

Chinese Realism: Between Impressionism and Expressionism

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Abstract

Post Tiananmen narrative enters a larger post-colonial, post-modern discourse where time is up to come to terms with history. Chinese postmodernism in the 90s moves away from the political influences that had spoiled the narrative in recent decades, towards an incontrovertible spiritual exploration, very much realist when it's twisted with history and rather expressionist when it's a process of self-discovery. This paper focuses on the attempt to distinguish the past two decades of Chinese literary production into two patterns, one impressed by reality and one expressed by the abyss of one own self.

Key words: *Modernism, Postmodernism, Realism, Impressionism, Expressionism*

Introduction

Chinese identity is defined by a past of injured and scars, this is up to now the most evident message lingering behind whatever narrative style post-Tiananmen has produced. The experience of loneliness that all the protagonists suffer cannot be read as personal experience or the vicissitudes of a family saga but as a national allegory and the matrix of China as whole. There is a deep feeling of desolation for a plot that, save few occasions, offers details of a life of humiliation and hardship, describes inevitable loss, condemns its heroes to a bitter and solitary ending. My guess is that the anti-Confucianism and anti-intellectualism of the past decades have emptied China of any residual of humanism, the roots-seeking experience acknowledges that the roots are dry, the reality they have to face is chaotic but turning back is no help for its chaos again. Tradition eroded, role models come loose, fathers are cruel and mothers are missing, life remains unfulfilled stuck between man's aspiration and the existential need to survive, and those characters discovered themselves alienated from their family, their village, the whole community and the sense of history, frozen between life and death. They lose in silence facing the wasteland of their life and an unaccomplished bildungsroman, they learnt and make the reader feel the inconsolability for a time that non even the parody of the Maoist era can't overcome.

Desolate Bildungsroman

Bildungsroman is the combination of two German words: *Bildung*, meaning education, and *Roman*, meaning novel. Seemingly, bildungsroman is a novel of education that deals with the formative years of the main character, the changes he, she goes through before reaching adulthood, his, her psychological development, moral education and social entanglement. The prototypical Bildungsroman is Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's*

Apprenticeship in which the hero engages in a double task of self-integration and integration into society and through instrumental collides with reality achieves his path to maturity and harmony. But a literary genre is the conceptualization of an economic-social change, it responds and analyses tormented historical circumstances. At the turn of the Eighteenth century Europe was caught between the products of the industrial revolution, while the countryside was abandoned, millions of people fancying dreams for a better life would rush into the urban space. The city was about to be transform into a metropolis and the individual was about to be left alone facing the tension with the cosmopolitan outside. Bildungsroman is the literary genre that follows the hero's moral path from childhood to adulthood usually moving from chaos to a final equilibrium between man and society. In Germany for instance the repressive state power and the absence of a legitimate public sphere during the Weimar Republic and the Nazi reign led to the creation of novels that featured self-involved protagonists who withdraw from active engagement with the social world, England and France produced works highly realist, the novels of society. An important reference -but one that would take us off the page- is the Nineteenth century traditional Bildungsroman which moves the plot throughout three main steps: the alienation of the subject from society and to some degree from himself, his journey (symbolic or physical) as process of self-discovery, the accommodation with the reality intended as compromise and an accomplished maturity. The story comes with a set of specific characteristic such as *childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality, the larger society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love, the search for a vocation and a working philosophy*¹, often ending on a positive note. Stendhal and Balzac protagonists to name some, are example of social Darwinism, complex and morally ambiguous, struggle to succeed in the infant capitalist society but in the end they handle what they longed for. Yet sometimes they offer an ambivalent response as their journey becomes a matter of compromise, foolish mistakes and painful disappointments, the case of Lucien de Rubempré², hinting for some the impossible reconciliation between youth and maturity, the grandiose dreams of the hero's youth are tempered by resignation and nostalgia which is indeed a trait of the Twentieth century novel.

Because of a post-Hegelian impulse, Darwinist theories devoted to conceive history in evolutionary terms cracked open. The trauma of the war, the collapse of Positivism, the contradiction of modernity, precludes a peaceful development into maturity and social accommodation. The traumatic discoveries of the century leave unsettled the tension between socialization and individuality, if time and space is relative, god is dead and the individual is a jumble of instinct then life can't be understood. Man's process of becoming is therefore left to the uncertainty, the meaning remains enigmatic, bildungsroman doesn't end in individual surrender or social achievement, but it does accept to deal with the new premises. Musil uses Torless's confusion between morality and sexuality, science and religion, reason and soul, as microcosm of the gap between rationality and irrationality:

There's something dark in me, deep under, all my thoughts, something I can't measure out with thoughts, a sort of life that can't be expressed in words and which is my life, all the same...

¹ Jerome H. Buckley (1974,18)

² Honoré de Balzac, *Illusions Perdues*

*“That silent life oppressed me, harassed me. Something kept on making me stare at it. I was tormented by the fear that our whole life might be like that and that I was only finding it out here and there, in bits and pieces. . . . Oh, I was dreadfully afraid! I was out of my mind...”*³

And the failure of the language to communicate the feeling itself as proof that the authority is not science but man himself, thus, at last, there is no connection between reason and truth. Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as Young Man* again shifts between moralities, in this case the tension between rationality and irrationality is given by religion inquietude and sensual pleasure. Life coincides with the heaviness of his sins, the sense of guilt, the redemption behind punishment, the fear of hell and the eternal damnation. Along with it shame brings forgiveness, confessing is repenting, for those who have sincere sorrow, faith is a lap into grace. But then the young man doubts, an aesthetic epiphany 'a long pink grown' forced him to surrender to the beauty of a woman, darker than a sin softer than a sound, because of lust the holiness of the sacrament crumbles into corruption. *I tried to love God but I failed*, Stephen confessed, his bildungsroman is interrupted or to be found somewhere else beyond the story, intellectual, sexual, and spiritual discoveries pushed him towards an artistic alienation until the final exile and his promise of return. However we must notice that we bid Torless and Dedalus goodbye, not at the end of their process of discovery and evolution but at the beginning, the novel ends while their journey, physical and spiritual, starts, they are both about to go somewhere else, implying that rather than an interrupted bildungsroman we shall refer to them as infant bildungsroman whose vagueness is the vagueness of the century. Same as Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. Alike Gustav von Aschenbach in *Death in Venice*, Hans Castorp, a 23 years old engineer, goes on a brief voyage, the humidity of Venice has been replaced by the Swiss snow, Grand Hôtel des Bains on the Lido replaced by International Sanatorium Berghof, the beauty of Tadzio by the sensuality of Claudia Chauchat. It seems at first a realist novel, with the omniscient narrator hunting down his characters and the dullness of detailed descriptions, a quite obvious story all in all, Hans pays a three weeks visit to his cousin suffering of tuberculosis, the regularity of the days is tricked by short walks and long meals. Just when his departure is approaching he is diagnosed with the same disease and winds up spending seven years at the sanatorium. Here begins his journey of self-exploration through the decay of the body and the beauty of humankind, the awareness of death and the secret of love. Meanwhile modernist European philosophical debates fully unfold: the power of Enlightenment, the human race moving along technology and morality, the shining road of progress, humanism and the collapse of all before the war. Hans is left alone striving to understand the meaning of life and death, this brother of Torless and Dedalus finally descends the mountain to disappear into the maelstrom of WWI, we can't say whether he will survive the festival of death or not, his bildungsroman just started, his journey is about to begin. The Norwegian Nobel Prize winner Knut Hamsun, in his self-searching novel *Hunger* offers a character at the edge of a physical collapse: the autobiographic story of an unknown mediocre writer, who accepts to starve to death rather than living out of anything but his few accomplished articles. After having been humiliated by the indifference of his destiny, after having tried in vain to sell all he had left, a worn out blanket and few buttons, the last image we have is again the protagonist sealing off for a redemption journey. Herman Hess's *Demian's*

