

Tree Burning: Yu Hua and Can Xue as Writers of the Rhizome

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

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Abstract

The thesis explores how Chinese avant-garde writers Yu Hua and Can Xue's early short fictions pose a profound stylistic and structural challenge to existing conventions of realist fictions in China. It mainly uses the idea of "rhizome" as a concept developed by Deleuze and Guattari to highlight two major attributes of these fictional works. These are 1) the tremendous interpretive freedom allowed and 2) the aesthetic integrity of the art works to exempt them from being didactic. As an important accompanying argument, the thesis will also use "rhizome" to challenge the popular attempts at reading these two avant-garde writers' works as representations of reality.

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1. Introduction

This paper seeks to sideline history and personal stories to illustrate the fruitfulness of reading avant-garde Chinese literature even without. However, some things need to be said to sketch out a time and place in which the object of inquiry become traceable in the history to which it is relevant.

1.1 Chinese Avant-Garde: Between Past and Future

The time around which the Chinese avant-garde was writing witnessed just the end of the Cultural Revolution and the beginning of Deng's economic reform. It was a time of reflecting on the past, which is fraught with trauma and regrets and it was also a time to look towards the future and the outside. The memories of the pains from times of famine and ruthless persecutions were still fresh yet a prospect of openness and connection to the larger world was also imminent. The avant-garde writers, among whom are Yu Hua, Can Xue, and Zong Pu, were certainly some of the major negotiators of this coupling of trauma and hopes.¹ They, in addition to many of their peers around the same time were to considerable degree impacted by the Cultural Revolution—Can Xue in particular suffered the misfortune of having her family condemned as rightists. But they were also eager experimenters of the new thoughts and ideas that became available during the economic reform. They adopted a style of writing that was vastly different

¹ Li Zehou 李泽厚, *Zhongguo xiandai sixiang shilun* 中国现代思想史论 [On Contemporary Chinese Thoughts], (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2008), 70.

from their precursors: graphic violence, fragments, incoherence and techniques rarely seen in what was usually associated with Chinese literature. Behind these innovations were of course a series of inspirations from what the economic reform was able to introduce: the landscape of Western modernism.

To give a particularly relevant example, in Wu Gefei's "Sartre's Encounter with China: Discovery and Reconstruction of the Human Paradigm in New-Era Chinese Literature", we are able to take a glimpse of how even a fraction of popular Western ideas were capable of inciting waves of new thoughts in a China that was eager to learn:

Since the 1980s, especially during the "Sartre Craze," a great deal of work was done translating and researching Sartrean existentialism in both philosophical and literary circles in China. As a new kind of humanism, Sartre's existential philosophy as well as his literary works greatly contributed to the discovery and deepening of the human paradigm in New Era Chinese literature.²

The "Sartre Craze" phenomenon during the 1980s in China highlights some important connections between post-Cultural-Revolution avant-garde literature and Sartrean philosophy. According to Wu, Sartre has generated a strong interest in his writing from Chinese readership because of a set of reasons. Firstly, Sartre has historically enjoyed a more communist reputation and was known to be sympathetic towards the Chinese communist cause. In addition, as is part of the widespread intellectual changes in the 80s, the translation of Sartre's works into Chinese coincided with the new era of Chinese economic reform, which allows a wide readership of his works among intellectuals and writers in China. Most importantly, in terms of Sartre's

² Wu Gefei, "Sartre's Encounter with China: Discovery and Reconstruction of the Human Paradigm in New-era Chinese Literature," PKn, vol.30, no.1 (June, 2017): 138-139.

philosophy in phenomenology and existentialism, his ideas of individual's radical freedom (coupled with its ensuing responsibility), isolation, and "existence prior to essence" have been very appealing to writers in search of a newer identity that is more concerned with "individuality" and a detachment from traditions. (Coincidentally, Sartre has been widely read in Japan earlier in the 1950s and 60s mostly for his fictions and a slight misunderstood reading of his philosophy, which also helps generate some novel literary thinking, such as Abe Kobo's engagement with metaphoric isolation in her *Women in the Dunes*).

There are two helpful takeaways from this article. For one, Wu's arguments and surveys have shed more light on the heavily heteroglossic nature of avant-garde literature like Yu Hua and Can Xue and further support the relevance of Western critical theory and literary traditions in their writings. Second and more importantly, the Sartrean way of understanding human conditions, that is, as essentially isolated, detached from predetermined values, and subject to inviolable freedom can be used as important ways to treat some of the extraordinarily absurd and cryptic literary works by Yu Hua and Can Xue. For example, Yu Hua's "Punishments and Past", in Sartrean reading, strongly resonates with the idea of an individual's inevitable and violent break with their past to confront the severance between identity and memory, a radically existentialist move for both Heidegger and Sartre.

Wu calls Sartre's contribution a creation of a "new human paradigm", one that gains so much popularity that it became almost a "cult of nothingness".³ This cult, as embodied in literature, advocates for the belief in the essential nothingness of the world (in the sense that there is no predetermined meaning in the grand scheme of things) and the transience of norms, which are both very important concepts advanced by the avant-garde, in particular in Can Xue's works. In *Five Spice Street*, for instance, freedom is often expressed as an ostensible mockery and absurdization of moral norms that define societal behaviors. In many other shorter works by Can Xue too, as this paper would like to demonstrate further, "nothing-ness" is a crucial structural and thematic notion.

Around the time of this renewed era of Western learning, Chinese literature also began forming its own theory, with Yan Lianke's idea of "Unrealism" (神现实主义) being one of the most influential in the discourses of fictions. Unrealism, as a kind of realism, seeks to abandon the surface logic of what we perceive to be the reality of our quotidian life in order to discover or construct an unseen reality whose ground of existence stems from our souls and spiritual experience.⁴ In other words, it advocates for a kind of writing that, despite its defiance against conventional realism, also proclaims itself to be real precisely because it abandons the deceptive surface of perceivable reality. Such idea perfectly aligns with the Sartrean belief in the "essential nothingness" of our external world and the importance of the reality which is given rise to by individual experience. It

³ Wu, 142.

