates the concrete bars turning them into the old wooden boards. The river flows once more. As to say that China through capitalism entered the global world at the expenses of her own identity, nostalgia is the tool reconnecting past and present giving meaning to them both, it reminds of an identity too often crumpled and now confused. We see the characters aging, physically decadent, simply weathering, the hair turning gray, the corners of the eyes and the neck beginning to crease, but alike in Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, -a 69 years old protagonist trying to convince himself not to want back his best years- nostalgia doesn't contemplate the earlier days, it rather ponders contemporaneity, unfathomable if not spiritually poor. Relationships have assumed a materialistic nature: Wang Qiyao is won by the car of Director Li and the carnival of commodities his status can offer. She refuses the innocent feeling of Mr.Chen in exchange of a life as concubine, thus her bitter end is out of free will, not according to hidden principle. Niuniu is convinced to give herself up to teacher Ti -by now become Mr.Ti- by the walls of a fancy restaurant and expensive dishes, we discovered that Duanli in *Lapse of Time* had married Wanyao because of what he represented before the CR reassembled social hierarchy<sup>5</sup>. Love is neither desire nor aesthetic appreciation but the best of the options available, postmodernity stands as the apology of shallowness. Deceived protagonists, the lost generation, turn back to their regrets, to all what they sacrificed for an idea, for only there they can find a purpose, a sense of humanity that the present doesn't have. This being the case, in spite of a youth that has been stolen, the hardship they have suffered, now that ten years have already passed by, the past comes back, as fleeting nostalgia deformed to an extent to appear beautiful, able to challenge the emptiness of modernity. Darkness and hope are fused together, for them to remember a time that never existed.

### Decadent History

Literature therefore turns towards the past and when it's not lost within the labyrinth of introspection becomes historical fiction (hereafter HF). A clear divorce from the Avant-garde experimentation and with no commitment to the loyalty of realism, nostalgia is often fused with the journey of a family saga spanning from a generation to another

<sup>4</sup> In order: Yu Hua (Brothers), Wang Xiaobo (2015), Yu Hua (Brothers), Su Tong (The Boat to Redemption), Wang Anyi (Song of Everlasting Sorrow).

<sup>5</sup> In order: Wang Anyi (Song of Everlasting Sorrow), Chen Ran (A Private Life), Wang Anyi (Lapse of Time).

experiencing a lapse of time roughly stretching from the pre-Republican era up to the age of capitalism. As it mostly takes place in the countryside with reason we could look at it as an extension of that aestheticization of the past that roots-seeking writers mastered so well. At the same time the impressive expansion of the market and the massive migration to the city forced the authors to play with reality as to say that HF is clearly a continuation of the roots-searching experience but the construction of modernity demonstrates that those roots are imaginary. Mo Yan's Northeast Gaomi Township and Su Tong's Maple Village whether they are real or not is not much the issue here, they stand as whimpering mirror. At times yearning call against the violence and decay of the present, at times setting of disease and corruption. History not necessarily is based on objective facts and it is always accompanied by a subjective imaginary which weakens the reliability of the structure. Sometimes like in the case of Su Tong's *My Life as Emperor* or *Binu and the Great Wall of China*, space and time are not specified, this is because history is still not the primary concern of contemporary writers but it's a mere setting, the absence of historical personages and more over the addition of mythical-magic elements suggest that the epic discourse converge into lyricism and a reflection over decadence. Decadence is indeed what closes the gap between Twentieth century Western and Chinese historical fiction though we are dealing with a different version of decadence. European *fin de siècle* decadentism is the cry for a society in decay which praises *ennui* or boredom over moral resolution, a generation corrupted by the extravagance and vanity of modernity. It's a process of falling away, the valuing of artificiality over nature, an interest in perversity and transgressive sexuality, for instance the sensual experiments of Des Esseintes in Huysmans's *A Rebours*, Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray's obsession with beauty or the empty pleasure of D'Annunzio. It's a disease associated with the malaise of Baudelaire and the obscure Symbolism of Paul Verlaine and Stéphane Mallarmé, the behavior of a generation that saw a civilization collapsing after the atrocity of the war. This is because decadence in the West is an aesthetic of modernity, a rejection to all what modernity represents in terms of progress, science and reason. But when decadentism arrived in China, May Fourth era, China didn't use it to fight back the excess of modernity, for there was no modernity yet, but the brutality of feudalism, decadence becomes a moment of degeneration<sup>6</sup>, corruption, immorality. Su Tong's *My Life as Emperor* is set under the fictive Xie dynastic empire, torture and conspiracy frame the brief reign of the young emperor and the empire itself slowly crumbles down because of an unescapable plague resting within any human achievement. In Yu Hua's *To Live* the protagonist Fu Gui goes through the all Chinese Socialist Revolution sensing the immaturity of history: in times of land reform, Yu Hua has the villagers smashing their cooking pots to follow the way towards communism and few pages later at the begging of the famine he has the team leader urging everyone to buy new pots as the common dining hall will be closed. It's the collapse of the revolution, the socialist utopia didn't live up its expectation, decadence is therefore what is left of decades of propaganda and together loss of belief in what history will bring. Mo Yan's *The Red Sorghum* links together the glorious past of the ancestors with the degeneration of the present but the real protagonist is war itself and it is war to be immoral, Wang Xiaobo's *Love in the Age of the Revolution*, parody of a typical revolutionary hero, unmasks the hypocrisy of history through the secret of sexuality, all example of HF,