³ Robert Musil (1964, 170)

bildungsroman unfolds through the existence of opposite forces mining Sinclair's childhood, again scattered between Christian standards and man's desires, the introspection remains ambiguous over good and evil and the nature of relationships. Which kind of diversity the sign of Cain resemble? It is only the expected breaking of the war to establish not much a conclusion over morality as the protagonist's journey towards adulthood.

Western modernism obsessed with introspectiveness and inwardness, finally after so much digging and questioning at the very bottom of man's abyss discovered tragedy, a metaphysical tragedy where the experience of solitude is proportional to the admission of responsibility for having renounced god without creating a valid alternative. Western tragedy is the metaphysical homelessness of being a fragment in a fragmented age featured by hopeless waiting, the boredom of those who have seen history reaching its climax, the sensation of a void within, the wounds that the imagination inflicts on those who believed in the project of Enlightenment, the meaning of the tortured body on the Cross, the existence of a shaking soul after centuries of certainty. By comparison Chinese postmodernism carries its tragedy as well, literature depicts disfigured bodies and twisted souls, however the final picture we receive is most different from that of the West. China deals with another tragedy that is not so much metaphysical as it is historical, yet history is not a central discourse. While the purest tradition of Chinese modern literature, standing on the solid base of history, searches for the individual's place into history, let's just think about *Scar* and *Roots* experience, post-1989 production seems to proceed otherwise from the individual to the history, thus we see the Japanese invasion and the name of their generals, we see the stain of blood on a dry soil left by the civil war, the Cultural Revolution (here after CR) and the whole frame it follows, denounce meetings, confessions, self-criticism, but the protagonist is taken out from the shadow of darkness it bears, and so is the reader, flung into a zone of humor that is together satire and resistance.

The Chinese Communist Party devoted itself to the ideological reform. The Marxist approach sees in the mode of production the source shaping the substructure of society, religion, art, philosophy but allegedly China didn't have time to wait for the economic conditions to be ready, thus without waiting for the production to modify society, Mao prepared people's mind through ideological reform. For 20 years China didn't have free thinkers but artisan educated to the Marx-Leninism, the brain washing phase, which we won't disclose here, might more realistically be called a conversion to communism as the religious association to the term conversion is the most appropriate to the process of indoctrination:

Even though I suffered from political discrimination, I thought that Mao was right (...) In those days, we didn't know what it was like outside China. We were indoctrinated, in school and elsewhere, that the Chinese people had more than enough to eat; that the People's Liberation Army was great; that it was glorious to learn from Dazhai and Daqing; that the Chinese people could produce their own atomic bomb (1964); that the Chinese people were bravely fighting Soviet revisionism; that the Chinese won the battle in the Sino-Indian border War (1962-1964); that Mao Zedong was the greatest

revolutionary leader of all mankind and that all the people in the world admired and worship him (...)⁴

The lives of Chinese peasants before 1949 -all in all the lives of Chinese masses- were based on family system, Confucian belief and superstition. The Party taught them the magic spell: *Before liberation I was...then the communist came...and now I have...* From this standpoint educating the masses was not as difficult as reforming the intellectuals for the peasant didn't have ideology but they were going to have one. The case of the intellectuals was indeed more delicate because they were always diffident from taking part in political and military turmoil and because the task the Party undergone was to transform them into communist soldiers. During the civil war they were between the fascist method of the KMT and the seduction of the communist propaganda, no one can say whether they purely embraced communism or joined Mao as the second worst. However two years after the establishment of the Peoples Republic they were told to re-mold 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, privacy was abolished for the sake of public life, people would not dare to write or publish anything fearing to say something wrong, people would keep distance between them in case to be forced to accuse each other once they would commit an error. Maoism until the end kept alive its conjectures, political suppression, the fear of revisionism, the need for mass mobilization, while so doing it had slowly washed away the family unit, the affection of one individual toward the other, in short if one could avoid being an enemy of society he was left to be eaten by loneliness. Matter of fact, unequivocal landmark of the post-Deng literary production is a loss of humanity from the side of the actors, rejected from the bigger society, alienated to themselves, they reveal man's lowest nature. In this sense Su Tong and Yu Hua's narrative rightly act as models. Sun Kwangtsai, the father of Sun Guanlin in Yu Hua's *Cries in the Drizzle* is a picture of immorality and brutality. Emotionless to everything but alcohol and beating, he fails to deliver duties of filial piety repeatedly humiliating his own father:

Sun Kwangtsai's real goal in punishing my little brother so harshly was to cow his father into submission, as Granddad perfectly well knew. He sat meekly in his little chair, and for Sun Kwangtsai it was most gratifying to witness the old man's discomfort as he raised his chopstick high in the air and struggle to pick up morsels from this awkward angle⁵

Altogether indifferent to his son Danglian with whom shared few words along two decades; devious towards his oldest son, Sun Guangping, disloyal to his wife, adulterous, drunkard, he finally dies unheard face down in the muck of a cesspit at the entrance to the village. The disgraced secretary Ku in Su Tong's *The Boat to Redemption*, focused on dealing with his own devils, he is not concerned at all about the solitude of his son, Danglian. He missed the process of self-alienation, self-destructiveness Danglian undergone, more worried to clear his past to establish a name for himself rather than a legacy for the future. His vain pride allows him to ignore the social implication the nickname *Kongpi* imposes on Danglian and the part he plays within the father-son dynamic, blinded by an out-of-date honor he doesn't see how his clumsy and at times

⁴ In Laifong Leung (1994, 58)

⁵ Yu Hua (2007, 150)

fanatic behavior enormously contributes to make of Danglian an outcast. Simultaneously Qiao Limin, Danglian's mother is not any better. She never showed any signs of affection, neither a caress nor a little comfort, unable to compromise after divorcing, worried to educate her son rather than loving him she is incapable to deliver any of them:

You wicked boy, she scolded. You are isolated from the masses, animals hate you, and a mangy dog chases you! Even a shit-eating dog has no forgiveness in its heart for you! (...) Mother supplied me with three meals a day, but every grain of rice was saturated with her sadness, and every vegetable leaf was infused with her disappointment⁶

Victim of the political atmosphere and the residue of her broken marriage, she built for them a space where the words mother and son meant nothing; at last, from the outside of a man toilet, refused by her son's anger she lives for good, sent off to work to the coal mines, amending her lack of maternal attention with few letters and a tin a biscuits. Xu Sanguan in Yu Hua's *Chronicle of a blood merchant* before his final redemption, the moment he accepts Yile as his son, doesn't falter to mark the difference between his biological sons and the bastard Yile:

Dad, do you think you could pretend for a little while that I'm your own son so I can eat some noodles too?

