

Scar Literature: A Step before Existentialism

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Abstract:

The literary path chosen by both of Post Mao China and Post WWII Europe had to go through a profound existentialism. The fall into a desolate nihilism, by which I mean the incapacity of replacing the dissolution of previous values with new ones, seems to be at first a common element, both 1948 Europe and 1976 China are left alone lingering on the ruins of the past. What's next is the impossible question. The paper after having discussed the controversial dynamic between power and intellectuals -a key of stability for any government even more in the Twentieth century- will disclose a more literary issue. If Post war Europe produced all in all a literature that is wounded by the atrocities of modernity, thus in a sense Existentialism can without hesitation be defined as a scar literature, Post-Cultural Revolution China produced a literature that is unconsciously existentialist: revolutionary realism is finally replaced by a realism which is altogether absurd, as absurd is sometimes history, and realist, as realist is sometimes man's humanism. Finally we will indulge in the main task Chinese literature is facing today: the quest for identity.

Key words: Existentialism, Scar Literature, Modernism, Post-Modernism, Socialism, Post-Socialism, Cultural Revolution, Crisis of Reason

Perhaps because of an irresistible call
We had no other choice
(Shu Ting)

Methodological introduction

"The very fate of our works was bond up with that of France in peril; ...our public was made up of men like ourselves who awaited war and death. Of their war, of their death we have to write... We learned to take Evil seriously; it was not our fault, nor was it pour merit, if we happened to live in an era when torture was a daily occurrence... We knew that the destruction of the human in man that torture brings about, was a Black Mass being celebrated everywhere in Paris while we ate, while we slept, while we loved; we heard whole streets echo with the shrieks of the tortured ones, and we understood that Evil, the fruit of a free and sovereign will, is absolute as God is. A day may come when a happy generation, looking back serenely, will see in our suffering and our shame one of

the paths that led to its peace. But we were not on the side of completed history; we were so situated that every minute actually lived appeared to us as something irreducible.”¹

Why am I beginning this article with the magnificent outburst Sartre wrote some sixty years ago? Because it is about the relation between intellectuals and their public under the regime, it's about the need to take side against the injustice and totalitarianism, bounding men to the cause of democracy and freedom. More than this, Sartre outburst is about surviving to fear, torture, history itself, in order to re-build again European society, a new consciousness for the previous one had been annihilated by the Holocaust. It is an incontrovertible fact that all modern revolutions have led to strengthen the State: French Revolution brings Napoleon, October Revolution brings Stalin, Republic of Weimer leads to Hitler. But while the idea of Modern State was based on the assumption of democracy, the ambition behind the ideology (fascism, national socialism, communism) shaped the fanatic dream of a world empire. Post-WWII French existentialism was the first philosophical-literary expression that dealt with the historical responsibility left by Western nihilism, Auschwitz and Hiroshima in fact will soon be understood for what they really are: the collapse of a civilization.

And yet if we read backward Sartre's piece and replaced the determination of the location, France with China, Paris with Beijing, we could easily guess it as an article of political realism written by Wang Meng, Wei Jingsheng or Bei Dao soon after the Cultural Revolution. Because Malraux, Sartre, Camus² are tragic writers as much as Wang Meng, Wei Jingsheng, Bei Dao: though the theoretical speculation develops through different depth of understanding, the abyss of evil is the same and the same is the human tragedy when at stake there is men's quest for life. The intellectual claims of Post WWII Europe goes along with those of Post Mao China. There is within the frame of the narrative a healing agenda using art as a catharsis, *beauty doesn't produce revolution but revolution needs it*³, a new set of values in the wasteland beyond the orthodoxy of Marxism and Fascism, a literature of conscience between ideal and reality where men, walking on a godless land, prepare the future resolving the present. A reasonable close parallelism can therefore be drawn between Scar Literature (first Post Mao Literature) and European Post WWII Literature. Broadly speaking the Western hemisphere in the first half of the Twentieth century produced a massive account of anxieties and neurosis (Kafka, Musil, Mann, Pirandello) which forced critical thinking and every form of art

¹ Jean Paul Sartre, *Qu'est-ce littérature?* In *Les Temps Modernes*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2002

² For details see: Albert Camus, *L'uomo in rivolta*, Bompiani, Milano, 2005
Albert Camus, *La Chute*, Prentice Hall, Paris, 1965

Alberto Camus, *The plague*, Vintage International Edition, New York, 1991

Albert Camus, *The Exile and The Kingdom*, Alfred A.Knopf, New York, 1958

Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, Vintage Books, New York, 1989

André Malraux, *Man's Fate*, Vintage Book, New York, 1961

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Ed. Gallimar, London, 1976

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, Citadel Press, New York, 1985

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, The New Classic Series, Norfolk, 1938

Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit and Three other plays*, Vintage Book, New York, 1949

Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is literature?*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1988

³ Albert Camus, *L'uomo in rivolta*, Bompiani, Milano, 2005, p. 302

into some irrational artistic expression. Questioning the nature of real has been the immediate necessity, and escaping into fantastic or absurd elements the prevalent solution, however the apocalyptic vision brought by the end of the war and by the loss of long standing cultural paradigm, is sided by an artistic emancipation offering a jumping off station. The same authors who first surrendered to a moment of paralysis, because of the epiphany of a second, a sudden moment of awakening, move back to reality adjusting them to it. Stephen Dedalus⁴ and his struggle for autonomy, K.⁵ amazement facing the uncanny of the bureaucratic apparatus, the dichotomy within the young Torless⁶ between evil and good, those are all literary attempts to create a new dialectic which must allow cohabitation between society needs for control and individual needs for freedom. Re-ordering the disorder, overpassing mediocrity through art is the moral imperative they are given. Again re-appears the idea of reality as whole, not anymore as objective construct of common meaning, but a fictional construct imposed a-posteriori upon chaos in order to provide a sense of order. Good and bad, tragic and laughable, bourgeois and proletariat will be able to live together under the same narrative plot linked together by a prospective that doesn't follow the pseudo-scientific logic of reality but a personal logic, the vision of the artist. Probably the most important message we receive from Modernist authors is that art therefore is not seeking anymore for aesthetic perfection or objective beauty for it is not beauty that it tries to represent and it is not the order of the narrative that matters, but art becomes an ethical symbol where the value of human life is put into question. However for academic purpose we can't possibly take into account Modernism tout-court, this paper doesn't have the ambition to depict an overall picture covering the all phenomena of modernity or the endless debate between modernism, postmodernism and Avant-Garde. What we suggest here is an existentialist reading of Scar Literature narrowing down the radar of investigation to the Post War French existentialist experience on one side and the first try of Post Mao literature on the other. We will, not without hesitation, trace back a profound call for humanism and, in spite of a very much different cultural heritage, the same stunning gaze towards absurd. In fact although modernism was introduced in China in the aftermath of May Fourth Movement, due to a complex set of conditions including the everlasting wartime period and the rise of Marxism, it is only after the Cultural Revolution that the dogma of socialist realism is shaken, allowing modernism to be accepted and understood. Besides, modernism is to be linked to a specific time in Western society, as a reaction to the crisis of Positivism, an unprecedented cultural crisis within European consciousness where the sense of incompleteness, the experience of fragmentation is reflected by literature through the emphasis on individual psychology, stream of consciousness and the plotlessness of the narrative. Those characteristic didn't appear in Chinese society for since the Communist took power, socialist realism -expression of class struggle and communist utopia-combined with revolutionary romanticism, -art which portrays a society in the making, the idea of a society rather than society as it is-, was the literary filter through which art was judged.

⁴ James Joyce, *A Portrait of a Young Artist*

⁵ Franz Kafka, *The Castle*

⁶ Robert Musil, *Young Torless*

When in 1978 Deng Xiaoping formulated the four modernizations⁷, (we might consider it as being five for it is implicit a quest for democracy⁸), and enlarged the ties of the official censorship, it reminded very much Mao's call for intellectual freedom in 1956⁹, the essential need for a socialist society to distinguish between fragrant flowers (constructive criticism) and poisonous weed (enemy of the State). However given the historical momentum Deng's claim represents a turning point in the Party-artist dramatic relation: if on one hand to the intellectuals is asked to renew their loyalty to the Party-State, on the other hand they are granted a free zone, whose borders are very much mobile, where society can be questioned and resolved. Writers, artists and directors by accepting not to explore certain subject are given a white canvas where to express their creativity, they are basically negotiating their way through Modernism.

The aim is not to summarize the last half century Western-Eastern literature which is a task already accomplished somewhere else¹⁰, but to close the gap between them by marking, strange to say, the specific nature of self and society. As we understand the literary path chosen by both, Post Mao China and Post WWII Europe, they went through a profound existentialist reading of life in terms of past experience and future expectation. The fall into a desolate nihilism, by which I mean the incapacity of replacing the dissolution of previous values with new ones, seems to be at first a common element, both 1948 Europe and 1976 China are left alone lingering on the ruins of the past. What's next is the impossible question. But it is here that an atheist humanism shapes the definition of a new humanity where the existence preceded the essence, as to say the renounce of any metaphysical theorization for a more daring reflection on the human capacity of auto-determination. It is as well a utopian socialism of universal responsibility where love appears after the tragedy as an absurd and rational message, a chance of salvation which is no longer a free zone between destruction and art, but a choice between the others and chaos.

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The paper will first discuss the controversial dynamic between power and intellectuals especially in China, a key of stability for any government even more in the Twentieth century. The demands of foreign markets and domestic issues such as raising capital or seeking distribution, or just the controversial habit of political adjustment, forced art-content to bend down in the name of a reason of state. Once again the request for independence has been rejected. We should in fact wonder whether art has ever been autonomous. Wiser would be to recognize that the ideal type of *art pour art* has been balanced over the history by a less idealist and to some degree modern understanding, the no less valid principle of art as a compromise. The myth of an artist locked in his room (Ruskin y Guatier, Baudelaire, D'Annunzio) composing lyrics which will awake at last

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<sup>7</sup> Dominant policy in the late 1970s, also referred as the New Long March, it urges for modernization of industry, agriculture, national defense, science.

<sup>8</sup> Wei Jingsheng one of the leading personality of the Democracy Movement: 'Democracy, freedom and happiness are the only goals of modernization. Without this fifth modernization, the four others are nothing more than a new-fangled lie.'

<sup>9</sup> For details see: Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, Norton & Company, New York, 1991  
Roderick Macfarquhar, Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2006

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. Puchner, Martin, gen. ed. *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*. 3rd ed. Vol. F. New York: Norton, 2012. Print.

the mass from century of darkness, it is a romantic point of view dismissed by last century. The truth, or whatever it is similar to it, is that art must be intended as a social creation, and therefore while describing the France of Napoleon the Third, we will mention the new bourgeoisie, the invention of photography, the architecture of Haussmann and the novels of Balzac as well. The artistic movements, especially in the past two centuries, due to the fact that art and society share the same space - overwhelming industrialization, changing of urban landscape, blasé attitude- and the same content -the dissolution of colors goes along with the dissolution of self and man ethical construction- assume a social function, more often than not a violent denounce of whatever society produces. That's why it might be more historically correct to say that while art in some ways is independent, the artist surely cannot. Back to the past century, being an intellectual meant to align oneself with totalitarian authoritarianism, fascism and communism have both had a devastating impact on the development of free thinking. While the majority of European intellectuals escaped somehow the delirium of the war, following the foundation of the People Republic of China, Chinese intellectuals became a tool for the machinery of the revolution, forced or convinced to praise the virtues of workers and farmers, they were asked not to create but to play a propagandistic function. The issue of the role of the intellectuals under the regime is not the core of this paper, but it's indispensable to understand it in order to describe what happened soon after the Party loosed its ties. After the death of Chairman Mao Zedong in 1976 and the removal of the Gang of Four from power, the relaxation of cultural policy not surprising brought a new genre of writing in terms of style, content and expectation. At the end of the 1970s China might have not produced literary masterpieces but each short story, each novel, should be reckoned as an historical document, the cultural key to decode the art which will follow. In a political arena such as China, it would not be wrong to consider such a literature as bearer of a political agenda: a moment of the propaganda pro Hua Guofeng<sup>11</sup>, who had just said the country to be at the edge of a collapse, and as a moment of the campaign against the Gang of Four by emphasizing the description of the dark society they had created. The Gang of Four is the scapegoat Hua Guofeng had cunningly found to let writers say what they wanted to say, people hear what they wanted to hear without undermining the foundation of the party, to some extent criticizing the Cultural Revolution without calling on trial Mao. The operation of distinguish is double: first, at least until 1980, the official line suggests to separate the Cultural Revolution from the Gang of Four, Cultural Revolution was therefore still seen as an indispensable moment of a permanent revolution. Only when the catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution was undeniable it was just then the moment of another magic spell: condemning the revolution without touching Mao's accomplishment. Mao, Gang of Four, Cultural Revolution appeared therefore as actors playing at the same time on different stages. This is an issue we must be clear about save misreading the history: in spite of the critical approach of the short stories, novels, plays we will present in this paper, the authors are all left wing intellectuals who showed a lifetime loyalty to the party. Even when living abroad, thus no subject anymore to the censor machine, when asked by foreign journalist about the literary talents wasted during the China *twenty lost years*, they always made