<sup>6</sup>Decadence in Chinese is translated as duo luo (墮落) literally 'degeneracy'

narrating the rise and fall of patriarchal families, days of sickness and death, plagues and epidemics, marking the fatality of their decline with no redemption. The tendency to overlook historical events and personages represent, from the side of the authors, the judgment against the official historiography and together an admission of history's vicious nature. The collective converges into personal experience, history is subjectivized, replaced by the writer own perception, his subjectivity, his memories, the past echoes violence and the present is either ruin or yet to be located, the dialogue between them doesn't lie in the objective reality, instead it's a sense of fatalism rejecting all along the project of modernity.

The process of de-construction reaches here another stage. On a technical level the omniscient authors shift to a narrative 'I' that while renouncing the ambitions of official historiography, suggests chaos, heterogeneity and indeterminacy. Mo Yan's narrative deforms time allowing the story to be told from different perspective and different age. In *Red Sorghum*, the story of the grandfather is told by the grandson -who could not have witnessed the events- through the memories of the father. In the third part of the novel, chapter six, we are given within one page two narratives 'I', the mother's memories and the son's tale, all surrealist devices suggesting that myth is more important than the story itself. In *The Temptation of Gangdise* we have a first persona narrative, a second person narrative and a third person, in *The Republic of Wine* the narrative voice is entangled with the voice of a novice writer and the voice of the writer, Mo Yan, himself. The chronology of history is tortured back and forth from the present, in and out from the past, reminding the reader that history is a construct, among others, subject to oblivion. Based on conceptual level, the myth of the revolution and his heroes are undressed, decay, intrigue and rivalry are more prominent than adherence to ethical values. Before and during the CR, historical fiction produced fictional stereotyped characters invariably black or white. Stylized characters, rather than real human beings: the good ones, -larger than life heroes- loyal, heroic, honorable and virtuous, the bad ones utterly evil, villainous and cruel for generation to come. During Maoism the former were obviously the poor peasant and workers, the latter landlords and rich peasant. Mo Yan's conflicting image of Granddad in *Red Sorghum*, a rebel, a villain, a bandit, an adulterer, a rapist, a murderer, was completely new to the Chinese reader and so was the description of Grandmother, a woman determined to decide her own fate, who when was told to marry a leper in exchange for a mule defies traditional and moral values, has an affair with a bandit, and confesses not to be afraid of the *eighteen levels of hell* just before dying. So are the women of the imaginary Maple Village in Su Tong's *Nineteen Thirty-Four Escapes* and another Grandmother, Jiang, abandoned by her husband, object of sexual desired, raped, abandoned again. She is the anti-hero par-excellence, ferocious in her revenge, guilty of infanticide and murder, tame-less before the plague, the poverty, the pool of corpses piling in front of her door every day. After having buried five of her children she is taken away, by the lover of her husband, out of an act of revenge, the last infant one. She reached for them but it's already too late, they are beyond the Yangtze River where she can't cross over, yet what we really read beyond the plague and criminals humans behaviors is the dissolute and outstanding image of motherhood. History at this stage lacks of utopian enthusiasm, the boundaries between past and present, dead and living, good and bad, are dropped, man is fooled and history emptied of ideological content. What is more striking is that there is no straight forward relationship between the actors