Xu San guan shook his head: "Yile, I almost never treat you any worse than them. If Erle and Sanle get something good to eat, you get some too. But the money I made today came from selling blood. This money is special. This money's harder to come by than other kind of money. I put my life at risk to get this money. So if I let you eat noodles too, I'd be doing that bastard He Xiaoyong a favor"⁷

Coming out from an age that taught China how to survive but not how to live, as Wang Anyi synthetically put it, *we eat to have strength to work; we work to eat a little better*. Life is reduced to basic needs, the main one is surviving, men are depicted as unscrupulous, brutal, cruel and vulgar, while women as deserted, Sun Guanlin's mother, after her husband affair is made public, can't but sit by the kitchen stove wiping away her tears; resigned, in Yu Hua's *To Live*, Fugui's wife, Jiazhen, can't but accept a man who loves gambling, whoring and beats her mercilessly just before ruining his family; debased, Li Lan (Yu Hua's *Brothers*) who spent half her life in shame and the last few years in sorrow; fated to surrender as when taken by force, Lin Hong by Baldy Li, Wang Qiyao by Director Li, Niuniu by teacher Ti, Grandma by Grandpa⁸, savagely raped, Grandmother Jiang by the landlord Chen in Su Tong's *Nineteen Thirty-Four Escapes*. Given all that, considering that they don't recall history but are in the middle of it, none of them, save few exceptions, is capable of developing human spirit. Beaten, starved to death, with their back bent on the crops, their hands broken by the winter, they must be selfish to the extreme, emotionally incapable, they are characters between human and monster, between heroes and idiots, last expression of Darwinian selection with no trace of humanism left behind. The tragedy of their lives, the history they share, has sometimes a relief, a moment of beauty. While the CR is still at full speed, as soon as it got dark, the

⁶ Su Tong (2010, 77)

⁷ Yu Hua (2004, 130)

⁸ In order: *Brothers* (Yu Hua), *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* (Wang Anyi), *My Private Life* (Chen Ran), *Red Sorghum* (Mo Yan)

crooked head Erxi, would let the mosquitos feed on him to protect the dumb pregnant Fenxia; even though raving for being a cuckold, Xu Sanguan finally carries Yile on his back to the Victory restaurant to have some noodles; after years of abuses and humiliations, in the very last page Huixian offers Denglian the tin red lantern symbol of lust, love and friendship⁹. But this is only the fiction coloring reality, not enough to change the spirit of desolation we receive from the whole narration. History has failed to redeem its people turning them into soulless disciples dwelling on a bowl of rice, family has failed their children turning them into soldiers with no grade, and so did the educational system collapsing behind political rhetoric and fanaticism. In *Cries in the Drizzle* the primary school teacher forces Guanglin to write a confession for a crime he didn't commit -hinting the collusive practice of the Party indoctrination system- in *A Private Life* Teacher Ti abused his power on the teenager Niuniu, harassing her verbally and physically. Generally speaking the total absence of role models forces everyone to retreat into themselves, renouncing to decode history as they know it, to embark a larger discourse over the existence as they sense it. Abandoned by everyone, the protagonists we encounter, are left alone in their journey towards maturity, we see them walking by a pond, staring the moon at night, wrapped by rattled clothes, begging, crying out their fear, taking it all out on some other victim, physically or metaphorically orphan, adults and children have no place to return to. In *The Boat to Redemption* Dongliang, facing his mother's refuse to compromise regarding his permanent residence has to choose between the river and the dry land. He chose the river for an invisible bond with his father's fate he cannot avoid. As things don't turn out as expected he moves back to his mother's place but feeling unwanted he has no other choice than to head back to the barge. But events don't bring improvements, each time he has a clash with his father, he runs ashore, walking nowhere, enduring random insult and mockery, at least until when he finds a purpose to his excursion at the barber shop. Again a while after his alienated personality and the reticence of the residents will push him away not without additional beatings and humiliations. Rejected by the dry land he can only go back to the barge, aware that none of them are willing to give him shelter:

My days on the river were unrelievedly lonely, and that loneliness comprised the last thread of self-respect. There were lots of boys in the fleet, but they were either too old and stupid or too young and disgusting, so I had no friends¹⁰

Su Tong's short stories and novels, are based on experience of adolescence and adults whose bildungsroman is stained by violence and death as decoration of the 'revolutionary carnival', sex experienced as a sin, family heritage as decadence, and only after they outlive their solitude and live in a society redeemed by the future, only then they feel all the tragedy of the past. Too late for any amend. Yu Hua's desolation is entrapped with the sad fate of the children and the selfishness of the adults. *Cries in the Drizzle* is not so much one person's war as it is a complex tangle of feelings of injustice, loneliness, disenchantment people are caught in. Guanglin's younger brother drowns in the river guilty to have miscalculated the burden of his task, the older one, Sun Guangping, after graduating from high school is called back to his village by the CR. Wondering about the latter stages of his life, he comes to terms with reality sulkily setting for a life in the

⁹ In order: Yu Hua (To Live), Yu Hua (Chronicle of a Blood Merchant), Su Tong (The Boat to Redemption)

¹⁰ Su Tong (2010, 60)

countryside. Guanglin himself is set aside twice, by his biological family who sent him away and by his foster family faded along the way. His existentiality reminds of Yile in *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*, both in between two houses, refused by both, homeless even when they have a roof to crawl under:

Yile began to cry. “Everyone says that you are not my real dad. Mom says you are not my real dad either. Now you are saying the same thing too. That means I don’t have a dad. I don’t have a mom either. I don’t have a family. All I have is me. I’m coming down on my own¹¹

But Yile yells out his rage, has a surrounding that seems taking pity on him and a father who finally act as such. Guanglin is locked up in his grief, his silence sounds as an admission of guilt, despised by his father without compensation, estranged from the village, he understood solitude as condition of his life:

My alienation had kept me away from the scenes surrounding his death and burial and I was anticipating that I would now be the object of even more forceful censure at home and in the village. But many days passed and nobody said or did anything different from before, which took me rather aback until I realized with relief that I had been utterly forgotten. I had been assigned a position where I was recognized at the same time repudiated by everyone in the village¹²

As he grows older he comes to realize that the desolate feeling of abandon is not individual but universal and he befriended with those who share the same irrevocability. His friends’ fate if possible is even bitter: Guoqing’s mother dies, his heartless father abandons him with ten yuan:

One morning when he was nine, Guoqing woke up to find out that he held his destiny in his own hands. Though far from being an adult, (...) all of a sudden he was independent. Premature freedom made him carry his fate on his shoulder the way he might carry a heavy suitcase.¹³

Fatherless Lulu invented a big brother to handle his isolation and the bloody street-fight, yet life plays on him one more evil trick when he is stripped off of his mother arrested for prostitution:

In the days that followed Lulu began living an outdoor life. He laid his bedroll out underneath a camphor tree, used the duffel bag as a pillow, and lay there reading his textbook (...) Always on alert, as soon as he heard the thud of well-regulated footsteps he would drop his book and sit up, opening his dark eyes wide. When a line of black garbed prisoners trotted past, hoes on their shoulders, a head would turn to look at him and Lulu’s rapturous gaze would meet his mother’s eyes.¹⁴

Fugui in *To Live* doesn’t die as secretary Ku does, but his fate is bitter to the extreme, he will have to outlive all those he loved the most, left alone with an ox bearing his name, unfolding his story of mistakes and amnesty to no one but a stranger. Reality marks the narrative in a chamber of torture.

