“Art Is to Sacrifice One’s Death”:

The Aesthetic and Ethic of the Chinese Diasporic Artist Mu Xin

by

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Leo Ching

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master
of Arts in Critical Asian Humanities in the Department of
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ABSTRACT

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In his world literature lecture series running from 1989 to 1994, the Chinese diasporic writer-painter Mu Xin (1927-2011) provided a puzzling proposition for a group of emerging Chinese artists living in New York: “Art is to sacrifice.” Reading this proposition in tandem with Mu Xin’s other comments on “sacrifice” from the lecture series, this study examines the intricate relationship between aesthetics and ethics in Mu Xin’s project of art. The question of diasporic positionality is inherent in the relationship between aesthetic and ethical discourses, for the two discourses were born in a Western tradition, once foreign to Mu Xin. Examining his life and his works in different media, I trace the intellectual genealogy of his works to Lu Xun and Lin Fengmian’s exchange on aesthetics in the late 1920s. Then, I examine how Mu Xin reinvented their aesthetic-cum-ethical project to shape his social role as an artist in the world. Finally, comparing him to a similar Chinese diasporic artist Gao Xingjian, I put Mu Xin’s artistic image in relation to the political position that he inhabited as a diasporic artist. I argue that Mu Xin not only vigorously forwarded an ethical project in pursuit of humanness with his advice on art but also envisioned such humanness to be a meditative process of social activity instead of any essential state of being or sentimentality in a singular mind. Through such an artistic project, Mu Xin managed to participate in reforming the static boundaries of culture and nation-state, such that he carried out a political project through fictional means, making the world more adaptive to individuals living within it.
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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Carlos Rojas, for guiding my year-long journey of finding my language to start talking about Mu Xin, an artist that is immediately so complicated in both the concrete and the creative worlds he inhabits. I thank Dr. Rojas for his astute commentary, truthful feedback, and prompt responses to all the problems that I have encountered along the way. As his advisee and a graduate student at Duke, I have truly matured as a scholar from working with Dr. Rojas closely in the past years, while I am still in awe of his diligence, his work ethic, and his rational approach to difficult problems. I would also like to thank Dr. Eileen Chow and Dr. Leo Ching for being on my committee. I am enormously grateful for their time, their investment, and their feedback.

Moreover, this project would not have been possible if it were not for the words of encouragement from Dr. Eileen Chow, Dr. Emily Sun at Barnard College, and Dr. Yang Chia-hsien at National Tsinghua University. Each of them has trusted my instinct in studying this obscure topic and offered me immense emotional support at moments that I doubted the worth of my effort, my ability to realize my vision, and was about to give up my project. In addition to reassuring me, they have also provided me with guidance in terms of promising directions I should pursue and ways to manage my many research interests. I am deeply humbled by their sincere words of wisdom and kindness to me, while I aspire to become teachers like them in the future.
I also owe a sizable intellectual debt to my fellow researchers working on the life and works of Mu Xin: To Dr. Ouyang Kaibin in Hong Kong, whose dedication to popularizing the academic research of Mu Xin was respectful, and who has generously shared with a green graduate student his research, his truthful opinions, and his resources. To Mr. Xia Chunjin of Tongxiang, Zhejiang Province, who has generously shared with me the current archival situation of Mu Xin. His thorough archival research and publications were central to my research, especially given the COVID-19 circumstances in the past year.

To all my old friends from New York City, and my new friends in Durham at Duke University. While I wrote out of my affection for Mu Xin’s determination to find his community as a penniless stranger in a new country, you are my community and my family as I move around the US and the world. You are my inspiration. This study is about the story of Mu Xin, but also a story of myself with all of you. Thank you all for your warmth and fondness throughout the years.

Lastly, to Roy Auh, for your sharp editorial eyes and your unconditional support for every decision I make along the way. Thank you for bearing up and walking me through all my frustrations, and for sharing with me your sincere thoughts on my project whenever I needed them, in addition to being a caring and respectful partner in life. You have always been my rock. And finally, to mom and dad. They have minimal interest in my project and their English is still not good enough to read it, but they have
trusted me, cheered for me, and remained proud of me all the way. You are the best parents that I could have ever wished for.
1. Introduction

On January 4, 1994, at the artist Chen Danqing’s residence in New York, the 67-year-old Chinese expatriate writer-painter Mu Xin 木心 (1927-2011) gave the concluding notes to his history of world literature lecture series:

In the future, we cannot meet every two weeks any more. It is possible that we will only get to meet once every two months, or two years. I need to say something that will be useful for your whole life. Forewarned is forearmed. Whether you will put it into practice or not, you are at liberty to do whatever you want. I only say that something to you on my part. What is it? Here is an outline:

- Literature is endearing.
- Life is fun.
- Art is to sacrifice.

(While I was looking through my own notes, I found myself writing from this point on and on without a pause. Evidently, in all these years, my thoughts can do without an outline. I know I have finished writing. I have constructed my literary views at last.) (Memoir of Literature 1067)

以後，不可能兩個星期見面，很可能兩個月、兩年見一面。我要講大家一辈子有用的東西。講了，有備無患。你們用不用，悉聽尊便，我只管我講。是哪些呢，分分綱目：

- 文學是可愛的。
- 生活是好玩的。
- 藝術是要有所犧牲的。

(翻原稿，發現我就此寫下去，沒有停頓地寫完了，可見那麼多年，我的思想可以沒有綱目。我知道我寫完了，算是把我的文學觀點架構起來了。)
Figure 1: Mu Xin on the final session of the lecture series, *The Tale of Mu Xin*.

Over the course of five years, Mu Xin gave a total of 85 lectures to a small group of young Chinese artists living in New York in the late 20th century. Following loosely the world literature textbook *The Outline of Literature* 文學大綱 that Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸 compiled and translated from Western sources in 1923, Mu Xin commented upon almost every author and philosophical thinker that shaped his understanding of art until that point. Instead of giving a scholarly review, Mu Xin put them in relation with his personal experience of reading, the social history of his time, his interest in artists that work beyond the literary medium, and his own creative works. Finally, with the final lecture here, as he put in the parenthesis, Mu Xin retrospectively structured his

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2 Mu Xin first read Zheng Zhenduo’s *Outline of Literature* when he was a child. It is unclear whether Mu Xin had Zheng’s book at hand at the time of his lecture series. While Zheng’s original text ended at the early 20th century literature, Mu Xin’s syllabus expanded 30 more lectures on the literary trends and genres in between the early 20th century and the early 1990s. Most significantly, Mu Xin added two more lectures on “philosophers that influenced twentieth century literature.” In Zheng Zhenduo’s original project, philosophy was not part of Zheng’s concern, but Mu Xin insisted philosophical grounding is needed to understand post-20th century literature. There, Mu Xin discussed Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Bergson, and Freud.
understanding of literature and art that he had been developing for decades through those artists.

In a slightly different form, this relationship between “art” and “sacrifice” from Mu Xin’s ending note runs throughout his literary lecture series and his other commentaries on his own arts. At different points in the lecture series, Mu Xin evaluated the artistic achievement of figures in his world literature canon on their behavior of xundao 殉道, meaning to sacrifice for dao 道. This concept of xundao adds another dimension to Mu Xin’s concluding advice that “art is to sacrifice,” as it gives the sacrifice a specific yet abstruse purpose: the dao. Literally translated to “path,” dao is a play on Confucian–Daoist–Buddhist conceptions of the Way, as well as the notion of religion in general, especially when dao is read in the word “殉道者 [xundaozhe, martyr]” or in context of Christian authors that Mu Xin commented on. With this concept of xundao, moreover, Mu Xin offered insights into how the sacrifice that he later advised on should be carried out. Throughout the lecture series, he further combined the concept of “sacrifice” that he would eventually single out as a structural clue with the idea of dao when he coined the expression “to sacrifice for dao by giving up one’s death 不死而殉道” from the saying “to sacrifice for dao by giving up one’s life 以死殉道.” In a separate interview from 2000, commenting on his own manuscript and paintings, Mu Xin’s notion of “sacrifice” reappeared in a more concise term as “to sacrifice one’s death 生殉,” contrasted against the more intuitive “to sacrifice one’s life 死殉” (The Art of Mu Xin 143).
Although the advice provided an entrance to what art meant to Mu Xin, it is immediately difficult to make sense of what his “sacrifice” actually entails because of the vague categories of “art,” “life,” and “dao.” Mu Xin’s layered advice is roughly a tripartite process: something is given up (“art is to sacrifice”), in a certain way (“to sacrifice one’s death”), and for a specific purpose (“to sacrifice for dao”). None of these steps grants an intuitive understanding.

From the phrasing of the first step, it is unclear whether it should be read as “to make art needs one to make a sacrifice” or “art itself is the process of one’s sacrifice.” Both readings require the artists to give up something in their lives. The difference is, while the first reading implies “art” to be the final purpose of sacrifice that is equivalent to the dao, the second reading claims “art” to be the manner of sacrifice rather than its final purpose. Is “art” for “dao” or the “dao” itself, regardless of how Mu Xin defines the two concepts? Can “art” both is and for “dao” at the same time? The second step of this vision is likewise difficult to comprehend, because “to sacrifice one’s death” is an oxymoronic description of how the sacrifice should be performed. Calling something a “sacrifice” implies the sacrificed thing to be of value, so that relinquishing it is a dreadful act. For instance, the common saying “to sacrifice one’s life” assumes life to be of utmost value and thus its sacrifice to be ultimate. In comparison, Mu Xin’s formulation “to sacrifice one’s death” renders one’s death a more valuable thing than

_3_ This ambiguity is true for both the original Chinese text “藝術是要有所犧牲的” and my translation, “Art is to sacrifice.”
one’s life. How is that possible? In what circumstance, and what about one’s death that makes it more valuable than one’s life? Finally, as spoken earlier, the problem of translating dao indicates the ambiguity of this purpose Mu Xin seemingly provided with his advice. Especially, if the reading “art itself is the process of one’s sacrifice” stands true in the first step, artmaking becomes an incessant sacrifice that traps the artist eternally. Why would someone trap oneself in an incessant loop of relinquishing valuable things without a clear return? It is thus imperative to clarify the untranslatable dao, as it might imply the ethos that motivates the artist to live on.

While to comprehend Mu Xin’s art certainly demands clarifying those questions inherent in his proposal to “sacrifice,” understanding why Mu Xin’s proposal to “sacrifice” contains those specific inherent problems is a more significant project. These questions evoked by the ambiguous proposal to sacrifice speak to a central difficulty that artists have commonly encountered since the Modern time: namely, how an artist navigates through the discourse of aesthetics and other ethical obligations: What is “art” for? What is given up and what else is produced in making it? This difficulty has been established since the pre-Kantian time and normalized globally through the Westernizing process of Modernization.

In his seminal book Ideology of the Aesthetic (1990), Terry Eagleton traces back to the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten (1714-1762) to show how the discourse of aesthetics emerged through a contrast between ethical and aesthetic judgements, or the generalities of reason and the particularities of sense. Aesthetic cognition—according
to Baumgarten and later Kantian philosophers—bridges an assumed gap between human’s creaturely life and human’s reasoning mind. However, Eagleton argues through historicizing this discourse of aesthetics that such a discourse negotiating a separated aesthetic and ethical judgement “is from the beginning a contradictory, double-edged concept” (28). On one hand, the discourse of aesthetics tends to separate art from other human activities. It proclaims itself “a genuinely emancipatory force” that is distinct from the normative boundaries, such as laws and moralities (28). On the other hand, in its very act of claiming its separation from everything else in a normal and material life, the aesthetic is “inserting social power more deeply into the very bodies of those it subjugates, and so operating as a supremely effective mode of political hegemony” (28). In other words, aesthetics cannot be autonomous from politics because claiming such a separate discourse exists is a political act in itself.

The questions that Mu Xin’s proposal to “sacrifice” raised are consistent with Eagleton’s skepticism about the autonomy of aesthetic judgement. The aesthetic judgement that inhabits a fictive and stylistic discourse in Mu Xin’s proposal seems to emancipate itself as an autonomous discourse from ethical obligations at first. In name of “art/literature,” aesthetic judgement assumes a parallel structure juxtaposed against (and thus separated from) the normative “life”: “Literature is endearing. /Life is fun.” However, this rhetorical emancipation implies a collusion with the hegemony of language, since the separation itself relies on the normalizing force of language drawing the boundary between concepts and giving names to Mu Xin’s two realms of concerns as
“life” and “art/literature.” In other words, through language, Mu Xin’s discourse of aesthetics in “art” and “literature” creates a space for itself and holds for itself as autonomous. More explicitly highlighting the artificiality in separating “art/literature” and “life,” the third line “[a]rt is to sacrifice” implies that “art” is not a natural category somewhere to be found but necessarily constituted by one’s action of “to sacrifice” in real life. Consequently, “art is to sacrifice ” reveals that to probe the question of how to reconcile Mu Xin’s aesthetics and ethics is really to ask in what way this so considered aesthetic and ethical judgements are implicated within each other. For example, as an artistic member of the human world, how is Mu Xin’s ethical pursuit of “dao” being expressed aesthetically in his creative works? In reverse, how did Mu Xin’s aesthetic for a particular kind of “art” fit in with his ethical duty of “dao” to the history and the society that he survived?

To understand the problem of aesthetics and ethics implicit in his artistic project more fully, thinking about Mu Xin’s understanding of art in dialogue with the ethical-cum-ideological Western discourse of aesthetics poses an ensuing question on his cultural positionality as an artist originated from a third world country but later relocated to the West. Born in 1927 to an affluent family in Wuzhen, a town in between Shanghai and Hangzhou, Mu Xin was educated mostly through the classical private tutoring during the war time and was trained in classical Chinese painting in his early
years. Because of his father’s business in the cosmopolitan city of Shanghai, however, Mu Xin was not unfamiliar with the idea of “the West.” Most interestingly, through family connections, Mu Xin was allowed to borrow from the collection of world literature in translation from the nearby family library of Mao Dun 茅盾. In 1943, the 17-year-old Mu Xin moved to Hangzhou to prepare for applying to the Hangzhou National Art Academy 國立杭州藝術專科學校, one of the first schools that promoted the Western method of training in China, and then in 1946, Mu Xin left Hangzhou for Shanghai to study Western painting at the Shanghai Fine Arts College 上海美術專科學校.

Nonetheless, Mu Xin did not get to experience “the West” beyond its literature, art, and education, as well as a few Westerners he met in the greater Shanghai area, until he moved to the United States in 1982 at the age of 55 years old. Initially registered as a student at the Art Students League in Manhattan and later became a permanent resident, he worked in New York City as a painter and writer under the pen name “Mu Xin” for 24 years. Since Mu Xin did not get to publish in writing or in painting in China

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4 I owe the information on Mu Xin’s biography to the archival works of Xia Chunjin 夏春錦, as published in Muxin kaosuo 木心考索 [Exposition of Mu Xin] (2019) and Wenxue de lubinxun 文學的魯賓遜 [The Robinson Crusoe of Literature] (2020). I cited mostly from “Chapter 6: Chronology” from Xia’s book Muxin kaosuo while crosschecking it with other articles written by Mu Xin’s past acquaintances, as they have been published in different Chinese magazines.

5 For more information, see Xia Chunjin’s article “Muxin yu maodun 茅心與茅盾” in Muxin kaosuo, p. 113-129. Mao Dun did not live in Wuzhen when Mu Xin was growing up there, but since Mao Dun’s mother moved back to Wuzhen in 1930, Mao Dun still visited Wuzhen frequently and brought many books over to the library. Mu Xin was connected to borrow from Mao Dun’s personal collection through a common family friend Huang Miaoxiang 黃妙祥, who helped managed Mao Dun’s family library at that time.

6 The academy did not have programs for different mediums under Western painting. All students in the Department of Western Painting (“西畫系”) were trained in sketching, watercolor painting, anatomy, and painting from human models, in addition to theoretical and language classes in Chinese and English. For Mu Xin’s transcripts at Shanghai Fine Arts College, see Xia’s Muxin kaosuo, p. 93-99.
due to the political changes in the country at that time, almost all of Mu Xin’s writings and paintings known today came from this New York period. In 2006, Mu Xin moved back to his hometown Wuzhen and passed away five years later, in 2011. From these details of his life, Mu Xin was attached to both a Westernizing China and a productive West that enabled the bulk of his arts.

Mu Xin’s expatriation thus provides the basis of what Rey Chow terms as “the lures of diaspora”: Chinese intellectuals working in the first world are hailed by the hegemonic discourse of the West as “spokesperson for ‘natives’ in the ‘third world’” (99). The “lures of diaspora” complicate how the aesthetic and ethic of Mu Xin’s artistic project need to be perceived culturally. “The lures” interpellate third world intellectuals to fall in an impossible identification with the Orientalist discourse in the first world hegemony. The Orientalist discourse turns the Chinese subjects into objects of Western gaze, while it makes the Western spectators the master-subject. When an expatriate Chinese intellectual instead of a Western scholar occupies the space of subject in this discourse, nonetheless, the Chinese object brings alienation to the Chinese intellectual’s own identity, while the Western master-subject demands the Chinese intellectual’s surrender of agency. The “lures of diaspora” thus creates a dilemma, where the

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7 In between 1957 and 1982, whenever he was not in political troubles, Mu Xin worked at various design and editing departments in China. Some of his early design works are still available. However, Mu Xin did not publish his creative works in writing or fine arts before all his manuscripts were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. The only exceptions were a manuscript that Mu Xin wrote when he was imprisoned at the Red Guard people’s prison in 1972 and a set of microscopic painting he made when he was under house arrest from 1977-79. Mu Xin sneaked those works out by sewing them into his pants’ paddings. See more in Art of Mu Xin: Landscape Paintings and Prison Notes (2011).
diasporic Chinese intellectual cannot politically align with either the victimized Chinese object or the Western master-subject.