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<sup>11</sup> The years 1976-1978, when Hua Guofeng was the Chairman of the CCP no open door policy existed, neither economic reform. It was only in December 1978 when Deng Xiaoping became the top leader of China that the country gave start to the process of modernization we know today.

plain and clear that the Gang of Four did not represent the Party, statement this one that saved Mao and the Party itself by stripping it from its most extreme Communist ideology. No one can really say whether the writers played a role by defending the official Chinese policy or they actually are the role they played, but as I said, the entangled dynamic between those two actors is not material for this paper. After having briefly analyzed the historical dynamic intellectual-regime, we will transfer the academic attention to a more literary ground: if Post war Europe produced all in all a literature that is wounded by the atrocities of modernity, thus in a sense Existentialism can without hesitation be defined as a scar literature, Post Cultural Revolution China produced a literature that is unconsciously existentialist: revolutionary realism is finally replaced by a realism true to history which is altogether absurd, as absurd is sometimes history, and realist, as realist is sometimes man's humanism. Finally we will indulge on the main task Chinese literature is facing today: the quest for identity, as to say the definition of self in Post-Ideology China.

### **Intellectuals under the Regime**

The end of War World II Europe was a clear insight for everyone: Europe was conquered and in ruin again, through war and torture freedom and civilization were at stake again, Usa and Urss will have to dispute the possession of the universe, therefore the inevitable choice is between either abstract capitalism or state control. The European working class back then is very much different from the Chinese working class in Mao era: more alike the bourgeoisie in the 1780, it is a class well aware of his position in the world, politically conscious and culturally prepared; it is the public the writers have to reach to recall democratic structures. Literature is therefore called by great circumstances to take side between morality and politics and the time for action came but the writers were not ready, some dramatically killed themselves (Benjamin), some chose the exile (Mann, Adorno, Einstein), some were ignobly killed (Garcia Lorca). It seemed after all that in the century of technological discovery and overwhelming progress, the highest moment of mankind as Hegel called it, everyone was living at the edge of nothingness. For those who survived the doom to look backwards: the first year of peace after WWI suddenly became the first year between two wars, the atmosphere was tense, the equilibrium fragile. The world is no longer unified and whole, confusion defines the cultural paradigm where old literary parameters seem no longer valid to describe the new sensibility. Revolutionary artistic methodology will soon appear (Proust), technique is celebrated (Futurism) and yet denounced (Duchamp), literary experiments introduced new style and content (Woolf) and yet the narrative loses unity (Joyce) and significance (Pirandello), the aim is not only to change the external shape of reality (Impressionism) but the whole content (Expressionism). On an artistic level the omniscient narrator of the realistic tradition, simply does not fit well the experience of a broken world, the subject is left wandering among the abyss of his sub-consciousness. Miro's disfigured bodies properly symbolize humanity beaten down by the cruelty of the world<sup>12</sup>, Van Gogh,

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<sup>12</sup> Joan Miro during an exhibition in Barcelona in 1939 first painted a mural and once finished he destroyed it coinciding with the closing of the exhibition. Symbol of Demystification of art and artist: 'I personally don't know where we are heading. The only thing that's clear to me is that I intend to destroy, destroy everything that exists in painting'

Munch's expressionism reminds us the progressive fragmentation, dissolution of human elements, understanding and achievements. Science had resolved quite many questions but at the eclipse of Positivism the result is still confusing: alienated characters, definition of existential space, perception of homelessness where individual existences are left alone swaying between the Benjamin end of history and Pirandello melancholic optimism. Oedipus is guilty or innocent? The Twentieth century will never answer because it says that he is guilty and innocent at the same time but it does take position against the evil. Against the process of dis-humanization the narrative first produced a negative criticism: openly accused is the totalitarianism which was together a political issue (Fascism slaughtering Europe) and a philosophical frame (existentialism suggesting the idea of life as possibility is a rebellion against the objectivity of the Hegelian system). In a second moment criticism becomes constructive, art represents therefore the intellectual bridge between a world collapsing and a new rationality often stained of transcendence. The downfall into nihilist abyss it's only a transactional phase, a lack of comprehension between realities, a moment of dramatic investigation deep into men most intimate doubts. In this sense Sartre praises Zola (Dreyfus's sentence) and regrets the indifference of Balzac during the revolutionary days of 1848 or Flaubert who didn't confront the Commune of Paris. Because salvation can be achieved but on this earth and so writers must take up their pen now, in their historical moment when night is darker, enlightening the way out, aware that some books are beautifully true only within their age.

China is no exception. Mao in his Talks at the Yanan Conference on Literature and Art (1942) had laid out the regulation for the control of literati under the regime: by saying that literature should serve politic he didn't say anything different from what China had expressed for centuries, the synonymy of art with morality and politics. Chinese philosophy has always been engaged on the discovery of the best approach to guarantee stability and this is because China has always been concerned about enduring rather than developing and duration is synonymous of repetition. The origins of Chinese conservatism are both religious and philosophical. Because China had no god, to be understood as a metaphysical element to refer to, China feared nature and felt vulnerable before it. Unlike the Western counterpart, which rebelled to it by digging into its mystery and drama, China accepted nature trying to come to terms with it, China stabilized nature through a system of repetitions, be it family clans, rituals, dynasties, the everlasting lengths of the party member's mandate. Following the reasoning, repetition brought conservatism, conservatism due to its static nature led to despotism. But it is the very roots of Chinese philosophy what shapes the immobility of China: Confucianism, Taoism, the early Moism they all agree on seeing in the proliferation of diversity (different values, concept of right and wrong, enlarging of knowledge) the cause of conflict, meant as social disorder, unhappiness, inequality. From here the need to keep people ignorant in an early stage for they have to believe rather than understand (Taoism), and to produce technician rather than thinker for thinkers will understand rather than believe (Communism). Thus no matter whether the focus is on people (Confucius), ruler (Mencius) or a system of fixed regulation (Legalism), the theorization always moved around political control and ethic. How to control disorder generated by proliferation of ideas on one hand, and on the other hand the ethical values the rulers and citizen have to possess in order to maintain a peaceful government. Art was therefore produced for morality sake, a writer should write to propagate moral principle and the official moral

was the one going towards the direction of the political power. But while in ancient China such a power shifted from one dynasty to another, since the Communist took power in 1949, literary works had to go through the criteria pointed by the party-State (socialist realism on a first stage, revolutionary realism once the communist regime was well off established). But who were the Chinese intellectuals under the regime? We could easily distinguish between two typologies. First one the confucianist, those who had been in the past examination candidates, classicist, conservatives within the framework of acceptance the social order and the central authority. That's why in the Nineteenth century they were quite slow on embracing the process of reform, the introduction of Western science and technology, they were those opposing machines for machines were going to dislocate the normal order of life, most important the relation between man and nature and by so doing introducing artificial elements to the cyclical rhythm of all. But it is just when they were devoted on 'saving China' that a second type of intellectual appeared. Those were the sons of May Fourth, the intellectuals of the New Cultural Movement, convinced that because China had missed the development of science hence progress didn't happen. Devoted to modern learning, where the importance of natural science would match social science in the making of a new society, those are the intellectuals who in the turn of a few years imported in China a main storm of new ideas: pragmatism (Dewey), liberalism (Russell), idealization of the East (Tagore), anarchism (Bakunin), humanitarianism (Tolstoy), scientific socialism (Marx and Engels). But Mao felt it differently. Maintaining the control over thoughts was of primary importance to maintain the control over the State. First question we should ask is why he needed so badly the intellectuals. Of course Mao was not acting out of fear, in fact Mao was acting out of very specific reasons: Mao needed to emancipate China from the Russian influence in terms of structure and in terms of political ideology, need that became an unbridgeable rupture in 1956 after, at the XX Congress of the Communist Party, Khrushchev denounced the crimes of Stalin. From then on, it is Chinese understanding that Russia had betrayed the Marxist-Leninist spirit abandoning China alone to stand against the Western capitalist propaganda. Mao therefore, once Russia was out of the picture needed the intellectuals (engineers, scientist, technicians, educators, artist) to build China, he needed their cooperation in matters of economic development -be it the collectivization of agriculture, the state ownership of industry or the economic growth- and in matters of education, propaganda, political contraposition to the West. Idealist as he was, Mao has always been obsessed with the *sin* of revisionism, tendency towards capitalism, and bureaucratism, sort of *laissez faire*, which following the establishment of power, seemed to have alienated the party members from the people. According to his desire, the intellectuals should have unmasked the traitors inside the ranks and simultaneously stir up the flame of the revolution, achieve, through a propaganda pro-regime, mass mobilization which is the indispensable ingredient of Mao's most evident heritage: The Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. But there is one more reason to explain why Mao needed to keep the intellectual near the Party line. The Communist-Marxist approach sees in the mode of production (structure) the source that shapes the substructure of a society, religion, art, philosophy. China didn't have yet this structure, the infant industrialization and the draft of collectivization were not develop enough for their production to modify the society, and Mao didn't want to wait for it, he rather prepared people's mind through ideological reform, the sub-structure therefore would become the engine to speed the economic



structure. Here comes the second question: how. How did Mao obtain the conversion of the intellectuals?