¹¹ Yu Hua (2004, 161)

¹² Yu Hua (2007, 24)

¹³ Ibid. p 227

¹⁴ Ibid. p.180

Impressionist Realism: Collective Loneliness

Swaying between life and death, forsaken by both, this trend of Chinese postmodernism that I discussed above is what I define as impressionist realism, a political fable with realistic mode registering the movements outside as a crucial element of human experience, absurd epilogue before the tragedy is understood. Narrative captures the transient through the eyes of the witnesses flashing upon the eyes the image of what they just saw. The tragedy of Chinese history borders the happenings of protagonist's broken life, the tone of the narration alternates between the indifference of history and subjective elements of compassion, similar to historical fiction but different because here history is reinvented, desacralized in promiscuous construct that is together, profound and superficial, tragic and absurd, historical and fictional. How can they manage such equilibrium? Through of the ambiguity of a *mise en abyme*, a technical spell, a part of the process of deconstruction, the realist hole that tosses down the characters to the extent that we don't quite know whether they are acting or living, playing a scene within the scene or according to the script. Baldy Li, the *metteur en scene*, in Yu Hua's *Brothers*, acts throughout the novel out of excess, incongruity or contrast to the object, the outcome is a displacement out of the linearity of the plot. When in chapter thirty-eight for instance he single-handedly resigned from the factory, the absurdity of the scene creates a comical effect:

He proceeded to deliver an hour long impassioned speech in which he spent fifty-nine minutes praising his own achievements and the final minute reapproving the two cripples as factory's director and deputy director. He concluded by sadly declaring that they, the Good Works Factory's workers, had unanimously accepted Director Baldy Li's letter of resignation. Baldy Li tearfully concluded "Thank you"¹⁵

The objective correlative is imperfect, the emotional algebra between the outside object and the inner feelings don't combine, facts exceed emotions, and more often than not, don't quite match. Drama, collective and individual, covers the whole plot, we are offered a detailed description of tortures inflicted by the madness of the CR, we record the broken lives of those who survived, and we are given an insight of the destructive consequences of economic developments. But it's not tragedy yet, there are fundamental conceptual elements missing. There is no catharsis for the protagonist, they are not allowed to receive final purification, even if at some stage of the narration their fate seem taking a positive turn in the end they always lose: Su Tong's Madwoman is taken away to a sanatorium, Fugui¹⁶ and Dongliang are left alone with a pile of memories and mistakes to decode, Sun Guanglin kneels down at the side of life, Lin Hongs whose natural beauty motivates her innocence, ends up opening a bordello, Song Gangs-the pure face of time-is ultimately a victim of the market economy. This is realism without salvation, a crude ostentation of that desolation, decadence, that, is one of the main traits of Chinese postmodern literature. There is not inevitability (*ekkyklema*), a reverse of fortune, an incident which gives start to a cause-effect plot, and there is not the intervention of a *Deus ex machina*, (usually a divinity in the Greek tragedy) to appeal when all else fails,

¹⁵ Yu Hua (2009, Chapter 38)

¹⁶ In order: Yu Hua (To Live), Su Tong, (The Boat to Redemption), Yu Hua (Cries in the Drizzle), Yu Hua (Brothers), Yu Hua (Brothers)

as a plot device, that comes from nowhere to untangle the dramatic course of events. What is missing more than anything else is this accidental element, absolutely unforeseeable circumstance that is exactly what the tragedy is about. It is all about a twist of fate, an inevitable, unavoidable twist of fate that changes dramatically the course of the plot. The tragedy is destiny happening, for this reason it generates empathy and fear, for it is unexpected. But most of these realist works are placed on a post-Euripides stage where tragedy is explained, focusing on the dialogue at the expense of the pathos behind it, somewhat turning the inevitability into rationality. In *Brothers*, at the very beginning, chapter one first paragraph, we are told that Baldy Li used to have a brother who died three years earlier, but the story of Baldy Li's brother, Song Gang, will accompany us until the very closing of the novel. In chapter thirty-seven we are told that the heartbroken Baldy Li, a decade later, will single-handedly account for the GDP of the entire county. In Wang Anyi's most dramatic work, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, the reader's suspense is cut short by sudden revelations, for instance, the paragraph titled 'Miss Third Place' reveals beforehand the final result of Miss Shanghai. Or we curiously follow the slow unfolding of Wang Qiyao's romance when abruptly we find the lovers holding after a sexual intercourse. We are shown the end at the start, we are deprived of curiosity and inquietude, pathos, the aim of the tragedy, is removed from the waiting, the narration is always aborted before it reaches its climax. Yu Hua and per extension this trend of realism, doesn't allow the tragedy to explode in its complexity and it is not for the purpose of a comic interlude, it is rather the necessity to avoid instigating sensitive topic they tacitly agreed not to and being forced to dig up answers already consigned to the official history. Thus they furtively break the crescendo by adding an amusing devise. In *Brothers* at the end of chapter thirteen the atrocious sounds of people being tortured coming from the warehouse and Song Fangpings emaciated face are softened by the wonder of the two brothers for the arm-dangling march, or in chapter seventy-five, when soon after having found out of Song Gang's suicide, Baldy Li and Lin Hong curse at each other as it was a cursing competition. If the first Avant-garde experimentation resolved evil with silence, here evil is redeemed with a last laugh. Xu Sanguan in Yu Hua's *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*, is told by a stranger, the audience, to denounce Xu Yulan, his wife, at home. A struggle session therefore has to take place within domestic walls. Xu Sanguan set forward to organize the guidelines in order to give credibility to the struggle session and make it seem as *real* as possible: the whole family occupies a preordered position, the three sons in a row, Xu Sanguan in front of them, Xu Yulan standing on a side. Afterwards they are told how to proceed as according to an invisible script save interrupting the session when it takes an unforeseeable turn. As the characters are all acting out commands the effect produced is similar to theatrical sequence:

You're not allowed to call her Mom at the struggle session. You can't call her mom until we're finished with the meeting¹⁷

The structure of realism made of details and redundant descriptions shivers, the dullness of realism is broken by the nonsense of life sometimes and the absurdity of the characters. Wang Er's confessions in Wang Xiaobo's *The Golden Years* specifically

¹⁷ Yu Hua (2004, 174)

describe his sexual intercourse with Chen Qingyang, very far in terms of content and terminology from the political contest of the CR and so are the leaders reading it:

When I turn in this confession, the leaders really liked it (...) our task in the future was to confess our illicit love affair. If we confessed well, they would allow us to get married. But we didn't want to get married. So later they said if we confessed well, they would let me go back to civilization, and then Chen Qingyang would get to work in a bigger hospital. So I stayed in my hotel room and I wrote confessions for over a month.¹⁸