In Rey Chow’s original analysis, “the lures” usually produce two kinds of aesthetic-cum-political images, through which diasporic intellectuals present their presumed cultural origin:

Depending on the political interest of the person, “Chinese difference” (by which is usually meant Chinese identity) may take the form of a reactionary confirmation of traditional, humanistic attitudes toward “culture” and “knowledge,” or it may assume a liberal guise by reading Chinese culture in terms of the Bakhtinian “dialogic” and “carnivalesque.” (109)

These two images summarize most of the scholarly comments on Mu Xin. For example, for Mu Xin’s 2001 touring exhibition entitled “Art of Mu Xin: Landscape Paintings and Prison Notes,” the art historian Richard M. Barnhart contributed a catalogue essay entitled “Landscape Painting at the End of Time.” There, Mu Xin is conceived as a diasporic artist of the former kind, who produced what Chow called a “reactionary confirmation of traditional, humanistic attitudes toward ‘culture’ and ‘knowledge.’”

Framed in connection to the literati landscape painting genre of “yimin” (遺民 lit. trans.: leftover people), Mu Xin’s paintings are “directly associated with the artist’s psychological and personal life in China between 1977 and 1979,” “reactionary” to the political atmosphere of Cultural Revolution that gave birth to his paintings (23).

Meanwhile, integrating Western techniques into that literati tradition, the artist expresses a humanistic attitude while taking root in the Chinese tradition: “[Mu Xin’s paintings] take their place in the ancient tradition of landscape painting in China and the
world, giving new and disturbing yet, finally, cautious reassuring form to motifs invested with layer upon layer of humanistic associations and meanings that had slowly shaped and defined Chinese visual culture” (26). In contrast, Toming Jun Liu (Mu Xin’s US translator and Professor of English at California State LA) imagines Mu Xin as the latter kind, “reading Chinese culture in terms of the Bakhtinian ‘dialogic’ and ‘carnivalesque.’” Discussing Mu Xin’s writings in various places, Toming focuses on how Mu Xin reconfigures Chinese literary subjects with literary styles that are in dialogue with literary traditions around the world. In Toming’s imagination, Mu Xin retained the specific “nationness 民族性” while speaking to an international “worldness 世界性.” Both strands of criticism fail to imagine how a diasporic artist like Mu Xin could avoid the “lures of diaspora,” and consequently failing to find an ethical way out of the Western hegemony.9

Nevertheless, being recruited by this problematic “lures of diaspora” is not Mu Xin’s or other Chinese diasporic intellectuals’ only choice to participate in the Western society they work in. Chow personally provided a resolution of ethics instead of politics.

8 The two terms came directly from Toming Jun Liu’s journal article “世界性美學思維振復漢語文學 —— 木心風格的意義 [Global Aesthetic Thinking Revive Chinese Literature]” (2006). Similar thinking can be observed throughout Toming’s discussions of Mu Xin elsewhere. For instance, in his textbook surveying American literature, A History of American Literature (2003), written in English but for Chinese students of English literature, Mu Xin was situated in the last chapter, “Globalization of American Literature: Diaspora writers,” with Czeslaw Milosz, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and Vladimir Nabokov. There, Toming wrote in the same categories: “As it is what makes MuXin unique, the subtle and refined quality of Mu Xin’s Chinese style brings out a kind of internalization, invention and unconventionality reminiscent of the best in modern Western literature. …MuXin the author belies the trite view that whatever is native and nationalist is automatically international” (369).

9 The scholarly reception of Mu Xin is not the focus of my study, but I would like to point out that both strands of criticism contain the scholars’ own political projects that they scaffolded over Mu Xin’s aesthetic-cum-political project in their readings of his works.
She believes the Third World intellectuals should speak of their place of origin as they would like to but avoid speaking for that origin (Chow 117). This resolution still operates in the intercultural model, where both the concept of “origin” and the concept of diasporic “destination” are relatively stable concepts associated with boundaries of the modern nation-states. Mu Xin’s case perhaps posed an alternative to Rey Chow’s original resolution. The discourse of aesthetics, unlike the scholarly discourse that Rey Chow is immediately concerned about in her argument, does more than representing (in analyzing) the world objectively as it already exists through its various specificities. Rather, through means of imagination and fiction, the aesthetics discourse that Mu Xin engaged with is a political force in itself that allows creative border crossing and creation, expanding and shifting the existing borders of “origin” and “destination.” It gives rise to a transcultural model instead of an intercultural one, unlimited by its tie to the existing nation-state specificities. The connection between aesthetics and ethics in Mu Xin’s art thus allows the question for what Mu Xin’s diasporic ethics becomes in his political aesthetics.

With this study, I attempt to understand Mu Xin’s works in terms of the relationship of aesthetics and ethics and the diasporic positionality through this conclusive notion of “sacrifice,” provided by the artist himself for his understanding of the arts. The first chapter focuses on Mu Xin’s discourse of sacrifice in explaining what Mu Xin meant by “art is to sacrifice one’s death,” as well as the meaning of “dao.” In particular, by teasing out the influence of Nietzschean and Daoist thoughts on his
notion, I trace the discourse of sacrifice in Mu Xin’s aesthetic-cum-political project to his survival of the May Fourth intellectuals’ debates on the ethical duty of arts and artists. I specifically investigate the exchanges around the notion of “rendao” (人道, loosely translated to “humanness”) between Lu Xun 魯迅 and Lin Fengmian 林風眠, two intellectuals that influenced Mu Xin the most in his youth. I argue that the two artists’ indirect influence on Mu Xin provided him with both a theoretical framework to structure his aesthetics and a degree of freedom to develop his own view on this aesthetic-cum-ethical discourse of sacrifice through a critical revision of their images.

The second chapter examines how Mu Xin’s arts interpret his theoretical discourse of sacrifice. Reconciling the art historian Wu Hung’s comment about Mu Xin as an artist who erases reality with Mu Xin’s determination to “sacrifice,” I assess what is gone, what is left, and what is produced in the various dimensions of “reality” that Mu Xin’s paintings and writings operate upon. Analyzing the aspects of intermediality and materiality in his arts, I connect the final effect that Mu Xin’s arts possess to his pursuit of “humanness.” I observe that this “humanness” for Mu Xin is not some obvious human quality that exists in absolute and singular form but is created through a form of sociality, which presents itself through intersubjective understanding and mediation.

The third chapter pays attention to the situatedness of Mu Xin’s interest in “humanness” in the post-Mao intellectual history of mainland China, especially during the 1980s. This historical connection between Mu Xin and the Chinese intellectual
discourse creates a bond for him with mainland China, despite working overseas. To see how Mu Xin is bound to a discursive China as a diasporic artist, I compare Mu Xin to the Chinese-French artist Gao Xingjian, who similarly engaged with the concept of individual humanness in the late 1980s and the 1990s from overseas. In Gao Xingjian’s case, while he rejects the ideology associated with the image of “China” through his life and arts, his rejection of it only reinforces the ideological categories and roots him deeper in this image of “China.” Different from Gao, Mu Xin accepted his connection to “China” on the one hand but transformed the ideological categories connected to “China” on the other. In this way, with Deleuze and Guattari’s critical terms, Mu Xin radically deterritorialized and reterritorialized the image of “China” through writing from a diaspora position and created a rhizomatic root of “China” for himself.
2. Mu Xin and the May Fourth Legacy

In his five-year lecture series, Mu Xin gradually unfolded his literary map of the world from the classical period all the way to the current time of his lecture. Beginning with the mythologies from the Greek antiquity period and finishing with the mid-20th century magical realism and neorealism from South America, Mu Xin traversed adroitly across time periods and cultures as he discussed literature and art with his students. However, holding together the sweeping range of his lecture series, two distinct strands of philosophical thought stood as the steady ground to the temporal and geographical boundaries on his world map: the philosophies of the 20th-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and the classical Chinese intellectual tradition of Daoism that passed from Laozi to Zhuangzi to the Wei-Jin literary men. As he owed the theoretical structure of his engagement with the world arts to these two philosophical influences, so did his final words in the lecture series about art being a sacrifice of one’s death.

Both Nietzsche and Zhuangzi have offered arguments on why one should go on living even in situations that call for death to be the more desirable course of action. For Nietzsche, he argues as such through his concept of the Overhuman (Übermensch), which has appeared under multiple names in The Birth of Tragedy (1872), Daybreak (1881), and Thus Spoke Zarathustra (1883). Through characters such as the fire-stealing Prometheus, the thinker in eternal solitude, and the bearer-of-burden Zarathustra, respectively, Nietzsche prophesies that an Overhuman will come into the world by enduring a
particular kind of suffering from living in the world.¹ The Overhuman will suffer from breaking the worldly laws, transcending conventional moralism, staying faithful to his own will, and maximizing his highest potential to progress humanity, and the person who can endure the greatest amount of such suffering manifests the greatest of the humankind. The weaker and lesser humans who cannot bear the burden of enduring such suffering, exploring the will, and progressing humanity on their own backs must instead be carried into the future of humanity as they learn from the Overhuman’s teachings. Since only those with the existential capacity to endure such burden of progressing humanity can rise to become an Overhuman, it can be said that in Nietzschean ethics, to break formulated moralism and to suffer from defying it becomes not only an ethical obligation but also, most importantly, a performative “willed” action for those who have such unique potential.²

Similar to Nietzsche, Zhuangzi found meaning in living through normally undesirable situations, living despite having to endure one’s suffering. By continuing to live, one could potentially achieve unity with the heavenly pattern, or the Way (道 dao). To achieve such unity with the Way is the supreme virtue for Zhuangzi. His ideal ethical individual is who appreciates the natural forms and provisions of life that they already

¹ On Nietzsche’s argument for a “titanic individual” in The Birth of Tragedy with the Dionysiac, Aeschylean Prometheus as the figurehead, see p. 62-65 in The Birth of Tragedy (New York: Anchor Books, 1956). On the solitude “thinker” see Book 5 from Daybreak. While both the titanic individual and the thinker images are important prequals to the concept of “Overhuman,” the concept itself is found in Thus Spoke Zarathustra.
possess over the normative values that impose upon them what a good life for them should be. In regards to considering conventional values as not universally good, he is similar to Nietzsche. However, living an ethical life for Zhuangzi does not require one to live as a lawbreaker or a risk taker that Nietzsche’s Overhuman is. One is not explicitly required to sacrifice a comfortable life to fight for a future vision yet to be imagined. For Zhuangzi, one could still appreciate one’s natural life by allowing the Way to proceed as it will and doing one’s best to live a small part of it. "人間世 [The Realm of Human]” chapter, for example, gives a brief sketch of a physically deformed person called “支離 [Splay-limb Shu].” Splay-limb Shu is not a leader of the people or a Nietzschean Overhuman. On the contrary, his physical deformity excludes him from being enlisted into the army and becoming a conventional hero of any sort. Still, Zhuangzi sees the normally undesirable destiny of Splay-limb Shu under a positive light, in terms of how it allowed him to survive the war and live out his naturally granted longevity: “With splayed limbs, he is still able to keep himself alive and to live out the years Heaven gave him. What if he had splayed Virtue?” Splayed-limb Shu’s virtue is not in how he abides by the Confucian virtues of societal duties, but in how he fulfilled a universal pattern of the Way through living as a small part of it.

Mu Xin’s notion of sacrifice reflects a combination of Nietzsche’s and Zhuangzi’s ethics by reading them in each other’s terms. Fundamentally, Mu Xin valued Zhuangzi’s

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naturalism, where each individual plays a part in the universe, over the heroic individualism of Nietzsche. In his world literature lecture series, Mu Xin particularly argued that whatever good the Overhuman can bring cannot reach the general humanity, since the social environment has never produced a generation of people that can receive the Overhuman’s teachings and move forward with him: “Nietzsche prophesied that an Overhuman will come, but it is only a dream of the theory of evolution. I believe this Overhuman will never come. Individual artists who resembled the Overhuman have been born long ago—and have died long ago. They cannot benefit mankind and have nothing to do with mankind.”

(Memoir of Literature 797) Rejecting Nietzsche’s Overhuman theory as unrealistic thinking, Mu Xin nonetheless retained the Overhuman’s characteristic will to suffer and to sacrifice. Through this will, Mu Xin read Zhuangzi’s ethic of following the natural forms of life as a willed performance of inaction, rather than a resting state of languid passivity: “Nietzsche was devoted to the world, so he went into madness. Zhuangzi was acting madness, but he was removed from the world. Acting is self-protective. Nietzsche did not know how to protect himself.” (763) Arguably, his performative reading of Zhuangzi’s survivalist ethic stays true to Zhuangzi’s project. However, as seen in the earlier passage, Zhuangzi does not consider surviving or living in less-than-ideal circumstances as an undesirable or sufferable situation, and therefore an act of sacrifice. This is where Mu Xin put a

4 “尼采預言‘超人’會降生——這是一場夢，還屬於進化論。我以為超人不會誕生的。個別藝術家作為超人，早就誕生了——早就死亡了。他們不會造福人類，和人類不相干的。”

5 “尼采是入世的，所以他瘋狂。莊子佯狂，但他是出世的。佯狂是為自保，尼采不知自保。”

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Nietzschean twist on Zhuangzi by calling the survival of life a form of “sacrifice,” imbibing it with the premise that living through suffering is a rejection of comfort of death: “Both Laozi and Zhuangzi support sacrificing for one’s faith by giving up one’s death.” (223)⁶ The attractiveness of death and the undesirability of living, crucial to the meaning of “sacrifice,” were Mu Xin’s Nietzschean reading of Zhuangzi’s philosophy.

From Nietzsche and Zhuangzi’s philosophies, Mu Xin obtained the philosophical ground for how living can be purposeful even at times of suffering. However, despite the centrality of Nietzsche and Zhuangzi’s ethics to Mu Xin’s final point of advice, what Mu Xin took away from Nietzsche and Zhuangzi to formulate his own idea is not the main focus of this chapter. Mu Xin’s eclectic borrowing from the two philosophers is a problematic phenomenon by itself. As critics of earnest moralism, appreciative of the ability to take multiple perspectives, Zhuangzi and Nietzsche are certainly comparable with each other. Nevertheless, the concept of “sacrifice” that Mu Xin came down with reveals more of their philosophical difference than similarities. It is unsettled why Mu Xin chose Nietzsche and Zhuangzi to guide his literary comments and advice to begin with, and how his relationship with Nietzsche and Zhuangzi shaped the above reading of them in his final advice.

Mu Xin was not the first Chinese intellectual that made the transcultural and transtemporal connection between Nietzsche and Zhuangzi’s philosophy. Such connection has been established ever since the introduction of Nietzsche to China at the

⁶ “老子、莊子，都提倡不死殉道。”
turn of the 20th century. In her research on Zhuangzi and Nietzsche’s influence on Chinese modern intellectuals, Mable Lee argues that the introduction of Nietzsche in the last decades of the Qing dynasty catalyzed a reaffirmation of the traditional individualism that is primarily based on the teaching of Zhuangzi (27). For instance, Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 (Chang Ping-lin in Mable Lee) (1869-1936) espoused a Confucian individualism that is characteristically Zhuangzi, a confident but unselfish version of individuals, and described it as being close to Nietzsche’s Overhuman (Lee 23-25). In the May Fourth Movement later, Nietzsche’s thoughts became a meaningful way to solve the existential problems of Chinese individuals in society and of the Chinese nation in the world (Lee 31). Among the May Fourth intellectuals, Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881-1936) was one of the most influential figures that engaged with both Nietzsche and Zhuangzi’s thoughts throughout his career. Lu Xun became situated within the Zhuangzi intellectual discourse when he mobilized attacks on different aspects of Zhuangzi’s philosophy to criticize his contemporary intellectuals. Yet on a more fundamental level, Lu Xun’s relationship with Zhuangzi was true to how Mu Xin described him, that “Zhuangzi’s thought is deep in his bones” (Mu Xin 205). As he pushed against Zhuangzi to establish his ideal Zarathustran “fighter” figure, Lu Xun embraced the core idea of a critical and selfless individual of Zhuangzi. This intellectual

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7 As Mabel Lee pointed out in her article “From Chuang-tzu to Nietzsche: On the individualism of Lu Hsun,” Zhang Taiyan’s Zhuangist reading of Nietzsche did not come from an interest directed in the text of Zhuangzi. Instead, Zhang was mostly interested in the Neo-Confucianist individualism that was heavily influenced by Zhuangzi. For primary text, see “On the Four Delusions” in Min-pao, 22 (Tokyo, 1908), p. 3.

8 “骨子裏都是莊子思想。”
history of Zhuangzi’s association with Nietzsche is crucial to Mu Xin’s reading and use of them in his own artistic project.

2.1 Lu Xun’s Sacrificial Narrative

On November 25, 1946, the Chinese Communist Party cell at the Shanghai Fine Arts College organized a group of students to discreetly attend the rally that commemorates the 10th anniversary of Lu Xun’s death, and to visit Lu Xun’s tomb at the Wanguo Public Cemetry 萬國公墓 on the next day. Mu Xin was among that group. One of the participants Wang Bomin 王伯敏 recalled the nineteen-years-old Mu Xin at that time:

This schoolmate Sun [Mu Xin] was from Wuzhen, Tongxiang, of the Zhejiang province. He dressed neatly and enjoyed reading the poems of Nietzsche. Quite a talented man. He was a liberalist, but he was also an active participant in the democratic movement that the student government organized, claiming that he aspired to become a nonpartisan revolutionary. (Wang 79)

這位姓孫的同學，是浙江桐鄉烏鎮人，穿著整齊，喜歡讀尼采的詩，有點才氣，是一個自由主義者，但又積極參加學生會的民主運動，聲言要做個無黨無派的革命者。9

9 The essay was first discovered by Xia Chunjin and published in his book Muxin kaosuo.
Figure 2: Mu Xin (6th from the left), Wang Bomin and 10 other students at Lu Xun’s grave (standing pose).

Figure 3: Mu Xin (1st on the right from Lu Xun’s portrait), Wang Bomin and 10 other students at Lu Xun’s grave (squatting pose).