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The lives of Chinese peasants which is all in all the lives of Chinese masses, was based on family system, Confucian believes and superstitions. The Communism taught them the magic spell: *Before liberation I was...then the communist came...and now I have...* The machine of propaganda build up an empire that didn't exist, a country of freedom, peace, justice, where communism would offer equality to the discontent of capitalism and freedom to those liberals afflicted by authoritarian government. Foreigners visiting China or foreign journalists would be impressed by the perfect picture of the industrialist family (wife knitting a sweater, two dogs in the garden, crucifix on the wall, bookshelves with Shakespeare and Mao, daughter practicing piano), workers carefully picked to illustrate the planned economy, model villages picked to illustrate the benefits of collectivism. All in all China was the world's biggest theatre, the image of a young girl with pigtail proudly driving a tractor is very much evocative of the making of a country. China by then was about a world in the making rather than the world as it was, and because the overwhelming power of propaganda people would believe that they were participating to the process of transformation, contributing to something bigger than themselves. From this standpoint educating the masses was not as difficult as reforming the intellectual for the peasant didn't have ideology but they were going to have one. The case of the intellectuals is 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 soldier. During the civil war they were between the fascist method of the KMT and the seduction of the communist propaganda, they joined Mao as the second worst rather than the first best. However two years after the establishment of the Peoples Republic they were told that they should have re-molded themselves to the task of communism and the ideological reform started. For those who wanted to survive there was nothing to do but to follow the leadership of the party. Two are the phases that clearly marked the whole process of indoctrination. The first one is the educational reform. Study meetings set to disseminate doctrine, slogans repeated *ad nauseam*, sessions of self-criticism aimed to rectify ideology, mass dictatorship, group punishing *capitalist roader trying to restore capitalism*. It is the phase of public humiliation and written confession where intellectuals (students, teachers, common people) were forced to publicly denounce themselves as rightist, revisionist, and then sent, best case scenario, to the countryside to dirty and bloody their hands, to learn about common people in the name of socialist realism. People would be set against each other searching for the 5 percent and doing everything to preserve one own position in the 95 percent¹³, people would keep distance between them not to be forced to accuse each other the day they will commit a crime against the State. Privacy, intimacy was abolished for the sake of public life and every single relationship became a matter of class background rather than affection. In short if one could avoid being an enemy of society he was left to be eaten by loneliness. They would not dare to write or publish anything fearing to say something wrong: among Chinese text only the Book of Odes was printed and Russian text of popular writer. Western classical music (Mozart Chopin, Beethoven) disappeared

¹³ Mao had said that good people made up at least 95 percent of population and bad people no more than 5 percent. This guideline was adopted as quota to judge people during the Cultural Revolution.

too considered to be decadent and bourgeois. Chinese opera became a tool of propaganda¹⁴, transforming art in a technique and literature into social science. Here the first phase ends and a second phase starts: the production of new intellectuals. By imitation of the Soviet models of education, schools were converted into training center of natural science for natural science would produce technician, dismantling almost all the institutes that had liberal arts for liberal art would produce thinkers. At the end of the fifties out of 200 institute of higher education only 13 included both arts and science, all the other institutes were replaced by Cadre schools. Those were nothing more than reform camps established throughout China, re-education camps for intellectuals (Urbling)¹⁵ encouraged by the party to go and live in the countryside. Partly as result of the closing of schools and universities, partly because of the need to evacuate from the city politically dangerous youth, the phenomenon of the Urbings or educated youth moved in the first years of the Cultural Revolution some twenty millions university trained population. But at village level, where popular education was guided by uneducated party members, the creation of intellectuals didn't provided the expected result. Intellectual were still coming from family with educational background often labeled under one of the Four Black categories¹⁶. What really happened was that the regime, based on the assumption that intellectual freedom is a bourgeois value, attempted to reduce individual consciousness to collective consciousness, in this sense China produced anti-art where literature was transformed into an official document of propaganda and the intellectuals in order to survive adjusted themselves to a Daoist-nihilist principle of no-action save being accused of a revisionist sin. For more than thirty years China didn't have free thinkers (the lost generation) but artisan educated to the Marx-Leninism principle. The brain washing phase might as well be called the ideological reform process but more realistically it is about a conversion to communism¹⁷ as the religious association to the term conversion is the most appropriate to describe the process of indoctrination: children would grow up with no personal feelings but the class struggle, struggle against the enemy and old values¹⁸. A person's class origin would be the criteria of judgment, consequently old revolutionaries that participated to the Long March, hero of the independence, commander of regiment, communist who devoted the

¹⁴ A typical play during the anti-landlord campaign would be: Father forced to surrender his daughter to a landlord, the girl becomes pregnant, the landlord promised to marry her but he sells her to a brothel instead. She escapes, hides in a cave for 2 years, the communist liberate her from the Japanese, the girl is finally reunited with one of the guerrilla's fighters a childhood friend she always loved. The landlord is trialed with death penalty

¹⁵Urblings is an invented world used by some scholars to indicate the educated youth that from the city moved to the country side to learn from the peasants, to work as peasants for underdetermined period. Since 1978, legally or illegally some of these educated youth moved back to the city ready to write short story about their experience. Better known as the Lost Generation.

¹⁶ Under the Cultural Revolution population was divided into Five Red Categories (workers, poor peasant, middle peasant, revolutionary cadres, revolutionary soldiers) and Four Black Categories (landlords, rich peasant, counterrevolutionaries, common criminals). Unfortunately one's category was inherited, the children of red family would be red and the children of black family would be black.

¹⁷ Scholars define the process of indoctrination as brainwashing, Mao called it Ideological reform. Who writes believes that conversion to communism better describes the religious process of indoctrination.

¹⁸ Four Olds: Target of the Cultural Revolution campaign was to destroy the Four Olds (ideas, culture, customs, habits) and establish the Four News.

whole life to the revolution, would be labelled as renegade, counter revolutionary, stigmatized for generations to come. Lu Xinhua's short story, *The Scar* (伤痕), is one of the first to violate the forbidden zone for writers, inferring what couldn't be said, the drama of an idea, brave enough to reveal family ties scattered by the overwhelming political pressure:

*"Secretary Li told me this morning that the County Party Committee had been considering asking me to work in their propaganda department, but he insisted I must give up Xiaohua. He said I should also try to understand the political importance of class background. If we remain engaged the Party committee will withdraw its offer..."*¹⁹

Many of those intellectual stigmatized as rightist were party members, who believed that the idea of the revolution was to emancipate people rather than control them. Intellectuals who had been writer for the party such as Ding Ling, Wang Meng, Feng Hsueh-Feng, because of the stigma they held, suddenly became somehow contagious and obviously the political need to label people as red or black, as good or bad, affected the public and private sphere²⁰. People would discredit each other to prove their loyalty to the party but even like this more than half million fell victims during the anti-rightist campaign (1957) and many more during the Cultural Revolution. China casted those aside in favor of fundamentalist, the new ruling class, but by so doing, by renouncing to critical thinking, China placed itself out of history undermining the all process of modernization. However, in 1976, the intellectual political scene was about to change.

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The Fourth National Congress of Writers and Artists (1979)<sup>21</sup>, which coincidentally takes place exactly two weeks after Wei Jingsheng -the most representative voice of the democracy movement- was sentenced to fifteen years jail term, is the political and literary moment when Revolutionary Realism, which had been the official literary orthodoxy since the Great Leap Forward, is called into question for the first time: artists insisted on the separation between art and politics, not in the name of *art pour art*, which is a Western artistic need not applicable on Chinese ground, but because a more pragmatic eagerness. Artists are not propagandist but interpreters of reality from here art's foremost duty is to defend the interests of the people which not always correspond with those of the party. Besides it has to be considered that back in 1979, in a context of political liberalization where social and political expressions were still unwillingly received, literature had become the only sphere where the demands raising from civil society were to some extent tolerated. Zhou Yang<sup>22</sup> in a four hours speech advocated a

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<sup>19</sup> Prize Winning Stories from China 1978-1979, *The Scar*, Lu Xinhua, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, 1981

<sup>20</sup> As Robert Loh observed: "During the persecution friends had been made to betray friends; family members had been forced to denounce each other. The traditional warm hospitality of Chinese, therefore, disappeared. We learned that the more friends we had, the more insecure our position. We began to know the fear of being isolated from our own group and of standing helplessly alone before the power of the State"

<sup>21</sup> In October-November 1979 in Beijing was held the Fourth Congress of Writers and Artist, in part to celebrate the new Dengist era, in, part to provide the artistic guidelines for the 1980s

<sup>22</sup> His position at the congress was delicate as he had been responsible for the condemnation of the rightists in 1957 and many of his former victims were among his audience. He made no self-criticism and treated the past errors as collective responsibility. See *Chinese Literature for the 1980s* (M.E.Sharpe, Armonk, NY, 1982) and Richard King, *Wound and Exposure: Chinese Literature after the Gang of Four*.

return to realism and a rejection of revolutionary romanticism, the cultural revolution main style, first calling into question Mao's Talk at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Arts in 1942, and then asking for a broader freedom for artistic application. Deng Xiaoping on his side stressed the continuity with Maoism, writers should educate people by portraying socialist heroes:

*"Writers and artists who are responsible to the people should always keep their faces turned towards the masses and constantly improve their skills, doing their best to avoid slipshod work, seriously considering the likely impact of their works on society and trying to provide the people with the best mental nourishment (...) Writers and artists should conscientiously study Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought (...) We hope that more and more comrades in their ranks will become real "engineers of the human soul"*<sup>23</sup>

And yet he marked a new discontinuity adding that artists should as well be free to choose form and content:

*"In the production of literature and art, which involves complex mental labor, it is essential that writers and artists follow their own creative spirit. What subjects they should choose for their creative work and how they should deal with those subjects are questions that writers and artists themselves must examine and gradually resolve through practice"*<sup>24</sup>.

The official position of the Party was clearly ambiguous for Deng didn't say what the Party should do shall the writers touch contents in conflict with the official line. While few years before such ambiguity would end with repression, in 1980 China gave discretionary power to the artists. As a matter of fact Deng's policy of liberalization always oscillates between the carrot of democracy -expectation of democracy- and the stick of bourgeois liberalization -spiritual pollution-. Alike Mao, he knew he needed the intellectuals to mobilize China, unlike Mao he knew that China was going some other direction. Given that, Post-Mao literature<sup>25</sup>, (Scar literature is the first attempt), is not a chronological definition but a new concept: art as anti-destiny. For the first time in a millenarian history Chinese art rebels to nature, the natural order of things and to the world as it is given: in substance, condemn of the past or part of it, call for a democratic atmosphere, expression of individuality. Art is now engaged with the attempt to mirror the truth, the reflection is ugly, the content they describe is often a memory of violence and the literary product might not be distinguishable in terms of artist achievement but at least it is an expression of crude realism. However due to the ambiguity of the party position in terms of subject matter, the edge between the speakable and unspeakable, admissible and inadmissible is a blurred zone were the artist has to gain his legitimacy at

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<sup>23</sup> <https://dengxiaopingworks.wordpress.com/2013/02/25/speech-greeting-the-fourth-congress-of-chinese-writers-and-artists/>

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> For details see: M. E. Sharpe, Contemporary Chinese Literature, An Anthology of Post-Mao Fiction and Poetry, East Gate Books, New York, 1985

Merle Goldman, Modern Chinese Literature in the May Fourth Era, Harvard University Press, London, 1977

Perry Link, Stubborn Weeds, Indiana University Press, 1983

Politics, Ideology, and Literary Discourse in Modern China, Duke University Press, London, 1993

Prize-Winning Stories from China 1978-1979, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, 1981

the beginning of every production. What to say must be gradually resolved through practice, Xiaoping had offered, giving start to a dance with the State were artists by a process of attempt and criticism negotiate their right to produce and the State recognizes that proliferation of ideas is not necessarily dangerous. And so they cut a deal, yesterday like today, in which consensus replaces coercion, complicity replaces criticism, the road towards the democracy wall in traced back and we can't fail to notice that, ironically, art mobilized the masses, as Mao always requested, only after Maoism.

### A Post War Experience

Since 1978 Chinese art moves towards realism but it is different from the broad version of Postmodernist critical realism of the Twentieth century for the target is not the capitalist system and it is different from the socialist-realism of communist China for it is critical towards the socialist society. Scar literature is featured by the connotation of unicity for is the first literary attempt of Post-Socialist China<sup>26</sup> and it is the attempt to give names to the past decades. It is necessarily a political choice, a periodizing concept that includes at once a rejection of the repressive political order and a critique of the rapid process of commodification, even though this last aspect will be better developed over the next decade, the post New Era Period. Back at the end of the 70s the Fourth Congress of Writers and Artist surely represents the watershed of Chinese modern production. Those publishing at the end of the seventies are those who some twenty years before, during the Hundred Flowers campaign, were labeled as rightist. They suddenly reappear well aware that time had come to take another risk. Whereas the former production depicted young heroes overcoming class enemies (old cadres and intellectuals), the new literature (Scar literature) displayed intellectuals and old cadres who were unjustly stigmatized as enemies, as heroes. Xiao Hua in *The Scar*, Lu Di in *Cries from Death Row*, Li Mei in *The Tunnel*<sup>27</sup> all bear the scar of a bastard:

*"Because for the last few decades, those who told falsehood in China were rewarded, and those who revealed the shortcomings and mistakes of certain people in power were picked on and oppressed...(this literature) should be specially protected"*<sup>28</sup>

In November 1977, with the reintroduction of the slogan *let hundred flowers bloom, and a hundred school of thought contend*, a short story was published, *班主任 (The Class Monitor)*<sup>29</sup>, it is an insight on the reactionary policy that treated intellectuals as enemy of the people and students were fed with propaganda. Liu Xinwu wonders about the spiritual damage inflicted on everyone by the Gang of Four, with particular empathy on the

<sup>26</sup> The debate over modernism and postmodernism is very much related to cultures and literature. In Japan a discussion over postmodernism is a discussion over avant-garde. In India debating postmodernism would actually be debating over modernity. Taking the West as referring point, the term *modern* refers to post-feudal bourgeois Europe in the Nineteenth century, *modernism* refers to the experience of the Twentieth century Western Avant-Guard, *Post-modern* refers to advanced capitalist society, therefore none of these terms match with the historical moment of post-Mao China. Pickowicz suggests the definition of *post-socialism* which presupposes socialist culture and element of modernism.