None of the protagonist is a tragic hero but similar to a Kafkaesque narration they are absurd characters plunged into the absurdity of history. And so while outside China is burning down, we are offered a funny, accurate description of a couple toying with love behind the hill or the postmortem public acknowledgment of possibly the greatest painter after Dali¹⁹. Like in Kafka or Beckett we are not reading tragedy anymore but the comedy of the absurd, the ability to provoke laugh from the horror, there is no space here for the emotional seizure on the part of the subject evident in the female writing, the general atmosphere of the narration is not so much about a tale of nostalgia over a mythical past as it is an accurate lack of introspection from the author and from the characters. Being emotionally uninvolved allowed them to survive. And because the narration out of ignorance doesn't quite comprehend life, the main characters seem to come to term with death rather than life. The excess of Maoism and the contradiction of the market economy have shaped a generation of writers whose future expectations don't 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, people learn to stand on their own not to succumb. The protagonist are dissatisfied, deceived, alienated from family members, yearning for love, anti-hero of the revolution, never fully engaged in the present nor fully aware of their past. Forever drifting towards a would-be identity. Death at last becomes a liberation more than a loss of self, an alternative life for many of them to seal the awareness of human fragility and cruelty. Sun Guangming drowns, Su Yu dies of a cerebral hemorrhage unnoticed by his family, Fugui's son is killed by unscrupulous doctors, his daughter by Red Guards disguised as doctors, secretary Ku and Song Gang died suicide suffocated by the heaviness of a shame they didn't provoke, Son Fanping and Sun Wei's father tortured to death²⁰ without knowing why. As they all die alone without never decoding what they lived for, death here is not just 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. If bildungsroman in Western modernism is a journey that is about to start, bildungsroman in Chinese postmodernism has been interrupted, life has been denied.

Expressionist Realism: The Aesthetic of Individualism

Post-Maoist literary path is generally described as a progressive movement from collectivism to individualism, from fragmentation to the discovery of self. There is one more evidence seasonings the whole Chinese Twentieth century, which is the shy oscillation from the anti-emotional modernity to emotional postmodernity. China

¹⁸ Wang Xiaobo (2007, 91)

¹⁹ See Wang Xiaobo, 2015

²⁰ In order: Cries in the Drizzle, To Live, The Boat To Redemption, Bothers, To Live.

received an education based on obedience, obedience to man-laden society, the hierarchy of the family, the authority of the State. Ah Q and his spiritual victory before his physical defeats became the key term to decode Chinese character. Modern history brought the time of ideology, loyalty to the utopia of communism, devotion to the permanent revolution, reformism through class struggle. Once again is obedience the quality requires to sustain the nation. Maoism educated China to politics but not to life neither to feel, China was never educated to think critically but to obey and reproduce and today, in a post-ideology reality, literature strives extensively for the first time against unknown feelings of loneliness and loss. Scar Literature wonders about individual scars but it is too young an attempt and it is still political, there is no desire of revenge as much as there is not future. Root-seeking returns to the simplicity of the past whenever the materialism of the present strikes on the limit of tradition, the politic of the Party is out of the picture but not the history whose gravity leans on the present affecting and corrupting any other thoughts. Historical fiction flows into the magic to make life endurable while the main stream of realism is too worry to deconstruct to produce the details of a valid introspection. All in all, those are undertakings that reject profundity, there is not introspective analysis, neither intellectual inquiry, as in postmodern Western literature, they turn away from emotional excess, enlarging their sense of reality to a contention for primary needs. Mo Yan, Su Tong, Yu Hua's protagonist live *in medias res*, they are all placed into a war-revolutionary contest, children fail to achieve adulthood, adults are not engaged on emotional level. Whirled by the ordinariness of their life and the daily battle for a bowl of rice, they have no time to make a sense out of it, sitting at the common dining hall they won't discuss the next stem of egalitarianism, they just see free meals. This is why the readers feel the violence of history but not the protagonists. Anything goes seems to be a valid principle to cross the existence, they have some sense of malaise and curiosity but they are too scared to pursuit, they love but in a very pale manner, they don't burn of earnest emotion, are not intimate with each other, with any real of life. They rather assume a numb approach towards the surrounding and by so doing they dried inside. As if moved by a Daoist refusal of social and political engagement, they finally got used to the tragedy, sitting in a courtyard or hiding within the crowd they see it happening, it is not that they are politically unaware but emotionally uninvolved. It is only when China realizes that the CR is not about to come back, when memories, rage and grief fade away, and somehow solved, that the past can finally be set aside to question oneself present. It's the turn of what I label as expressionist realism, the emotional face of Chinese postmodernism whose landscape is neither the countryside nor the city but the inner soul, a display of human being wholly naked. A tragic realism, mostly the female narrative of Chen Ran, Lin Bai, Wang Anyi, characterized by the disharmony of the outside and a dramatic inner journey leading to despair. In some artistically weaker attempt, the case of Mian Mian and Wei Hui, the inner journey is less intimate and more public, less about one own self and more about the endless possibility of interrelation, it happens *en plain air* and it tests the limit of the body in a transitional China. But in both cases the great narrative is replaced by sighing souls. Wang Qiao, Niuniu, Candy, Coco²¹, they all slip through the catastrophe of Chinese history, can't remember it, they didn't see it, their present is not made out of history, they play with

²¹ In order: Wang Anyi (The Song of Everlasting Sorrow), Chen Ran (A Private Life), Mian Mian (Candy), Wei Hui (Shanghai Baby).

love, experiment the maze of sexuality, hardly decode life with silence, they hide behind the curtain of their youth and their ignorance while flashing upon the eyes the meaning of things unseen. The space of narrative is here colonized by nothing but the subject, self-expression, individual voice in a world perceived as hostile and insecure; passion, desire, independence occupy the artistic canvas beyond the trivial aspect of life, the need for a bowl of rice is replaced by the essential demand for a human touch, reality is twisted into a sudden mood, a radical emotion, a primitive fear that has no shape and comes from the beginning of time. Yet it's now that the historical tragedy of China becomes metaphysic and beautiful.