The fact that Mu Xin was remembered here as a young man who “enjoyed reading the poems of Nietzsche” by Wang Bomin as they both secretly went to venerate Lu Xun in 1946 is not a coincidence. As one of the frontier propellers of Nietzschean thoughts during the May Fourth period, Lu Xun played a major role in how the philosopher Nietzsche came to Mu Xin’s literary map. Mu Xin had plenty of opportunities to learn about Nietzsche from Lu Xun’s effort before the commemoration event. Lu Xun started engaging with Nietzsche as early as the early 20th century, where he mentioned Nietzsche in his essays “摩羅詩力說 [On Mara Poets]” (1907) and “文化偏至論 [The Aberrancies of Culture]” (1908). From 1920 to 1924, The People’s Tocsin magazine 民鐸雜
published four different translations of the “Prologue” from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where Lu Xun’s translation was one of them. In the same publication, Mao Dun also published his translation on the “New Idol” and “The Flies in the Marketplace” sections from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. While the 13-year-old Mu Xin was reading extensively from Mao Dun’s library collection, it is possible that Mu Xin was first exposed to Nietzsche through the introduction of the May Fourth intellectuals, where Lu Xun stood in the spotlight. More definitely, three years after the commemoration event, Mu Xin went into the Moganshan Mountains for a reading and writing retreat, and he brought book-length translations of Nietzsche with him. From his later recollections of the books’ material, Mu Xin obtained Xu Fancheng’s translation, who was assisted by Lu Xun to translate Nietzsche’s *Ecce Homo, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Daybreak*, and *The Gay Science* into Chinese in the last years of Lu Xun’s life.10

Lu Xun’s thoughts and his reception of Nietzsche bear resemblance to Mu Xin’s concept of art as sacrifice as well as Mu Xin’s later clarification that such sacrifice is performed in one’s giving up the opportunity to die for a life of endless suffering. Take the iron house metaphor in Lu Xun’s “Preface” to *Call to Arms* (1922) for example. The metaphor begins when Lu Xun’s narrative “I” discusses the prospects of political creative writings with his friend and expresses his disillusionment with the initial hope for starting a literary movement to “change people’s spirit” in China (3):

10 The recollections of Mu Xin here refer to his letter to Guo Songfen, as will be quoted later in my essay. On Lu Xun “assisting” Xu Fancheng, Lu Xun contributed to Xu’s project mainly by pointing him to the volumes that need to be translated and helping him with the publication process.
Imagine an iron house without windows, absolutely indestructible, with many people fast asleep inside who will soon die of suffocation. But you know since they will die in their sleep, they will not feel the pain of death. Now if you cry aloud to wake a few of the lighter sleepers, making those unfortunate few suffer the agony of irrevocable death, do you think you are doing them a good turn? (5)

Lu Xun compared “the people of a weak and backward country,” the majority of Chinese people insusceptible to any spirit of life, to the people dying asleep in a suffocating iron house (3). The writings that can initiate a literary movement is the “cry” in the iron house. The outcry of writers can make a few others in the house “sacrifice one’s death” by alerting them of their deadly situation. In this way, ideally, the awakened few will give up their restful comfort, as they lay dying, to fight awake for a chance to change their deadly fate. As for this purpose of sacrifice, however, Lu Xun did not believe the country’s overall “spirit” or its mortal destiny could be changed simply by the awakening of the few, or share his friend’s “hope” that the irony house could be shattered with an artistic movement (5-6). Strangely, he proceeded with his friend’s suggestion to return to political creative writing. In this metaphor, the comfort in a peaceful “death” is being sacrificed through the writer’s artmaking that awakens a few

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others, whereas the purpose of this sacrifice remains that people are awakened by art to live in agony just for the sake of living in suffering in this artistic awakening itself.

Lu Xun’s seemingly tautological initiative to practice such a “sacrifice of one’s death” for the sake of suffering in such sacrifice resonates with Nietzsche’s thoughts through two courses of connections, one from the early 20th century and the other from the 1920s. There, the Zhuangist influence on his Nietzschean thoughts was already present. First, in his “iron house” metaphor, although dying in one’s sleep is desirable, Lu Xun saw more value in the importance of retaining one’s sensitivity to one’s inner spirit, even if such spirit is in agony. An early manifestation of this “inner spirit” can be found in his essay, “破惡聲論 [On Smashing the Voices of Evil]” (1908), when Lu Xun just began to explicitly engage with Nietzsche’s Overhuman theory. Different from his later pessimism demonstrated in the iron house metaphor, Lu Xun, at the time, still believed in the power for this inner brilliance to bring forth a full awakening of the mass people’s spirit. Yet in this early episode already, Lu Xun endorsed the “inner brilliance” (內曜) as an essential quality to possess against the current spiritual “hibernation” of Chinese individuals, despite him recognizing that such inner brilliance causes immediate panic among the crowd (Luxun quanji 8:23-24). Lu Xun’s appreciation for inner vigor is similar to Nietzsche’s emphasis on experience—being aware of one’s ever-changing feelings, the particular circumstances that trigger them, and one’s interpretations of the moment—as the basis of exploring alternative moralities and values.
Interestingly, Lu Xun’s attention to the vigor of life’s spirit here might have an underlying Daoist tone. Lu Xun’s “inner brilliance” here repeated the promotion of Nietzsche’s idea “of hope, of energy, of progress” from his earlier essay “摩羅詩力說 [On the Power of Mara Poetry]” (1907) where he criticized the philosophy of inaction, quoting Laozi as a figurehead, as he craved for a revolutionary poet-individual (Luxun quanji 1:67-68). While pushing against the Daoist tradition to advocate for social activism, “inner brilliance” nevertheless supported the Zhuangist inner enlightenment of individuals. It echoes Nakajima Tokuzō 中島德藏’s reading of Nietzsche in his 1901 lecture, “Nietzsche against Tolstoyism” (ニーチェ対トルストイ主義), which praises the Overhuman qualities of vigor, power, and beauty. It was an influential reading to the later “On an Aesthetic Lifestyle” (美的生活) debate among Japanese intellectuals on interpreting Nietzsche during the Meiji era, through which the young Lu Xun learned about the German thinker. There, Nakajima borrowed the term “free-and-easy wandering” (逍遙) from Zhuangzi (Parkes 188). Name of the first chapter in the book, “free-and-easy wandering” describes the experience where one achieves a radical detachment from the human life-world of relationship, duty, responsibility, ritual through roaming, such that one understands one’s existence in a new diversity of experiences. With this term, Nakajima claimed that Nietzschean virtue must be based on the “instinct” of the body. Furthermore, after quoting from Laozi’s Dao De Jing 道德經,
Nakajima maintained that “Laozi and Zhuangzi are in agreement with Nietzsche”
(Graham Parkes 188).\textsuperscript{12}

Later, Lu Xun’s favor for the human spirit in the iron house metaphor extended to his interest in Kuriyagawa Hakuson 厨川白村’s (1880-1923) book, *Symbol of Suffering* 虚構の象徴, which Lu Xun translated into Chinese as *Kumen de xiangzheng* 苦悶的象徵 in 1924. This event was the second course of connection between Lu Xun’s sacrificial narrative in the 1920s and the Nietzschean philosophy. In his introduction, Lu Xun took particular interest in Kuriyagawa’s concept that he translated into “the force of life” (生命力) (*Kumen de xiangzheng* ii). In his book, Kuriyagawa combined the philosophy of Nietzsche, Freud, Bergson, and other European philosophers to advance his own theory of literary creation. Kuriyagawa began with identifying a “force of life,” a wild gushing energy that is always seeking freedom and liberation, as the basis of human existence. Among many philosophical and literary characters raised as examples, Kuriyagawa finds Nietzsche’s *Overhuman* as one of the figures that emblematizes this thinking (*Kumen de xiangzheng* 2). However, Kuriyagawa also highlighted the fact that the struggle for existence simultaneously leads people to make willing compromises and submissions to their “social” and “moral beings” (*Kumen de xiangzheng* 7-9). The conflict between the forces of life and of society thus comprises its own narrative of sacrifice. People give up the force

\textsuperscript{12} For more discussion on the early association of Nietzsche and Zhuangzi, especially as it relates to the “On an Aesthetic Lifestyle” debate, see Chin-yee Cheung’s discussion in his book *Lu Xun: the Chinese “Gentle” Nietzsche* (Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2001), p. 153-154. Cheung speculates that Lu Xun probably did not read Tokuzō’s original essay as it was published on a highly specialized academic journal, but essay itself was influential to the later debate overall.
of life essential to their individuality to become generous, dutiful, and law-abiding members of families, societies, or nations, but their remaining desire for individuality causes them suffering and mental anguish while fulfilling their social roles.

Unlike Lu Xun’s ardent political optimism behind his early notion of inner brilliance, in Kuriyagawa’s narrative that Lu Xun was later drawn into, the purpose of sacrifice is an aesthetic one. As Lu Xun quoted Kuriyagawa in his introductory essay: “The suffering and regrets caused by the repression of the force of life are the root of literature and art, whereas their representation is Symbolism in a broad sense.” (Kumen de xiangzheng ii)\textsuperscript{13} Kuriyagawa found human suffering becoming valuable in the hand of an artist. As if having a painful image from the concrete reality reappearing in a harmless dream, the artist transforms suffering into art from a removed and symbolic perspective, while at an immediate and personal level remaining susceptible and knowledgeable to such suffering (Kumen de xiangzheng 19-30). In Lu Xun’s translation of Kuriyagawa, neither author made an explicit reference to Zhuangzi or Daoist thoughts. However, one can find a similar advocacy of maintaining multiple perspectives to see one’s suffering in Zhuangzi. As David B. Wong points out, Zhuangzi values the ability to comprehend one’s instinctive response from a dual perspective, especially when one is dealing with grief from personal loss. From a personal and human level, one recognizes having those emotions as essential to one’s humanness, while from a universal level, one withdraws from personal emotions to recognize the loss as a symbolic part to the natural

\textsuperscript{13} “生命力受了壓抑而生的苦悶懊惱乃是文藝的根柢，而其表現法乃是廣義的象徵主義。”
pattern of the universe, thus growing resilient to one’s emotional sufferings (Wong 214-216). As such, Kuriyagawa aesthetic project of human sufferings closely resembled the Zhuangist ethics in their endorsement of the capability to have a dual perspective.

These two courses trace the Zhuangist-Nietzschean philosophy’s connections to Lu Xun’s endorsement of human spirit, while suggesting Lu Xun’s possible influence on Mu Xin’s Zhuangist-Nietzschean claim that “art is to sacrifice one’s death.” In the iron house metaphor of Lu Xun, the two central aspects of Nietzsche and Zhuangzi’s thoughts that interested Mu Xin and produced his eclectic reading of them were already at play. Mu Xin’s emphasis on the active and performative role of the artist in sacrifice, as well as his refusal to reconceive pain and sufferings as a natural and pleasant experience through Zhuangzi’s experiential relativity, resonates with Lu Xun’s aversion to inaction and his determination to awaken people in the iron house from their paralyzing comfort to come into senses with their agony. Moreover, Mu Xin’s disbelief that a singular Overhuman can redeem the general situation of humanity, which led into his appreciation for Zhuangzi’s naturalism that conceives each individual as a small part to a greater whole, was already embedded in Lu Xun’s disbelief of the awakened few can ever shake the iron house.

Seeing Mu Xin’s narrative of sacrifice through Lu Xun’s Zhuangist-Nietzschean discourse of sacrifice clarifies some conceptual difficulties in Mu Xin’s advice—how death can be more desirable than life, and why this desirable death has to be given up. Since staying alive for the artist means neither a hope for changing the desperate
situation, nor a relative experience that can be understood as enjoyable, staying alive only means suffering for an artist who must live through the pain to create. Compared to this painful living, the death of the physical and/or mental is immediately more appealing. Death can bestow a spiritual comfort by releasing one from one’s pain in living permanently, or from one’s unceasing conflict between the human desire and vigor and the societal values and obligations. Thus, when the artist “sacrifices death,” the artist is really giving up a spiritual comfort to stay alive through pains and suffering. As seen in Lu Xun’s discussion of inner brilliance and his later translation of Kuriyagma’s “force of life,” sufferings in one’s survival provides the double basis to an artist’s vigorous humanness and symbolic creativity.

2.2 Sacrifice for “Rendao”

Despite the conceptual connection to Lu Xun’s discourse of sacrifice, the word “sacrifice” itself in Mu Xin’s advice remains slightly unfitting with Lu Xun’s project. “Sacrifice” not only implies that one gives up something better for a less desirable thing at the present moment, but also a hope for something better to happen in the foreseeable future, be it the iron house to be shattered, the artist-individual’s vigor of life to be heightened, or the artistic value to be generated by the artist’s suffering. If such a prospect is impossible to be realized, the artist would not be making a meaningful sacrifice but a terribly senseless decision to begin with. In Lu Xun’s particular case, it is more apparent over time that Lu Xun lacked such hope that makes his project a significant “sacrifice” per se.
For Lu Xun, the human vigor carried by the medium of art is only ephemeral, as well as any intrinsic value of symbolic art, for art is always consumed by political ideologies in all realistic revolutions. In his 1927 lecture, “魏晉風度及文章與藥及酒之關係 [The Style and Prose of the Wei-Jin Epoch and Their Connection with Wine and Drugs],” Lu Xun created an ideal character of the human spirit to illustrate the impossibility for art to transcend reality or politics. Through the Wen-Jin literary men, Lu Xun put a Nietzschean revision to figures traditionally associated with Zhuangzi’s thoughts. Though influenced by a Daoist lifestyle, the Wei-Jin literary men in Lu Xun’s portrayal do not dwell in the relativist and aestheticizing notion of perspectivism that Zhuangzi endorsed. Rather, they are closer to the law-breaking Overhuman who hold their own ethical convictions and are concerned with other people and politics in their society. Like Lu Xun’s contemporaries, these literary men cannot reconcile their own values and individuality with their contemporary time that they cannot change, such that they can only intoxicate themselves with alcohol to soothe their frustration (Luxun quanji 3:502). Notably, “intoxication” here is a positive concept associated with the vigor of life, such as Lu Xun wrote in “復仇 [Revenge]” in 1924: “the desperation to caress, kiss, and embrace: to experience life as intoxication and ecstasy.” (Luxun quanji 2:172) Nevertheless, Lu Xun’s appreciation for this intoxicated frenzy simultaneously shows his deviation from Kuriyagawa’s symbolic art project. Unlike Kuriyagawa’s artist, who is still able to separate dreams from reality like Nietzsche’s Apollo, Lu Xun settled on a vision particularly close to a Dionysian ecstasy, where working on art as a fictional,
creative, and aesthetic object as such is no longer enough for someone pursuing the full vigor of life.

More explicitly, Lu Xun voiced his disapproval of creative works that take their primary value in sophisticated literary aesthetics through his argumentative essays and articles that came out in the later years. In his article “小品文的危機 [The Literary Essay in Crisis]” (1933), in particular, he condemned the artists who took joy in the creative and refining process of writing as creating ornaments that are “sophisticated and elegant”(風雅) and commented what people needed were “daggers and javelins, sharp of blade and highly practical. Elegance is of no use whatsoever” (Luxun quanji 4:576-577).14 Lu Xun considered these fine-tuned literary works to be paralyzing, unless they are taken merely as a preparatory step for what he takes to be truly useful writings, created primarily to bring social change. Lu Xun also drifted away from practicing creative art himself after the publication of Wild Grass 野草 in 1927, which contains poems he wrote in the years between Call to Arms and his lecture on the Wei-Jin epoch. Failing to imagine a lasting return for the creative writer’s sacrifice in the iron house, Lu Xun opted for a more embodied voice of zawen 雜文, submitting himself into an intoxicated non-fictional voice that converses with the world directly instead of taking up a fictional consciousness that operates in a symbolic and non-embodied manner.

14 “所要的也是匕首和投槍，要鋒利而切實，用不着什麼雅。”
Lu Xun eventually stirred away from the artistic mission of sacrificing one’s
death by committing what Mabel Lee called as “suicide of the creative self.” With the
term, Lee observes that it became clear to Lu Xun around the late 1920s that his
philosophy of literature and revolution were incompatible. While both literature and
revolution originate from one’s dissatisfaction with the status quo, unlike political
revolutionaries, writers could never find the reality satisfactory and will continue to
suffer even after the revolution (“Suicide of the Creative Self” 155). As a result of this
irreconcilable difference between his two main pursuits, Lu Xun stopped writing
creatively in agonizing pain, in order to devote himself truly to the social causes that he
saw in literature at the very beginning, as well as to rescue his creative works
preemptively from being consumed by revolutionary ideologies that would direct his
future writings.

Nonetheless, Lu Xun was not the only figure at play in this discourse of
sacrificing for human vigor in the early 20th century discourse that inspired Mu Xin’s
own project. Interestingly, the opposing side to Lu Xun’s view on art was more familiar
to the world that Mu Xin belonged to. Though passionate about writing throughout his
life, Mu Xin was trained as a painter. When Mu Xin visited Lu Xun’s grave in 1946, his
group primarily represented sympathy for Lu Xun from the field of fine arts. While Lu
Xun remained for him one of the very few noteworthy modern Chinese writers on the
literary side, as for an inspiration on the side of fine arts, Mu Xin had been an admirer of
Lin Fengmian’s works. Not only was the Hangzhou National Art Academy that Mu Xin
initially hoped to attend before going to Shanghai presided by Lin Fengmian at that time, Mu Xin also met with Lin Fengmian personally in the early 1950s and exchanged letters with Lin in the following years.

Similar to Lu Xun, Lin Fengmian was aware of art’s entanglement with politics and the artist’s social duty to heighten people’s sensitivity to human existence. Lin expressed explicitly his interest in the social function of art through his “致全國藝術界書 [Open Letter to the Art Field of the Nation]”(1927), written after he had left Beijing to join Cai Yuanpei’s Hangzhou National Art Academy in the south. Quoting Plato’s aesthetic education, Lin argued that “art is a sharp instrument to transform society,” as it could capture, console, and empower human feelings (60). In addition to his explicit statements, Lin practiced being a socially conscious painter himself. In 1927, shortly before he wrote the “Open Letter,” Lin made a series of three paintings on conditions of human sufferings in response to the Kuomintang’s assassination of revolutionaries in that year. In particular, Lin named his first work of this series “rendao” (人道).