and the history, in this search for meanings, the outcome of the dialectic between signifier and signified is independent from each other. History for better or worse is often told through the eyes of a child therefore left it un-decoded. Bald Li and Song Gang in Yu Hua's *Brothers*, Sun Gunlin in Yu Hua's *Cries in the Drizzle*, Dongliang in Su Tong's *The Boat to Redemption*, go through their childhood during the years of the CR, parade, big poster, paper dunce cups, wooden placards, armbands giggle before their eyes like carnivalesque storm of their youth. To their eyes one of the most dramatic events in words history becomes a feast they want to participate and when it comes to adults they just submit to it without really understanding why the world has turn upside down:

One summer day Xu Sanguan came home and said to Xu Yulan, "On the way back it seemed like no one who lives in our lane was at home. Everyone's in the streets. I've never seen so many people in the streets before in my entire life. There are people with red armbands, and people marching, and people writing political slogans, and people pasting up big-character posters. The walls on the main street are covered with big-character posters. They paste them up one on top of the other, thicker and thicker, until it looks like the walls are wearing cotton-padded jackets. And I saw the county secretary, that fat guy from Shandong. He used to think he was really something. Whenever I used to see him, he would be holding a nice cup of tea in his hand, but now he's got an old metal washbasin in his hand, and he keeps banging on it and cursing himself, saying he's a dog through and through."

Xu Sanguan said, "Have you heard? Do you know why the factories have shut down, and the stores are closed, and why there are no classes at the schools? You know why you don't have to go fry dough? Why some people have hung themselves from trees, and some people are locked up in 'cow sheds' and beaten half to death? Do you know why? Do you know why as soon as Chairman Mao says something, people take what he said and make it into a song, and paint his words on the walls, and on the pavement, and on cars and ferry boats, on their sheets and pillowcases, on cups and cooking pans, and even on bathroom walls and the sides of spittoons? Do you know how it was that Chairman Mao's name grew so long? Listen to this: He's the Great Leader Great Teacher Supreme Commander and Helmsman Chairman Mao May He Live Ten Thousand Years! That's fifteen words in all, and you have to say it in one breath, without missing a beat. You know why that is? Because the Cultural Revolution has arrived"<sup>7</sup>

Man is fooled then and history is irrational. The legendary Commander Yu in the *Red Sorghum* betrayed by his compatriot keeps fighting alone the Japanese to defend a deserted land just to wound up in exile in a foreign country. The good giant Song Fanpings in *Brothers* writes a last love letter just before his body is mercilessly smashed, Dongliang's father in *The Boat to Redemption*, will drown himself to death under the shame of a political misunderstanding. For those who survived the past, history seems to be a cruel labyrinth of significance with no escape to rationality. From year to year, from generation to generation, it's a merciless fate rather than reason, what shapes people's destiny. Su Tong's historical fiction is set in no particular time, the world he invented is a *scary dream in a rainy night*, but they all have a common trait, it is a story of decline, health, family, morality, beauty, we don't see them accomplishing we are shown how they decay. *My Life as Emperor* could be read as the mystical tale of a cruel emperor turning into a tight-rope walker and Buddhist adept. But we would misjudge the tale. The final slaughtering and the burning of the imperial Great Xie Palace have to be placed

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<sup>7</sup> Yu Hua (2003, 163)

within a larger discourse over humanity's condition: the death of the innocent eight-year-old Jade Locket more than that of the last emperor Duanwen robbed men of any possible future. The pile of rubble of what once was the splendor of halls and gardens may be priceless may be worthless, confesses the former emperor, they don't just declare the biological shift of power but the mischievous forces of history undermining free will, to burn then is not the palace itself but the vanity of the historical process.