<sup>27</sup> Xiao Hua (Lu Xinhua, *The Scar*), Lu Di (Jin Yanhua and Wang JingQuan, *Cries from the Death Row*), Li Mei (Chen Ruoxi, *The Tunnel*)

<sup>28</sup> Wang Ruowang, *a Cold wind in Springtime*, Guangming ribao, 20 July, 1979

<sup>29</sup> In *Prize-Winning Stories from China 1978-1979*, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, 1981, Liu Xinwu, *The Class Monitor*.

youngster. Xie Huimin who won't read *The Gadfly*<sup>30</sup> convinced that the books obtained outside bookstore and library were subversive and pornographic, (broadly speaking foreign literature was tout court labelled as pornographic books), goes along with another character, Jiping<sup>31</sup>, from the pen of Xu Hui, who would burn a painted reproduction of Ruben's Oil because he never painted the heroes of the proletariat. Uncounted short stories appeared producing a literature which deeply distinguishes itself from the past and simultaneously affirms own connotation. By a quick glance we soon come across the double features they carry: ideological distance from the slogan of the Cultural Revolution, *Attack with Words and Defend with weapons*<sup>32</sup>, *Destroying the four Olds and Establishing the Four News* and the shaping of a content that has got nothing to do with the exasperation of themes such as class struggle or the beauty of communism but a content true to life. At stake there is the most recent past: Scar Literature is an attempt to come to terms with China most recent past which is a story of corruption, violence, banishments, violation of one owns identity. A new literature moved the first step, both nihilist and existentialist. At first the attempt is to portray the scar of a society, bureaucratic ineptitude, the mistakes made by the party, at least part of it, the most bureaucratic and the leftist side, the degeneration of Communist ideology. Slowly and inevitably the outer process of criticism turns into an inner process of understanding, Scar Literature finds itself entangled with self-reflection literature, with more humanist themes and a broader historical scope. No longer focusing merely on the injustices suffered by intellectuals, somehow always related to the art-party dialectic, but it also began to include more individualistic topics such as love, personal responsibility, and self-worth, (Bai Hua, *A Bundle of Letters*, Xiao Yi, *The little egg Girl*) more introspective works where the human soul is still tied to historical and political particulars but free to discover new dimensions.

Back to *The Class Monitor*, the story itself is not artistically significant and yet it was claimed as the most socially relevant piece in the last twenty years because for it offered characters that were not ideal workers, and themes that were not party-orientated. The way was now traced. Soon after in 1978 Lu Xinhua, who had been himself a worker, a peasant and a soldier, published another short story *The Scar* which gave name to the genre: *Do you think it is wrong for a revolutionary to have emotions?* It's the question Xiao Hua -the protagonist- asks to an entire generation. Individuality, introspection, self-definition step finally on the stage of Chinese production. It does it on the background of the Cultural Revolution, it is still deeply political but the central theme is not the communist rhetoric, as socialist realism or revolutionary realism wanted to, but a humanistic view point on what is left after Mao. By spotlighting the destruction of Chinese family the contrast with the whole literary production since 1949 is astonishing. It must be said that 1980 China, especially Beijing, is a country of cultural interaction, the movies of the Sixth Generation Authors, ideology-free, by displaying a face of Chinese society, the floating population as contradiction of an irresponsible process of modernization, are a powerful example in such a sense. The eighties is a decade of

<sup>30</sup> The *Gadfly* is a novel by Irish writer Ethel Voynich, published in 1897 set during the Italian *Risorgimento*, is primarily concerned with the culture of revolution and revolutionaries.

<sup>31</sup> See Nightmare, Notes from Mother's Hand

<sup>32</sup> Introduced by Jiang Qing in a public speech on September 1967, it officially gave start to the most violent phase of the Cultural revolution

significant cultural movement, art galleries, exhibitions, critical thinking, Avant Guard, more in general it is the spirit of experimentation what flooded into China at the beginning of the 1980s giving vent to contemporary art. Writers were encouraged to take up again their pens to publish previously forbidden statements and they took the opportunity to harshly attack previous policies, the failed Great Leap Forward and the utopia of the great Cultural Revolution. To be sure to have access to the press, the focus is not on the desire of revenge, there is not revolutionary impetus in any of the short stories tagged as Scar Literature, and neither reference on the present regime, those are texts in the past tense, based on personal suffering, wasted youth and talents (The Monitor), sacrifice (Sacred duty, Dedication), patriotism (Awake my Brother), intimate responsibility for the tragedy (Something Most Precious), despair, fear, and guilt everyone endured during the political persecution. Yet they enjoyed for a while intellectual freedom for while attacking the party leaders they saved the party itself believing in the party's ability to restore legality and democracy. Post 1976 literature registered faithfully the transaction from Socialist to Post-Socialist China, it is in this historical momentum the handover from Mao to Deng that China takes officially consciousness of the possibility of a socialist tragedy, which is to say a more objective reading of the party policy during the Cultural Revolution. Chen Guokai in *What should I do?* brings on the stage the nude truth of family tied scattered: the death of the aunt cut off the branches of the past, the temporary death of the first husband denies a chance for the future. In *Cries from Death Row* the mention of the rape is only the end of the process of fragmentation:

*“At my father’s struggle meeting, I had placed on his head a dunce cap of my own making. Not long after that my mum had been taken away and investigated. After repeated criticism through seven days and nights, she died in a dark room. But not only had I shed no tears, I had actually hung a placard over our door that read: ‘To hell with them’. It was on that day that I solemn announced the severing of relations between my father and me (...)*<sup>33</sup>

The novels scrupulous to the scar tradition clearly distinguish between Mao and Lin Biao, between Mao and the Gang of Four. Mao is therefore the forger of new China, while Lin Biao and his Gang are those who destroyed it by inventing an enemy that didn't exist (enemy agent, spy, and counterrevolutionary). Only after, after Mao, Lin Biao, Jiang Qing were out of the picture the complicated background of the class struggle during the Cultural Revolution came to light: the proletarian dictatorship had become a dictatorship over proletariat where man are destroyed and reaffirmed every day, in China alike in Europe<sup>34</sup>. Not only the collective spirit of a society had been destroyed by placing sons against the fathers, but the excess of the intellectual persecution enlarged the disillusionment of a generation towards ideology and the existing political system. As reaction a profound sense of individualism took shape, in a sense that Chinese nature which has always been vulnerable to nature but felt protected by the morality of the institutions, suddenly discovered her abandoned to men egoism and fanaticism, China felt betrayed by the collectivism of her philosophical roots. From here the production of a narrative that behind the curtains of a socialist solution, reveals the consciousness of liability, the reality of loneliness, the dissolution of self:

<sup>33</sup> *Cries from Death Row*, in *Stubborn Weeds*, Indiana University Press, Usa, 1983, p.98

<sup>34</sup> See Wei Jingsheng short story Q1-a Twentieth-Century Bastille

*“We became suspicious of strangers and each other, so that it was no longer comfortable to see each other, because it would mean a long report back on what we talked about and why. One became insular and only stayed within one’s own place of work, lived among one’s own fellow workers, shared the same dormitories, ate at the same canteens”<sup>35</sup>*

Solitude, anxiety, depression, despair are called upon men to confront the absurd of reality. Human nature is under attack: Xunze might have been right, human nature is after all evil, a selfish moment which needs to be strictly regulated. Or maybe not, Mencius might as well be the one who better understood it: human nature is actually good, men tend to have feelings of solidarity but ideology spoiled it. Scar Literature steps out from the dialectic human nature-Marxism, freeing literature itself from the determinist belief that human behaviors and feelings were determined by class interest, and that alienation has to be intended as political or due to economic exploitation. Human feelings and actions are much more than this, it is a complex entangles of consideration, characterization, interior construction, impression, irrational impulses which, it seems to be the conclusion of Scar Literature, even though reality is absurd, man is still free. All in all Scar Literature restituted to Chinese literature the previous Confucian humanism shifting from Mao’s class struggle to existentialism, replacing class struggle with humanism, communist rhetoric with introspection. Let us now focus on the details of a new era.

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The world of Scar Literature immediately becomes inexplicable, it loses the rationality in which the party had compressed reality, and instead it allows reality to explode into nihilist and irrational fragments, as it is for instance the bigamy in *What Should I do?* or the blind obedience to Mao in *Drunken among Flowers* where a young city girl let a poor peasant sleep with her in the name of the revolution³⁶. Striking is the resemblance with the European experience in the first half of the past century where the downfall into nihilist abyss seems to be a common trait of the whole narrative as it is the message send by the first Avant-guard. However after a moment of dramatic reflection, the nihilist element will be replaced by a more subtle understanding where absurd, by which I mean elements that overcome the application of human science, becomes only a moment, among others, of a more complex process towards rationality. The decades between the end of the Nineteenth century and Twentieth century in the Western hemisphere have been years of conflict and ambiguities. The political frame has witnessed the rise and fall of a new social actor, the bourgeoisie; meanwhile the weaknesses of so called democratic systems have led to the madness of Totalitarianism. Soon after the dissolution of Western Totalitarianism we assist the dissolution of a civilization as some scholars put it, the war destructiveness, both physical and moral, undermined the fabric of the national past, yesterday’s values were dismissed but the vacuum they left hadn’t been replaced. In this desolate and abandoned land that was post-war Europe, nihilist theorization found a fertile ground. The empirical reality that escaped the war bears scars of violence and art will assume responsibility to show the way out from the recent past. The artistic problematic the day after the Holocaust is the

³⁵ Dikotter F., *The Tragedy of Liberation*, Bloomsbury Press, London, 2013

³⁶ *What Should I do?* (Chen Guokai), *Drunken Among Flowers* (Li Jian)

representation of the unimaginable. At stake is not only the esthetic problem, but the limit of representation itself, how to describe terror or the modern phenomenon of de-subjectification, this slow process that sees the idea of a man fragmenting into pieces since Copernic ruled him out from the center of the Universe. The spectacle of unprecedented atrocity undermined the subject sense of integrity, shuttles between the catastrophes of fragmentation (life as representation) and the catastrophe of fascism. What modernism tout court does, with a well-known display of attempts, (Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism, Symbolism, Dadaism, Surrealism) is to examine the paradox and indefinable forces underlying the existence. By redefining concept on which we based our human perception, space and time, history, and therefore human life, cease to be an ordered sequence of event but a rather chaotic experience that we don't quite understand. And right here, in this specific historical framework will take place a dramatic testament on the human subject. The Existentialism indeed. Unlike the Western counterpart, Chinese modernism cannot retreat into a nostalgic past because such a past never existed, what did exist was the experience of feudalism, despotism and cultural isolation. At the end of the seventies China was coming out from the tragedy of the Cultural Revolution but not just. At Mao's death China had to face the impossible task to save Mao while condemning the Cultural Revolution for discrediting Mao would have meant discrediting the party and the state. The resolution of the CCP sixtieth anniversary will obviously absolve Mao as a another victim of the Gang of Four :

*"As for Lin Biao, Jiang Qing and other who were placed in important positions by comrade Mao Zedong, the matter is of entirely different nature. They rigged up two counter-revolutionary cliques in an attempt to seize supreme power and taking advantage of comrade Mao Zedong's errors, committed many crimes behind his back, bringing disaster to the country and to the people."*³⁷

In the wake of the Cultural Revolution China met modernism again. Those who took at heart the original Maoist message and the Marxist orthodoxy dared to think, speak, act against the injustice they suffered by the hand of a corrupted side. The drama *What if I really were?*³⁸ is a precise and acute act of accuse to the excess of the past, Lin Biao and the Gang of Four guilty of spoiling the Communist ideology, as much as the present, a society maintained on privileges and fraudulent activities where official posts are offered and special requests granted to those able to lend some power or money. Humanism is always entangled with political reminiscence, recalling the past tragedy (*What if I really were, The Barber's Tale*³⁹) is a strategy adopted to fill the gap of the separation, overcome the individual isolation and rebuild a common frame of memories and understanding. Scar Literature cunningly contains what Baudelaire would have called a *double simultaneous postulation*, the capacity to refer to different contexts. Had it spoke to the only party it would have been accused of being propaganda, had it spoke to the only victims it would have been accused of being anti-revolutionary. And so it spoke to everyone. And because, as Sartre beautifully put it, literature is the subjectivity of a society in permanent revolution, Scar Literature more than anything represents the soul of

³⁷ Roderick Macfarquhar, Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution*, Harvard University Press, p.459

³⁸ Play in six act written by Sha Yexin, Li Shoucheng, Yao Mingde. Because of the specific content, it became a moment of the Party discussion of what is acceptable in literature.