⁴ Yan Lianke, *Faxian Xiaoshuo* 发现小说, (Tianjin: Nankai University Press, 2011), 45.

allows a freedom of narrative expressions that no longer has to abide by the rigid requirements of realist writings that must adhere to “real-life” logics of story progression.

These new literary thoughts, both imported from the outside and innovated from the inside testified to the unconventionality of Chinese avant-garde, who, as Yan Lianke has succinctly summed up, has strayed far from the surface logics of our perceived reality. But even among the avant-gardes, two writers stand out very prominently in terms of the radicalness of their approach from the rest. They are Yu Hua and Can Xue in their early writing careers.

1.2 Instrumental Arts vs Absolute Arts: What It Means to be Freed from a Purpose

Not all avant-gardes subscribe to similar ideas in literary expressions—as is the point of being avant-garde, a term that denotes merely a change in style from its predecessors. So what makes Yu Hua and Can Xue more the focus of this paper and why is it still relevant to bring their early writing careers up? To answer this question requires a differentiation between what one may call “instrumental arts”, as is the preferred way of writing in many other avant-garde writers and “absolute arts”, or, as I would like to also call, “opaque arts” that Yu and Can have adopted.

What is an “instrumental art”? Perhaps Zong Pu’s famous work “Who am I” may be able to provide some insights. Written from the perspective of an intellectual before her imminent death during the Cultural Revolution, “Who am I” is a very straightforward fictional work on the traumatizing experience of the Cultural Revolution. It tells the story

of how Wei Mi and Shu Mi, an intellectual couple were persecuted by the Red Guards for their “rightist inclination”. Instead of obscure symbolism and story motifs that seldom directly comment on anything explicit about the Cultural revolution, Zongpu’s narrative is very clear and coherent and she does not shy from point out the exact historical context where her story took place. She compares, in an apparent reversal, intellectuals with vermin and poison while the frenetic Red Guards and their behaviors are transfigured into the images of the sun and flower. This absurd reversal of associations, by comparing the terrifying with precisely the beautiful and vice versa functions to expose a reality where the common sense is lost and where what is right and wrong have turned upside down. Near the end of the story, the protagonist Wei Mi saw a symbol of “人” being eaten away by skeletons, snakes, scorpions, and other beasts. The process of its decomposition, to use the final line of the work, will eventually lead to “Humankind (人) returning to their soil”.⁵ This is an interesting configuration of the violence and scenes of decomposition since it sees them as conducive to a newer age of humanity, a return to something beautiful and primitive in the past.

Three major traits from Zongpu’s “Who am I” coheres with those of “instrumental arts”. The first, it portrays and comments on a reality grounded within a certain historical moment, namely that of the Cultural Revolution. “Who am I” depicts two individuals’ experience under such historical environment and offers, affectively and

⁵ Zong pu, *Zong Pu/ 宗璞*, (Beijing: Ren Min Wen Xue Chu Ban She, 1991), 5.

argumentatively the detriments of such times to the conditions of human lives in general. The work of art here serves the purpose of reflecting on something other than itself and outside of itself. The second, “Who am I” abides by the logic of the same reality on which it comments on and uses the language that coheres with such logic. Perhaps a less convoluted way of putting it is to simply say that the story adopts the same norms and common sense that common readers share. We enter and travel in the world of “Who am I” very comfortably: the symbols, from “vermin” to “sun” are all familiar and clearly layered; the story progresses linearly and coherently without interruptions and violent breaks; the characters speak common sense and they cry and mourn like how we all will. We are given a set of well-defined objects of concerns (i.e. the red guards and their persecution) and as we proceed through the story, it becomes clear that the story is driven by a purpose—to lament and to reflect on the future. Finally, “Who am I” sets us up for a positive prospect and a hopeful vision of future. As Shi Mei said, “humankind will eventually return to their soil” and the insanity around them will come to an end at the dawn of a new age. Here Zong Pu projects for us the shape of a future that will regain a meaning following the end of the Cultural Revolution. Here the fiction conveys a hope.

Yu Hua and Can Xue’s early fictions are largely different in all three aspects as mentioned above. More will be discussed in detail in the body paragraphs of this paper, but to briefly lay out what it means to be writers of “absolute arts” as opposed to “instrumental arts”, it may be said that their works are not clearly spatial-temporally connected to a historical moment and they neither seek to abide by the logics of these moments nor try to necessarily offer any message. They are akin to an amorphous

labyrinth with infinite entries and exits, with no clearly defined purposes or routes or ways of traversing. One could say that they are rhizomes.

1.3 Rhizome as Writing and as Reading

Now we are back to the initial question asked at the beginning of the previous section. Why Yu Hua and Can Xue? In short, it is because they write in such ways that do not necessarily invite a realist reading of their works. They are art works in their absolute rights, their purpose diluted in the opaqueness of their fictional world and language and as such they become free. This paper uses the theory developed by Deleuze and Guattari in their *Thousand Plateaus*, named “the rhizome”. A rhizome rejects the structure of arbor, with its linear progression, its emphasis on transcendence, and its locus of purposes. A rhizome is shapeless and extends in infinite directions. Its body is entered and exited at any point. It is a most radical freedom.⁶

This paper tries to illustrate the rhizomatic qualities of early Yu Hua and Can Xue’s works and it also tries to convince the readers to liberate the works as well as themselves from treating the art works as necessarily instrumental. It inevitably involves a combat against many popular readings of these writers’ works, especially those interpretations that assume as a principle of their arguments that some authorial or historical purpose and reflection necessarily exist behind the works of art.

⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 7.

The arguments of this paper start off with discussions of Yu Hua's early works to show how his writings avoid singular readings and dismiss the notion of progress. Like a rhizome, Yu Hua's works constitute some kind of open structures where interpretive cuts come in and exit freely. Particular focus will be given to his usage of violence to examine how it functions as an apparatus of freedom that leaves no sight of hope. In the section following Yu Hua, the paper will move on to discuss some of Can Xue's works and arguments with the goal of demonstrating her aesthetics of "madness" which gives birth to worlds and worlds of dreams that exist in their own rights as independent from the encroachment of the logics of "reality".