The soul of history is eaten away by the plague of time. *Nineteen Thirty-four Escapes* builds up a projection over the fate of human life. The dispersal of a family whose visual images is given by the immense figure of Grandmother Jiang abandoned and raped, the silence death of five of her six children, the kidnapping of the last one, is sided here by the symbolic migration from the countryside to the city, allegorical transfer from the poverty of tradition to the success of modernity. But the death of the oldest son, Dingo, who had moved to the city to become a bamboo craftsman as his father, reminds us that there is not real escape. No matter where, history is rotten and doomed are the protagonists. In *Opium Family* genetic deficiency is at stake but it is the all scaffolding of human performances to crumble down. Most evident is the erosion of the genetic foundation: four of Liu Laoxia's children are deformed, the fifth one is an idiot and the only healthy one, Liu Chencao, is illegitimate. That goes together with the moral collapse of the fathers: the family patriarch who sells his daughter to an old bandit, for her to be later raped by a peasant who becomes a communist leader, illustrates the writer's dissatisfaction with the present state. As the novel enters the phase of the Communist revolution, the protagonists of the Republican era are erased from the surface of history by the consequences of the land reform. Again is a final, spectacular fire to seal the tragic destiny of those coping with darkness.

But it is in Su Tong's *Rice* where better the curve of human life reveals the doom of any living thing. The journey of Five Dragons, from his flooded countryside to the gigantic smokestack of the city is as well the Chinese physical and spiritual transition from the stagnation of the countryside to the degeneration of the urban space in the 90s. From orphan in Maple-Poplar Village to beggar in Brick Mason Avenue, from porter to husband father and patriarch of the Rise Emporium, from gang-member to head criminal mind, from powerful womanizer to rotten tortured body, Five Dragon's inability to construct his living setting is as well the result for a never fully engaged identity. Humiliated, beaten cursed by his urban family members who refers to him as a bastard, a beast, a beggar, cut off from his native village, Five Dragons epitomizes at its best the rhetoric of degeneracy which mutilates human values and the sense of history. Signs of decadence are everywhere as a definitive attribute of man's soul and body, in this sense his deadly venereal disease is the indemnification for a life of abuse he inflicted on the others out of personal, unresolved revenge. Next to him everyone has been infected by the germ of a ruthless exploitation, people in general have stepped over the limit of human decency unaware of their de-humanizing behaviors:

Finally she crawled under the bed, without a pause in her litany: Your aunt was a whore, your father's a one-eyed dragon who murders for fun, and your brother's a cripple who suffocated his own bay sister. There isn't a decent human being in your family.<sup>8</sup>

Morality is gambled in exchanged for life, love turns into a sexual abuse, forgiveness bargained for revenge, vengeance deviates into a sadistic mechanism of fatalism, the exercise of free will transforms individuality into a misshapen hedonism and a dissolute attempt of being. The decisive final image, Five Dragons own son pulling off his father's golden teeth is the dramatic final testament over a humanity with neither love nor redemption but a macabre, brutal reminiscence of Goya's *Saturn Devouring His Son*, it is history claiming back what belongs to it.

The city is once more an obscene trap for those seeking paradise in it, a gigantic coffin of industrial smoke, noisy streets and bitter violence where people turn into criminals or victims if not both:

This was the city. Or, as Five Dragons would have put it, an obscene, sinful, huge, fucking trap ready to lure the unwary. For a handful of rice, or a few coins, or a moment of pleasure, pitiful people poured into the city by train and by boat, all bending their efforts toward finding paradise on earth. If only they knew it didn't exist.<sup>9</sup>

But if the city is the graveyard of those who believed in it, so is the countryside. Valorized in people's memory, idealized when associated to the spiritual poverty of the city, in fact it is another moment of the legacy of death. The imaginary Maple-Poplar Village is submerged by floodwater in *Rice* and by a pool of corpses after a cholera epidemic in *Nineteen Thirty-four Escapes*. It becomes clear that in response to the ideological revolutionary literature that created an illusory world of propaganda, the exploration of reality that lay behind ideology led postmodern writers to deny any possibility of reconnection with the roots they were still searching in the 80s and to create a world that again is illusory but into the primitivism of man's instinct. The evil from which no one seems neither responsible nor innocent, establishes a double parallel resolution: the meaningless of human evolution and the decadence immanent of history.