³⁹ Wang Meng, *The Barber's Tale*

Chinese modernity. Let us now analyze with a more analytic glance the moments where such a narrative embraces existentialism.

- **Abandoned subjectivity**

The death of god is the modern concept that suggests the end of metaphysic and a metaphor that open up to a philosophical-sociological crisis covering any realm of science, natural science and liberal arts. The whole Europe felt the disentanglement from Positivist certainty as the crisis of modern civilization whose center doesn't hold anymore, there are social values that have to change because outdated, religious values incapable of leading the center of morality. After having scarified god, man recovers his freedom but he falls into an historical interval of nihilism. The process exploded in the Twentieth century but it has origins well rooted into the past. Copernicus had washed away mankind from the center of the universe: to the initial phase of pride took over a sense of loss for man was no longer the center of it. Darwin reduced man to a developed animal, Freud to entangled instinct, Foucault declares his death. What happened is that the hyperuranion introduced by Plato went slowly dissolving; the secularization of existence took the place of the Judeo-Christian conception of history, the idea of salvation obtained through the sin-redemption-final judgment process left room for a moment of disillusionment where the dissolution of previously shared values goes along with a religious doubt:

*"If there is God, then it is always his will, and I can do nothing against his will. If there isn't, then it is my will, and I am bond to express my free will (...) I am bond to shoot myself (...)"*⁴⁰

The non-existence of God is the atrocious doubt introduced by the Twentieth century. It turns out to be an altruist suicide that of Kirillov⁴¹, suicide to demonstrate to mankind the non-existence of god, and by so doing Kirillov, like the Orestes of Sartre, offers to mankind the new freedom they were looking for. The spiritual emptiness is excruciating. The philosophical awareness of one's own finitude is a burden that the century will try to fill up with some theoretical attempt, for instance totalitarianism, be it fascism or communism, but it fails. What we assist here it's rather a process of annihilation, for man is not ready to carry the crux without a god to hold him straight:

*"I lost the whole game (...) Now I am going to be like Anny, I am going to outlive myself. Eat, sleep, sleep, eat. Exist slowly, softly like these trees, like a puddle of water, like the red bench of a streetcar"*⁴²

At the end of metaphysic is decadence, the ideological refuse of a pre-determined order came together with a very high price: science disguised as myth, political debate as struggle for power, freedom as chaos. For there is no more a shared morality, a science that can all explain, neither a god that redeems man's sin, reality becomes a process of understanding that is facing now its limits. In fact if on one hand reality has been freed from the chains of metaphysic, on the other hand by losing its feature of objectivity it became uncommunicable. The time of relativism starts, the border between good and evil is vanished, nihilism is the uncanny of an historical moment that forced men to reconsider the social dynamic with the outside, be it divine or human. Considering the context just described, the so called liberation is more an acceptancy of one own solitude

⁴⁰F. Dostoyevsky, *The Devils*, Penguins Group, London, 1982, p. 612

⁴¹ Dostoyevsky (*The Devils*)

⁴² J.P. Sartre, *Nausea*, The New Classic Series, Norfolk, p. 210

than celebration of a radical achievement, and it is specifically within this space of moral vacuum that we read the work of existentialism and by reflex Scar Literature, witnesses of a time in search for meaning.

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Sartre saying that the *existence precedes the essence* is a public declaration of independence. Man first exists as individual, as conscious being, as entity in itself, and only after he defines himself in this world assuming a social role. A paper cutter for example is produced in a certain way and it has a certain use, the artisan who made it had an idea of what he was doing and how doing it, therefore we can say that the property of the paper cutter, its essence, precedes its existence. The same goes for men for their realization is somehow a concept in the mind of God. But if we eliminate God from the stage, if God doesn't exist, man exists before being defined by any other concept, as to say that if God doesn't exist, and therefore man has not been planned in advance, his existence preceded his essence. At first he is nothing, then throughout subjectivity he becomes something and he will make choices for which he is responsible. But because his choices generate images that to some degree influence others, he is responsible for the all mankind. Universal responsibility is therefore the first issue to be discussed. The existentialist based their theorization of universal responsibility on Dostoyevsky's statement *If God doesn't exist, everything is possible*. The moral and metaphysical condition of being human, all too human, obliged every single man not so much to deal with permissiveness, as it might be a nowadays issue, but to reconsider the very same foundation of mortality, moving therefore the lens from the divine-human dialectic to a man's relationship with the world. As to say that once god has been dethroned man has to find back his own value. Sartre had his Zeus confessing Aegisthus:

*"Once freedom burns into man's heart, the gods are powerless against him. It's a matter between man and man"*<sup>43</sup>

Orestes, heroes of the same tragedy, as reminiscence of the Nietzschean mad man, killed the King, the god is no longer. He is now dangerous because he knows himself to be free, the most dangerous animal is a free man. He will accept the burden of his freedom so heavy to drag him down into the abyss of life, he will accept the endless emptiness of life now that he too, abandoned, foreign to himself, raised as new Prometheus confronting a divinity he can't accept:

*"But I shall not return under your law; I am doomed to have no other law than mine...For I am a man, and every man must find out his own way"*<sup>44</sup>

The world pictured by the existentialist is nothing more than the desolating ruins of the after war, the inertia of a broken existence where the nausea and the anguish they irreversibly sink into, force us to wonder whether a man can survive the death of god. Doomed to loneliness is therefore the second issue emerged from the nihilist process. They bravely refuse any determinism (the assumption of a cunning reason leading man's existence) but refuge into an atheist humanism, stressing the beauty and yet the heaviness of human condition, the burden of their loneliness which is altogether their freedom and a duty of universal responsibility. If in a sense they renounce to the idea of saving God, they don't renounce the idea of serving him by pushing forward a message of fraternity before everyone. In a world without a living God, man is condemned to be free, he didn't

<sup>43</sup> J.P. Sartre, *The Flies*, act II, in *No Exit and Three other plays*, Vintage Book, New York, 1949, p.104

<sup>44</sup> J.P. Sartre, *The Flies*, act III, in *No Exit and Three other plays*, Vintage Book, New York, 1949, p.122

create himself and yet after having been casted into a world which has lost orientation signs, he becomes responsible for everything he does, the values he has just invented. Adapting the theory to the Chinese contest, the death of god is nothing but the reaction to Mao and the ideology he embodied. At first man is a stranger confronting the outside, desperate heroism, anguish can be easily traced back: Wang Xiaohua (The Scar) and Xie Huimin (The Class Monitor), both victims of the propaganda of the Gang of Four, are now told that what they fought for was actually wrong, incapable of embrace the change they stand like stranger within a world they quite not recognize. But then the experience of the evil will create a common ground for despair and hope. The doctor Rieux (*The Plague*) is what becomes of Meursault (*The Stranger*)<sup>45</sup>; he is not anymore a stranger passing in perpetual indifference, alike Liu Xinwu, Wang Meng, Lu Xinhua, Bai Hua, they are all aware that the plague of totalitarianism has ruled out the future, no one will ever be free as long as there are pestilences:

*A pestilence isn't a thing made to man's measure therefore we tell our self that it will pass away. But it doesn't always pass away and, from one bad dream to another, it is man who pass away and the humanist first of all (...)*<sup>46</sup>

The Western world by placing aside the Christian paradigm and China by losing the ideology that kept hold of a society (Maoism) were forced to recognize that the world doesn't have higher meaning, it rather had an element of abstraction, a divorce from reality very much different from man's quest for happiness. Here in this abandoned space of human suffering they were asked to believe everything or deny everything. An uncompromising duty laid on some of them; it had nothing to do with religion or politic, it is the criminal indifference, the agony of a child what pushed the protagonists to become individually responsible for the all mankind, captivated by the idea that somehow if the world doesn't have higher meaning, man does. This is why all the characters pictures by Scar and Existentialist Literature survived: an organic solidarity developed between them, from now on it is the interdependence of the parts what allows the system to keep going and man to re-adjust it according to the value of a new era.

- **The Absurd**

Absurdity is often associated to the meaning of life. On a philosophical stage it's a problem of time, it remarks that what we do now it will not matter in a million years, it's a problem of space, it remarks that we are tiny insignificant element plunged in the vastness of the universe and it's a problem of justification, if we are going to die anyway why struggling to earn money, to buy a house, to sustain oneself, all in all if we are going to die why living at all? But we are not going to solve those issues here, such analysis requires a personal belief that cannot be made methodologically objective. And because the aim of any research is to attend the highest possible degree of objectivity, we will treat absurdity as a sociological issue, it is therefore the discrepancy between one own expectation and reality, the happening in between is what we define as absurdity. The individual starting point is a sense of disorientation facing a world very much different from the previous one or the one he was expecting. Camus in the Myth of Sisyphus states that the absurd arises when the world fails to meet our demands for meaning, it is

<sup>45</sup> Albert Camus

<sup>46</sup> Alberto Camus, *The Plague*, Vintage International Edition, New York, 1991, p.37

therefore a schism what does happen, an unbridgeable gap between man and nature, to some extent between man and man. Probably correct, but the search for meaning must be placed in a specific historical contest. Back to Twentieth century Europe, absurd is the world after overtaking God. First has been denied the divine element on which were based the very foundation of the Western civilization, *I tried to love God, it seems now I failed*, will say Stephen Dedalus<sup>47</sup> in his religious-philosophical awakening, soon after a new myth has been assumed as ruler of a new era, progress. But history, we have seen, has finally proved it as a false myth; suddenly, once the echo of the new progressive era is long past, everyone is plunged into the midst of nothingness. The technological development succeeded to tie the individual to an indifferent system within the dictatorship of object, enlarging the gap between objective culture, what a society is in terms of organization, institution, technology, and subjective culture, individual capacity to deal with his products. Modernity seems to push man back to the original state of a miserable spectator, the universe is emptied of illusions and promises, there are no memories of a lost land nor hope for a promise land, man becomes a stranger in the world and it is this divorce between man and life what generates the feeling of absurdity.