15 “在教育主张上，从柏拉图提出美育主义后，多数的教育家们，都认美术是改造社会的利器。”
Figure 4: Lin Fengmian, *Rendao* 人道, ca. 1927. Oil on canvas.

In the middle to the right of the painting, a nude female torso captures the spotlight. With her eyes closed and her head tilted to her left, she dangles her left arm down lifelessly, suggesting that she has already deceased. On her sides, there are three human figures hidden in the shadows, and two of them were hauled by dark chains on their neck. In the middle to the left, the image sinks into complete darkness. It is suggested to be the shadow of a torso, as a boney black arm shoots out from it, grabbing the female nude’s right breast. From the image, the title “*rendao*” could either refer to the Western Humanism, as in an outcry for human empathy to descend the chained and dying figures, or more generally point to the condition of human life, which is close to the Buddhist belief that life is primarily based on suffering. Here, Lin’s ambiguous use of the *rendao* perhaps resonated with Lu Xun’s interest in existential vigor as the essence of humanness as the word alludes to Lu Xun’s 1919 essay, “不滿 [Dissatisfaction],” where he famously said: “Dissatisfaction is a vehicle of ascendance. Only humans capable of
bearing dissatisfaction can progress toward humanism \([\text{rendao}]\).”\(^{16}\) \((\text{Luxun quanji} 1:358)\)

There, as Gloria Davies pointed out, Lu Xun intentionally confused the Western Humanism and the Confucian-Buddhist-Daoist connotations to question more broadly “what it meant to be human” \((\text{Davies} 233)\). In such conflation of Western and Chinese discourses, the notion of \text{rendao} activates moral cultivation but does not prescribe any particular course of action \((\text{Davies} 234)\). In Lu Xun’s vocabulary, the human vigor lies in the core of this \text{rendao}, or humanness in a general sense.

Yet unlike Lu Xun, Lin Fengmian never felt that the artist’s sophisticated-and-elegant fictional voice in the society was insufficient for someone who hoped to heighten people’s sensitivity to their humanness, or their \text{rendao}. In Lin’s project, while an artistic movement that transforms society could not be achieved with the artists’ singular effort, the artist’s creative endeavor in producing polished artworks with high aesthetic value still plays a crucial part to make a revolutionary movement possible. In his “Open Letter,” Lin appreciated the self-sacrificing artist who followed the Buddhist spirit of “sending myself to the hell” and “locked themselves in their studios,” trying to create the Western style masterpieces \((54)\).\(^{17}\) Lin considered these aestheticizing works as greatly valuable, for he believed only these sophisticated and polished objects—rather than Lu Xun’s “rough-and-ready”—could be attractive enough to inspire people’s

\(^{16}\) “不滿是向上的車輪, 能夠載著不自滿的人類, 向人道[rendao]前進。”

\(^{17}\) “抱定此種信念, 以‘我入地狱’之精神, 乃與五七同誌, 終日埋首畫室之中, 畜其全力, 專在西洋藝術之創作, 與中西藝術之溝通上做功夫; 如是者六七年。在此六七年的短期中, 雖因天才不逮之故, 未見有多少之成效, 只此奮鬥不已, 無時或忘藝術運動的苦心, 自問亦復差堪告慰。”
connoisseurship and to stir sincere engagement, activating their critical thinking rather than instigating them to fall for a blind zealous. Then, instead of commenting on how these artists should feel their works engage with the society insufficiently like how Lu Xun praised the literary men’s frustration and intoxication, Lin strived for an institutional change to make the artists be heard, or to make them capable of awakening the majority of people in the iron house if using Lu Xun’s language. That is, to make real changes happen, their artistic effort needed to be assisted by the publicity campaign in defense of art. Lin proceeded to argue that the best way to start this publicity campaign is to utilize the prestige and resources of the government, where he advocated for a national art academy in particular (Lin 61-65).

The difference between Lin Fengmian and Lu Xun in how they imagined this sacrificial project for rendao, or for a vaguely translated “humanness,” becomes the most conspicuous when they encountered each other’s view through the essay that Lu Xun wrote for the Eighteen Art Society’s exhibition, “一八藝社習作展覽會小引 [A Short Introduction to the Exhibition of the Eighteen Art Society’s Compositions].” The Eighteen Art Society started as a student group at the Hangzhou National Art College in 1929, personally advised by Lin Fengmian. However, since they believed that artists should focus on exploring socially enlightening projects exclusively within the creative realm and should not partake in political activism to champion a specific ideology, Lin Fengmian and other school administrators enforced a strong policy against students who engaged with political activism on campus. They considered political activism a
distraction from their academic work. As a result, the Eighteen Art Society split into two
groups by how the members hoped to engage with politics. The original Eighteen Art
Society used creative woodblock prints to respond directly to political ideologies,
especially in favor of the Left. The later formed West Lake Eighteen Art Society held its
neutrality to political activism and remained within Lin’s support and institutional
orthodoxy (Tang 98-104). Soon, the Eighteen Art Society captured the attention of Lu
Xun as “新的，年青的，前進的 [new, youthful, and progressive],” despite him
recognizing some of its shortcomings (Luxun quanji 4:308). In their support, Lu Xun
wrote an introduction to the Eighteen Art Society’s exhibition and voiced his
disapproval of the aesthetic statements that Lin Fengmian upheld. Lu Xun wrote, there
could not be an “為人類的藝術 [art for humanity]” in a divided society, as it was
impossible for art to maintain its neutrality without being appropriated by formed
values and ideologies (308). Neither had there been anyone worthy of the title of artist in
contemporary China (308). Unhappy with Lu Xun’s claims in the essay, the
administration of the Hangzhou National Art Academy commanded the author of the
Eighteen Art Society’s self-introduction, Ji Chundan 季春丹, to remove Lu Xun’s one-
page text from the exhibition catalogue (Tang 104).

2.3 Reimagining the Sacrifice

Working in the difference between Lu Xun and Lin Fengmian, Mu Xin
eventually opted for the image of Lin Fengmian instead of Lu Xun to illustrate his claim
for art is to “sacrifice.” Although Mu Xin’s personal Zhuangist-Nietzschean discourse of
sacrifice was probably much in debt to Lu Xun’s thoughts, the word “sacrifice” carries an optimism that Lu Xun did not possess. In his literary lectures, Mu Xin repetitively brought up how Lu Xun turned away from the Nietzsche-Zhuangist intellectual tradition. For instance, in his lecture discussing Wei-Jin literature’s connection with Zhuangzi and Laozi, Mu Xin said: “Lu Xun was inspired by Nietzsche in his early years, and his talent and character was perfectly Nietzschean. But he gave it up halfway, until the latter of his life, when the Nietzsche’s influence had completely vanished” (Memoir of Literature 166).18 In another instance, Mu Xin also commented: “It was a pity that Mr. Lu Xun’s ambition was limited to anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism. It was such a pity that he found his faith just when he was starting to be skeptical” (Memoir of Literature 515).19 While this narrative that separates the Nietzschean and Zhuangist influence on Lu Xun into two stages of his life certainly reflects the ideological reading of Lu Xun around the time that Mu Xin attended the memorial rally in the 1930s, the tone that Mu Xin adopted expressed his conflicted personal opinion about Lu Xun.20 On one hand, as Mu Xin appreciated Lu Xun for what he achieved in his Zhuangist-Nietzschean “early years,” Mu Xin’s comment expressed his deep admiration for Lu Xun as a pioneer in thinking transculturally and skeptically. On the other hand, by reading Lu Xun’s later

18 “魯迅早年受尼采啓示，他的才華品格也合乎尼采，後來半途而廢，晚年魯迅，尼采的影響完全消失。”
19 “他早期的 想宣言《摩羅詩力說》，就對拜倫大為贊揚，以為要救中國，必須提倡‘恶魔精神’，可惜魯迅先生的抱負只在反帝反封建，可惜他剛剛開始懷疑，就找到了信仰。”
works as a betrayal of his early years, Mu Xin simultaneously voiced his deep disappointment with Lu Xun’s resolution.

In contrast, Lin Fengmian believed that the artistic medium would still participate in the project of heightening and consoling human sensibility and therefore a need to continue refining art within its own realm. This optimism was crucial for Mu Xin to enliven the project of sacrifice, which Lu Xun imagined first but remained skeptical of its revolutionary efficacy in society. In the late 1990s, Mu Xin wrote an essay titled “雙重悲悼 [Doubled Mourning]” for the death of Lin Fengmian in 1991. The essay describes the life of Lin from when Mu Xin first saw Lin’s painting in 1949, to his personal encounters with Lin in the early 1950s, and then to Lin’s experience during and after the Cultural Revolution. Specifically, on the last event, Mu Xin praised how Lin made the appropriate choice to burn all his paintings and how Lin survived being imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution. In this series of events, Mu Xin raised Lin’s choices as representative of his concept “art is to sacrifice one’s death”: “Giving up your paintings to drop some charges was the only way to survive, as well as the only thing that accorded with the essence of sacrificing for art. Master Lin’s decision was simply that. His words were more concise: ‘As long as I am alive, I can paint more.’”

Through

21 “唯有放弃画, 减轻罪名, 人才有望活下来, 才符合为艺术殉道的精髓, 林先生当时的决策, 不外乎上述的原委, 他说得简明: ‘只要人活着, 还可以再画。’” Since I cannot access the book that contains this quote at this moment, the pagination of this quote is unknown. I quote from various private mainland Chinese blogsites that publish this essay. The whole article is published in p. 127-152 in Mu Xin, Tongqing zhongduan lu [Book of Interrupted Sympathies] (Taipei: Hanyin wenhua, 1999).
highlighting these details, Mu Xin sought out to reconcile with Lu Xun’s pessimistic
thought in the fragility and insufficiency of aesthetic works.

With the image of Lin Fengmian in his essay, Mu Xin recognized the validity of
Lu Xun’s concern, as he did not avoid the fact that the artworks of Lin were consumed
by an ideological movement in the most literal way, burned into ashes so that the artist
could live. Simultaneously, Mu Xin also found these creative artworks to be resilient to
ideology and brought hope to Lu Xun’s hopeless vision. To make this argument, Mu Xin
took liberty with them that might be different from Lin Fengmian’s true imagination of
his project. When Lin said “As long as I am alive, I can paint more,” it seems to imply
that Lin gave up both the spiritual and the physical comfort in death, or the chance to
commit suicide, in order to live on and produce artworks that could measure up to the
destroyed paintings’ quality in the future after the Cultural Revolution. However, as Mu
Xin saw it, Lin’s post-Cultural Revolution paintings were never as great as the works he
made before the Cultural Revolution, although they could reflect a more mature state of
mind. Neither could Lin ever remake the paintings he made before, as he had taken up a
different stage and spirit in his life. Still, Mu Xin did not read this fact as a pessimistic
sign that the integrity of artworks would be forever lost as soon as they are consumed by
ideology, for the absence of something is not nothing.

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22 Pagination unknown. “之後，我只看到過林風眠先生在一九八零年間赴法國展覽的那一組畫，香港製作
的，它們實在不足以表示畫家的原有水准。再之後，凡刊有林先生作品的雜志、畫報、畫集，我總有仔細流
觀，一次比一次散了，掙了——藝術家達到爐火純青隨心所欲的大成境界，其‘心’，是自己的不可更替
的‘心’，如果不純粹是自己的心，或者自己的心乏了，那麼隨性所欲的又是什麼呢。”
Commenting on Lin Fengmian’s life and works, Mu Xin provided an allegory of the peony to illustrate how an afterlife of art is possible even after its destruction: “There was once a peony, and its flower had withered away. Yet people still talked about the absent flower through its remaining leaves on the stem. Tragedies as such always strike me profoundly.”\(^{23}\) Mu Xin’s optimism for art in this metaphor here is comparable to what Jacques Derrida termed as “survivance” in his *Archive Fever*: “afterlife [survivance] no longer means death and the return of the specter, but the surviving of an excess of life which resists annihilation” (60). In the original allegorical story, the peony not only exists in its physical form that is subject to life and death, but also through a profusion of its “excess of life” (or its “traces” if substituting the original phrase with a better known Derridean term) that comes after the physical peony’s destruction. Through a series of indexical relationships, the peony continues to be present in its absence: the stem that was attached to the peony, as well as the people who see the stem. Putting this allegory back to the life and death of an artist and artworks, the “excess of life” of the artwork becomes the artist, who sacrificed his death at the moment of his art’s destruction, as well as the newly made artworks, which bore traces that the artist had moved on from a previous stage in life, all became a continuation of the old paintings at the moment of their destruction through their indexical relationship. In Mu Xin’s imagination, this possibility for art’s *survivance* makes the project for *rendao* — a pursuit of humanness — a worthwhile sacrifice.

\(^{23}\) Pagination unknown. “一枝牡丹，花已謝。人們以猶在之葉論不在之花，為這樣悲劇我將撼動無盡……”
2.4 Conclusion

In his analysis of Lin Fengmian from *The Lyrical in Epic Time* (2015), David Der-wei Wang quoted Lin’s self-description from his letter to Mu Xin, cited in Mu Xin’s article “Doubled Mourning,” as a dictum of Lin Fengmian’s aesthetics of lyricism: “I am like the Sphinx, seated in the midst of desert. Great ages come and go, and I remain motionless.” This chapter has shown how Mu Xin, through his advice for the artists to commit sacrifice, understood this transtemporal “motionlessness” of a certain aesthetics as related to its social implications. Although Mu Xin did not quote the intellectuals’ exchanges in the 1920s explicitly for his advice encouraging artists to sacrifice their death with and for their art, the figures of Lu Xun and Lin Fengmian emerge in Mu Xin’s artistic project through his intellectual indebtedness to his interest in the concept of “sacrifice” that operates on multiple temporalities, in addition to his engagement with Zhuangist and Nietzschean thoughts.

Importantly, Xin engaged with Lu Xun and Lin Fengmian through two occasions of grieving: his participation in the commemoration rally of Lu Xun’s death in 1946, and his essay mourning the death of Lin Fengmian from the 1990s. On the one hand, these two occasions of mourning transformed Mu Xin himself into a special kind of “excess of life,” or a next episode of the “motionlessness” of the May Fourth artists-intellectuals. The works and life of Mu Xin can be seen as an extension to the “great ages” that Lu Xun and Lin Fengmian belonged to, not through how Mu Xin had directly come in contact

24 “我像斯芬克士，坐在沙漠裏，偉大的時代一個一個過去了，我依然不動。”
with either figure and passed on their wisdom exactly as what it was, but through indexing their intellectual legacy precisely by its absence in passing. In this way, Lu Xun’s writerly cry in the iron house and Lin Fengmian’s painterly advocacy for “sending myself to hell” continues to direct Mu Xin to call for the artist’s sacrifice in his survival of them both.

One the other hand, working in the “excess of life” of this intellectual legacy, Mu Xin is simultaneously forced by the two occasions of mourning to escape from these haunting forefathers to course his own way. This flight of escape does not mean a simple sense of “individual talent” as defined by T. S. Eliot in his classic argument from “Tradition and Individual Talent,” where individuals are merely repeating some essential pattern and renewing the essential center of tradition “impersonally,” as they imbue it with contemporary sensibilities (40). Rather, Mu Xin’s active evocation of the forefathers, as well as the discourse of humanness in their call to sacrifice, must be read in terms of how Mu Xin found use of them in his own works and life, where his individuality inhabited the center.
3. Humanness as Sociality: The Discourse of Sacrifice in Mu Xin’s Arts

Mu Xin’s project of sacrifice carried a mission closely related to his own life, although he used the life and works of Lin Fengmian to illustrate his aesthetic discourse of sacrifice. His writing on Lin Fengmian was ultimately writing about himself. Not unlike Lin Fengmian’s unfortunate experience that he grieved for in the “Doubled Mourning,” Mu Xin lost all his writings and paintings as they were confiscated at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. Mu Xin was incarcerated in a state prison in 1968, put into solitary confinement in the Red Guard people’s prison 1972, and sentenced to hard labor for seven years after, including two years under house arrest in 1977-1979. In these years during and after the Cultural Revolution, to live meant to suffer, to endure, and to sacrifice the comfort of physical and mental relief in one’s death. As such, many intellectuals committed suicide, as they became disillusioned by how the revolutionary ideal they helped established evolved into a disaster. Nevertheless, different from his contemporaries, Mu Xin retained the vigor of his spirit by making art in secret while in prison. In the eighteen months of his solitary confinement in 1972, Mu Xin wrote a 132-page manuscript by sneaking out pages from the notepad and thinning the ink that the guards gave him to write “self-reflections.” Each page was filled with imagined dialogues with artists and philosophers he had read about since childhood. During his house arrest in 1977-79, he secretly experimented with the transfer ink technique and made microscopic landscape paintings (The Art of Mu Xin 16). Looking back at the Cultural Revolution, Mu Xin described it in a similar language to Lin Fengmian’s
description for a self-sacrificing artist: “Tolstoy and Shakespeare went down to hell with me.” (Tan) Mu Xin’s artmaking turned his life of suffering into a productive space for creation, where artmaking transformed his imprisonment to an experiential basis that enabled creative art and allowed living to be tolerable.

Mu Xin’s expatriation later was another event when the self-sacrificing image of an artist emerged from his own life, despite in a slightly different sense. When China opened its doors again in the 1980s, many Chinese artists who had attended the Shanghai Fine Arts College across the years moved to New York. Through each other’s connections, these artists became students at the non-degree program of the Art Students League. Mu Xin was the oldest one of them. To practice art, this group of artists that came from intellectual and bourgeois families in China gave up their comfortable life in China to work in New York, staying away from the political turbulence in China. However, New York gave them a life in poverty that they had never experienced before. To make ends meet, many found themselves painting portraits for pedestrians on the street. Mu Xin himself took up antique repairing and considered his early time in New York “even more difficult than the situations of Cultural Revolution,” saying “even when I was in the prison, people still gave me food to eat, but that was not guaranteed in New York.”(Tan) Notably, this agonizing condition of expatriated intellectuals was different from that of the intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution, as the afflictions in their lives were not caused by external factors but by their personal choice. Had they returned to China, or had they opted for a different career in the United States as some
of them did, their lives could have been easier. However, this difference does not obstruct but only enhances Mu Xin’s overall project that claims “art is to sacrifice.” It affirms the artist’s choice of art and of its price of suffering as a willed deed, more coherent with the project’s Zhuangist-Nietzschean undertone.

