CHINA'S AVANT-GARDE FICTION

AN ANTHOLOGY

Edited by Jing Wang

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My journey to China in 1987 was a new beginning. I dedicate this anthology to the twenty-two young men and women on the Duke Study-in-China Program who shared that experience with me: Grant Alger, Laura Beasley, Fred Boltz, Gail Ellis, Kate Farrington, Kevin Force, Arianne Gaetano, Chris Galati, Louis Gump, Lisa Haag, Stephanie Hawkinson, Lauren Herbtsman, Richard Hudspeth, Alec Jeong, Saul Kotzubei, Dara Lao, Mary Markis, Donna Marsh, Brandon Meyerson, Michael Roffman, Lily Su, and Nancy Yu.

INTRODUCTION ❁ *Jing Wang*

The 1980s dawned in China with the promise of a new history that would leave ultraleftism behind. But the nation's farewell to Mao's socialist past was accompanied by a contradiction: the cult of Mao disappeared only to return a decade later as a flourishing culture industry that cashed in on remembering Mao. The Mao Zedong Fever of the early 1990s was puzzling to many. But it was not an accident. Memories of Mao's era and obsessions with Maoism lingered throughout the postrevolutionary decade of the 1980s. Nowhere else were those memories registered more deeply than in narrative fiction. The "wounded literature" of the early 1980s served as a paramount example of writers' efforts to recount and recant the heresy of the Cultural Revolution. The exorcism of Mao Zedong and the radicalism he once stood for raged on. Writers of "reform literature" and the "literature of reeducated youths"—which includes the much acclaimed "root-searching" literature of the mid-1980s—continued Chinese writers' historical mission of reevaluating bygone political movements in the manner of enlightenment philosophers. Never mind if their revisit of that moment grew increasingly ambivalent: was the Cultural Revolution an unredeemable trauma or a utopia aborted? Writing as an anxiety-ridden political act, and specifically, writing as a weighty act of resistance to Maoism, was a sublime agenda that was hardly questioned, let alone challenged, until the debut of the Avant-Garde School (*xianfeng pai*) around 1987.

Indeed, as David Der-Wei Wang so aptly summarizes, Chinese literature from 1919 to 1989 is "burdened with writers' heavy concern for the Chinese nation."[1] The avant-garde, sometimes referred to as

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[1] David Der-Wei Wang, "Chinese Fiction for the Nineties," in *Running Wild: New Chi-*

"experimentalists," wanted none of this. Their penchant for trivial pursuits was unmistakable: "The burden of a nation is truly not as light as that of a singular 'I.' "[2] This remark teasingly captures the spirit of the young rebels' airy flight from anything onerous. The dramatic contrast between the new school and their literary forebears can hardly be made clearer.

Although the avant-gardists did not issue any manifesto, they struck up a concerted tune around 1987 under the aegis of *Harvest* (*Shouhuo*), an upscale literary magazine. They were a cluster of young writers who flaunted the lightness of being as a mere instance of improvisation in narration. Predictably, nothing could be more unbearable for them than the concept of "burden"—whether it was conceived of as a cultural, historical, sociopolitical, existential, or, not the least of all, semantic burden.

The avant-gardists have come a long way since the May Fourth period of the early twentieth century. Theirs was a belated escape from the bondage of anxiety consciousness (*youhuan yishi*)—a Confucian humanist heritage—that nourished generations of Chinese literati in a compulsive desire to play the role of political missionaries and commentators. Ma Yuan, Yu Hua, Ge Fei, to name a few of them, discovered something that May Fourth writers (especially Lu Xun and his cohort of left-wing writers) could never have imagined nor afforded: writing is fun on its own terms. Not only were rational critiques of politics à la May Fourth exiled from these new writings, but also missing was the atavistic call of the cultural original—traditional ethos and aesthetics—a legacy that Shen Congwen passed on, via Wang Zengqi,[3] to the "root-searching" writers of the mid-1980s.

The avant-gardists emerged at a particular historical juncture when the utopian mood of the country was on the decline. The years 1985

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nese Writers, ed. David Der-Wei Wang and Jeanne Tai (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 252.

[2] He Xiangyang, " 'Shenfu' yu 'lianzu': Jianping xungenhou wenxue wenhua zhuti de liubian" (Fathers on trial and nostalgia for ancestors: Notes on the transformation of literary and cultural subjectivity after the root-searching movement), *Wenxue pinglun* (Literary review) 5 (1992): 41.