Modern society, the greatest accomplishment of the Nineteenth century, had collapsed leaving behind lack of order and the bankrupt of science. There is a shadow of futility and hopelessness framing the most sensitive consciousness, the world is left to chaos, tomorrow doesn't exist and we all shall die. Nihilist speculation formulated the death of God, man was therefore self-created, *l'homme est une passion inutile*<sup>48</sup>, is the symbolic expression describing man's desire to be God alike, to create a world auto-sufficient, and it is precisely the lack of completeness, the failure before such a desire to doom humans being into despair. Absurdity is therefore what fills the gap left emptied by the end of transcendence. Tragedy, absurdity, detachment, moral vacuum are all common traits of post war literature. To be more specific existentialist novels molded characters that are all strangers as different, absurd as detached from reality and 'idiot', reminiscence of that Prince Mishkin<sup>49</sup> who shook the society by not understanding the rules governing it. Behind the curtain of a crisis of consciousness, Kafka's K. believes that there is a sense in the ordinary senselessness of the human communication. He is the writer of impossible transcendence, the universe is full of signs we cannot understand but there is something behind the stage, thus rather than allowing his characters to arrive at one sided views of reality, he masterly unfolds a dialectical relationship between the actors, controversial point of view, all reasonable all legitimate, are largely discussed, with the outcome to regulate somehow the disorder. On the contrary for Camus the tragedy of human existence is the absence of any transcendence, his characters always lived like in a permanent exile, exile from their land, from themselves, a sensation of void which never left them not even when imagining the future. And yet while Kafka's character lives in anxiety for this lack, Camus seems to be at peace with the disorder: *"I felt that I had been happy and that I was happy again. For everything to be consummated, for me to feel less alone, I had only to wish that there be a large crowd of spectators the day of my execution and that they greet me with cries of hate"*<sup>50</sup>

<sup>47</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of a Young Artist*

<sup>48</sup> Man is a useless passion. J.P.Sartre

<sup>49</sup> F. Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*

<sup>50</sup> A. Camus, *The Stranger*, Vintage Books, New York, 1989, p.123

In spite of the spiritual poverty of the social reality suicide is not an option. Whether the earth or the sun revolves around the other is a matter of profound indifference, it is a futile question, says Camus, the real question is whether life has a meaning or not, because if the answer is negative then suicide is legitimate. But life seems to be worth to be lived, even if there is no God, even after the Holocaust it is possible to find a meaning beyond nihilism. Existentialism tout-court, unlike the previous literary framework, rejected suicide in name of an impossible choice. Outlive oneself:

*“My all life is behind me. I see it completely; I see its shape and the slow movements which have brought me this far. There is little to say about it: a lost game, that’s all (...) At the same time I learned that you always lose. Only the rascals think they win. Now I am going to be like Anny, I am going to outlive myself”*<sup>51</sup>

And again:

*“Sisyphus proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched conditions: it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn”*<sup>52</sup>

The absurd man will not commit suicide; he will experience the divine responsibility of being without illusion and without resignation either. It is an absurd victory the one we are assisting, Sisyphus like Kirillov whose sacrifice is man’s last revolution, assertion of freedom and human glory. All of them will go through the night of Gethsemane, Antoine Roquentin<sup>53</sup>, Meurseault<sup>54</sup>, Raskolnikov<sup>55</sup>, Joseph K.<sup>56</sup> they will all stand still while the civilization next to them seemed to have collapsed. Resisting won’t make their lives less absurd but it will surely feature them with nobility. Is this a self-deceiving behavior? It is rather self-preserving. Fortunately or unfortunately we are gifted with self-consciousness, we sense the limits of our human conditions, sometimes we transcend our self whenever we produce art or we contemplate it, more often we can choose how to approach our life, with heroism, despair or irony. The awareness of a shadow of absurdity resting upon those who survived the tragedy is as well what happened in China soon after Mao died: Post-war Europe was left to face the absurd when it was presented a world without God, Post-Mao China was forced to face the absurd when ideology came loose. To understand this point we have to go back to the very roots of Chinese civilization. Western society based the concept of identity on the solid platform of truth. Truth has been simultaneously a religious understanding of human expectation, science able to explain man’s position in the universe and art expressed through beauty because the perfection of beauty reconnects man to the divine element he once had. But Chinese identity had none of it. Chinese virtues, identity, society couldn’t possibly stand on a religious base for while in the Western counterpart first came religion and then society and therefore Christianity shaped the whole civilization, religion belief in China came after society and therefore it never had the strength, the imprimatur to unify a country otherwise so vast and different. Science is a recent invention in China. It appeared at the end of the

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<sup>51</sup> J.P. Sartre, *Nausea*, The New Classic Series, Norfolk, p. 210

<sup>52</sup> A. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Vintage Books, New York, 1989, p.90

<sup>53</sup> *The Nausea*

<sup>54</sup> *The Stranger*

<sup>55</sup> *Crime and Punishment*

<sup>56</sup> *The Castle*

Nineteenth century, together with the Western powers and the idea of a materialist progress. Obviously it was opposed by the conservative wings, as contrary to nature and Chinese spiritual philosophy. Neither art nor beauty could represent an amalgam for the scattered Chinese identity for beauty in China is an imperfect concept that doesn't last, too liable, too weak. Art, by definition, pretends to be immortal, art is what remains once we are no more, but China had no time to look for perfection for China was engaged with the tragedy which fragmented, dispersed men's awareness, and men's critical thinking. Beauty, by large art, in China doesn't last because China burnt it down to produce steal in order to catch up with the European production; beauty in China was smashed and tore apart, silenced, treated as an impostor, a rightist, enemy of the masses. And because beauty couldn't console China, China to survive needed a more solid background, a frame to hold on to while dynasties, invaders, regimes would rapidly alternate. It was ideology. The cultural stage on which was based Chinese identity has always been ideology, first was Confucius to define the shape of what was moral and what was not, then was Maoism, read it as Communism to point out what was right and what was wrong. At last arrived capitalism to indicate the difference between success and failure, with a blend new of values and ethics. The process of modernization quite successfully hid the contradiction of a society where nowadays individualism and competition have to go along with respect and collectivism. Cultural chaos took finally the resemblance of peace. Clearly the ideological vacuum following the death of Mao plays a big part in the definition of a new identity because ideology is the imaginary representation of the world but now that ideology has slipped out of daily life there is a space yet to be filled. Absurdity takes shape.

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Do we find absurdity in Scar Literature? As a matter of fact we do, though we have to abandon the metaphysical halo surrounding Western literature and accepting a more secular dimension. Xiao Yi's story, the *Little Egg Girl* is absurd in a way that it depicts the malaise of a generation looking for identity. And it's not about women condition in China, neither the fanatic rhetoric over class enemy, it's about the absolute loneliness those characters are inevitably tied on once the ideological machine closes on them. *What if I really were?* is a political act of course, but it is as well a literary satire rooted in absurdity and melancholy. Well written attempt of *meta-teatro* where reality and fiction blended together compose the prelude, characters looking for identities recall very closely Pirandello's play *Six Characters looking for authors*. Absurd is here the dissolution of self and the process of composition of a new self-based on a balance of truth and lies. In spite of numerous attempt of escaping from the mask they were given, the social role they inevitably carry, they failed. Nowhere in Scar Literature we assist to a definitive liberation of the protagonists, as trapped in a chamber of torture, can none of them live according to their will neither can die on the stage as a Shakespearian name. Fated to remain suspended in a room, on a stage without conclusion, a definitive salvation, always in between their true being and the matching representation. Clumsy at times facing a reality they acknowledge as absurd, awkward to madness and yet gifted of a sharp beautiful reason which able them to resist the relativity of human construction. Li Xiaozhang⁵⁷, like young Qin⁵⁸ and teacher Wang⁵⁹ in *Maples*, they have to measure

⁵⁷ What if I really were?

⁵⁸ The Girl who seemed to Understand (Liu Zhen)

themselves against the contradiction of an authoritarian social structure: throughout an epiphany process of understanding they realize that the egalitarian notion of the intellectual never really happened, the collectivization has been a waste of land, the Cultural revolution a waste of youth, the idealization of peasant life was actually hiding poverty and ignorance. Suddenly they discovered false what they believed to be true and in a moment of fine realism the rebel against the injustice. How do they do it? Through awareness, awareness of the evil is the rebellion of Scar literature. Here lies the main difference with the Western attempt of rebellion. Rebelling is what happened before the nonsense of a human condition unjust and incomprehensible. But Western absurdity is very much related to metaphysic, it is the expression through which man rebels to his liable condition and the all 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 will replace 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, from here 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. Scar Literature doesn't have the same speculative strength, beside China didn't have a god to rebel to. Back to the roots of Chinese philosophy China never really found time for metaphysic for her primary interest has always been ethical. 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. Confucianism is the philosophy of social organization, of order, public education and practical knowledge. It gave Chinese society a system of education and strict conventions of social etiquette. The main purpose was to form an ethical stratum of intellectuals who could lead the road for a right and durable government. Taoism, was more concerned with the observation of nature and the discovery of its Way, or Tao, in order to maintain peace. Human happiness, which is to be found in harmony, is achieved when men follow the social order which is hierarchy linked to the natural order of things. 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. Confucian preaching is about rectifying men conduct and behavior, a man who rectifies himself can rule his family, he will bring order to the State and peace to the world. As we see it, the philosophical speculation never engages itself with metaphysic but social ethic, thus the metaphysical rebellion was reduced to a socio-political one. Consequently the rhetoric over absurdity is not much about man but it calls into discussion the very essence of communist ideology. However the intellectual awareness of the process, as it often happens to be, represents for both, Chinese and Western intellectuals, the key to liberation. The outcome behind the struggle between life and shape is the colonization of a new space where life is not melted with metaphysic and man, even though limited and solitary, stands still.

⁵⁹ Maple (Zheng Yi)

- **Realism**

In a lecture held in Paris in 1945⁶⁰ Sartre sustained that we judge the genius of Proust or Racine based on the totality of their works that they produced rather than on the totality of the works they could have produced, as to say that there is no space for anything left beyond the realm of reality. If a man is a coward or a hero it is not because he was born coward or hero, but because he made himself as such. Such a philosophy had enormous consequences on the literary production which followed. Existentialist novels tend to cover a space of few days, they abound of details and introspective monologue, they recall god but to avoid it, all in all they use literary techniques which help to diffuse a realistic atmosphere around the characters and their surroundings. A suffocating realism covering the all narrative is very much present in Scar Literature as well. Clearly we shall keep in mind that Chinese realism is very much different from let's say the Italian verismo of Verga or the French realism of Zola and Balzac. The former is a scientific experiment which wanted to prove the application of Positivist methodology of natural science over human science. Chinese realism is nothing as such, it is the attempt to reproduce historical truth after for decade it was denied, to restore the distinction between I and They, to some extent between self and society, after for decades it had submitted to a collective We. Their works touched the overall social stage, offered their concern for social justice avoiding being critical of the current regime but advocating writing as self-expression. Wan Zhi's *Open Ground*⁶¹ realism deals with the tragic irony of Twentieth century China: history comes full circle, the Americans once fought as the ideological enemy are now called back to build modern China. The anonymous hero crossing the ruins of a battleground, carrying a sack full of bones offers the reader an impossible question: what was it all for? Bei Dao⁶²'s *The Homecoming Stranger* shows the distortion of human relationship and enlightens the complex world of disillusion and despair that is Post-Cultural Revolution China. But again Chinese realism is very much concerned about exploring the present rather than the past. The *Homecoming Stranger*, *Waves*, *In the Ruins*⁶³ are all set in a post tragedy China, where everyone appears as coming out from a shipwreck wandering between emptiness and obscurity. The common fate they endured pushed them closer, alike the universal responsibility Sartre claimed, they are all doomed to be free, there is a feeling of uncertainty embracing the all narration and such an uncertainty is very much real indeed, there is a whole nation to be re-shaped, twisted identities out of recognition:

*"I was struck dumb: was he this shriveled little old man? Father. I leaned weakly against the door"*⁶⁴

Out of words:

*"This is exactly the question our generation has raised and must answer. Perhaps the search itself is what already epitomizes our generation. We will not accept death, or silence, or obedience to any preconceived judgment!"*⁶⁵

Out of tune:

⁶⁰ Existentialism is an Humanism

⁶¹ Chen Maiping, pseud.Wan Zhi

⁶² Zhao Zhenkai, pseud. Bei Dao and Shi Mo

⁶³ Bei Dao

⁶⁴ Bei Dao, *The Homecoming Stanger*, A New Directions Book, Hong Kong, 1986, p.12

⁶⁵ Bei Dao, *Waves*, A New Directions Book, Hong Kong, 1986, p.162

“He looked at his watch again. He really did not understand what he was expecting himself. It was as if he still hadn’t freed himself from the mechanical concept of time that professors had (...)”⁶⁶

Soon after a moment of loss, the problem of self gets involved in a more general issue, the dimension of the human problem. It is here that Chinese literary quest for a new identity and the realism of the plot assumes nihilist features. Alike the Russian experience for some aspect, it indulges on a materialistic representation of life, leaving aside the inner dimension. The repressive regime of the Tsar Nicholas ends in 1855, the new Tsar Alexander starts a time of reform, open policy especially towards art. The historical brackets 1853-1863 represent for Russia what the early eighties represent for China: a rebelling generation against tradition, family, values⁶⁷ in the name of a freedom that new government just promised. Nihilism is therefore the denial of the pillars of society rather than an inner discontent as it was for the European existentialist. Dostoyevsky in this contest is a beautiful exception, he never forgets that life like literature has a metaphysical dimension, human will seems always being hold by an independent destiny, (see for instance the empty room soon after Raskolnikov’s homicide) and freedom comes only when free will and destiny finally find a moment of overlapping, (in this sense the suicide of Kirillov if on one side is an act of liberation , on the other side is an act of religious desperation, what is beyond the cross is the question he is about to proffer). But in Post-Mao Literature, specifically Scar Literature, this frame is missing, the characters we come across are very much defined by a spiritual impotency:

“Looking up the sky Qin suddenly asked, “Do you know why it is that the moon and the stars stay up in the sky and don’t fall down?”