2. Reading Yu Hua: Violence as Freedom

Yu Hua's early writings incorporate an enormous amount of violent imaginations and corporeal descriptions while also demonstrating a fondness of dialogic nonsense and verbal paranoia—these being, of course, only the tips of the iceberg in terms of other more nuanced differences in his styles. Yu Hua then, himself already constitutes a very diverse writer in many regards and to encapsulate him, not to mention alongside other post-Mao writers, as is the thesis of any meaningful account of literary history, appears a very difficult task. The ensuing result often becomes that when we talk about the post-Mao works together in terms of their similarities, we often find ourselves discussing the writers themselves, whose inevitably shared experience of the Cultural Revolution tempts us to conflate them with their fictions.¹ In order to have a coherent account of the literary scene in the post-Mao, the writers are pushed to the forefront of their works and their memories became the key to a denouement for all the nonsense in their fictional writings. This chapter wants to avoid autobiography and political history as the dominant ways of reading Yu Hua and focus instead his works as what Deleuze and Guattari refers to as rhizomatic forms of reading that challenges existing paradigms of fictional forms and structures of meanings, using specifically the works by early Yu Hua as examples.

2.1 Rhizomatic Narrative, Rhizomatic Symbols

¹ Andrew F. Jones, "Avant-Garde Fiction in Post-Mao China", *The Columbia Companion to Modern Chinese Literature*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 315.

The meaning of “rhizome”, a term borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari’s work *Thousand Plateaus*, refers to a de-structuralizing view where things, from the progress of stories to the movements of history, assume “very diverse forms, from ramified surface extension in all directions to concretions into bulbs and tubers.”² A rhizome evades the classical model of literary writing with a coherent narrative that follows faithfully things’ causal reasoning. This term has perhaps best captured the characteristics of Post-Mao avant-garde works whose seemingly non-sensical narratives and expressions avoid easy explications. It additionally avoids framing these works under a certain view as the master-reading of the work, either historicist or auteurist, thereby avoiding the paradoxical move of de-modernizing the modern (or one could say, reverting the modern back to the classical). To demonstrate how the avant-garde could be rhizomes, the paper will primarily focus on their formal elements and their structures of meanings.

Proceeding from formal and stylistic observations, the most outstanding characteristic in Yu Hua’s works that are noticeably rhizomatic is perhaps his narrative style. A frequently occurring narrational feature in Yu Hua’s work is what Yan Lianke calls in his “Discovery of Fiction” “non-causality” where the world and events in and around which the story takes place does not require an introduction to make it “reasonable”.³ Readers are thrown into a world whose degree of realness is unknown to them: it could be perfectly akin to the nonfictional reality or, as is more often the case, a

² Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 7.

³ Yan Lianke, *Faxian Xiaoshuo* 发现小说, (Tianjin: Nankai University Press, 2011), 15.

world where something or most things are absurd and out-of-place. In Yu's "Classical Love", the readers are surprised with a lack of explanation as to where the events are unfolding and the incoming scenes of cannibalism easily become a shock. In addition to this feature of "non-causality", some of Yu's works also has a relatively disjointed and fragmented narrative that make the story difficult to structuralize into a coherent form. In "Punishment and Past", for example, events do not follow one after another in a predictable linear fashion but rather intercept with each other, simultaneously intermingled with scenes from memories and self-reflections. As is a very common feature for works considered to be rhizomatic by Deleuze and Guattari themselves, Yu's narrative style which ignores the conventional causality and coherence in realist fiction is no doubt rhizomatic, where story is "a broken chain of affects and variable speeds, with accelerations and transformations".⁴

But narrative style is almost universally unconventional in modernist novel, what seems to be the most idiosyncratic rhizomatic elements from Yu Hua's stories are the opaqueness of his symbolism. "Punishment and Past" is among some of the most typical instances of this quality. It gives a grotesque and cryptic account of the interactions between a "stranger" and a "penal expert".⁵ The story is mainly in dialogic form and takes place entirely in somewhere akin to a prison cell. The "penal expert" interrogates the "I" and appears to have full knowledge of the "I" 's past and memories. After

⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, 9.

⁵ Yu Hua, "Wangshi yu Xingfa 往事与刑罚", *Yu Hua 余华*, (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 2001), 57.

deciding that these memories, along with the “I”, must be destroyed for the better, the story proceeds to give an account an extraordinarily graphic destruction of these memories, followed by an equally gruesome suicide of the “penal expert”. If one should read the story as one does, a fictional work that has stable structure of semiotics, —such as *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* where the image of Eden seamlessly comes into the interpretive lens of any informed reader— one would be completely lost as to where the story is heading to. The only facile reading that a well-tuned realist reader may be able to get from the story may very well come solely from the lunatic “penal expert” ’s control of the “the stranger”’s past, which is told via four critical events that are dated very specifically— as these dates are apparently related to the Cultural Revolution. Relying solely on this clue does not lead anywhere else besides stating the obvious, which is that the story is somehow connected to the Cultural Revolution.

In fact, as a very dialogue-heavy story that leaves out any clear moral and affective direction and by virtue of lacking in narrative coherence that explains the situation of being inside this prison cell whose veracity is also unclear, the story offers a gigantic body of interpretive chaos—as is the quality of a rhizome—that extends, on symbolic and thematic plain, to many other potential dimensions of the human conditions, and one can see unequivocally a wide horizon of interpretive landscape beyond the enclosed structure that centers “Cultural Revolution” and “trauma” as its main concern. For instance, the opaqueness of the function of the cell in relation to its method of execution, namely hanging, opens up the interpretive possibility of the work as a commentary on the penal system and of seeing incarceration and hanging as the

existential loneliness of a subject/artist entrapped within their own memories. By diluting his artifacts, actions, and characters within a murky ocean of signified, Yu Hua has created what, in Deleuze and Guattari's terms, is an "asignifying rupture" that rejects the "oversignifying breaks which cut across a single structure" and allows the story to multiply and reach forward to many other "shapes and forms".⁶

What also gives Yu Hua's symbolism a veritable rhizomatic quality besides its ambiguity, is its violence. Yu Hua's violence as a stylistic device is used both as and against symbols. The first, Yu's "violence", in the form of graphic imagery and scenes, functions as central motifs and symbols throughout many of his stories. To use "Classical Love" as example again, the graphic depiction of cannibalistic behaviors in the third part of the story is one important way to show the downfall of the town in the story, both materially and morally. As a parallel instance, "Traveling Alone at 18" also uses people's violence against a car, which becomes anthropomorphically "wounded" to metaphorize the cruelty of strangers in the social world. The fascinating point in Yu's usage of violence as a motif is that unlike most other symbols, violence does not have a specific form: like a rhizome, it comes into being via its relative degree to the perception of the reader whose own moral position determines whether or not the violence should become visible.