Mostly female writing, this is a trend that has been given various names, Private Writing, Individualized Writing, Women's Literature²² for it is achieved by female writers who disclosed their privacy and their biography. It is a fact that in postmodern China the journey of self-exploration, self-scrutiny, the psychological and contemplative reflections over the existence at the moment is essentially a female phenomenon with female protagonists. The response to Flaubert's adulterous Madam Bovary, Dostoyevsky's rebellious Ana Karenina, Murakami's troubled Naoko is to be found in Wang Anyi, Chen Ran, Lin Bai, Chi Li, Mian Mian, Wei Hui. However my attention is not placed on who wrote what. This section is not about gender analysis or feminist concern but focused on the content of the narration which is an alternative writing no so much to the male narrative as to the mainstream narrative based on longstanding emotional anesthesia. Narrative enters now a different dimension, more than ever the line between literature and fiction comes loose, directly cutting into the state of the subject. Fiction here contain more truth than fact, the journey into the inner-self is dramatic because it's not bound to the past but it's happening all along, scattered between disjointed space, one own room of solitude and a desperate longing for the other. To some extent female writers have succeed where until now male writers have failed. Unveil the self. Different from the visionary experience of Can Xue, this is not surrealism, the days of the CR don't turn into monsters and obsession but in feelings of uncertainly and disorientation, the collective discourse of a nation, always held out in Yu Hua, Su Tong, Mo Yan, is replaced by personal memories, it is still realism but a tragic one. The inward turn literature has taken in the wake of Mao's death, explodes here unsuppressed in a stream of conscious of sensations, moods and images stolen to the life. Alike Twentieth century Western modernism the style is fragmented, the plot is missing or very fragile, a maze of time and space as fickle as creativity can possibly be, first and third person narrative mingled dissolved the borders separating author and character to the point that sometimes the characters have the same name as the author. The language is lyrical and traumatic, magic and realist. The realism of the inner experience which moves among different level of suspicions and discoveries is absorbed into an atmosphere of vagueness, the delicacy of a memory blanketed into layer of dust, the characters recall the past but they don't remember it, bits and pieces can't be assemble together:

I lay awake all night in my room staring at the ceiling, pursuing the shadows of the past in a desperate effort to remember... something. What? Even to have been able to grasp a

²² Sirenhua xiezuo (私人化写作), Gerenhua xiezuo (个人化写作), Nvsheng wenzi (女生文字)

few traces here and there would have been all right, but it was like trying to look into the impossibly distant future, as if nothing had ever happened – a blank²³

In the autobiographical essay *Years of Sadness* Wang Anyi returns to episodes of her childhood in the 60s. The CR doesn't appear in its historical expressions but as personal dimension, the Four Clean-ups Movement²⁴ set the stage for her loneliness, the fear of darkness, that awkward feeling of being always superfluous. Growing up was sad and a shameful experience, *every touch felt vulgarly brutal*, yet the remembrance of those years helps the writer to become aware of the significance of her inadequacy, estranged and disconnected to both the repressive collectivism and the shallow capitalism. The protagonists by and large are urban educated female venturing far beyond themselves; Duomi, Niuniu, Wang Qiayo, Coco, Hong²⁵ using their bodies as the tool of their experience perceive a world denied to their narrative brothers but in the end this world closes on them too, revealing the same desperate loneliness. The background stage is very desolating though to fail this time is not the primary organs of socialization, family and school, but the male world. Men are broken. In Wei Hui's *Shanghai Baby*, Coco shares her life with Tian Tian who is a frustrated artist and an impotent man, in Mian Mian's *Candy*, Hong linked herself with Saining who is an heroin addicted and an idler. Fathers are absent (Lin Bai's *One Person War*) or violent (Chen Ran's *A Private Life*) sided by loving mothers who disappeared to soon or emotionally frigid. Teased from their classmates, neglected by distant men, these coming of age women are affected by the same terror of being abandoned, of never forgetting, the tacit ineluctability that someday life must die. Incapable to name what they feel they can't project themselves into anybody else, inevitably they are homeless again. Unlike the realism of Su Tong and Yu Hua, where the experience of solitude is not object of introspection, now the authors dig the dirt out of from whatever is between human mistakes and fate, rub the crack between their possibilities and pick what is left. Not much after all if not the awareness of one's diversity. Tragedy appears when the stillness of their habitude moves one more step forward becoming pathologic. So we explain Niuniu that after having suffered the loss of her mother, her only friend and her lover adjusts the bathroom to the resemblance of a house and the bathtub to the resemblance of a bedroom, the tininess of that improbable space and the yellow sunflower on a lavender vase is the remedy she invented to the hopelessness she feels. Tiny rooms, windows, mirrors, frame the scene of more than few novels, this is the empirical space writers and characters need to withdraw from the noisy scenes outside. The safety of their room is a place which enable them to hold society at distance, the window they lean on becomes a symbol of defense from the injustice of the world and the mirror from which beautiful naked women contemplate themselves is a confirm of their existence reflecting no more the chaos of their personality but the unicity of the body, the prospective of their own I. And when the day darkens they indulge in self-admiration, masturbation as a mean to express their freedom, writing to communicate to themselves what they can't say to the others. The homelessness they feel

²³ Chen Ran (2004, 194)

²⁴ Launched in 1963, it aimed at cleaning political, economic, organizational and ideological view within the Party. As Mao was dissatisfied with the results, ex-post it revealed itself as the antechamber of the Four Olds Campaign and the Cultural Revolution.

²⁵ In order: Lin Bai (*One Person's War*), Chen Ran (*A Private Life*), Wang Anyi (*The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*), Wei Hui (*Shanghai Baby*), Mian Mian (*Candy*).

disappears for a while, insulated from their inconsolable loss, their temporality, the ghost of the past, sheltered by the fantasy they composed. A sudden epiphany, again, as it is for the Western modernist narrative, acts as explanatory device for their unsettled status: in *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* the moment of epiphany occurs on Wang Qiyao's murder, the very last page of the novel, she suddenly recalls the actress in the murder scene at the film studio forty years before, back then she was already watching her own death. In *Years of Sadness* Wang Anyi writes:

I was standing at the entrance to a pitch-dark movie theater, wrapped in the purplish red velvet curtain when I heard her stifled sobs. A little light seeped in from behind that curtain and I could see her silhouette. She sat in the last row next to the entrance holding a flashlight. The woman crying was an usher. This scene didn't frighten or startle me. I didn't even wonder why she was crying. But I just couldn't help myself and started crying, too. In that instant, like a cork popping, sadness burst out and filled my heart.²⁶

The crying woman acts like a mirror, it both reflects the self and creates the other self and by comparison the character, in this case the author, gives name to the humiliation of her childhood. Often further off their time, they are never where they actually are, at many critical moments they can't but witness the unfolding of evil, like Niuniu contemplating the apartment 905 on fire, or Wang Qiyao acting as an invisible testimony while the CR rages the street of Shanghai. The silence is the same we have seen in *Brothers, To Live, The Boat to Redemption* to name some, once the curtain on history is raised, the multitude gathers around, observing powerless, murmuring in surprise, whispering details, laughing uncontrollably out of shame. But they are the only one person who stepped out from the nameless crowd of the male narrative. And the silence is shattered.