In this New York period of his life, Mu Xin again performed Lin Fengmian’s image of a self-sacrificing artist. According to the painter Cao Liwei, a fellow student at the Art Students League, when Mu Xin resumed his writing in addition to his painting career in New York, he would confine himself to his room for days to write, unaware of lice coming out of his shirt when he finished (Tan). Even as he became more settled in the 90s, Mu Xin continued to paint and write in a performatively laborious manner. In his letter responding to the Taiwan author Guo Songfen, a close friend and a supporter of his writing career, Mu Xin wrote: “You encourage me to write, write something good. I write. But for my ill-tempered nature, I’m much similar to an Italian painter, waiting and waiting to start my fresco, all because I’m too busy assembling the devil’s toys of grill tops and sausage machines” (jixing panduan 53-57). Here, Mu Xin depicted himself as if artmaking required him to be arrested in the apartment to work, giving up other comfortable and desirable things in his life. In doing so, he established an artistic self-image that is coherent with his discourse of sacrifice, even when making art no longer caused as much suffering in his life.

1 “你勸勉我寫，寫出好的來。我是在寫，可奈就壞脾氣的特性而言，很像意大利的一個畫家，壁畫遲遲不動工，盡忙于制作烤肉機器，羊腸充氣的妖魔玩具。”
These anecdotes from Mu Xin’s life suggest that, in advancing his discourse of sacrifice, Mu Xin was not simply continuing the mission of heightening humanness to survive a previous generation. More importantly, Mu Xin engaged with the discourse of sacrifice as an interpretation of his own arts, through which he understood and shaped his life as an ethical pursuit for this spirit of “humanness” as he would define.

The most performative moment through which Mu Xin made an image of himself as the sacrificial artist was perhaps his exhibition “Art of Mu Xin: Landscape Paintings and Prison Notes,” which the art historians Wu Hung and Alexandra Monroe co-curated in 2001 and toured around New York, Chicago, New Haven, and Hawaii. The exhibition featured a collection of landscape paintings that he painted during the solitary confinement in 1977-79, collectively titled “Tower within a Tower” — an ivory tower inside a Tower of London, as explained by Mu Xin — as well as the manuscript he wrote in 1972 in the Red Guard people’s prison, which was an air-raid shelter. The two objects from Mu Xin’s experience of sacrifice in the past witnessed his two major self-manifestations as an artist to US society. Mu Xin initially used the collection of paintings to prove to the immigration officer his identity as an emerging artist, when he first landed in New York in 1982. Then, Mu Xin’s Prison Notes were brought to the United States in 1991 by a Chinese student coming over to study aboard and became publicly
displayed ten years later with the landscape paintings, making Mu Xin’s debut as an artist through his first major exhibition in the United States.²

On this artistic “self that he [Mu Xin] has invented for himself and for his readers,” Wu Hung’s catalogue essay “Reading Mu Xin: An Exile without a Past” that he wrote for the exhibition made an interesting point on the relationship between Mu Xin’s arts and life (40-41). Wu suggests that the key subject of Mu Xin’s prison works is not the causes or conditions of the imprisonment during the Cultural Revolution, or the historical environment immediate to the artworks themselves. Rather, Mu Xin’s early art featured alternatively a selective assemblage of elements from his memories of the past. The manuscript that is an assemblage of literary and philosophical voices is essentially about the parts of his youth that have vanished in front of his eyes, with the bygone libraries that sheltered the young artist during the Japanese invasion and his literary manuscripts and paintings confiscated and destroyed before his imprisonment. Wu sees this fragmented and episodic image in Mu Xin’s artworks through a psychoanalytic light, using the theory of dissociation of Laurence J. Kirmayer (44). The theory of dissociation generally refers to the phenomenon that some episodes become left out when the consciousness breaks up into fragments. In Kirmayer’s theory, a dissociative

² Strictly speaking, Mu Xin’s actual debut in the US happened in 1984. During his year as the Resident Tutor at the University’s Adams House, Wu Hung planned the first solo exhibition of Mu Xin in the residential hall’s public space as one of the seven exhibitions featuring a series of Chinese artists from the Art Students League circle in New York, including the early works of Chen Danqing, Luo Zhongli, Zhang Hongtu, for some examples. However, the 1984 exhibition happened on a small scale and did not attract mass attention, since the American mainstream audience was not interested in the Chinese artists community yet at that time.
narrative is a response to trauma, where the survivors put together a narrative with fragmented episodes in their memory in order to cope with the fact that a smooth and consensual historical narrative of the traumatic moment might never be achievable. In the context of Mu Xin’s life and works, Wu Hung suggested that Mu Xin engaged with such a dissociative narrative to replace the traumatic reality of his life, so that he could manage the otherwise unbearable reality itself and find freedom in its burden: “Simply put, Mu Xin did not write this passage [from the *Prison Notes*] to respond to reality; he wrote it to erase reality” (44). Here, the word “erasure” does not simply mean an absence of something but signifies a quality of action that causes the absence to happen. Emphasizing Mu Xin’s “erasure” of reality, Wu proposes Mu Xin’s arts should be read as an active endeavor rather than a passive response.

How does Wu’s proposition of “art erases reality” further the understanding of Mu Xin’s sacrificial project for humanness? The idea of “erasure” can sound immediately discordant with Mu Xin’s own discourse of sacrifice. The discourse of sacrifice implies an initiative to tackle the world unflinchingly and an investment in exploring the conditions of the humanness quality, whereas “erasure” implies an escapist mentality. Especially under the psychoanalytic terminology of “dissociation” that Wu Hung associated it with, “erasure” captures one’s movement from suffering in an absolute historical reality, which was hazy and left out of memory under a traumatic shock, into embracing a relative reality, which constitutes an autonomous and clarifying alternative space to dwell in. This escapist connotation of “erasure” might work in
analyzing Mu Xin’s works during the Cultural Revolution alone, when the experience of suffering had no escape as long as Mu Xin was alive. Nevertheless, it is insufficient to explain those early works as part of a consistent project of art that Mu Xin continued to embrace even after the Cultural Revolution, when there was not much in the historical dimension of reality that Mu Xin needed to escape from. In light of his later experience in New York, the concrete reality that the artist lived in did improve significantly as he settled in the foreign city. As seen in his letter to Guo Songfen, the individual desires of the artist could be fulfilled to a certain degree and generate a hedonistic pleasure. Mu Xin’s art during the latter period was rather associated with self-inflicted suffering.

Then, alternatively, if “art erases reality” does not mean a simple escape from the absolute historical reality, where one moved from a less desirable situation to a more manageable one, this “erasure” would imply the artist considers the concrete reality to be satisfying already. The artist only chooses to dwell in art over the concrete historical reality because what art does is even better than the already pleasant life. If this is true, what did art produce for Mu Xin that was even better than the hedonistic pleasure that Mu Xin gave up to make art? How can we imagine a relationship for art and life that still engages with reality in its absence but stays more coherent with Mu Xin’s project, rooted in a pursuit for rendao or a sense of humanness, an artistic ethic that always returns to how art influences others in the world and the society as a whole?
3.1 Reality in the Liminal Space

While Mu Xin looked up Lin Fengmian as an ideal artist in the discourse of sacrifice, Mu Xin’s paintings bear resemblance to Lin’s art in how they both “erase” reality while retaining some connections to it. Both Mu Xin and Lin Fengmian retained figurative forms, although neither engaged with these forms to illustrate some concrete reality out there in the world. As David Der-wei Wang discussed in “The Riddle of the Sphinx: Lin Fengmian and the Polemics of Realism in Modern Chinese Painting,” Lin Fengmian was not interested in the project centered on a Western concept of Realism like his contemporary Xu Beihong, who believed that “art should be faithful to reality, because nothing can be spoken without an adherence to the real” (Xu 41). Rather, Lin Fengmian erased art’s referential dimension to a concrete reality, something beyond the surface of the painting, but retained the canonical figurative forms of illusionistic art to fill in with his own expression. In doing so, Lin Fengmian’s erasure of reality “re-formed” reality, where the word “reality” is no longer the authentic unchangeable truth but a symbolic order of experience (Wang 240).

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Figure 5: Lin Fengmian, *Flying Geese by Reeds* 蘆花飛雁, 1964. Ink on paper, 47.5×58cm.

Figure 6: Mu Xin, *Fishing Village* 漁村, 1979. Gouache and ink on paper, 68.6×68.6cm.

Figure 7: Mu Xin, *Eve Before the War* 戰爭前夜, 2001.
In the case of Mu Xin, from before to after his expatriation in 1982, his art moved further away from the detailed forms and closer toward a more succinct and fluid formless style, rich with an expressive quality from lines, the light and dark contrast and brushworks. However, among all these paintings, what has never changed is also the manner in which the forms of the real world are never fully eliminated by the paintings’ expressive style. Similar to Lin’s particular taste for and treatment of the *shanshui* landscape, Mu Xin’s paintings of landscape are very rarely non-figurative abstractions but remain formal representations of the landscape, especially the cultural-historical landscape in traditional Chinese *literati* paintings. One can distinguish the different canonical landscape features in Mu Xin’s paintings, such as the forests, lake, mountains, and clouds, although these features have lost their specificity.

However, Mu Xin differed from Lin Fengmian in what came after this “erasure” of reality, or what the artists’ expressive “re-formation” of reality eventually expressed. In his art, Lin Fengmian understood his contemporary intellectuals’ interest in “humanness” as a riddle of a Romantic interiority. As seen in Wang’s analysis, Lin Fengmian always simultaneously presented two contradicting aesthetic sentiments within one frame (Wang 260-261). Lin recognized the enthusiasm for an ideological discourse of image but retained an unease or uncanniness within it by preserving the discordance between style and form. Such expression of Lin is primarily affective and lyrical. The illusion of a Romantic interiority is halted, or put out of language, by a stylistic intervention, which is simultaneously an explicitization, of how such interiority
is framed. In comparison, Mu Xin’s paintings preserved the ethics of “riddle” in Lin’s artistic project, that the artist “opts to inhabit the riddle” because “the power of art [...] lies in providing not one answer to human experience but multiple clues to that answer” (Wang 258). However, unlike Lin’s use of visual cues to suggest multiple possibilities of one’s interiority that the image expresses, Mu Xin engaged with both visual and verbal factors of a painting to take that the Romantic interiority that Lin tried to reveal and problematize back onto its stubborn surface, which is intra-referential in terms of art’s mediums and mediation.

While evoking the literati tradition formally like Lin, Mu Xin’s paintings are not as interested in the particular sentiments in the aesthetics of the Song and Ming Dynasty literati paintings as they are engaging with the aspect of intermediality within that tradition. On a literati painting of the landscape, there is usually a poem inscribed in the calligraphic script in the blank space, which describes an experience of the depicted scene. Between the art and text, while the poem textually depicts the painted landscape visually seen, the calligraphic aspect of the poem builds onto the visual and textual relation of the landscape by giving the poem its visual characteristics. Here, the image and the text are the two poetic forms practiced together, where the inscription and the painted landscape are both extensions to this intermedial practice. In Mu Xin’s paintings, the textual dimension is brought into the image through his poetic titles, which can be seen as modern manifestations of the inscribed poem on literati paintings. Practicing this intermediality, Mu Xin did not express his skepticism on the particular
knowledge system of the traditional sentiments per se but more fundamentally the 
tradition’s very sentimentality. The titles, supposedly reinforcing what the images’ 
subjects are, are overly suggestive and allusive. Rather than revealing the singular 
message together—“the understanding of the mind,” according to the early Qing artist 
Shitao in Philosophy of Painting (Lin 140)—they open a wide array of specific events and 
narratives from the textual canons of history and literature.

Figure 8: Mu Xin, Waiting for Rabbi 等待拉比, 2000. Gouache on canvas.

For example, Waiting for Rabbi 等待拉比 is a gouache-on-canvas painting from 
2000. It presents a landscape with a dome-shaped mountain in the center, surrounded by 
a vast span of luxuriant forest unfolding along the horizon. To the left of the mountain 
and behind its peak, a pale moon plunges out from the sky. Its moonlight leaves the 
mountain in a pitch-black shade but lays a silver gauze on the surrounding forest, such 
that the rolling forest blends in with the mist and clouds. As far as which mountain this 
is, the formal characteristics of the painting render it indefinitely ambiguous. The only 
clue is textual, but the text does not provide for clarity.

All of Mu Xin’s New York paintings have titles similar to a one-line poetry in 
their own right, whose meanings are indefinitely vague just like some of the poems 
inscribed on a traditional literati landscape painting. The title “Waiting for Rabbi” here is
particularly so because it draws from a rich literary interplay of biblical and absurdist references outside of the visual tradition. The Hebrew term “Rabbi” in the title means “leader” or “my leader.” By using this term, Mu Xin could be referencing stories of Jewish leaders most famously associated with a mountain, such as the story of Moses, sometimes referred to as “rabbeinu” or “my leader,” who received the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai, or of Abraham, a forefather of the Israelites, who nearly sacrificed his son Isaac at Mount Moriah. Meanwhile, the full title “Waiting for Rabbi” could be spun from the title of Samuel Beckett’s seminal absurdist play, “Waiting for Godot.” The play tells of two men, Vladimir and Estragon, desperately waiting under a tree for someone named “Godot” to arrive but never actually does during the play. The play parodies the Judeo-Christian belief in the arrival of a messiah or savior, flirting with the possibility that the waiting might be futile and unmeaningful at all.

From the elusive image and its interaction with the suggestive title, it is impossible to tell which narrative is the one the artist is truly composing. Is the mountain symbolizing a site of divine revelation, a moment of faith and clarity? Or is it putting on a theater for dated wishful thinking that is meaningless and absurd in modern times?

Through the formally constructed ambiguity, Mu Xin’s painting places the beholders in the liminal space between knowing and seeing the reality. This vision both converges and diverges from Lin’s riddling re-form, as seen in how Mu Xin spoke with the same concept of riddling in a conversation with the painter Li Chunyang: “Art is neither a question nor a riddle. Riddles fail as soon as they are deciphered. Painting is
my silent exile” (Mu Xin & Li Chunyang). This is to say, on one hand, as a “riddle” similar to Lin’s thinking, art makes the beholders experience the artist’s landscape in a realistic way, where the “surface” of the image always has a “depth” to it in the unspoken words of the human mind that is being represented. The illusionistic image and the revealing title collectively give a tantalizing range of clues to the sentiments behind the image, and to decipher the riddling title and painted landscape, beholders each come up with their narrative that stands in as what the representing image really is about. On the other hand, since no answer to what is being represented is given as it is left in silence, the ambiguous medium of the landscape becomes the reality that the beholders experience. There remains an element of doubt planted within the stubbornness of the white space, between the title on the information plate and the landscape on the canvas. The beholders give the artwork meaning through their chosen narratives and experience the artwork through its immediate visual forms, but they can never be certain to say they know what the absolute subject of the artwork is. Overall, Mu Xin’s paintings erase reality but only to reform reality through its material ambiguity, as the extent of our immediate reality itself in various mediums, suggesting we might never know beyond what we see. As rich and vivid as those clues to a possible reality are, they are merely a surface to an unfathomable and unreachable expressive entity. Nonetheless, this experience of uncertainty is the reality that the artworks

4 “藝術不是問題也不是謎語，謎語一旦猜出就死了。繪畫是我沉默的流亡。”
constantly produce. After all, people cannot inhabit anything more real than their experience of this ambiguous and opaque surface of reality.

In effect, if the inscription and depicted landscape in the literati art tradition are considered a smooth translation from each other, the title and the painted landscape in Mu Xin’s art can only be seen as “infelicitous” translations of each other instead. In his *How to Do Things with Words*, John Austin used the word “infelicity” to describe ways in which language can create “the things that can be and go wrong with an occasion” (14). In Austin’s theorization, infelicities are not simply errors that should be dismissed but can be generative speech acts that produce unexpected effects. In the particular occasion of Mu Xin’s intermedial “translation,” since the title expands and distracts rather than reinforces the spiritual vision that the painted landscape provides, Mu Xin’s paintings make the tradition of literati paintings infelicitous. The title’s translation of the image is carried through, but the further effect of the translation does not show up as promised, making what Austin terms as an “abuse” of a “perlocutionary act” (18, 108-109). Then, because the abuse of tradition exposes its capability to fail and to bring unexpected effects, this infelicitous process of translation between the title and the depicted landscape underscores the crucial part that the mediums play in mediating meaning in the conventional systematic knowledge. Mu Xin’s reform of reality thus brings

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5 I owe my thoughts on the connection between translation and Austin’s speech acts to Dr. Carlos Rojas, more specifically to his article “How to Do Things with Words: Yang Jiang and the Politics of Translation.”
beholders to recognize that the lyrical sentimentality is actually a performative result of two poetic forms, referencing and translating back and forth in an indefinite loop.

3.2 Traveling Through the Space with Others

Mu Xin’s intermedial art explains how he “erased” reality by bringing what we understand as reality to the surface of medium and mediation. However, it has not yet resolved the question of why Mu Xin would opt for this artistic surface as something better than reality in a non-escapist mindset, more coherent with his proposition that “art is to sacrifice.” In fact, if making art demands one to sacrifice comforts in life and to live through hardships, the impenetrable surface that artmaking produces might cause another kind of suffering, making the hardships of living worse. As each beholder is trapped in the intra-referencing artwork together with the artist Mu Xin himself, the artwork places people phenomenologically to confront each other's understanding in a constant process of mediation. Since everyone’s reading of the artwork is just as valid in this process, a transparent shared understanding of the authentic and unchangeable “Truth” can never be achieved. This inaccessibility of the Truth can bring about anxiety and become another source of one’s suffering, in addition to the potential suffering in life. It seems that although Mu Xin sacrificed the hedonistic pleasure and comfort in a non-artistic life with artmaking, this attention to the surface in his art was not immediately that much more appealing than the pleasant non-artistic life.