The second type, and perhaps more subtle kind of violence in Yu's work is against the very idea of symbolism. "Traveling Alone at 18" has probably used this

⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, 7, 9.

violence in the most straightforward fashion. On the surface, the story deals with one's growth and one's realization of the nonsensical lives within society. The young man leaves home and enters society with bright hope for his future, only to have his car torn down and people fighting him as well as one another. Prior to the ending, one of the major themes of the story appears to be the constant struggle between the young man's desire to rationalize his external environment and the nonsense that is this environment. We are seemingly shown his struggles in the symbolisms of quotidian and physical objects and figures. It takes place in the fights for apples, the tearing of the car, among people with specific occupations: construction workers, apple farmers, and etc. These specificities, along with the clear presence of identifiable objects such as car and apples, tempt us towards an interpretations of them as having some sort of significance. One may reasonably ask following such observation: Is the chaos among car and apples a reflection of the urban-rural conflict in modern Chinese society? Why is no one, except for the young man, holding any regard for "private property" but simply does as they like? Why is the destruction of the car so violent and described so analogously to a corporeal torture? However, as we come to the end of the story:

The sky turned pitch dark. There was nothing around, only wounded cars and the wounded me. I looked terribly sadly at the car. It looked terribly sadly at me. I reached out my hand to touch it. It was all cold. At that instant the wind started to blow. It was a strong wind, the tree leaves from up on the hills shrieked with the sounds of waves. The sounds scared me and made just as cold as the car.⁷

⁷ Yu Hua, "Shibasui Chumenyuanxing 十八岁出门远行", *Yu Hua 余华*, (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 2001), 9.

we come to the scene where all the motifs that we have picked up are now without a denouement when the scrambling fight drives everyone and everything away. The arborescent semiotic structure that we have established crumbles before this violence which demolishes not only what is in the texts but also what may be underneath it.

2.2 Rhizome as a Dilution of Meanings: Yu Hua and the Challenge to the Arbor

As the previous section of the paper has touched on, Yu Hua wields violence not only as a recurring motif in his works but also as a tool against the very idea of motifs and symbols. This feature of many early writings by him hints at a larger project that is perhaps being undertaken here, that is, that Yu Hua is trying to demolish the very idea of “literature” as it was understood in the more conventional way.

Again, we go back to one of his stories as an example. “Classical Love”, as the title suggests, opens up with the classical encounter between a young aspiring student and a young lady whose beauty destines her to be the love of the former—along with everything that a young man and young woman say and do to each other per the most banal imagination. This opener no doubt sets us up for a traditional story trope on the matter of love only to completely throw us off with an extremely grotesque development immediately afterwards. All the gentleness of the stories, sceneries, and characters turned into a violent, cannibalistic nightmare as the result of the young man’s unwillingness to return to his newfound love after his failure at the Keju (科举). What is even more bizarre following this nightmarish episode of the same place, is its ensuing return to life,

which is coupled by the young man's maturation, reminiscence, and in fact reunion with his loved one. However, the ending halts this reunion abruptly by suggesting that the young man is too "eager" to be able to attain a reunion, and for once again, the cycle back to "love" and the fulfillment of it that we predict for the story fails the second time.

What the story makes clear at the first turn of events, which is the transformation of the love story into a cannibalistic nightmare, is the rejection of the classic love story (古典爱情) as a useful approach to fiction writing.

As Liu Sheng watched the shop-owner savagely swing the axe, he heard the sound of cracking and saw the bones severed and blood spewing everywhere, staining the owner's face red. The young girl's body shook at the sound of cracking. As she turned around to see what happened, she saw her arm lying on a tree trunk, and was startled to complete silence. Only a few seconds later did she make some large sounds of crying and fell to the ground. She kept crying and shrieking as she lied down. The owner reached for a rag towel to wipe his face and one of his guys fetched the arm outside the hut to someone with a basket. The guy put the arm into the basket, paid for it and left. Right at that moment, the old woman rushed into the hut, picked up a sharp blade from the ground and stabbed violently into the young girl's chest. The girl made another cry before turning completely quiet. It was already too late when the owner found out that happened. He sent the woman flying with his punch, picked up the dead body of the young girl, and in a dazzling fashion, quickly dissect her and delivered one after one of her body parts to the person outside the hut.⁸

A scene like this, whose violence is so raw, so unabashedly graphic allows very little room to read the story in the context of any love story. The direct description of blood-letting and limb-tearing, especially, as an additional interesting gesture, against women, seems to constitute not only a violence against the banal gentility of the previous parts of

⁸ Yu Hua, "Gudian Aiqing 古典爱情", *Yu Hua 余华*, (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 2001), 35.

the story but more importantly against this trope of story where women are often sanctified in the eyes of men.

Going further, when scenes of cannibalism give ways to the return of order and the tender love dreams of the young man—that, unbeknownst to the readers, are also going to fail—the story sets us up for a second betrayal. On one hand, the failed agency of man in bringing the woman back alive directly challenges classical stories of male heroes that often act as the sole moving force of the story. On the other, the seeming promise of a happy reunion only to dismiss it with a nonchalant “you’re too eager” precludes the story from returning back to convention, as if to say that reunion, both as a typical trope in love stories and as an ideological move towards the past, is a dead option. We have here a mockery and betrayal of the conspicuously cliché mode of classical romance storytelling in the most total sense.