The old man kept his eyes down and continued eating his cornbread and gruel. He had no time for such questions but as he had to say something he bluntly replied, “I don’t care. If they want to fall, let them. If they don’t want to, they can stay up there.”⁶⁸

Specifically through the expression of spiritual impotency and incommunicability of those suffering, Scar Literature develops a realistic narrative. Xiaohua⁶⁹, Xie Huimin⁷⁰, the father in *A Bundle of Letters*, whose name is never mentioned, none of them is able to speak out love, fear, rage any of those feeling the Cultural Revolution had generated and repressed. Schopenhauer more than Hegel is the ideological reference of Scar Literature, life is chaos, chaos has taken the place of logic, the social stratus is very much confusing, the demarcation line between right and wrong doesn’t hold anymore, the enemy of the people are reintegrated, party members are punished. Where to stand now? Scar Literature’s characters choose more or less openly to silence themselves, not ready yet to call history by name. But, we suggest, the disengagement of these people from the historical present (phenomenon this one which takes shape soon after the open door policy to become very much evident some ten years later) is just the obvious outfall of an

⁶⁶ Bei Dao, In *The Ruins*, A New Directions Book, Hong Kong, 1986, p.1

⁶⁷ Bazarof, main character in Turgenev masterpiece’s *Fathers and Son* might as well being considered as history first nihilist character for he is bearer of a burden of new ideals in open diaspora with the previous generation.

⁶⁸ Liu Zhen, *The Girl Who Seemed to Understand*, In Perry Link, *Stubborn Weeds*, Indiana University Press, 1983

⁶⁹ The Scar

⁷⁰ The Teacher

historical betrayal. Mao's mistake were blamed by Deng Xiaoping, one above all *to have produced an entire generation of mental cripples*, therefore the old generation, the very same that actively participate to the socialist construction, is now called to repudiate Mao's Cultural Revolution and what they worked for, the planned economy. But while doing so, the new economic agenda didn't bring any good giving way to social issues such as unemployment, floating population, and criminality. The State discovers itself weak; it is not any longer able to protect its workers, declaring the bankrupt of state factory, forcing women to prostitution, rural workers into illicit business. The new policy not only enlarge the gap never really fulfilled between the intellectual class and the working class but the very same working class is reduced to a sub strata a subaltern class that if on one hand didn't see the promise of egalitarianism fulfilled, on the other hand it has to survive in the new shining city just built (Li Xiaozhang/Zhang Xiaoli)⁷¹. On a sociological base of disillusionment and mistrust, the abandoned workers will try to make it in a way or another, detachment and criminality are the most evident result of a ruthless policy. On a purely literary ground, the refusal to refer to any metaphysical scapegoat brings an obsession for reality. Scar Literature writers don't invent any art to sublime life, as did for instance the Greek tragedy or modernist European artists, like orphans they drag themselves towards the future knowing that the price for having eaten from the tree of knowledge is the acknowledgement of evil. Standing on a post-Euripides stage they accept the tragedy they were given trying to explain it, but the explanation lacks of conclusions. None of the novels has a clear ending, the impression the readers receive after the last page has been turn is that the narrative has been violently cut. What happen to Xiaohua after her mum died? What will be of Xie Huimin after all she fought for is finally proved been wrong? How will Xue Zijun⁷² deal with the family destruction and resurrection? Scar Literature pushes forward issues that were denied before, personal understanding of the history, family drama, workers condition, peasant famine, victims of ideology, but it doesn't answer to any of the questions it raises. In part because the years between the end of the 1970's and the beginning of 1980's don't pretend to come to term with the past, but to unfold it for a further judgment. In part because the last station is not nihilism but the promise of a new start, therefore they stick to the shapeless reality they touch with curious glance into the future. None of the writers is able to say what is going to be post-Mao China and from this standpoint it seems unavoidable for their novels to focus on personal experience and not to have a clear conclusion for it. In this sense Scar Literature could be labelled a Chinese experiment of anti-destiny: replacing collective consciousness with individual consciousness is surely a rebellion to the artistic production as it was meant till then. But we will come back on this point later.

- **Humanism**

The cult of humanity was proved wrong by the collapse of Positivism and by the ideological delirium of fascism. The contradiction of the industrial revolution, first and fore most the class struggle, reveals that evolution not always is synonymous of progress. The unleashing of vulgar imperialism confirms that the romantic nationalism easily turns to be a violent colonialism guilty of forgetting the liberal premises through which should have happened man's liberation. At the turn of the century there is all in all an evident

⁷¹ What if I really were?

⁷² Chen Guokai, What should I do?

shame blowing over European consciousness for having betrayed bourgeois ideals and for having misread history. The Humanism we refer to it is not a theory which sees in human being as the forger of the universe, it is the state of liberation and freedom human beings were forced by the existentialist reading of existence. Man, condemned to be free, is therefore defined by the choices he makes. Man calls for man, to get recognition as the artist by his public and for a duty of common responsibility, the common ends is humanity tout-court. Following Sartre assumption, Existentialism is a humanism, Western Existentialism and Scar Literature they both start from here. But while Western Existentialism takes man as the end of the theory and a supreme value, Scar Literature, in spite of the obvious existentialist features, is quite far from picturing human beings as the purpose of history. Here we are forced to open a bracket. In spite of diffuse and accepted understanding regarding Chinese philosophy, it is opinion of who writes that Chinese philosophy has never been about humanism: Confucian preaching is about rectifying men's conduct and behavior, a man who rectifies himself can rule his family, he will bring order to the State and peace to the world. As we see it, the philosophical speculation never engages itself with metaphysic but social ethic, more realistic or practical in a way and yet much less systematic. However the fact that Chinese philosophy lies on the moral realm, on human daily experiences, doesn't allow us to consider humanism as the backbone of Chinese society. In fact if we consider humanism as a critical thinking that bases itself on an anthropocentric paradigm man-orientated, I believe this is not what China is about. Deep into Chinese history man seems to have always been subordinated to nature: in the traditional painting for instance, landscapes and bucolic scenes precede people and if there are human figures they are very small compare to the economy of the picture. Short stories and novels with the first person narrator appeared in China only after May Fourth, as to say that Chinese literature hadn't found space before for individuality and personal discourse, but the singular bibliography had to convey into a larger pond, the empire or the party. Deep into Chinese history, society has always hierarchy overshadowed individuality, the individual overshadowed by the family, the family overshadowed by the state, the very same Confucian ethic non only lacks of discussion on individual freedom and rights, but entangles man's identity into a network of social relationships so tight that once the social tie comes less there is nothing left. Yesterday like today every single Chinese is responsible for the procreation of the next generation and the subsistence of the old one, somehow no one exists as single unit. Shifting from the sociological system to the economic one, the very same framework is just reproduced. The economic system (clearly until 1976) in fact has always been about subsistence economy which provides for basic needs provided by the State. The sociological implication of the *danwei*⁷³, millions or urban workers eating with a meal ticket food supplied by the party state, recalls the idea of a mother country (China) that tends to control every single aspect of people life. It has to do with collectivism and egalitarianism rather than humanism which unlike is a perspective that affirms *humanitas*, benevolence towards the other of course, but first and foremost a connection with the beauty of human reason, individual choices and the human dogma. Humanism as Sartre put it is a theory which takes man as an end and as a higher value, unlike Chinese ideology which always considered man as an aim to achieve some outside purpose. All

⁷³ Dan wei(单位),

this to say that while referring to humanism into Chinese literature we refer to a culture whose center is the human world but not human itself.

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May Fourth is the watershed in Chinese modern history, started as a bunch of student protesting in Beijing it became a national wide movement which broke with the Confucian tradition and pushed Chinese culture into a global one. But the humanist impulse of May Fourth and its enlighten project of science and democracy, was gradually abandoned during Mao's age. Individuality, subjectivity were then suspended by the mandate of collective class struggle for national salvation. Since the formation of The People Republic in fact a collective personality stifled any self-awareness, intimate discourse, personal approach on reality. The intellectual rhetoric was very much politically orientated and submitted to the party censorship. No wonder that the intellectual world, soon after Mao, was hunted by the specter of humanism seen as the individualistic system of the bourgeoisie. Any reference to man self-existence, desire, exclusive feelings became automatically a challenge to the socialist construction for it would ignore the mainstream of political life. Back at the end of the seventies, with Mao out of the picture, China tumbled from the Scylla of Communism to the Charybdis of Capitalism, nostalgia for the glorious dream of Communism floats over every short story even more legitimate when compared to the misery of present days where youngsters yearn a Party card only to become a cadre hence accessing to official post (What if I really were). On the other hand from the Party-State outlook, to legitimate Humanism was to acknowledge an autonomous space of morality and authority independent form the Party leaders, therefore potentially dangerous. The impasse was evident to everyone. Among the first to rise the discussion on humanism<sup>74</sup> was Wang Ruoshui<sup>75</sup> in the attempt to reintegrate the value of individual into Marxism. Is the person the starting point of Marxism? His essay *In defense of Humanism*, while answering the dissatisfaction inside some realm of the party according to whom humanist values stand as anti-Marxist, he calls for socialist humanism:

*Socialist humanism implies abandoning the total dictatorship and merciless struggle of ten year chaos, abandoning the deification of one individual...seeing that the personal freedoms and human dignity of citizens are not infringed upon. Why should this sort of socialist humanism be treated as evil thing?*

The ambition was to find a justification to human being within the frame of Marxism but outside the class-struggle theory and if human per se was the origin of the Marxist speculation, then human should be the end and not the means of socialism. Obviously such a revisionist view placing emphasis on the single human being rather than the socialist state system couldn't pass unobserved. The answer from the Party sounded like a Maoist echo. Back in 1956 Mao had called for the Hundred Flowers campaign though one year later the campaign was repressed with the lunch of the anti-rightist campaign. In the 1980's Deng political reform, on economic bases must be seen as a no way back process of modernization, -tending to be an acritical process of westernization-, but on a cultural base Deng's behavior recalls very much that of Mao in the fifties: if at first he tolerated the debate alienation-humanism he soon stepped back from the stage of

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<sup>74</sup> Ren dao zhu yi(人道主义)

<sup>75</sup> See Wang Ruoshui, A Defense of Humanism (1963)

democracy labelling Chinese attempt of cultural liberation (high hills shoes, flared trousers, expression of individualism) as symbol of spiritual pollution<sup>76</sup> and bourgeois liberalization (Bougelib)<sup>77</sup>. The merit of Scar Literature therefore, given the historical moment, is enormous: after having found an autonomous space of production, it was about changing the secular Chinese tendency towards de-personalization. How did it do? It's a double process: first it eliminates the distance between art and life, and we have already seen how realism marks clearly the narrative strategy. Soon after by placing man into an anti-Copernican dimension, as to say that Scar Literature re-allocated man in the very middle of the stage, allowing individual experience to represent collective drama and expectation. Similar to Sartrean humanism, the novels labelled under Scar Literature emphasize subjectivity, all quite aware that human essence is self-determined rather than historically determined, stressing issues such as of human value, human dignity, human liberation, and human freedom without of course forgetting political reminiscence: Bai Hua in *A bundle of letters*, Jiang Zilong in *Manager Qiao Assumes Office* or in *Foundation*, Liu Binyan in *Between Human and Demon*, just to name few examples, through the unfolding of a personal narration, they both cunningly attack bureaucratism and power abuse. Jiang Zilong particularly had witnessed the setbacks from the disastrous Great Leap Forward to the economic recovery, the chaos of the Cultural Revolution to China's modernization. More than a work of literature, *Manager Qiao Assumes Office* and *More about Manager Qiao*, seem a systematic study of economy where the readers are introduced into the space of Chinese factory whose reality sways between unqualified staff ordering expensive yet useless foreign equipment and the intellectual effort reduced to find new selling methods to compete with foreign products on the world market. Nonetheless a message of universal love seems to be the message left in heredity from both, the literature of the wounded and French Existentialism: The teacher Zhang (The Class Monitor), the policeman Wang Gongbo (The Sacred Duty), doctor Rieux (The Plague), Clemence (The Fall) are messengers of a message of universal peace and redemption, the party or the history will restore the wrongdoings of the past and create the condition for a future free of guilt. But for China it takes shape now another issue. He Jingfu<sup>78</sup> the man without identity card embodies the idea of a generation without identity: out of class struggle, without the cause of socialist construction, how to measure the value of a man's life?