In the world literature lecture series, Mu Xin traced the Greek mythologies as the beginning of his world, and this beginning section concludes with the myth of
Narcissus. There, through the myth of Narcissus, Mu Xin acknowledged the potential experience of suffering when one begins to deeply engage with a surface as the only reality. Mu Xin introduced one of the classical versions of the myth: one day, the beautiful hunter Narcissus sees his reflection in the pool, thinking that it is a real man, and falls in love with him. However, he cannot touch the man in the pool. Narcissus falls ill and then determines that he will stay by the pool without trying to reach out for the man’s image, as he does so until he dies (Memoir of Literature 32). In this mythical narrative, Narcissus’s suffering is that he cannot reach what he longs for—he cannot reach anything beyond the image of the man in the water, as what he fell in love with is only a surface that does not have a real object behind it.

And yet, by concealing the ending of the story, Mu Xin altered the classical reading of the myth of Narcissus, which is situated within the mimetic framework. Traditionally, the myth ends when Narcissus transforms into a narcissus flower as he dies. In the aesthetic discourse, the flower here is a symbol of narcissism, particularly central to the “art for art’s sake” movement. “Art for art’s sake” believes that art should not be appreciated for what it does or shows, but for art itself. In Mu Xin’s narration of the myth, the flower of narcissism is never revealed, and through this choice to eliminate the flower in the ending, Mu Xin suggested that one becomes an artist for something beyond the narcissistic wallow of art. Focusing his narrative instead on Narcissus’s suffering by the pond, Mu Xin turned to art’s ethical component: art does something important and ethical, such that the sacrifice the artist makes is not in vain.
In particular, Mu Xin highlighted the ethics of art through an idiosyncratic version of the myth by André Gide, who claimed that “‘Art for art’s sake’ owed its failure solely to its refusal to embrace moral questions” (Walker 22). More specifically, Mu Xin paraphrased from Gide’s “Le Traité du Narcisse. Théorie du symbole [The Treatise of Narcissus: Theory of the Symbol],” where the mythical Narcissus is an archetype for all artists. In this version of the myth, the opaqueness of reality and the superficiality of art are no longer so dreadful that they only bring out the unproductive kind of suffering. Rather, the key to the particular kind of suffering that interests Gide is that a surface is not just a blank space—some ultimate truth of reality is a secret hidden in secrecy—but a mirror where images proliferate in a non-authentic and symbolic way.

Gide’s myth of Narcissus differs from the classical version most significantly in that Narcissus is no longer obsessed solely with his self-image. His desire to possess the person behind the image is replaced by an aesthetic contemplation, where he simply observes his image from afar. There, the egotistic self in the pond’s image dissipates and a pluralistic image of others emerges. Gide’s Narcissus dwells in this liminal space between reality and dreamlike imaginations, seeing his physical form in the water becoming a mirror reflecting people before his own time: “himself absorbed by the past human generations” (Gide). More explicitly, in his discussion of the artist’s ethics in a footnote, Gide recognizes the desire to grasp the “Truth” (Vérité) in a concrete reality

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6 “Grave et religieux il reprend sa calme attitude : il demeure—symbole qui grandit—et, penché sur l’apparence du Monde, sent vaguement en lui, résorbées, les générations humaines qui passent.”
behind the image can never be fulfilled. The “Truth” always refers back to the egotistical artist who enforces its narrative, like the image that Narcissus falls in love with is always a fragile reflection of Narcissus himself. Yet what draws Gide’s attention, on the flip side, is that the image that cannot afford a specific “Truth” provides for an imaginary contemplation of a pluralistic "Concept" (Idée), freed from the gravity of the limiting historical time or the artist's egotistical self. Such "Concept" is manifested by the disappearance of the egoistic subject as the center, which is the individual artist, and the conflation of the historical time into one flat eternal present that is the surface of the pond. The surface of the image then becomes a pure scene, where the multitude of subjects from the past tradition can inhabit the individual voice together in a synchronized manner. In this way, the superficial image allows for a new kind of sociality. This type of sociality does not require an ideological identification, which seeks moral agreement among the majority, but creates an imaginary identification with the others, making possible the impossible connections between human beings in reality.

3.3 An Embodied Journey

Although evoking Gide’s version of the myth, Mu Xin’s interest in the surface was nonetheless more generally structural than strictly symbolic. That is to say, what unites a society of people is certainly not the universal “Truth,” which is actually an egoistic narrative of an individual rooted in a specific system of knowledge, but it is not the absolute “Concept” either, which is a pluralistic but monological canon of tradition that Gide describes as “harmonieux [harmonious]” and “crystalline [crystalline],” an
everlasting past that continues to inhabit and generate the future (Gide). Mu Xin provides a resolution with the surface’s materiality as the only structural reference. Each material medium of his arts puts different cultures and individuals from the past, present, and future all alike on the same canvas, where the difference between narratives is in the materials at hand.

While Mu Xin’s paintings already highlight the importance of materiality, this structural resolution is manifested to the fullest in Mu Xin’s writings. There, Mu Xin frequently engaged with a metamorphosing narrative subject. But as the voice of the narrative “I” pluralizes into many subject-positions, the narrative does not resolve in presenting a streamline narrative that unites all voices. Instead, as each subject-position is mediated through the raw material of language, in all its visual forms and sounds, Mu Xin’s writings become texts with an affective materiality that take the readers to experience a journey of transformation in an embodied manner. Notably, this embodied journey of the readers in the future is parallel to, but not the same as, the present experience of transformation belonging to the narrative “I” the texts refer to, or the past transformation of the artist as he became the narrative “I” by taking up his pen.

Take the short story “哥倫比亞的倒影[A Shade of Columbia]” as an example. Written in the 1980s when Mu Xin lived close to Lincoln Center, the story is about a stroll that a semi-autobiographical narrative voice “I” took from his home to the campus of Columbia University on a spring afternoon (Gelunbiya de daoying 95-105). The story presents a vibrant landscape filled with non-lingual, intuitive, and contingent
encounters, which not only guides the narrator’s inspecting eyes but also shapes the narrative voice “I”: when he sees a pair of pre-Civil War-style boots at a flea market, he begins a conversation with Abraham Lincoln and Benjamin Franklin; as he walks by the Thinker sculpture by Rodin, he conceives it as a portrait of André Gide and travels with Gide’s autobiography to France Algeria to encounter Oscar Wilde; and as he stands in the lecture hall, he joins Demosthenes, Huxley, and Cicero in a contest of speech. Despite he does not engage in any actual conversation with others throughout the story, the narrator remains accompanied in a tacit form of mental identification.

More importantly, the narrator does not simply imagine himself participating in those conversations; he genuinely experiences these impossible encounters as if they were real. The realistic experience is communicated by the narrator’s heteroglossic voice that switches between speech-genres as he participates in different conversations, as if the narrator is taken into the past where he had to talk like how those episodes were documented in history. Visiting Algeria with Gide, what previously was an indirect account shift to a quoted dialogue between “him” and “me”; debating with the rhetoricians, the voice doubles into a self-debating voice through parentheses, and then a series of proclamation and theses; touring the Renaissance Europe, the narrative voice becomes ekphrastic and lyrical. In a flow of stream-of-consciousness, Mu Xin’s portrayal of this introspective wanderer in the crowd of New York presents the narrator as a scattered subject, as if Gide’s Narcissus seeing the past generations of human beings in his own image. He is dispersed across the different segments of New York, identified
with both a self-as-subject, as the gaze that inspects the landscape, and a self-as-objects, the different characters in the landscape that he sees.

Nevertheless, the story ends as the narrator returns to his senses, separating his realistic experiences from what could have been happening in the real world. His last transformation happens when he walks into the Riverside Park and looks at the opposite shore through its reflection on the Hudson River. There, the narrator started paraphrasing from Gide’s “Treaties of Narcissus,” himself becoming Narcissus lured by the goddess Nemesis, seeing the buildings on the opposite side of the river shore reflected in the river as the “shadow of generations of human beings.” However, at the brink of losing the senses of his body to the mythical character of Narcissus, the narrator ends his account of the stroll. He realizes all that has happened to him are like shadows in the river, ready to be broken by an easy breeze. This ending throws his realistic experiences of magical transformations in previous pages into a superficial performance of the character in a mental theater. There, the metamorphosis that the narrator has genuinely experienced is rejected as merely a transformation of language, which has happened only in his soliloquy.

Still, it is precisely in this double-bind between an experiential reality and a mental theater that the readers are allowed to share the narrator’s journey, through the materiality of the narrator’s speech, in the text’s visual and aural performance as Chinese written characters. For example, as he sees the pair of boots walking towards him from the flea market stall, the staggering gait of the boots is described as “彳彳亍亍”
"chi-chu-chu-chu" (100). Although the word "chi-chu/zhu" can be alternatively written in more phonetic characters (e.g., “踟蹰 [zhi-zhu]” and “躡躈 [chi-chu]”), Mu Xin chose the more pictographic way of writing it; each character is a half of the character for “行 [walking]”. As a result, “彳亍” takes the readers to witness visually the broken gait through the textual medium. Moreover, the ending section presents the landscape both audially and textually. Looking at the other shore across the river, the narrator describes the image of the other shore as “前前後後參參差差凹凹凸凸” (lit. trans.: front-front-back-back-long-long-short-short-concave-concave-convex-convex) and then its reflection in the river as “凸凸凹凹差差參參後後前前.” The text first collects a series of reduplicatives to present the gradations of the image and then visually and aurally reverses the whole series for its reflection. Through this visual and aural textuality, readers experience what the narrator experiences in an equally concrete and realistic means. They are similarly placed in the vibrant landscape through encountering the physical materials in their hand, which is the text. At the same time, however, the aural and visual characters highlight the materiality of the text, rendering what the readers experience realistically into the author’s performative display of the narrator, isolating them again in an opaque reality that cannot penetrate the surface of the book’s page.

In his writings of this kind, Mu Xin found accompaniment for his readers in the “past human generations” like Gide—in the narrator that is being transformed into historical figures by the landscape, as well as the writer that was transformed into a semi-autobiographical character by the narrative voice “I.” Still, this society of human
beings created by the story is different from a crystalline symbolic narrative that Gide sought for. Rather than dwelling in a personal vision, Mu Xin revealed a limit of human knowledge through the materiality of surface, which reminds people of the nature of the world they live in and the inherent qualities of their human subjectivity. Although one can never know certainly the full depths of one’s immediate reality—a source of epistemological suffering— this opaque end of artmaking is more constructive than destructive to one’s life. People are still able to retain their experience of the world, to recognize their vulnerability to doubt, to question specific knowledge, and to discover what is more in the world. There, from this existential basis that makes a community possible, the experiences of the unreachability and liminality of reality became essential to what it means to be human, rather than any crystalline ideal.

3.4 Conclusion

In the end of a letter to Guo Songfen, Mu Xin quoted from Nietzsche’s *Daybreak*:

“I miss that *Daybreak*. I still remember, there was a paragraph comparing thinkers to the vagrant birds. They are flying in separate ways before they meet each other, when they all rest on an island midway. After a short break, they set off separately again, ‘where all is sea, sea, and nothing but sea!’” (Jixing panduan 84) These vivid words can conclude the final image that Mu Xin achieved with his arts. His paintings and writings alike, Mu Xin’s art does not erase the “reality” as a collection of historical events that had
happened in his life, in an escapist mindset to avoid its pain. In erasing “reality” as a whole category of reference, neither does his art resort to some crystalline humanness that belongs to some alternative realm of ideal. Instead, for Mu Xin, what humanness meant, or what it ultimately meant to be human, was nothing more than an experience of sociality in the transient moment that people encountered each other, and in the half-second lag that the multiplicity of humanness became revealed to them when people were each caught on a glitch in their own journeys. There, the relationship between one’s artistic selfhood and the plural discourses of politics, history, and philosophy becomes the discursive reality that people are each responsible for; aesthetics becomes people’s means to achieve that practical and ethical end of shaping one’s relationship with the world.

On a side note, this pursuit of humanness as an intersubjective moment perhaps also explains why Mu Xin embarked on the literary lecture series in the first place. In the final lecture, Mu Xin briefly clarified his final advice on sacrifice:

Perhaps you might ask: Why does the artist have to make some sacrifice? Whoever asking this question probably does not want to make the sacrifice, because he/she still hasn’t figured out what art is about and is scared of sacrificing in vain—I can make a total confession: in the beginning, art is also a dream. It is only more beautiful and more enduring than the dreams of power, wealth, and sexual desires.

We all have a psychological need to share. When you finish a painting you are satisfied with, the first thought that comes to your mind is to share it with others. Humans are like this. Power or wealth is only for showing off and cannot be shared… Sexual desire is also between two people. There can’t be a third one. In comparison, art can be shared. (*Memoir of Literature* 1081)

也许你要問：為什麼藝術家一定要有所犧牲呢？
As a part of Mu Xin’s life-shaping project, the lecture series was beyond an individualistic project for Mu Xin to construct his own artistic framework. Rather, the lectures created a concrete space in a concrete time that made a community of artists from different ages, holding different political views, and working in different creative gather nevertheless. The lecture series thus provided another surface which required a continuous motion of mediation—or in Mu Xin’s simple words, “to share.” The lecture series itself reaffirmed that the humanness that Mu Xin was pursuing through his artistic endeavors in various forms and medium does not exist in an impossible human sentiment in the singular mind, but the fact that we are sensible and affectable beings as people in the world.
4. Humanness as a Diasporic Problem

In his book *A Glimpse on Twentieth-century (Mainland) Chinese Literature and the Arts* 二十世紀中國（大陸）文藝一瞥 (1987), Li Zehou 李澤厚 put down these perceptive words on the mainland Chinese intellectuals in the 1980s:

Everything reminds of the May Fourth era. The enlightenment of humanity, the awakening of humanity, Humanism, the return of humanness etc. are all evolving around one theme: the perceptual and corporal individual demands to be liberated from the reasoning and alienating God. The cry for "human, oh human" has reached each dimension of every discipline. What does the cry mean? The answer is indeterminate, but one point about it is clear: the era of creating gods and heroes to rule oneself has passed, and we have returned to the sentimentality, yarning, puzzlements, laments, and joyfulness from the May Fourth era. However, this return happened after sixty years of miseries.

The overall phenomenon of nostalgia in the 1980s for the May Fourth era contextualizes Mu Xin’s aesthetic. From his advice of sacrifice to his pursuit for an absolute humanness, Mu Xin made his personal variation of the May Fourth legacy by presenting himself as an artist emerging from the intellectual discourse of that much earlier time. In Mu Xin’s retrospective gaze, examining what was left from the May Fourth debates, the inherent anachronism could not be resolved easily by simply revealing the artist’s autonomy from his time, such as by his will to become a particular kind of artist, or to a certain ethical sociality.
As He Guimei pointed out, the attention to humanness and the parallel with the May Fourth era in the 1980s China should be understood in relation to the events and intellectual discourse in the 1950s-70s, instead of being seen as an unsophisticated “continuation” or a testimony of “rupture” in Chinese contemporary intellectual history (58-61). Through the theoretical lens of Michele Foucault’s “repressive hypothesis” in particular, He analyzed how “the idea and discourse human” from 19th-century Romanticism in the West—which forwards its own idealist version of Humanism that revolts against the Enlightenment definition of it that overemphasized Reason—has been a “specter” for the 20th-century Chinese intellectuals. While the May Fourth intellectuals adopted the Romantic vocabularies of individual subjectivity and humanness for their domestic political causes, during the Mao era, such a discourse was never fully repressed in China but continued to undergird the domestic thoughts. In the critical twenty years before the 1980s, China navigated its way through the orthodox Marxist ideology and the historical reality of its Third World revolution, where those issues at the center of Chinese thoughts were conceptually circumscribed by its dialectic margin: the 19th century European thoughts, where the concept of “revolution,” “intellectual,” and “Humanism” that interested the Chinese were initially created for. The mainland Chinese intellectuals in the 1950s-70s coursed their own path by differentiating themselves from the culture of revolution in 19th century Europe (113-114). In its following, the 1980s interest in the discourse of humanness and humanism should be conceived as the centralization of a pre-existing margin: “If how the discourse
of Humanism and the 19th century thoughts existed as ‘specter’ in the 1950s-70s shows a
Third World socialist revolution’s attempt to ‘overcome’ its nervous tension with the
Western modern culture, how the discourse of Humanism and the 19th century
thoughts entered into the mainstream in the 1980s exhibits the failure and disappearance
of the aforementioned state of tension and resistance” (59).

Putting Mu Xin into perspective, the historical relevancy of Mu Xin’s artistic
project to the late 20th century he lived in is clarified and problematized simultaneously.
On one hand, his imperative to sacrifice immediate comforts for creating art that kindles
humanness reflects the collective historical consciousness of mainland Chinese
intellectuals in the 1980s. Although he was critical about the late 20th century Chinese
intellectuals, Mu Xin nevertheless shared their interest in interpreting the 19th century
aesthetic theories and philosophy (such as Nietzsche) as a system of disciplinary
knowledge for what it meant to be human, as well as their discursive notions on
humanness such as “文学是人學 [the study of literature is a study of human].”
On the
other hand, a problem emerges from Mu Xin’s role in the 1980s Chinese intellectual
history. From the genealogy that He Guimei traces out, although posed as a concern
directed against the ideology of a collective nationalism prevailing the Mao era, the
1980s discourses of humanness that evaluates human individuals’ subjectivity were
actively sustained by a historical consciousness specific to the nation-state that had just

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8 Mu Xin made such claim in the introductory lecture to his world literature lecture series. On the 1980s use
of this phrase, see He Guimei’s “第一章：回到十九世紀” (Chapter 1: Return to the 19th Century).
moved out of the Mao era. Then, if Mu Xin’s interest in humanness and the May Fourth era was deeply rooted in a historical consciousness among mainland Chinese intellectuals in the 1980s, what did it mean for him to continue to reproduce this historical consciousness specific to mainland China as an artist working in the United States?