At this point, Yu Hua’s efforts in challenging, mocking, and demolishing existing fiction modes are beyond question. However, this resort to violence and corporeal imagery is not really particularly new in the Western literary landscape. The instrumental function of “violence” echoes the project of Kierkegaard and the French existentialists whose viewed spiritual resignation, ontological suspension, and the return to corporeality as a necessary phase for a more constructive stage for self-fulfillment. Even in Japanese post-war works, we have encountered the claim that the destruction of flesh functions as the “bridge towards a higher aesthetic ideal” that elevates people from the older

ideologies of patriotic sacrifice towards a more authentic self.⁹ Similarly, an analogous theory can be found in *Fear and Trembling*, where the deprivation of a predetermined higher meaning to life is seen by Kierkegaard as a necessary nihilistic stage that establishes the condition for a later “leap of faith”, thereby allowing oneself to find the “absurd faith”.¹⁰ It is also very intuitive to most that Camus’ Sisyphus conveys similar ideas. According to him, the realization that the universe is indifferent to the necessarily curious human intellect establishes the precondition for the freedom with which the self can then acquire in constructing its very own *raison d’être*.¹¹ After all, any constructed meaning would remain trivialized in the presence of an a priori essence.

However, what marks Yu Hua as a unique writer and thinker in this regard—namely, what makes him meaningfully rhizomatic as opposed to simply modernist is that unlike existentialists, he is unwilling to construct a new arbor on the debris of his destruction. In “The Disenchantment of History and the Tragic Consciousness of Chinese Postmodernity”, Chinese literature scholar Alberto Castelli uses early Yu Hua as one exemplar of Chinese post-modernism which he compares to an “unhappy consciousness” that gears towards the breakdown of the orthodoxy of nation and history that China has upheld in any capacity. It signifies a people’s inability to identify themselves with the nation once more. As such, Yu Hua, in addition to resembling European post-modernism

⁹ Mishima Yukio, *Sun and Steel*, trans. Ivan Morris. (London: Vintage Classics, 2011): 34.

¹⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, “Fear and Trembling,” In *Basic Writings of Existentialism*, ed. Gordon Marino (New York: Modern Library, 2004), 30-31.

¹¹ Albert Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus,” *Basic Writings of Existentialism*, ed. Gordon Marino (New York: Modern Library, 2004), 442.

in his severance from the symbolism of the state and a coherent account thereof, also rejects a solution or a higher Absolute for reconciliation. One could say that while European postmodernism proposes nothingness to be a beginning for newer construction of meanings, Yu Hua is in the process of tearing apart any consciousness and structure with no further teleos: the act of tearing, violence, and cannibalism are the end in themselves. It is in this rejection of raising a new consciousness that Yu Hua's work retain the shape of rhizome, with all its connectivity, multiplicity, and amorphousness.

2.3 Shift in Landscape: When Rhizome Becomes the New Arbor

There was a basis for Soseki's fear that he had been "cheated" by English literature. Only those who have come to accept "literature" as natural cannot detect this "cheating." Nor should we invoke vague generalizations about the identity crisis of one who confronts an alien culture. To do this would be to assume there was something self-evident about "literature" and to lose sight of its ideological nature.¹²

For Karatani Kōjin, modern Japanese literature commenced at the moment when a new generation of young writers, such as Natsume Soseki and Mori Ogai became increasingly interpellated by and habituated to the Western tradition. This landscape that is molded and conditioned by Western thinking with elements of Japan's own reaction towards modernity gradually became the norm, the outside of which looked increasingly distant and blurry. The worry here with respect to every kind of modernity/avant-garde, as is the case with Chinese avant-garde, as a term in relation to the past/classical, is that it

¹² Karatani Kōjin, "The Discovery of Landscape", *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 18.

is bound to become a new norm whose original motto of being “avant-garde” becomes nullified once it becomes too popularized and too “normal”.

In fact, Zhang Xudong also warns us in his *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms* that avant-garde in China is a “negative supplement” to the mainstream socialist literature. This is an interesting statement because it suggests not only that the avant-garde supplements a socialist vision in post-Cultural-Revolution China of a rational, cosmopolitan society but also that this rationalized cosmopolis must be approached or defined by its negation. This negation, as the modernist trope of literary works have shown, is founded upon an affinity to the un-reason or irrationality that paradoxically defined “modernity”. In a sense, avant-garde or modernism positioned itself as the peripheral and the rebellious but it is precisely this peripheral and rebellious nature of it that is the normative practice of modernity that 1) was inherent in China’s modernization process that departs from the highly ideological state during the Cultural Revolution and 2) “was conditioned by China’s integration into the global system and symbolized in by the classic texts of Euro-American modernism”.¹³ The question for us as readers of Yu Hua then becomes: what if the rhizomatic violence of Yu Hua becomes the dominant landscape of negation of our contemporary work? What if the classical mode of storytelling and arborescent structure of symbols that Yu furiously tears down is far gone and loses the value in being torn down any further? Where do we go from here?

¹³ Zhang Xudong, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reform* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997) 155-157.

2.4 Reading as Rhizome: Rescuing the Avant-Garde from the Burden of Subversion

The answer now rests on the shoulders of the readers, who, just like the writers, are members of the rhizome who must undertake the labor of creating stories. Perhaps one could even say that a rhizomatist does not really believe in fixed landscapes, if we allow violence to do more than what we perceive the writers intend them to do.

The beginning of this paper brings up the point that relying on a speculative reading based on historical context and autobiographical information undermines the importance of Post-Mao writings as *sui generis* literary works and tyrannizes the reading of them with what is outside of the texts. In lieu of a purely autobiographical and historical account of post-Mao literature, readings of these works may be more productively “rhizomes”, where things, from the progress of stories to the movements of history, are read with “very diverse forms, from ramified surface extension in all directions to concretions into bulbs and tubers.”¹⁴ As rhizomes, works become unattributable, that is, that they no longer need to be restrained within any particular framework of reading, either from the dominant historicist view or from views that antagonize history and author tout court. As befitting the self-definitions of modernist thinking and modernist works, works as rhizomes avoid the self-contradicting reading that treats them as at once deconstructing and subject to a certain view.