### The Problematization of Individuality

The early stage of Post Mao cultural production resembles very closely the pre-Cultural Revolution experience, recalling an intellectual discourse over subjectivity and humanism. The literature of the wounded represents the first landmark of the Literature of New Era as a whole, a literature of introspection, roots searching, to a large extent modernist. However, as mentioned above, the evil from which Chinese artists drew their genesis is different from that of European Modernism since the spleen of Baudelaire, or

<sup>76</sup>Jing shen wuran(精神污染)

<sup>77</sup> The term Spiritual Pollution was somehow controversial for it had already been used by Hitler (1937) to condemn the Bolshevik culture in a famous speech on Arian Art. Deng was advised to replace it with that of bourgeois liberalization.

<sup>78</sup> See the novel Humanity written by Dai Houying

the historical warning of Adorno and Benjamin. Modernism, we suggest, takes shape as a reaction to the crisis, an unprecedented cultural crisis in the European consciousness. The historical result after Hegel and after Nietzsche has been Auschwitz. All the human science at the beginning of the Twentieth century have found themselves describing the modern decadence as the first consequence of that glorious technological progress, and new social phenomenon, alienation, neurosis, anomie, blasé as the climax of an historical misunderstanding. But all this process in China never took place. The origin of the tension in the 80's in China is in the collective rather than individual, it is a social space created by shared life experience not by economic changes enlarging the gap between wealth and poverty. And the target of the critical plead is not the bourgeois society but the Party-State called to rationalize a version of Post Mao socialism. No writers of Post-Mao period have matched the analytical depth of Sartre and Camus but they have proved themselves to be more than engineers producing a growing awareness over China's most complex issues. In this sense the Wounded Literature is very much iconoclast, it tends to wash slowly away everything from the origins. To be profoundly analyzed in China is the relation between ideas and behavior, in Mao's political agenda the union between the intellectuals and the masses was the *condition sine qua non* without with the socialist utopia could not be realized. In fact only the intellectuals could have educated the people and enlarge the diffusion of Marxist Thought. For this reason under the regime intellectuals were told how and what to write about and soon after Mao they were told to consider the social effect of their work. What happened in the eighties is that writers were called to face a domestic and 'international' issue. Within China it was their academic duty to produce a literature which discussed the past and yet different from the past, in fact what Scar Literature does is to unfold the past through singular stories, past events, leaving aside most of the political rhetoric, stressing people's hidden emotions. Outside the domestic walls, the authors of this genre didn't want to be identified with the Western style, they rather wanted to create new literature that was non-socialist and non-Maoist, yet uniquely Chinese. As a result, there is an interesting convergence of classical and traditional, realist and modern, collective and existentialist elements. It wouldn't be false to claim that Post Mao Literature is tied to a definition of self in a post-ideology China. Here lays the great leap forward of Chinese literature. Chinese people have always considered themselves as part of a group because they have always been treated as member of a group rather than individual. Confucianism, Taoism, Communism, as already mentioned above, overshadowed man by the application of society (family, clans, dynasty) for the sake of stability. Due the priority of a collective dimension over singular expression, the artistic representation was to follow the pattern given by society, for example the examination system. Already in used during Ming dynasty, scholars were chosen by testing their ability to write *paku* essay, basically a predefined structure where themes were taken from the Confucian classics, form, number of words and language were strictly prescribed. The obvious intention was to control intellectual ideas by reducing freedom of thought, originalities in style and personal views were judged as mistakes. The beauty of individuality was all in all a threat. What we assist in the past 30 years, starting with Scar Literature, is the attempt to turn inward a millenarian process of de-personalization by recalling the dignity of human life. If we were to compare the literary process in nowadays China, it stands as opposite to the Western happening: a fragmented and fragmenting individual is the message left in heredity from the Avant

Guard: slow decomposition of man and structure is the key to understand Cubism. The clear and distinguishable image of man contemplating nature or man challenging it, leaves space to a reality that is together multi-shaped and irrational. It's a snow ball: the process of liberation, the enlighten path of a reason that potentially discovers and explains the universe, stretched to the limits ends up into a detailed dissolution of every shape. Man crying out his unspeakable anguish assumes distorted and un-recognizable features (Munch). Finally human beings succumb to the contradiction of modernity, the evil of everyday life, until completely disappearing from the picture (Rotcko). An empty canvas is all is left of centuries of achievements. Western artistic representation is a process that from unity tends towards fragmentation, dissolution, it somehow foresees the end of a civilization. But in China we assist now to a reverse process: trying to recompose an identity that was scattered, ill-treated for centuries, is the real challenge. Post Cultural Revolution period is one of the culturally most devastating phenomena of Chinese modernity, it is the awakening of people consciousness and the revelation of a Self. Among young intellectuals toying with the idea of new values and ideals there are ex Red Guards that until the day before were told to restrain one owns Self for to have a Self means to be selfish, to be selfish means to be individualist, to be individualist means to be bourgeois and bourgeois shall disappear. Now the new literary path suggests that they were quite wrong after all. From this stand point, bringing together the concept of individual is the dramatic task of Chinese Literature in the past decades, suggesting a new national identity where individual claims and the Party exigence might go along. Of course it can't be denied that Chinese process of unification has to go through a moment of dissolution as well. The impression is that contemporary China before being able to find a new identity is fated to go through a process of fragmentation, *Socialism with Chinese characteristic* is a moment when values, consolidate understanding, literature, art, language, music, the amalgam of a whole civilization comes loose. If on one hand it is expression of individualism, on the other hand it is erosion of tradition, and here lies the real issue. If Scar Literature had to deal only with the need to describe an individuality damaged by the logic of ideology, today's literature has to deal with an identity damaged by the logic of marketization. The transaction from Socialist China to Post-Socialist China before being an economic switch, is an ethical change. The problem is that China was not backed up by an outside authority. The Western world before any cultural change or secular movement, was parachuted by the power of religion which somehow always pointed the way, Chinese contest had first in the family orientated system and then in Mao a background of morality to fall on. But in the new Chinese society the authority the individual can rely on is individual itself which is an expression not well defined yet. From here the ideological moral vacuum an evident disengagement from the historical present, whose victims feel the need to buy a new phone model every six months to satisfy their desire to belong somewhere. Twenty-thirty years old youngster looking for a social definition, some of them have assisted the government's crackdown at Tiananmen. In addition to this, they grew up on a quite confusing cultural background which is the result of an overlapping of cultural paradigm. They are brought up with the Confucian ideal of filial piety, which means first and foremost respect for the others, and suddenly they found themselves living in a world that tolerate and advise individualism, competitiveness, auto-referential egoism. They are ask to fulfill duties that modernity denies, to have an identity in a world that changes every day, to be modern and traditional,



conservative and liberal, to memorize Mao's speeches and embrace the opportunity offered by capitalism. It comes alone, the conclusion of this cultural overdose it couldn't be but fragmentation, isolation, disintegration. An immense ideological vacuum is the prize to be paid to step into modernity even more acute if we think that the theoretical framework on which the Western world based the condition for an individualistic society, a state with a strong democracy belief and welfare support, are still missing in China. Post-Mao China, which is as well Post-Cultural Revolution China, Post-Gang of Four China, Post-Ideology China, produced an autonomous intellectual reform which breaks with the previous socialist realism or revolutionary realism: it focuses on the utopia of the past decades, through the exploration of stream of consciousness, magic realism, psychological realism, reviewing with the eyes of a witness the main scenes of an era, from time to time bureaucratism, broken family, poverty, romance, power abuse, brave expectation. To some degree we might refer to a Freudian phenomenon which by no means deals with sexual psychoanalyses or unconscious repressed desire but it lies on the attempt to describe hidden dimensions such as the depth of human soul or people's suffering, whose expressions were denied before. I dare to assume that the problematization of individuality in Chinese contest, as it emerges in vitro from Scar Literature, must be seen as a larger discourse about Chinese people and a national allegory. The readings presented here though can't be exhaustive of Chinese modern literary panorama, however can be used as a tool for a deductive process: the exploration of subjectivity constitutes the bulk of contemporary art, literature, aesthetics, all aware of the humanist quest for Chinese's soul after for few decades it dissolved into the impersonality of the masses. Through their work, authors examined the collective Chinese experience from a cultural and aesthetic point of view and much less from a historical one. Quite soon the artistic process of self-discovering brought to root-searching literature: Han Shaogong, Shen Congwen, Ah Cheng, Li Hangyu Mo Yan, whose subjective vision and monologue used as surrealist amalgam, recall strongly Western modernism and the experience of Latin American Magic realism. Theirs is an art fed by notion of Chinese fiction and Western literary trends, the anger that more often than not surfaces the narration is balanced by the increasing openness in Chinese society. Experiments in modernism, notion of individuality, ideas of subjectivity, quest for self are all predicament well disclosed somewhere else<sup>79</sup>, thus I won't stress here what is probably the greatest accomplishment of Chinese modernity. However I would like to emphasize one last aspect regarding the ambivalent relation intellectuals-State: while the future of Western literature is to be decided by history, it is the political arena what shapes the future of Chinese literature, needless to say that the affirmation of the role of the writers and the message they carry is probably the key factor for a modern China. The Western process of modernity is a process that we might consider starting with the Renaissance, though the idea itself of a progress, as a line that that keeps moving forward, plunges its very roots into the Jewish-Christian thought. However after the Renaissance,

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<sup>79</sup> For a discourse on Chinese search for individual identity see Anne Wedell-Wedellsborg, "The ambivalent Role of the Chinese Literary Critic in the 1980s", in Wendy Larson and Ann Wedell-Wedellsborg, eds., *Inside Out: Modernism and Postmodernism in Chinese Literary Culture* (Aarhus University Press, 1993). See also from the same author "The Changing concept of Self as Reflected in Chinese Literature of the 1980s", in Viviane Alletone, ed., *Notion et Perceptions du Changement en Chine* (College de France, Paris, 1994)

it is in the XVIII century, the Age of Enlightenment that the Western civilization re-discovers a free overwhelming thinking and the spectacle of technical progress will let individual to stand in focus providing condition for the developing of a Self. China is no different. Modernity is associated to the idea of liberation of individual, the right to purpose personal goals and the exceptional depth of our reasoning: the beauty of our consciousness, even though is a tragic consciousness, stands among all the others human accomplishment. Of course the expression of individuality might as well bring disagreement, -Scar Literature in fact has opened the view to an ocean of questions- but it shouldn't be a problem if we consider what really matters. What matters for Existentialist and Scar Literature is not to justify the truth left behind but to discover a new one. Ernst Dvinger in *Diary of Siberia* tells the story of an officer that being kept prisoner built up a wooden piano and he would play it without producing any sound reminding us the beauty of human intelligence before the tragedy. Art produces beauty and beauty teaches us that we create history according to what we believe being true.

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