[3] In 1980, Wang Zengqi published "Shoujie" (Buddhist initiation), a story that inspired A Cheng and many other "root-searching" writers. The story was originally published in *Beijing wenxue* (Beijing literary monthly) 10 (1980): 41–49.

and 1986 were memorable in that they witnessed the intensification of "methodology fever," the massive propagation of the formula for a market economy, and the reiteration, since spring 1986, of the urgency for political reform voiced by Deng Xiaoping and other high-ranking Party officials. The raging nationwide expectations for a more enlightened and wealthier future grew so quickly that the early signs of stalled economic reform in the cities were taken as ominous setbacks, which baffled a previously impassioned public. A succession of dramatic political events—the university students' demonstration in Beijing in late 1986, Party Secretary Hu Yaobang's immediate ouster as a result, the launching of yet another campaign against "bourgeois liberalism" in early 1987—further deepened the public's mood of disillusionment. An increasingly pervasive dystopian mentality spread. In October 1987 it reached an acme as Premier Zhao Ziyang announced at the Thirteenth Party Congress that China still lingered at the threshold of the "*primary* stage of socialism."

The emergence of the Avant-Garde School around 1987 seemed for many a timely response to the exhaustion of the utopian motif of the early 1980s. Indeed, most Chinese critics at home viewed the rise of the new fiction as a direct reflection of the epochal disillusionment with humanism and heroism. To think of the avant-gardists in such historicist terms was to compromise their "experimental" aura and to pare down an invasive aesthetic revolution to an impassive reflection of a social reality gone awry. It is not surprising, then, that the school's eccentric experiment with language was often dismissed as babbling and called a deplorable example of the "depression of creativity"[4] and of the "loss of the sensational [sociopolitical] impact"[5] of literature in the late 1980s.

Such a historicist view, however, even though it smacks of mechanical causality, is not entirely scandalous. The Avant-Garde School was no historical accident. Its irreverent attitude toward history and culture is decipherable only when seen against the historical context from which it emerged. The young heretics' fabrication of a rootless subject, devoid of memory, was not a mindless pursuit. The making of a subject without a core who narrates without a purpose was a highly subversive act. What the avant-gardists sneered at was the sublime subject construed for a decade by humanist writers and intellectuals. Theirs was a sociopolitically centered and culturally invested subject invigorated with a teleological and utopian vision toward life. Whether the subject is in search of the Chinese modern, cultural roots, or other "authentic" points of origin,[6] it is charged with reasoned drives. The avant-gardists' heroes and heroines, by contrast, drive nowhere; they only drift.

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[4] Articles on the phenomenon of the "depression of creativity" were common in 1988 and 1989. For one example see Wang Meng and Wang Gan, "Piruan? Huapo?" (Depletion? Sliding down the hill?), *Zhongshan* (Bell mountain) 3 (1989): 148–160.

[5] Yang Yu, "Wenxue: Shiqu hongdong xiaoying yihou" (Literature: After losing its sensational impact), *Renmin ribao*, 12 February 1988, overseas edition.

Indeed, what made possible the dramatic entry of the avant-gardists was precisely their remembrance and overwriting of the epochal discourse of the 1980s—nearly ten years of national outburst of utopian fever and fascination with cultural roots. This anthology aims to exhibit that dangerous narrative space opened up by this group of rebels who consciously worked to shatter the myth of "man" and utopia and to shock and alienate the traditional readership at home. Posing as seditious literary elements in the post-Mao era, the avant-gardists adopted an impious attitude toward history. Those who look in their stories for trenchant critiques of the Cultural Revolution will be disappointed. What they display, instead, is a voracious appetite for the clinical depiction of unmotivated violence, which represents a metonymy, rather than just a metaphor, of the historical cataclysm of the Cultural Revolution (Yu Hua's "1986" is a case in point).

It is not difficult to imagine why this avant-gardist attempt at fictionalizing violence risked offending veterans of the Cultural Revolution. The experimental tribute to homicidal instincts and savage compulsions of the most unpredictable kind was a heresy to the older generation of writers and critics for whom violence was a political act and a symptom, albeit an irrational one, of history. The pure consumption of violence as an aesthetic form was inconceivable, and not surprisingly, utterly sacrilegious, to survivors of turbulent historical trauma. The avant-gardists were oblivious to all taboos, of course, having practiced the art of blasphemy to such near perfection that by comparison even Mo Yan's parade of scatological imagery appeared tame. The antihumanist imagination of brutality in a typical scene from "1986" is a hair-raiser by all standards.