¹⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 7.

However, this is not to deny the usefulness of an autobiographical reading of fictions. Auteurism establishes a much needed connection between works and the personal history of the author. Many fictional works, especially in the post-Mao era have been seen in this way as a poetic reflection on the writer's traumatizing past, which often reveals something fascinating about the larger past that that writer is situated in. To reject autobiography as an important entry point into fictions is to overlook the inadvertent locus of the author that stands between imaginations and reality, be it the material reality where objects and people in the work come from or the conceptual reality whose ideological forces shape the ethics of the book. In acknowledgement of this importance however, we must also not forget that the writer, even if we hesitate to subscribe wholesale to Roland Barthes' declaration of their death, is still only one alternative way of approaching the work. In announcing the author as the sovereign, we have thereby denied the work's way into other multitudinous forms of interpretations. There is a more productive model of reading, namely as a rhizome, as a root that extends endlessly into infinite shapes whose body may be entered or exited at any given point. The author becomes not the sovereign but one of the "exits" and "entrances" through which the work as a rhizome is approached.

A book has neither object nor subject; it is made of variously formed matters, and very different dates and speeds. To attribute the book to a subject is to overlook this working of matters, and the exteriority of their relations. It is to fabricate a beneficent God to explain geological movements. In a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification. As an

assemblage, a book has only itself, in connection with other assemblages and in relation to other bodies without organs.¹⁵

Instead of seeing the avant-garde as simply “avant-garde”, as entrapped within the convenient terminology that frames it, a rhizomatic reading sees it as leading to many “lines of flight” and “movements of deterritorialization and destratification”. A work does not belong to any singular attribute, even as the authorial intention should leave its thrust ostensibly within it—whether as a form of subversion, or a mourning from the “unhappy unconscious”. A work is dissolved within the heteroglossia of its readers who find their entry at any given point of the root and leave it at just as random an exit as they please. Like the prison cell in “Punishment and Past”, the reader acts out their own creation by molding the prison cell into something, a sanctum of memories, a miniature of our penal system, an artist’s den of solitude, or etc.

¹⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, 3, 4.

3. Reading Can Xue: Dreamscapes of Madness

If Yu Hua weaves his stories into the rhizome with a prismatic structure of interpretations that welcomes a great variety of entries and exits, then Can Xue does so with a complete absence of structural directions. Andrew Jones puts it succinctly with respect to Can Xue's artistry of structural decomposition. "In Can Xue's work, recent history is oblique, fractured, and seen only through the eyes of protagonists whose vision is both irrational and partial. They are, indeed, little more than the sum of the physical decay and psychological delusions by which they are afflicted."¹ For Can Xue, history becomes not simply an unreliable entity, that is, a floating signifier whose essence is molded according to the shapes of our interpretive corridors, but rather, in a more extreme fashion, an ontologically deformed being, a misbegotten child of madness who obstructs any approach of reason. Here, the delight of semiotic archiving and plethoric readings from Yu Hua's texts transforms into a nightmarish walk into paranoia. We are haunted by the bombardments of randomly appearing phrases and objects whose meanings we seek after in vain in a narrative of complete fragments and misdirections. In a sense, as this paper would like to demonstrate, Can Xue's resignation of the symbolic "signified" and the interpretive obstruction enacted by her narrative chaos constitute precisely an aesthetic of "madness", a madness that emanates itself from itself, and which does not force us towards anything other than itself. It is through this sui generis

¹ Andrew F. Jones, "Avant-Garde Fiction in Post-Mao China", *The Columbia Companion to Modern Chinese Literature*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 315

madness, as readings of Can Xue's texts would hopefully show, that we access the rhizome of infinite possibility and are able to exist towards the threshold of nonexistence.

3.1 Embracing Madness and the Beauty of Destruction

Two major characteristics of Can Xue's early short fictions make apparent her insistence on the futility of symbolic essence and her resolve to leave it unsubstantiated. The first is her narrative sequence that, despite its general lack of direction, often descends into destruction and demise.

In "The Ox", for example, we are given a story of no progression whatsoever that nonetheless, as the title suggests, revolves around the presence of an ox. In brief, this story talks about a wife and husband in the countryside. They are each obsessed over something: the narrator, who is the wife, keeps mentioning a mysterious purple ox that appears all over around the house. The husband, on the other hand, will not stop whining about his bad teeth, and the cookies and mice which supposedly cause his teeth to deteriorate. The ox functions as an object of paranoia for the narrator whose insanity is immediately hinted through her obsessive muttering of its presence.

It came again, butting and bumping against the wooden wall, making a loud noise. I opened the door and was forced to shut my eyes by the dazzling flash of purple light. "It has gone," I dropped my hands in disappointment. "It will keep circling us forever. Cold sweat is dripping from my armpits." . . . It has not come since yesterday, when I stood at the window the whole day, combing my short hair, which is parched like hay, with a broken comb. In the pane, I could see clumps of hair between the teeth of the comb.²

²Can Xue. "The Ox," *Dialogues in Paradise*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1989), 75.

While scenes such as this sometimes pose more the question of fictional reality than the question of sanity, as it remains unknown whether Can Xue, like Yu Hua, is only depicting a reality different from the nonfictional world, the failure of the husband to notice the ox and share his wife's concern tell us that the ox is only observable from the narrator's point of view, and therefore it is a product of her delusions. The ox comes to the narrator on a daily basis and becomes something that she is both afraid of and obsessive with. Its presence causes her to be alerted while its absence is also concerning.