On the second point, Mu Xin did not emerge to the problem as an artist of singularity, detached from his times. The overseas interest in absolute humanness, nevertheless inseparable from a homebound consciousness, was common among Chinese intellectuals who lived and worked abroad in the late 20th century. For example, while on a self-exile in France, the émigré artist Gao Xingjian 高行健 suggested an ethic for the liberation of individuals from a public to a private realm. Similar to Mu Xin, Gao proposed his ideal type of ethical individual by pushing against the Nietzschean model. In his manifesto “沒有主義 [Without Isms]” in particular, Gao criticized the heroic, revolutionary, and sacrificial Overhuman for being overly Romantic and believed the contemporary artists are unable to find true freedom in the concrete categories of political authorities and the ideological “-isms” of the real world (75). Gao urges individuals to be aware of the limitations of the aesthetics practice in the public world—the writer being “a frail individual… whose voice is inevitably weak” — and to seek an internal freedom that satisfies a private mind by turning the limitation of art into a limitless space of self-reflection (32, 48).
Admittedly, Gao Xingjian’s artistic project expresses a more radical form of individualism than Mu Xin’s project that endorses “sacrifice” and a social sensibility. While Mu Xin claimed that “My literature is political; it is to evoke the self-reflexive love of humanity,” Gao Xingjian insists on a cold detachment of literature from all its readers and its social responsibilities: “I express, I exist.” (Memoir of Literature 89) (Gao 80) Yet regardless how literature is conceptualized differently on political terms, both Mu Xin and Gao Xingjian were in an active (and mostly oppositional) dialogue with their contemporaries in China through speaking in the same discourse of humanness, despite working overseas. On the most fundamental level, with the terms from “the living tree” metaphor that Tu Wei-ming invented for his theory of “cultural China,” Mu Xin and Gao Xingjian are both “rooted” in a discursive and historical specificity of their homeland, although they have “branched out” of the traditional linguistic, political, and geographic boundaries of China as diasporic artists (Tu 1-34). However, to get a deeper understanding of Mu Xin’s positionality through his historical consciousness specific to mainland China and his diasporic identity, it is necessary to ask how Mu Xin was “rooted” in this homeland of China through discursive practice, or in what way he was “rooted,” by differentiating him from similar diasporic artists in the late 20th century like Gao Xingjian.

* “我的文學, 有政治性, 是企圖喚回人類的自愛。”
Before Gao Xingjian can be interpreted as an effective figure that helps illustrate Mu Xin’s rootedness in China as a diasporic artist, an immediate difficulty should be resolved. To read Gao Xingjian as connected to any sense of Chinese “root” contradicts the cause of the diasporic discourse in his life and arts, since Gao Xingjian’s determination to cut off from his “root” in China galvanized his diaspora.

In August 1998, one year after he obtained French citizenship but almost a decade after he officially disclaimed his exile from China for France after the ‘89 mass protest, Gao Xingjian wrote an article on his diasporic experience for Le Monde, titled “L’Esprit de liberté, ma France [The Spirit of Liberty, My France].” In the article, Gao saw France providing him with the necessary conditions to live and work freely that China could not give him, making his ”France” a distinct space from his ”China” that allows the kinetic concept of “diaspora” to happen in the first place. Here, “France” and “China” are not simply two geopolitical entities but denote two categories of concepts that Gao associated with the two nations. The essay begins with Gao’s remembrance of the first time he encountered his “France,” when he read French literature in his spare time as a teen, sheltered by his liberal parents from the repressive country and time they lived in. Then, Gao recounted how he continued to experience his France through language and literature when he studied French in college in Beijing. In his words, while “China” was the immediate reality that Gao suffered from, ”France” was “le rêve [the dream].” For the rest of the article, Gao discussed how he could still sense that literary and dreamlike
“France” from the Paris that “devenu réalité [came true]” as he relocated, how he found a compatriotic bound with the French people through literary exchanges, and how China had persecuted him to such an extent that he no longer considered it his homeland (Gao). In this narrative, the two countries of “China” and “France” are presented as a dichotomous binary. While “China” is the landscape where the ideology rules supreme, the collective space of social subjects, the center of history, and the origin of sufferings, “France” is the dreamscape that escapes ideology, the private space of an artist’s interiority, the literary margin that infringes the center, and the liberating present. The artist’s diaspora travels through the distance in between. Gao emphasized his familiarity with and his sense of belonging to “France,” while this pronounced sense of belonging is foiled by his physical and mental detachment from “China.”

Based on his own diasporic experience previously recounted in his *Le Monde* article, Gao Xingjian’s novel *One Man’s Bible* 一個人的聖經 came out a year later in 1999. Through this work of fiction, Gao again attempted to cut off his bound with China, contaminated by ideological persecutions and sufferings, and to bring himself to an authentic freedom in a private form of language, only possible in France. The novel replicates the picture of “China” and “France” through the two narrative pronouns: the “你 [you]” that is a writer in exile, traveling among Hong Kong and other Western countries but eventually settling in France, and the “他 [he]” that lived in China during the Cultural Revolution and in the early 1980s. Here, the separation between the pronouns are linguistic constructs. The suffering “he” and the exilic “you” in fact coexist
in one body as they are connected by the act of remembering. As linguistic constructs, the separation between “you” and “he” creates a narrative, where the “you” that exists in the exilic present tries to make sense of “his” past sufferings in the homebound past, as well as to redeem himself from it. As the “you” of the present moment dissociates his earlier experiences in China into the experience of a third person identity “he,” the “you” creates an alienated identity through which “you” can looks at himself as an object: “You need to distance yourself from suffering, calmly scan those dim memories, and find in them some bright spots, so that you will be able to investigate the road you have traveled” (Gao 207). In doing so, “you” extracts himself from the past sufferings, as well as the entire picture of “China,” by reshaping his past experience of “China” into someone else’s.

The distinction between the second and third person pronouns also allows “you” to the freedom of self-creation, fashioning his own social identity by distinguishing a selfhood of “you” from “his” existing identity. For instance, in Chapter 18, the narrator “you” forward his identification with no-ism by saying “no” to “him” being “impulsive and stupid” during the Cultural Revolution:

No, you simply narrate, use language to reconstruct the he of that time. From this time and this place you return to that time and that place, using your state of mind at this time and this place to tell of him at that time and that place. Probably this is the significance of this investigation of yours. ...Now you are without “isms.” ... This is the difference between the you of the present and the he that you are investigating. (Gao 212-213)

10 Unless otherwise noted, excerpts from Gao’s novel all come from Mabel Lee’s translation of his One Man’s Bible (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc., 2002).
不，你只陳述，用語言來還原當時的他，你從此時此地回到彼時彼地，此時此地的心境複述彼時彼地的他，大概就是你這番觀審的意義。⋯⋯如今，你沒有主義。⋯⋯這便是此時的你同你觀審的他之間的差異。  

Here, Gao’s self-creation is doubly effective. The creation of a sense of selfhood of the “you” also allows Gao Xingjian, the writer, to replicate his own exile through the fictional lens, where his external displacement in the society is paired with an internal displacement of the interiority through creating this “you” as his fictional personality: the external displacement takes place within the artists’ social position, as his *Le Monde* article reveals, where one moved from one place to another in the society of a public human world; the internal displacement refers to a movement within the artist’s interiority, as represented by his *One Man’s Bible*. The internal movement relies on a distance between the self-as-subject that is actively observing and the self-as-object that is being observed. One sees oneself as an object from an external position that emerges through the novel’s linguistic representation and fictional characters, from the “he” displacing the “you” from ideology to liberty, as well as the “you” displacing Gao Xingjian from reality to fiction. In this double displacement, Gao rejected the root of “China” and all the conceptual dimensions it denotes through a radically diasporic positionality, operating on both the social and the subjective levels that could define him as a subject to a root.  

However, in practice, Gao could not really reject “China” as his “root” in a discursive and historical sense. Gao’s double displacement here coheres with the type of displacement from what Louis Althusser portrays as “interpellation.” In *On the*
Reproduction of Capital, Althusser uses the concept of “interpellation” to demonstrate the role of ideology in the formation of a “concrete subject,” which is a category that both manifests and constitutes ideology (190). Putting the concept into a theoretic scene, Althusser equates interpellation to an act of “hailing.” Althusser imagines a police officer calling on someone’s back— “Hey, you there!” —and the person turns around: “By this mere 180-degree physical conversion, he becomes a subject” (191). In this “180-degree physical conversion,” an internal displacement occurs as the individual unconsciously recognizes “that hail is really addressed to him” (191). The “you” from the hail “Hey, you there!” becomes a third person, creating the self-as-object that the individual can discern his/her self-as-subject “I” with: “it was really he who was hailed” (191). In recognition that the hailed object is the “I” of the subject, the individual “recruits” him/herself, or becomes a subject, by identifying his/her subjectivity with an object that is outside of him/her (190). Putting this scene back to the relationship between a subject and ideology, Althusser proposes that “[t]he existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing” (191). Ideology, like the police officer’s voice on the street, hails people into categories and identities. People can choose to place themselves in a certain identity or not, but such placement of identity does not change their status as subjects of ideology as a whole. The moment of recognizing oneself as a “subject,” one has already displaced oneself to inhabit the space of ideology. Ideology thus emerges from within one’s recognition of one’s interiority, such that no one can be outside of ideology.
Gao Xingjian produces interpellated subjects who recognize the ideological hail but resist identification with the categories. In *One Man’s Bible*, for instance, the narrator “you” rejects being attached to what “China” signifies by resisting identification with the narrator “he.” In this process of resistance, the “you” recognizes the existence of the “he” nonetheless and reinforces the ideological structure behind the split of pronouns. Under the remembrance of “you,” the narrative of “he” only contributes to a traditionalist, post-'89 Western impression of China. Growing up among Red Guards and then living in the May Seventh Cadre School, “he” witnesses through the Cultural Revolution how Chinese people including himself are victimized subjects that cannot escape the horror of ideological repressions and persecutions in the nation-state of China. Whereas, the narrative of “you” assumes the position of a stereotypical Chinese dissident in remembering the "he." The "you" holds onto a sentiment that C. T. Hsia termed as the "obsession with China" in looking back to its malaise, as well as an idealistic perception of Europe as a cultured and enlightened place, seeing only the poetic image of it even until the very end:\footnote{From C.T. Hsia’s *A History of Modern Chinese* (1961).} "The organ and a choir. The hotel room has stylish old furniture, a heavy oak table, dark-brown carved wardrobes, and a wooden bed with round carved posts." While Althusser claims there is no outside of ideology, the "you" affirms Althusser’s claim as he recognizes what the ideology (“China”) wants him to be, the “he,” as what he cannot be.
Moreover, while the kinesis of diaspora as “he” transitions to “you” seems to defy the integrity of ideology, such a component of diaspora only makes Gao Xingjian preserve ideology as a stable and inviolable apparatus. Immediately, since ideology is circumscribed by the categorical limit of “China,” the diaspora itself, the moving out of “China,” suggests a stepping outside of ideology. The problem with such an idea is that the diasporic individual, who is the sum of the “he” and the “you,” is constantly accused in the novel as an “敵人 [enemy]” and a “反革命 [counter-revolutionist]” to the normal Chinese society that must be gotten rid of. Instead of a rule-breaking hero, the diasporic narrator(s) is more similar to the soldier who deserted during the war and was banished from home (59-60). “He” read about it in childhood, whereas “[now] it was he who had deserted” (60). This story of the diasporic soldier provides an alternative narrative for diaspora. The narrator becomes “you” that is different from “he” but in doing so accepts being hailed as a disruption to ideology, where his moving out of China instead maintains the ideology as what it should be. Consequently, Gao’s rejection of his rootedness in the ideological “China” only roots him even deeper within it.

4.2 A Root as a Rhizome: Mu Xin

In a biographical documentary series, *The Tale of Mu Xin* 木心物語(2016), there is a scene where Mu Xin recalled a conversation he had about his diaspora in the U.S.:

“‘They said: 'Are you an exiled writer?' I said no, I just took a long walk and found
myself in New York” (Tan). Indeed, unlike Gao Xingjian, Mu Xin was not strictly a “writer of diaspora” who reflects on an experience of one’s displacement in one’s writing, although he was a diasporic writer in practice. Mu Xin’s diaspora reflects much of the urban sensibility of a flâneur, who wanders amid the dynamic and cosmopolitan crowd, rather than that of a displaced writer, who discovers a new sense of loss and/or freedom in an exilic foreign place.

This urban sensibility that drives his diaspora reaches beyond Mu Xin’s description of his own life and plays a major role in his diasporic arts. In his writings, for example, the narrators’ physical displacement never causes a cognitive distance between the places the narrators depart and arrive. While they also have the idealized poetic pictures of Europe in their head, not unlike Gao Xingjian’s narrators and Gao himself, Mu Xin’s narrators never fail to recognize that those aestheticized Europe is only an image that does not correspond to reality. Neither had Mu Xin nor his characters ever verbalized their sense of belonging to the foreign land like Gao Xingjian’s proclamation of his compatriotic bound with the French, but that does not preclude their connection with the local space. Rather, through various forms of imagined dialogues in the stories,

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12 “他們說，你是流亡作家嗎？我 no, 我是散步散得遠了，就到了紐約。”
13 In “你還在這裡 [You Are Still There]” the narrator reflects on both his expectation for New York as an “ever-changing” city and his disillusionment half a year later, where he sees the same pedestrians appearing at the same place all the time; in “哥倫比亞的倒影 [The Shadow of Columbia]” the narrator imagines the scenes of the harbor from medieval romance but at the same time experiences the chaotic train station of Rome; in “兩個即興曲 [Two Sonatinas],” the narrator tours Denmark and sees the Little Mermaid statue in terms of both a fairytale fantasy and the news reports saying people have stolen the arm of the statue—examples are many.
Mu Xin’s narrators are able to penetrate other people’s minds without having to communicate, as if establishing a tacit form of understanding among cosmopolitan subjects.

The difference between Gao Xingjian and Mu Xin is perhaps partly due to the difference between Paris and New York, the two cities they relocated to. Gao described this difference by the end of *One Man’s Bible*: “The place is New York...Chinatowns are everywhere, whether downtown in Manhattan, or in Flushing, Queens. This is China, more Chinese than China, as Chinese New Yorkers construct their own virtual hometowns...You are, in fact, not so alone in the world, and have many close friends, as well as some you have just made” (555). Gao Xingjian’s semi-autobiographical narrator found this New York unsatisfying and chooses to base in France instead, as he is unwilling to “put on a play with Chinese actors” (555). Mu Xin, in contrast, mingled in the Chinese artists circle at Art Students League in New York comfortably without feeling the urge to learn English well, while he participated in imaginative conversations with the non-Chinese people around him through his literature and arts. Nevertheless, the different attitudes toward their remaining connections with China as well as to their statuses of diaspora, as shown through this biographical detail, suggest that another form of “root” need to be conceived in order to understand Mu Xin’s arts and life. Unlike Gao Xingjian, who depicted “China” and “France” in a clear dichotomy, Mu Xin’s homeland and foreign land intersect in a grey area in between that cannot be
clearly situated into a simple binary in “the living tree,” with its branches reaching out and its root planted inside some bounded shapes.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari engage with the botanical metaphors to conceptualize a “rhizome” as an alternative to a traditionalist root tree. Deleuze and Guattari describe the generative model of the root tree as a process of “tracing” (12-17). That is, the growth of the “tree” is like drawing on a piece of paper on top of an existing map underneath, which is a centralized unity represented by the “root.” In the real world, when a person becomes a subject in the society by moving from one place to another on this existing map, the person neither changes the underlying structure or supporting axis, the intersubjective relations, nor the subject positions the map produces (12). The interpellation theory of Althusser—as well as Gao Xingjian’s diasporic life and works—produces this kind of a root tree. Interpellation produces subject positions on a map, where the map is the ideology. In one’s recognition of oneself as a ready-made subject position, the self-as-object, the subject imitates the object but, in this process, retains the shape of both the Self and the Other. In case of Gao Xingjian, for example, his characters and himself cannot imagine new ways to exist in the world other than being alternatively the homebound “Chinese” or the exilic “French,” or to embrace other non-binary categories like the hybridized “New York” that are beyond the current pictures of “China” and “France.”

Instead of “tracing,” Deleuze and Guattari conceptualize a different generative model for a rhizome, defined by the “lines of flight” or “detrimentalization” (14-15).
“Deterritorialization” does not refer to one’s simple displacement from one place in preparation to move to another place on a map, assuming one subject position after another, but to one’s displacement from all ready-made places on the map at hand. Then, “reterritorialization” follows “deterritorialization.” The displaced person becomes a point on an unmapped territory, while maintaining his/her connection, “lines of flight,” with the former map’s points of reference. Deleuze and Guattari use a wasp pollinating an orchid as an example for this process (10). At the moment of pollination, the wasp and the orchid make a heterogeneous unity, because unlike the two branches from the same tree, they do not belong to any singular "root" of specie. When the wasp and the orchid come into contact, the wasp is deterritorialized from its waspness and reterritorialized as an expansion to the orchid as the wasp carries out part of the orchid’s “reproductive apparatus.” Simultaneously, the orchid is deterritorialized from its orchidness and reterritorialized as an expansion to the wasp as it bears “an image, a tracing of the wasp.” In this process where each is changed by the other, the root map of rhizome is no longer a centralized and homogenous unity like the root of a tree, but a transforming and expanding being, a map with a shifting landscape, that contains subjects constantly evolving beyond becoming actually what one is potentially.