In Yu Hua's *Blood and Plum Blossom* we read a pastiche of traditional and popular fiction, the tales of nights are impoverished of their moral connotation, Ruan Haikuo's journey back to where he started hints the circularity of history and more pessimistically the stagnant nature of it, failing to get his revenge over the death of his late father proves the vanity of the all trajectory. But the chain of fatalism is broken every now and then by the introduction of a literary trick. It's the turn of Magic realism. Black-robed sorcerer, long hair with healing quality, the Great Wall torn down, reincarnation, animals with super power, impossible coincidence, enchant the course of history and change it. The distortion of chronological sequence reinforces the confusion between reality and fantasy, rapturous imaginary stretching for miles of time and ancestors, rise, crops and sorghum cut short the distance between generations, fantastic within the plot gives the narration mythical proportion. Gradually history becomes myth and it is this spectacularization of history that leads to the construction of an alternative past. We are given a fabulous

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<sup>8</sup> Su Tong (1995, 169)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.217

description of landscape where magic is the pendulum swaying between two possible narratives: it naturally overpasses into surrealism, we have then the narrative of Can Xue with dreamlike landscape and mysterious characters, but some other time magic retreats into realism, it is the case of Yu Hua and Su Tong, where the tragedy of history is interrupted by the exceptionality of the protagonists.

Nostalgia and decadence are then two of the main traits featuring the Chinese literary postmodern turn. Literature seems to embrace an essentially pessimistic view for those who came of age in the 60s, Maoism was a cataclysm and the waves travel along the bones of contemporaneity. Xu Bing's conceptual art and his massive installation a *Book from the Sky* (1987-1991) well symbolize the general atmosphere. He spent three years carving four thousands Chinese characters, he printed them in Chinese paper, four volumes, one hundreds twenty six copies, bounded them in the format of a classical text form Song and Ming dynasty. Not an exercise of calligraphy but a deconstruction of meaning. To a closer look for those familiar with Chinese characters the stunning surprise to realize that none of them exist. The iconoclastic expression has the clear aim to dismantle thousand years of tradition assuming the futility of human endeavor. Postmodernism is to any latitude a process of deconstruction, in the case of China, history is the structure to be dismantled to be questioned and accepted. Were the Red Guards victims or victimizers? Was the Rustication Movement a waste of youth or idealism? Why the Cultural Revolution? History is dismantled, derided, reduced to madness, ignored, what is left is man. In this sense Chinese postmodernity shares the same features of disintegration, de-collectivization, de-personalization as the Western counterpart, they meet on a vanishing land self-annihilation, tragic, not tragedy, meets them in the middle, not as contraposition of ethical forces, as for instance in the Greek performance, but as contraposition between the subject, his peaceful and reflexive nature and the object, the violence of the world outside. Thus it is the struggle against external elements rather than an intimate dissonance what generates conflict. Tragic is the experience of absurdity, existence pushed to its limits reveals the repetitiveness of history. Here we assist to man's reaction to nonsense which is at times the idea of death, as prolonged silence against the triumph of chaos and alternative solution to the meaningless of life. But Western absurdity is very much related to metaphysic, it is the expression through which man rebels to his liable humanity, incomprehensible condition and the whole creation, it's not negation of divinity, its rebellion to it. Romanticism fought the unbearable gap between men's loneliness and divine indifference, Ivan Karamazov replaced the reign of God with the realm of justice, Nietzsche didn't kill god but he found him already death in the soul of his age, thus the need to organize the world according to man dimensions. Two centuries of metaphysical rebellion aimed to affirm order and rationality in a universe that had lost a common framework of understanding. The last message of the Twentieth century, beside the attempt to live without transcendence might as well be: We rebel therefore we are, but we are alone. Post-Maoism production doesn't have the same speculative strength, simply because China doesn't have a god to rebel to, thus ethic rather than metaphysic was Chinese primary interest. Metaphysical problems such as that of space and time, matter and spirit, man and divine are rarely discussed, and if they are it is for the sake of ethics. In this sense Western society relates itself to God and therefore the philosophical speculation is either a denial or a reaffirmation of metaphysical elements, while Chinese society relates itself to the society itself. Consequently the