What is important however, is that in the overall structure of the story, which consists of 1) the narrator's house—the scene where the entire story and the couple's conversations take place—and 2) the outside—a place only shown through the appearance of the ox, the ox serves to provide a glimpse of what is “other” to the narrator as housewife. In an interesting contrast, the husband of the story finds his obsession over things with greater emphasis on domesticity:

“What shall we do if our room is flooded? I wonder if the glass jar under the bed will be washed away. I have six teeth preserved inside.”... One day I saw you in the mirror trying to fill the cracks between your teeth with arsenic. Why?”³

It almost seems as if, following a reasonable reading of this contrast between the husband and the wife, that they are longing for a life that is not very available for them. The domestically confined woman obsesses over the beast of the field while the man who has to labor outside worries constantly over the life of the inside. The husband and the wife

³ Can Xue, 75.

are each seeking to traverse the unbreakable boundary between the socially assigned duties in the domestic and the outside, so much so that it becomes their obsessions.

We now have a picture of stable duality, but it is precisely after this comfort in assuming a structural progression that Can Xue inserts her genius of destruction. Here goes the ending of “The Ox”:

I could see far, far away in the mirror. A huge beast had fallen into the water and was splashing and writhing in the throes of death. Black smoke was belching from its nose, dark red blood spurted from its mouth. Panic-stricken, I turned around, only to see him raising a big hammer high above his head and swinging it toward the mirror.⁴

The ox dies a violent death, and the mirror with which the husband worries about his wife is also shattered. We now stand in a debris of the structure we have tried to establish. There is no breakthrough, no crescendo for this imminent traversal by the couple. The purple ox dies, spewing its purple blood: the narrator’s paranoia ends but so does her hope of living a life of an “other”. The texts end abruptly there with nothing further ahead. It is a swift and clean cut of violence to bring our expectations to an end. It is not a similar ending to Yu Hua’s “Classical Love Story” where the story lingers to toy us over how it just upset our projection. It stops at the exact moment where destruction is fulfilled.

Scholars and readers have been offering interpretations on what the ending of “The Ox” is trying to deliver. Lucy Pappas for example, provides several popular readings. One of them sees the ox as the ancestors’ past and its death as a form of

⁴ Can Xue, 76

severance from it while another reads the ending as the husband's anger towards the wife who sees in her imaginary ox the figure of her lover.⁵ These various versions of interpretations demonstrate first and foremost the same rhizomatic quality of Can Xue's storytelling that lends itself to numerous readings. Attempting to offer an account, or an explication of what the ending should signify is nothing to frown upon. If anything, like what Yu Hua invites us to do, it gives us many more stories beyond the text itself.

However, in Can Xue's writing such as "The Ox", what gives a more fundamentally convention-challenging way of treating her narrative is perhaps to abandon our efforts at "explaining" it. The gesture of destruction in the story suffices in constituting an aesthetic climax, as is akin to a ceremony of faith that suspends the intrusion of reason in the face of which beauty is destined to be reduced into a rational act. Nothing fuels the magnificence of the ox's death and the mirror's shattering more than the realization that the story has previously been an unending stream of paranoiac mutterings and images of rural banalities. As if to end the pain for the narrator, her husband, and for the readers who are just now only awakened from the buzzing nightmare of obsessions, Can Xue lights everything aflame. Here death and shattering exist in their own rights as an end to the dream.

Death as the destruction of all things no longer had meaning when life was revealed to be a fatuous sequence of empty words, the hollow jingle of a jester's cap and bells.⁶

⁵ Lucy Pappas, "Objects of Obsessions: Interpreting Can Xue's 'Ox'", *Undergraduate Research* 1 (1), 168.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, (New York: Routledge, 1989), 14.

No symbolic beyond is needed or desired. In fact, this moment of catharsis is attained by precisely the annihilation of our habitual semiotic insertion. Our pondering of the significance of the color purple is halted by the very corporeal manifestation of that purple in the blood of death. Our self-gazing through the mirror is interrupted by the shattering of that very means of self-gazing. We thought we were playing a game of symbols with Can Xue, only to find out that she is also ready for us to awaken from its matrix.

With Can Xue then, we have come to a hidden place, an underbelly so to speak, of the rhizome, as paradoxically as it sounds. Yu Hua offers us the unnumbered stories of a body of texts while Can Xue points us towards the alternative of not participating in these possibilities. We are invited to treat actions and words as themselves, as existence par excellence. The colors, shapes, sensations, impressions, and emotions that they conjure and incite become their very purpose. We engage, in other words, in a very bodily fashion with her stories.

2.2 Madness as Alternate Reality

Some more readings of Can Xue's stories may help illuminate more clearly how her writings invite us to be content with traversing her indecipherable nightmares just as they are. Two examples stand out most strongly in this regard.

The first, Can Xue's "Views in Broken Walls" narrates a simple, seemingly non-sensical story of a man and a woman living outdoors (presumably camping) near a decrepit wall that was the original source of their common passions that bound them

together and how they grew tired of this way of living and had to rely on the prospect of a mysterious old woman's passing to carry on. The tale is filled with verbal nonsense and absurdities that one may find in *Waiting for Godot* and Yu Hua's "Punishment and Past" where the contents of the dialogues do not give the readers much directions or clues as to where the story might be heading. The man and woman could be discussing how big the rain is at one point and then how time goes by as quickly as a dragonfly (a comparison that is as uncommon as their actions). Their daily activities are often rather trivial and repetitive:

At noon, we discovered a game, which was to run around the broken pillar. We ran and ran, our tattered clothes messy hairs flying all over the place, like two ghosts. We saw each other's ghostly visage and we cried and ran even faster.⁷

At the end, the couple does not leave the place or even change much of what they have been doing. The final line is given by the woman who indicates that they never know where the old woman comes from.

Again, like other Can Xue's stories, "Views in the Broken Walls" yields plentiful interpretations. It reads like, for one, a metaphor for marriage where one meets and becomes united with another through a particular shared passion. That passion expired at a later time and the couple must then find another thing to rely on to carry on their private cohabitation (in this case, the mentioning of a mysterious old woman that would pass by them as long as they wait for her). However, the story also seems to lend itself to being

⁷ Can, 56.

read as an artist/ writer's inner life where the wall signifies an anxiety of influence that partially perpetually haunts them and partially gives way to new hopes and new motifs.