Chen Ran's *A Private Life* is the text exemplary of this expression of Chinese postmodernism and tragic aesthetic. It takes place in the present but it's a collage of memories set in the turbulent decades between the CR and the Open Door Policy. Alienated from her father, authoritarian and violent, and from the world outside - represented by the cruel teacher Ti and indifferent schoolmates -, Ni Niuniu recalls how she spent most of her time talking to either herself within the fissure of imaginary dialogue or her body, *sometimes I felt like I was a whole group of people*, she confesses. Her closest relationships are with the few women she comes across: her mother and the patient nanny who are not immune to the grief of separation, the neighbor the sensual widow Ho and her high school friend Yi Qiu each of whom will initiate Niuniu to the secrets of love and an uncanny sexuality. But they are all vexed by physical problems, the widow Ho has diabetes, her classmate had infantile paralysis as a child, the nanny had lost an eye after suffering domestic violence, her mother died of heart failure. Her identity is thus soon defined by a pathological weakness inherent the female condition. After that the coming of age of womanhood is injured by the experience of loss, sudden and savage, slow and invisible and a never ending solitude whose laces are loosened only by a disordered and unceasing writing. Life is marked by death, Niuniu is well aware of it, she saw it, she felt it, writing allows her not to talk while it wins her time to ponder the meaningless of time, the inescapable melancholia of few recollections, the beauty of a

²⁶ Wang Anyi (2009, 69)

lapse stolen to the logic of the universe. Like the plants on her balcony, she is suspended within the power of her loneliness, whether to go outside or to linger in the bathtub is matter of fear and desire, out there where life happens for real she might be able to sustain one of her dreams, or maybe not:

If they were to move outside, they could draw nourishment from the rich soil of the broad, deep beds, but they would also have to struggle ceaselessly with all the other plants to survive. And they would be unprotected from the wind and sun. On the other hand, although they could escape nature's ravaging heat and cold on my balcony, they would be deprived of any deeper sustenance.

They are thinking about this. So am I.²⁷

Post-Mao narrative is an odyssey from the individual to the history, singular experience, small community fortune packed into the bigger frame of national history, one man's destiny as a metaphor of an age. But in this trend of female narrative history is out of the game, self is all we have. 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, the plot is not questionable anymore for there is no plot only the nudity of a confession, one person's war is just one person's war. It's a selfish literature, self-centered and together extremely generous for the autobiographical experience, the exposure of topics viewed as taboo, such as masturbation, abortion, lesbianism, or the admission of one's obsessions, mirrors everyone's obsession. Western modernism and Chinese postmodernism come here to a profound literary overlapping, echoing consistent individual subjectivity, the same introspectiveness, the same inwardness. Duomi, Niuniu, are the equivalent of Torless or Michel²⁸, living is not a matter of order or strength but of morality and immorality and so the exploration of self becomes the defining moment between being and the conscience of being. As they can't find outside what they need, they dig inside for a justification of one's own life, but there is no life anymore, as soon as reality shines through the room they built to feel safe, the alternative world made of fantasies and *petites histoires* comes down. Niuniu becomes 'Miss Nothing' and the existence a sphere of *emptiness, estrangement, separation and longing*²⁹, Duomi in the end chooses herself as lover, Hong deals with the voice of conflicting feelings and the final admission to have been defeated, Coco after having lost all she had is incapable to define herself, Wang Qiyao dies alone revealing what she feared the most, aging. The beauty and the value of the female aesthetic attempt lie in its crude realism, realism stretched beyond the limit of endurance. But here realism doesn't work its South American magic, there is neither rescue nor peace for those fated to hundred years of loneliness, the roots-seeking experiment is swallowed by a less idealistic cognition, human being are rootless indeed. It can't be Marquez the key to read this last frontier of Chinese realism but the existentialism of Kundera and Duras's tragedy. The grandeur of the inexplicable turns history into metaphysic, into the metaphysic of private life, the inexplicability of love, a grief that it's not grief but death, the malady of death, transform a random solitude in a collective inhumanity. Kundera's novels move within the political anguish of a context today

²⁷ Chen Ran (2004, 214)

²⁸ Musil (The Confusions of Young Torless), Gide (The Immoralist)

²⁹ Chen Ran (2004, 6)

forgotten, the milieu of post-war era in Czechoslovakia, but by destroying the bounds between life and death, beauty and truth, he pushed the narrative outside the chain of totalitarianism. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, apparently the story of the dialectic between heaviness and lightness is not just so. The tragic fate Tomas suffered under the regime, the story of a man that sees himself slumped from the status of a surgeon to that of window washer is as well the sum of everything the Revolution, any revolution, did wrong. And Teresa trying to see herself through the mirror -alike Niuniu and Duomi-, is the expression of mankind deepest needs: the attempt to find out the unicity of her own 'I' in a world where all bodies became equal.

Memories as leitmotif and sexuality as revelation. These are the elements through which the aesthetic of individualism is expressed and one own self explored. Self is a concept imported from the West since the May Fourth awaking as part of Chinese modernity but suspended in its draft moment. As to say that emotions and desires are not new to Chinese people, but in Maoist China they were controlled if not stigmatized as improper for under the pressure of a totalitarian system individual issues don't belong to the revolutionary discourse. On the other hand since Yanan era asceticism was one of the tools to control people, 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. Not surprisingly adults dealt with sexuality as with a secret and adolescents were tamed to believe sex as wrong and dirty. Male writers, the likes of Yu Hua, Ge Fei, Ma Yuan, Su Tong offer a sexuality often spoiled by the intervention of adultery, sadism, paranoia. Yu Hua toys with a grotesque sexuality if not deformed by the CR. In *Cries in the Drizzle*, Wang Liqiang, due to the invalidity of his wife, is denied the pleasure of intimacy, out of desire he carries on a two years affair whose disproportioned consequences reflect the extend of the political repression. The protagonist Guanglin's sexual awakening begins at fourteen with a night shiver accompanied by the panic of his secret masturbation. Drifted between temptation and a no well specified sin, he feels the need to confess to be loyal, he presumes punishment as mean to amendment:

My life organized itself into two parts, day and night. During the day I felt up right and fearless, but once night arrived my resolve quickly collapsed. The speed with which I fell into desire's embrace never ceased to astonish me. In those days my heart was in turmoil. I often felt that I was being torn in two, my dual identities glaring at each other like archenemies³⁰

Alike the young Torless, Dedalus, Demian, the fruition of his discovery will soon be suffocated by a deep sense of guilt and the subsequent alienation from his best friend Su Yu. Meanwhile Su Yu's desire will lead him to embrace a female in the street resulting for him in denunciation meeting, wooden placard, shaved head and a year sentenced to reform labor. In *The Boat to Redemption*, Donglian suffers the same shame with the additional weight of a father acting as redeemer. In love with the by now grown up Huxiang, Donglian's body reveals what his soul conceals:

³⁰ Yu Hua (2007, 121)

When Huixian dressed in skirts that exposed her knees; one look and I lost control. I wondered if I had a sickness. I know Father thought so. But he did not think it was physical; as he saw it, it was a character flaw. Was my character flawed? I didn't know. But for years I fought off the erections, for my benefit and for Father's. By now everyone knew how he had suffered over his erections, and how he'd come up with a unique way of dealing with the problem — in essence, cut the weeds and dig up the roots. With one snip of his scissors, he had eradicated the evil at its source, thus atoning for his sins.³¹

Maoism needed to restricted freedom to obtain discipline, discipline goes together with devotion to instruction, ideological progress and political work. Out of it are forbidden dimensions, such as love, sexuality, art, all equally unhealthy to the common cause of communism:

My genitals were a constant worry. Genitals have no brain, no knowledge and no ability to pretend. God, how I hated my hand! Its assistance was the reason why I left evidence of my genital crimes on my quilt. I tried everything. I made it a point not to let my hand come into contact with my genitals. They had to be kept apart, and the best way to do that was to give up some of the comforts of sleep. So I began wearing long trousers and a belt to bed; I got into the habit of slipping under the covers each night wearing a pair of work trousers over my underpants, and prayed to the image of Deng Shaoxiang to help me get through the night without incident. I lay stiffly on my army cot, not relaxing until I heard the martyr's stern command — *Come down, come down* — and fell asleep. The habit served me well. Granted, the stink of sweat rose from my bedding, but my dreams were clean and pure. All I had was an infrequent nightmare. I'd wake up out of fright, drenched in sweat. I had one particular bad dream I never told my father about. In it I saw Huixian standing on the shore, calling my name over and over again. I stayed in the cabin, unable to move, since many people had conspired to tie me up and get Father to repeat a ritual over me. He was crying as he snipped off half my penis with a pair of scissors. As he wiped the blood off the scissors he said to me with fatherly concern, 'Try to bear the pain, Dongliang, it's for your own good. Now you're just like me, we're the same, and I don't have to worry about you any longer.'³²

When man's solicitude is diverted from production and Marxist-Leninist thought man then is found at fault. The discovery of sexuality therefore is the assumption of a political sin, innocence run in inverse proportion of ignorance, romantic romance is replaced by destruction. The brutality people are dealt with channels sexual desire into awful alternative, the attempt of self-castration of Donglian's father for instance, and squalid instinct, in Su Tong's *North Side Story*, Hongqi attraction to the beautiful Meiqi will bring the episode of the raping and Meiqi's suicide. If sex does happen, sexuality comes out unexpressed. Passion is out of sight and all come with it, waiting, desire, foolishness, the reader doesn't feel the roaring of the clothes dropping on the floor. Loving appears somewhere as lacking spontaneity, as atomized, as floating above understanding. In *Bothers*, there is a clear sense of frustration when the beautiful Lin Hong recalls her days of intimacy with the handsome Sang Gang:

She remembered how she and Song Gang had never lasted more than two minutes. Even when Song Gang was healthy they would do it very perfunctorily, and after he became ill he could not manage even that.³³

³¹ Su Tong, (2010, 339)

³² Ibid, p.340

³³ Yu Hua (2009)

It is not a case that Lin Hong physical liberation if not spiritual takes place with Baldy Li in the reform era when political repression was benched and silenced emotions were finally unleashed. The greater openness increased artistic production and after few years of debate and criticism in the 90s writing about intimacy, a-politic themes, became socially tolerable. Afterwards libido, subconscious, unconscious, desire invaded the narrative restoring the discourse over self, initiated with Ding Ling's *Miss Sophia Diary* (1922)³⁴. Sophia is the new woman forged by May Fourth, love, sexuality, desire stand as a licit curiosity contraposed to all the conventional code of Chinese life. Alone in the freezing Beijing winter suffering of tuberculosis, she wanders among her thoughts as a ship-wrecker on the shore of her identity suspended among her hopeless despair and childish optimism. Someone in between Madame Bovary, an erotic being unfamiliar with her own ambiguous sexuality, and the Ibsen's Nora gifted with more femininity and maybe less courage, in fact she doesn't slam the door of the century, there is no reconciliation with history, Sophia always struggles between love and solitude, as an admission that there is not opportunity of harmony for those self-questioning. But within a post-revolutionary discourse self becomes the base of real. Sexuality therefore emerges as counterpoint to the sexual repression of revolutionary era, expression of rebellion against the authority, moment of resistance against the inertia of time and a metaphor of identity in an age where expressing one own identity was a sin no more. Heroes disappear, no longer examples of morality but wicked and dumb, the epic of one man show fighting off invaders and injustice changed his costume and the body prevails as an apolitical power: nudity defies the historical grandeur promised by ideology. Alike Ah Q and his spiritual victory -the strategy that turns defeat into victory- it is Wang Er's sexual freedom in both novels *2015* and *The Golden Years*³⁵ what allows him to survive under conditions of oppression and war. The narrator tell us a story from a not clear point in the future, the time of the narrative is very slippery, in *2015* as much as in *The Golden Years* the time order flashes between the present in the future and the present in the past, indulging sometimes on extemporal reflection produced by the protagonist or the author itself. The countryside is the background stage but here is less an actor as it is in Ah Cheng or Han Shaogong for instance, modern values are not questioned and that idea of collective simplicity, innocent goodness is spoiled by satire and irony. The communist revolution is presented as a game, demystified like in one of the illustration of the artist of Gunduz Aghayev; love is adulterous or twisted in a sadomasochist game, freedom assumes the likeness of a forbidden instinct. The key to understand Xiaobo's narrative, and the postmodern Chinese self in general, is somewhere between Freud and Mao, a psychological mechanism over repressed sexual instinct and unconscious that flourished as soon as Maoism declined, and a physical reaction to the socialist state able to sublimate sexual passion into revolutionary passion. Women walk on the tightrope of time, on one side they struggle against patriarchal authority, on the other side they become aware of the power of their own sexuality. The frigid and chaste widow in Can Xue's *Five Spice Street* beautifully explains the change:

³⁴ One of the most celebrated 20th century Chinese writer, author of *Miss Sophia's Diary*, the landmark in Chinese Romanticism and the proletarian novel *The Sun Shines Over Sanggan River*, Stalin Prize winning (1951)

³⁵ See Wang Xiaobo

Because they lack confidence in their sexuality and are never active, they've lost control over men. They have surrounded to men's tyranny and ended up with nothing but self-pity. In fact, it could have been quite different. We should have understood the function of our own bodies and attracted and controlled men that way, and then tamed them. (...) Yet a woman's sex is her magic weapon for defeating the outside world and revealing the significance of her existence (...) Sexual power is unique to women: it's a kind of self-consciousness about one's bodily function. When this consciousness sharpens, a woman becomes like a goddess.³⁶

Self-identification has to pass through the recognition of one own body, the body as site of resistance to the constructed image of women as wife and mother, and body as subject of pleasure. In this case the physical journey of Mian Mian and Wei Hui and the detailed radical introspection of Chen Ran and Lin Bai set the guidelines for the next generation: the aesthetic of modernity they performed as alternative to the politicized Maoist years is all along the narration of an alternative China.

To conclude: as a reaction to the Avant-gardist experimentation, the shaking structure of the text and the destructiveness of the content, the second half of the 90s opens to a new realist school a production somewhere between the stillness of traditional realism and the extreme subjectivity of high modernism. Loyal to the path spotted by the Avant-garde, this is a literature that cut off with the grand narration, national allegory, the rhetoric of writing serving the people but it is staged on individual's impression and experience. The reality writers draw up their ideas from is shaking, it's a platform in definition, uncertainly and disorientation overshadows the daily routine, man is left alone to face a common fate. But they went beyond historical judgment. In Lin Bai's *The Seat on the Verandah*, the author nothing says about the Communist Revolution -the historical period when the story is set- but focused her attention on the concubine Zhu Liang, expression of beauty, and that unsettle relationship with her maiden Qi Ye. History is the backdrop, yet ignored, characters shouting question about human existence turn inward towards their subjectivity, their own past and towards one's body to different degrees. My impression is that to be facing two different narratives, one lingers on a surface of absurdity where neither life nor history is to be understood, the other drawn into the tragedy of both.

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³⁶ Can Xue (2009, 49)

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