rhetoric over absurdity is not much about man but it calls into discussion the very essence of communist ideology. In the midst of a world at war Kafka and Camus describe man's struggle with the Absolute, they both write of a trial as a metaphor of human failure, we failed to understand within the frame of indeterminacy. The relation between cause and effect becomes irrelevant, defeated our certitudes, meanings indefinable, the real sentence is the silence. Beckett and Pirandello's heroes act as lunatic in fact they are dangerously healthy, willing to survive in spite of the brutality of the century, they learn to stand as cripples whose consciousness cracks into a bitter joke. When asked by the first American director about the meaning of *Godot*, Beckett answered: 'If I knew, I would have said so in the play' which takes us back to China, once again, to the painter without permit, the uncle Wang Er in Xiaobo's novel *2015*, he doesn't know either the meaning of none of his paintings. Contemporaneity is a riddle whose silence expresses the futility of human desire. The process of deconstruction has reached the last step, from history to the individual, from the individual to the inner-self, the outward silence is balanced by inward voices, an orchestra of fragmented monologues, shy consciousness, a solo of loneliness. As in a decadent tale we saw the protagonists standing aloof, sustained only by the puzzling and introspection phase of their bildungsroman, speechless protagonists cut themselves off the masses, the mediocrity of reality is at times charmed by the beauty of a nostalgic imaginary or ignored out of fear. Memories bring decadence. The Avant-garde experiment turns into violence the scars of the CR, the lighter historical fiction is based on the ruin of history and the deception of the present time, realism offers images of desolation and abandonment, from Scar Literature crossing the last four decades of Chinese production right down to the Private Female writing, the reader, alike the actor, is muted by the bitter-sweet symphony of singular-universal fate. The drama of human condition is what emerges at last, alike in Malraux's novel, the need to be intoxicated by an idea, in the case of China that of national salvation, communism, the desperate clash between the lightness of an ideal and the impossible weigh of an historical betrayal. Nostalgia trespasses its temporal dimension to monopolize the plot as another illusion, just an illusion, because China can't draw her present hope from the past but only from the future. As part of a Post-Ideology discourse literature evolves towards an autonomous area where taboos are broken but don't disappear, history disengaged and yet revisited over and over again. One lesson given by history is that history repeats itself, to a warring time will follow a peaceful one, to one leader another one will come along and so on until the end of time. And because we know the process lingering behind, we are able to give name to our reality, to unscramble it by comparing with the past, somehow aware that we have already lived it. But what China lives today is not mirrored by flavor of bygone ages, it has to deal with a problem of disengagement, which is not only a political disengagement, it is a disengagement from life itself, detached from the future, by definition, and from the past cause it was a mistake. Whether it is a consequence of the overwhelming power of globalization or a rejection of Mao's asceticism, is not here to be discussed, surely enough China appears today as a floating island in an ocean of nonsense, swaying between controversial ideologies and doubtful expectations. Given that, it would be misleading to read these novels as a political allegory. Postmodern literature doesn't focus on Socialist China, or on the logic of marketization: it is the clash between the two ideologies what holds the key of a narrative otherwise innocent. In a revolutionary attempt of bravery and regrets, literature opens a window on reality, deformed as a



monster crude as humanity, while questioning the truth behind the scene. Reading becomes a decadent experience between a farewell and a déjà-vu.

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