Mu Xin’s root of “China” takes shape as such a rhizome. The discussion of Mu Xin’s literature will not be complete without attending to the second major theme in his writing, in addition to the flâneur theme that portrays an urban wanderer walking around the (imaginary) world. While living in New York, Mu Xin wrote essays, short
stories, and poems looking back to his hometowns: the town of Wuzhen from his childhood and the cities of Hangzhou and Shanghai from his adolescent years and youth. On the first look, through these stories, Mu Xin not only looked back to his hometown with nostalgia but was looking at it through a particular literary lens, which is the May Fourth genre of native soil literature. For instance, Mu Xin’s short story “壽衣 [The Burial Suits]” imitates Lu Xun’s short story “祝福 [The New Year’s Sacrifice]” closely. Both stories are narrated by a man recalling memories from his childhood, about a family helper in his household who secretly escaped from her husband’s home to work but later being found by her husband’s family, or in Mu Xin’s story, her husband himself. The only difference is, the helper in Lu Xun’s original story, Hsiang Lin’s wife, is taken back by force to her husband’s home in the mountains by her husband’s family, while in Mu Xin’s story, the narrator’s family steps out and defends their helper Mrs. Chen when her husband shows up. As a result, unlike the tragic ending of Hsiang Lin’s wife, Mrs. Chen manages to spend the last years of her life in peace at the narrator’s home, such that the narrator’s sisters even offer to set up her funeral and show her the burial suits they have prepared for her to wear when she dies. Through the semi-autobiographical narrator in the novel, Mu Xin as a diasporic author seemed to rehearse the “imaginary nostalgia” of a hometown, as David Der-wei Wang terms it, felt “after the author is uprooted from the soil he cherishes so much and, more ironically, has been denied any possibility of savoring or understanding its actuality” (Wang 109). For May Fourth writers like Lu Xun, the moment of their “uproot” happened when they were
displaced from a local town to an urban metropolis, while for Mu Xin, the moment of his “uproot” occurred in his diasporic displacement from the greater Shanghai area to New York.

Nevertheless, as he wrote in this major genre of modern Chinese literature, Mu Xin produced a variation of the native soil genre that deterritorializes the genre from within. For instance, the story of “The Burial Suits” ends on a drastically different note from Lu Xun’s “The New Year's Sacrifice.” Instead of continuing the nostalgic, sympathetic, and grateful sentiment for the helper, Mu Xin displaced his narrator into a different sentiment that cannot fit quite into the previous tone:

They said to her:

“Young coffin is ready. It’s very nice, stopping at the Back Flower Hall.” She nodded. My sisters brought the burial suits over, picking them up one by one to show Ms. Chen. They told me: Ms. Chen smiled. She spoke very clearly: “I can’t believe I get to wear a burial suit like these!”

Hearing my sisters’ words, I felt a sharp aversion—why would they do this; only girls would do something like this!

The year that the victory of Anti-Japanese War was in sight, I left home for a big city to make a living by myself.

At the end of the war, I was admitted to the university through the academic equivalency evaluation. I was a boarder. I spent all my summer and winter breaks at school. (Wensha muyuan riji 160)
These ending lines channel a different sentimentality that is in tension with the previous sentiment of nostalgia. The image of hometown, with Ms. Chen and his sisters in it, were made not out of familial affection but of moral detachment, or even superiority. The narrator lands in a different place in a line of flight from the nostalgic and appreciative role that he should behave, both physically and psychologically, that by avoiding home, he seeks to forget about these embarrassing women at home who console each other through the feudal codes of rituals. In this displacement of the narrator in the end, Mu Xin captured a minor or deterritorialized tenor within the major genre of native soil literature. On one hand, the narrator is a fictional embodiment of Mu Xin himself. He experiences what Mu Xin experienced in his youth, who had two sisters and did escape the town to live in the major cities, trying to make a living by himself. Through the narrator, Mu Xin planted himself into the center of the narrative voice’s imagined nostalgia. However, despite how deeply he is rooted in the genre, by presenting the narrator’s shift in his sentiment, Mu Xin presented a view of the genre from outside. The narrator’s transition leaves the story endlessly contradictory. While nostalgia overwhelms, skepticism sets in with the last lines evoking a moral conscience, which takes guilt in the narrator’s attempt to forget instead of to change.

Mu Xin’s deterritorialization of the image of “China” from its native literary map was accompanied by a reterritorialization of it through the artist’s interactions with the foreign audience. In the 2001 exhibition “Art of Mu Xin: Landscape Paintings and Prison Notes,” in particular, Mu Xin physically reterritorialized the manuscript he produced
during the Cultural Revolution by taking it to the galleries of the U.S. Traveling from
New York, New Haven, Chicago, to Hawaii, this manuscript entitled *Prison Notes*
became something beyond simple documentations of a “Chinese” history. Rather, the
manuscript was a variation of the “American” history too, since it formed an image of a
New York resident who once lived in China—“THE Chinese writer and artist Mu Xin,
who was born in 1927, emigrated to the United States in 1982, and lives in Forest Hills,
Queens,” or the “Chinese-born artist Mu Xin,” as William Zimmer and Holland Cotter
wrote for the *New York Times* respectively in their exhibition reviews.

Moreover, the image of “China” was transformed and reconstituted as the
manuscript reterritorialized. The insidiousness of the binary logic of a root tree still
existed in Mu Xin’s decision to exhibit his works created from his imprisonments during
the Cultural Revolution, which could easily contribute to the stereotypical knowledge of
China that the American audience held at the turn of the new millennium. However, Mu
Xin decisively resisted facilitating interpretations of the exhibition in association with
the Cultural Revolution, despite his audience having eagerly hoped for him to do so. As
Mu Xin responded in his interview with Toming Jun Liu, who kept bringing back the
Cultural Revolution and his imprisonment as the point of reference for his manuscript
on show:

Sir, perhaps you expect the author to give a romantic and realistic narrative in
this dialogue on the manuscript. But I naturally prefer to describe my attitude in
terms of cinematic stills and fade-outs. ... But, didn’t we agree at the outset to "de-
emphasize certain temporal-spatial factors”? You cannot expect the author of the
*Notes* to make too much of a confession. (142)
In doing so, Mu Xin urged the American audience to give up looking for a ready-made image of “China” as perceived by the West—“China” as the landscape of ideology, sufferings, imprisonments, and death—and put them to confront the *Prison Notes* on its own terms.

Figure 9: Recto 52 from the “Prison Notes,” in “The Art of Mu Xin: Landscape Paintings and Prison Notes.”
Figure 10: *Prison Notes* at Yale University Art Gallery, October 12 – December 9, 2001.

Figure 11: “The Art of Mu Xin: Landscape Paintings and *Prison Notes*” exhibition at Yale University Art Gallery, October 12 – December 9, 2001.
In the exhibition, while the microscopic handwriting on the manuscript itself was unreadable for people literate and illiterate in Chinese alike, Mu Xin gave permission to translate a few segments from the text into English, available to the audience on the exhibition site. And yet, the translation did not disclose how the text segments were chosen, who chose them, or how they were interrelated. Neither did it reveal the strategies of their translation, how true they speak to the manuscript’s content in Chinese, or if these segments are representative of the style and content of the whole manuscript. In effect, the translation emerged as a transitional and indirect discourse that constitutes its own object, both opaque and liberating at once: opaque because its ability to refer to the manuscript cannot exceed an exigency of the translator, in that there is a perpetual gap between the translation, which produces interpretations, and the source text and its language, where the meaning of the Prison Notes resides; liberating because the translation’s inaccessibility to the manuscript put the readers at ease, as in now the readers could only make up facts to stand in for what had actually happened in the manuscript, instead of seeking truth from the manuscript that was essentially “Chinese.” On top of the previous forms of reterritorialization, the manuscript thus created through its translation another stratum of territory, as well as another direction of expansion.
4.3 Conclusion

Mu Xin invented the notion “帶根的流浪人 [a vagabond with a root]” in an essay that portrays the Czech writer Milan Kundera, which is actually another fictional personality of Mu Xin himself: “Kundera goes vagabonding with his root and has spent nearly ten years in France. However, it is not so much that he recognizes France as his homeland, as that he holds no hackneyed plot about any ‘nation’ on the map or in history.” (39) This slightly oxymoronic notion summarizes the central concern of this chapter, which is to understand Mu Xin’s aesthetic and ethical pursuits in relation to the two countries that the artist was tied to. How could Mu Xin identify as a homeless individual but retain an attachment to a collective origination, or a sense of belonging at the same time? How could his art receive nourishments from (and reversely sustain the livelihood of) a “root” that is never planted into a concrete soil, a space that never collapses with any categorizable place in the world?

Mu Xin’s idiosyncratic “rootedness” cannot be conceptualized with the traditional model of a “tree.” His works are not consistent with the type of aesthetic practice that either manifests or denies an essentialist root, such as a picture of a “Chineseness” that is planted in the soil of whatever specificity. Since both manifesting and denying the root legitimize without altering the root’s authority to produce categories and identities, the tree model only inserts the artist and the aesthetic practice

14 “昆德拉帶根流浪，在法國已近十年，與其說他認法國為祖國，不如說他對任何地理上的歷史上的“國”都不具迂腐的情結。”
deeper in the categorized places and ready-made identities. Instead, Mu Xin’s attachment to the Chinese discursive interest in humanness in the 1980s and the cosmopolitan environment in New York can be conceptualized as a rhizome, in Deleuze and Guattari’s term. The rhizome is still a rooted concept, but a root of a different kind. A rhizome is connected to but not limited by the concept of “Chineseness” in various specific dimensions, since the rhizome has a capability to alter those specific dimensions by generating serendipitous connections. Rooted in a rhizomic “China,” Mu Xin lived and worked in the society of a foreign country as he could, amalgamating an outsider’s perspective into his own vision, while changing the society of the foreign country to understand, accept, and grow with him.
5. Epilogue

Soon after the literary lecture series ended in January, Mu Xin departed for London on June 6, 1994, and finally visited the Europe he had been imagining since childhood. Accompanied by his artists-friends Chen Danqing and Liu Dan, Mu Xin stayed at the British dealer and collector Hugh Moss’s Tudor countryside mansion for three weeks (Xie). During this stay, Mu Xin spent three days touring London and another two days visiting Shakespeare’s hometown at Stratford (Figure 5). This journey

![Image](image.png)

Figure 12: Mu Xin (middle), Liu Dan (left) and Alexandra Munroe (right) at the British Museum.

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15 Hugh Moss was Liu Dan’s British sponsor. Mu Xin was invited by Liu Dan and Hugh Moss together to visit the UK.
perhaps brought Mu Xin a sense of conclusion to this much postponed trip: around 1949, the professor at Shanghai Fine Arts College Chen Shiwen proposed to sponsor Mu Xin to study in France, but this plan eventually was aborted (Xia 250).\textsuperscript{16} A few months after he returned to New York from London, Mu Xin finally made the decision to return to where his grand tour of the West had all started. In January 1995, Mu Xin went back to the town of Wuzhen alone without telling his friends. He saw his childhood home there for the first time in 52 years, ever since he left for the big cities in 1943 (Xia 260).

However, the trip to Wuzhen only confirmed Mu Xin of his unwillingness and inability to take “root” in any concrete soil in the world. The family estate was given up by Mu Xin’s mother Shenzhen in 1950 to rid their family of their "landlord" classification and was turned into a smith work factory by the town’s manufacturing “cooperative”(合作社) in March 1958. The factory went bankrupt and deserted Mu Xin’s family estate in 1995, the year he visited (Mu Xin Art Museum). Seeing the ragged state of his childhood home, with a few workers working by dying kilns, Mu Xin wrote about his trip in an essay titled “烏鎮 [Wuzhen],” later published in the \textit{China Times} 中國時報 in Taiwan.

There, Mu Xin wrote resolutely:

\begin{quote}
In the concepts that I am used to, “hometown” means “the most familiar place.” However, at that moment, I only knew its name (still correct) and its dialect (still unchanged), and nothing else accorded other than those. … Farewell, I will not come back again.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{16} Exact cause unknown. One of the factors could be Chen’s own exile. He left the mainland for Hong Kong in 1949.

\textsuperscript{17} Reprinted in \textit{同情中斷錄} [Book of Interrupted Sympathies]; pagination unknown.
Nonetheless, life played tricks on Mu Xin again at the turn of the new millennium. In 1998, Chen Xianghong 陳向宏, the Director of the General Office at Tongxiang Municipality at that time, read Mu Xin’s essay “Wuzhen” through a retired local teacher from Wuzhen. Soon afterward, Chen was sent to Wuzhen as the Secretary of the Wuzhen Township and launched his project of reviving Wuzhen to its former state before its architectures were destroyed in the recent decades. While restoring the town’s cultural heritage through modeling after ancient artistic form, the project also aimed to economically resuscitate the fallen town. In 2001, Chen connected with Mu Xin through the writer Wang Anyi 王安憶 and invited him to come back to Wuzhen. With Chen Danqing as his guarantor, Chen offered Mu Xin that he would rebuild his family estate for him to live in and hire him a team of domestic helpers all for free, in addition to shielding him from unwanted visits and public attention (Chen Xianghong). After five years of convincing, in 2006, Mu Xin eventually agreed to move back against his initial will and was transported to Wuzhen as a living cultural artefact.

In his last years, quite contradictory to the sentimentalized narrative about “a fallen leaf returning to its root,” Mu Xin continued to see himself in diaspora while living at the exact same place he was born. As Mu Xin justified his return: “Today’s Wuzhen is no longer the Wuzhen back then. A new generation provides me with an
abundant space of creativity, so I return.” (Xia) In Mu Xin’s unpublished manuscript written during his last years in Wuzhen, Chen Danqing further located these following lines:

Set out to the world,
Exile,
Thousands of mountains and rivers,
The uttermost of sky and earth,
All the way to the motherland:
The hometown. (Chen Danqing 122)

What made him finally accept the invitation after five years? If homecoming meant continuing an ongoing diasporic experience, how did this diaspora in a reverse direction fit into his discourse of sacrifice? If these words were read as a continuous performance of the diasporic personality that Mu Xin had established with his earlier works, rather than what actually drove his return, Mu Xin’s decision to accept the invitation becomes all so puzzling. Notably, a narrative of death accompanied the narrative of diaspora that Mu Xin tried to construct with his last words. As Chinese artists became more recognized in the West by the end of the 20th century, many Chinese artists that had accompanied Mu Xin in New York in the 1980s and early 1990s started moving back to

18 “今日之烏鎮非昔日之烏鎮矣，一代新人給予我創作藝術足夠的空間，所以我回來了。”
the Greater China area. Mu Xin’s New York City began to fall deadly silent after his once boisterous salon that held literary lectures came into conclusion. Among those who stayed in New York, in July 2005, Mu Xin’s dear friend Guo Songfen passed away from a stroke. In April 2006, the eldest attendee of his literary lectures, the painter Jin Gao also passed away from illness. The society that Mu Xin found the liveliest form of humanness was no longer there by the early 2000s. As Chen Xianghong recalled, upon making his decision to relocate to Wuzhen, Mu Xin inquired about his future life in Wuzhen as well as his death: “Would I be able to be buried here in Wuzhen?” “Could I be buried in my art museum?” (Tan) In the last years of his life, was the sacrificial artist Mu Xin finally resorting to a permanent comfort in the foreseeable death, releasing himself from a lifelong sacrifice to art? Or was his giving way to this surface image of a diasporic artist, this cultural artifact in the reconstructed utopia of Wuzhen, the ultimate completion to his declaration of “art is to sacrifice one’s death”?

Looking back to the life of Mu Xin, it was truly as what he had said: “Every stage and every step in my life was a mistake.” (Chen Xianghong) From his beginning years as an aspiring artist unable to join an art school immediately, his many imprisonments that deterred him from working creatively in public, his expatriation in 1982 with a

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19 In 2011, the year he passed away, Mu Xin met with Lin Bing and Hiroshi Okamoto, who were both trained by I. M. Pei. and were designing the upcoming Mu Xin Art Museum in Wu Zhen. There, as Chen Xianghong recalled, Mu Xin compared himself to I. M. Pei, who he met back in New York in 2001: “Every stage and every step in Mr. Pei’s life was right, while every stage and every step in my life was a mistake.”
group of much younger artists, to his final return to his hometown in 2006 against his
initial plan, Mu Xin’s life and his experience of expatriation were different from the
widely acknowledged artists of his generation today. For instance, Mu Xin never became
another Zao Wou-ki 趙無極, who enrolled in the Hangzhou National Art Academy
before its exile in 1935—eight years before Mu Xin arrived in Hangzhou—and
successfully made his way to study in France in 1948—one year before Mu Xin was
offered the same opportunity. Had the steps that Mu Xin took in his life matched up
with the stages of political changes in the country, could Mu Xin have become another
Zao Wou-ki? The answer is nowhere to be found. Nonetheless, all of the “mistakes” in
Mu Xin’s life made him representative of the unfortunate mass of Chinese intellectuals
in his generation, who did not make the serendipitous opportunities like most of the
Chinese diasporic artists known widely today.20

Despite living in a very comparable period, Mu Xin’s life of “mistakes” allowed
him for a distinct aesthetic and ethical resolution with the 20th century world that the
artists renowned or not have all shared. Interrogating the ghosts of the May Fourth
forefathers that shaped their turbulent and regrettable youth, Mu Xin found creative
empowerment through the aesthetic-cum-ethical principles they laid; struggling to make

20 Mu Xin can also be compared to Chinese diasporic writers such as Hualing Nieh Engle and Eileen Chang. Although my study here did not get to discuss this part of his life, Mu Xin actually went to Taiwan before the Kuomintang government’s exile there in 1948. He participated in rescuing student activists from Kuomintang’s prison in 1947 during the White Terror in Shanghai. For this reason, he was expelled from Shanghai Fine Arts College and blacklisted by the Kuomintang government in Shanghai. Mu Xin only returned to mainland China in 1949 because his mother wrote him letters that urged him to do so. Had he stayed in Taiwan, or simply relocated to Hong Kong like many other intellectuals at that time, Mu Xin’s life could have been again very different.
sense of the historical misfortunes that once arrested his art, Mu Xin comprehended the ultimate value of art not in the singular expression of individual sensibilities, but in the collective processes of intermedial and intersubjective meditation; working abroad as an artist still unable to expel his Chineseness, Mu Xin avoided bitterness and hatred of the West but took China’s Westernization as a basis of creativity embedded in his own experience. There, Mu Xin’s aesthetic-cum-political statement lies not in terms of oppression and resistance but in a productive skepticism that took lines of flight escaping while shifting and expanding every ultimate categorizing authority.
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