Regardless of the kind of reading we would like to give to the text, it remains incredibly jarring to put Can Xue's motifs together. They are too random and go in too many directions. Settling on one version of the story leaves out many others without being itself particularly satisfactory in the face of such whimsical images as dragonflies. But in a similar of treating "The Ox", we may very well also look at "Broken Walls" as a dreamscape of human existence. Just as how the death of the ox in "The Ox" as a self-announcement of violence, the unending banalities of the "Walls" exist as precisely a dreamworld of mundane life. We are entrapped within the walls, the mud, and the dirt. We share the boredom and toiling of the young couple within the nightmarish walls just as they appear to be. We treat the madness of the nightmare just as it is, just as real as they already are, instead of assuming them to be symbolic of something "reasonable". We become content with the insanity of imagery, phrases, and colors just the way they are. It is an experience that Foucault puts very well:

For the madness of men is a divine spectacle: "In fact, could one make observations from the Moon, as did Menippus, considering the numberless agitations of the Earth, one would think one saw a swarm of flies or gnats fighting among themselves, struggling and laying traps, stealing from one another, playing, gamboling, falling, and dying, and one would not believe the troubles, the tragedies that were produced by such a minute animalcule destined to perish so shortly." Madness is no longer the familiar foreignness of the world; it is merely a commonplace spectacle for the foreign spectator.⁸

⁸ Foucault, 25.

We enter the world of Can Xue's genius of madness, and to our "reason" they appear nasty and insane but what is it really except a familiar spectacle for us as the foreign spectator.

We find further clues of Can Xue's fondness of a dreamworld immune from the violence of symbolic cuts in her article called "Art that Belongs to Art History". In a very interesting way, Can Xue contrasts the works of Kafka and Borges with those of the Chinese novels that were dominating her time. According to her, while the latter had the tendency to write something with a preconceived moral and message to convey, the novels by Kafka and Borges are often "spontaneous flows of one's souls and split of the ego". They are "the expressions of the struggles of their egos, and the direct revelations of the existential conditions".⁹ What Can Xue is arguing here then seems to be that literary works, or "true artistic literature" are ones that do not presuppose their central ideas, and importantly they must also not be didactic. Moreover, when works like Kafka's and Borges 'exude some sort of "beauty", they do it through "narrating itself" rather than "narrating its instantiations". The story constitutes itself as the very performance of our existence, instead of relying on what is to be concealed behind a network of symbols that then leads to a reality outside of the fictional realm. A philosophical author's interiority, she argues, despite its formation within reality, has in fact transcended that reality creatively via "fantasy".¹⁰ The writer becomes a fantasizer, who, after their existential

⁹ Can, 2.

¹⁰ Can, 3.

epiphany, creates a world of fantasy to elevate our perception of reality towards that which does not ground upon the familiar mundane.

The imagination may be compared to Adam's dream,-he awoke and found it truth.¹¹

In fact, one could say that Can Xue has created her own dream world of logics and signs that must be treated in their own language rather than what we assume to be their essence.

2.3 Rhizome as Non-being

So far we have seen two major ways of appreciating Can Xue. The first is what much of the scholarships on Can Xue do. They insist as a principle of their work that some kind of "secret code" must exist within Can Xue's writings and that revelations will be attained once we carefully scrutinize every detail of her texts. Such projects are always incredibly fascinating and indeed this kind of decoding helps spring forth numerous interpretations of the texts. Can Xue scholar Li Tianming lays out very straightforwardly the importance of postulating a "secret code" and finding a way to decipher it:

These stories are composed in a symbolic mode and are replete with many of Can Xue's private symbols. Reading them is really 'as difficult as deciphering some secret code,' as Can Xue herself admits. However, her remark reveals another aspect of these stories: since they are written in a so-called 'secret code,' there certainly exists a method to decipher the 'secret code,' otherwise the stories will be totally meaningless.¹²

¹¹ John Keats, *Selected Letters of John Keats*, (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2005), 54.

¹² Li Tianming, "A Tormented Soul in a Locked Hut—Can Xue's Short Stories", (MA thesis, The University of British Columbia, 1994), 46

However, as the previous sections of this chapter have tried to show, Can Xue's stories are very much capable of yielding a reading where we need not speculate into the symbolic underside of her motifs. This kind of reading is what the other major way of treating her texts is. In very brief term, it is a suspense of the symbolic and a preservation of madness and fantasy as sui generis. We partake in the dreams of Can Xue who dreams because she wishes. In reading her stories, we go through a ritual in a place far far away from us where the reason we uphold no longer applies.

It is this way of reading where our interpretive scepter finds no use and is replaced with simply us, in direct contact with the madness of fantasy. It is here, like in the debris in the aftermath of Yu Hua's destruction of the arbor that we find ourselves being with the rhizome:

There is no unity to serve as pivot in the object, or to divide in the subject. There is not even the unity to abort in the object or "return" in the subject.....There is neither imitation nor resemblance, only an exploding of two heterogeneous series on the line of flight composed by a common rhizome that can no longer be attributed to or subjugated by anything signifying.¹³

The stable duality between the signifiers and the signified is absent in such madness. It rejects resemblance and an immutable signified that help make sure it leaves its shape behind in the form of a "reflection" or a "message". True courage when one enters the rhizome is not only to be content with the multiplicity of shapes but to also accept the state of shapelessness. It is to accept one's severance from essence and its plunge into non-being.

¹³ Deleuze and Guattari, 8, 10.

In Can Xue's foreword to her *Dialogues in Paradise*, she describes her writings to be impossible in realism, and that she "will gather all her emotion and ideals to fight iron-strong reality".¹⁴ One may reasonably wonder what besides an artistic choice are the reasons for this hard-fought rejection of reality, if not some sort of disillusionment and revolt towards it (which we may well speculate based on her childhood that is spent in the mountains away from her incarcerated father and labor-reforming mother). However, what is important here is that she relishes narrative trauma and violence against everything concrete, coherent, and one may even say, felicitous. This violence is a veritable courage. It is a fight with no end in sight.

¹⁴ Can, 3

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