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[6] For a detailed discussion of Chinese intellectuals' search for modernity see Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), chap. 2. An examination of "root-searching" literature can be found in chapter 4, "Mapping Aesthetic Modernity," and chapter 5, "Romancing the Subject."

Although the core of the school—Ge Fei, Yu Hua, Su Tong, Sun Ganlu, and Bei Cun—came of age during the 1980s, the avant-gardists did not all belong to the post–Cultural Revolution generation. The two pioneers of the school—Ma Yuan and Can Xue (the only female avant-gardist)—were in fact a generation older. Ma Yuan's mischievous construction of the maze of narration began the discursive revolution as early as 1984 with his publication of "The Goddess of the River Lhasa." It was an intriguing coincidence that during the same year, the Chinese translation of Jorge Borges's stories, a literary event important only in retrospect, was published in China. Many indigenous critics traced the foreign lineage of the young avant-gardists to the Argentinean author ("the young generation of writers were mostly bastard sons of Borges").[7] But in fact it was Ma Yuan (a Han Chinese writing about Tibet) whose idiosyncratic adventures into the labyrinths of narrative opened before our eyes the infinity of the inexhaustible form. Today, any historical account of the literary avant-garde has to start with Ma Yuan.

In 1986, just when Ma Yuan's influence began to be felt in avant-gardist circles, Can Xue published "The Hut on the Mountain," "Old Floating Cloud," and "Yellow Mud Street." If Ma Yuan's pure fiction opens up new possibilities of narrating the legendary, Can Xue's world seems closed because of its allegorical similarity to the immediate historical past—two decades of revolutionary violence now turned inward. But Can Xue is far from interested in delivering another antirevolutionary testimony. Her victims are all disembodied and dehistoricized, as is the origin of the violence with which they are afflicted. She draws us step by step to the killing field located in the psyche of anonymous, historically unidentifiable victims. Hers is a vicious narrative circle that always brings us back, after a journey through the savage imagery of schizophrenia and cannibalism, to the same closure—the cemetery of the mind. Eternity reappears in the form of the blusterous vortex of violence. The dead, of course, are not resting in peace. At the turn of each page, we are deafened by noises (squeaks, howls, and snickers) and confronted with corpses of all sizes and smells. Dead moths, dragonflies, cockroaches, sparrows, cats, and severed human body parts flood the wreckage of the mental battleground. The dominant imagery of animals and animalism in Can Xue's fiction seems ready-made for its appropriation into the critique of the antihumanistic ravage of the Cultural Revolution. Her hysterical mode of narration was indeed often seen as political in various ways—as gender specific and a camouflage of the feminist resistance to "institutionalized patriarchal rule."[8]

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[7] Chen Xiaoming, "Houxiandai zhuyi: Wenhua weiwangren de wan'ge (Postmodernism: The dirge of cultural survivors), in " 'Houxiandai' bitan" ("Notes on postmodernity"), *Zhongshan* 1 (1993): 181.

Yet Can Xue's contribution to China's avant-garde fiction has little to do with what readers identify as the "final" referent of all those violent signifiers in her texts. Her fiction does not merely serve as a metaphor either for postrevolutionary or feminist politics. Can Xue's distinctly paranoid persona is, within the confines of her nightmarish world, a self-consciously depoliticized and an empty, albeit psychically energized, form without content. This is what makes her distinguishable from the authors of "wounded literature" and other contemporary female writers. Her fictional logic is built on an inversion: violence is disengaged from history and internalized into a mere mental image that is ultimately fictitious. This displacement of the real/historical by the hallucinatory and the contingent as the locale of authenticity constitutes Can Xue's legacy to those avant-gardists who came after her. As the signifier of violence is finally freed from the tyrannical enclosure of history, it gains an autonomous life on its own terms—multiplicable, uncontainable, and without a raison d'être. It was Can Xue's formal turn in the depiction of violence that made possible the appearance of the wicked little Shu Nong in Su Tong's tale "The Brothers Shu" and Yu Hua's self-mutilating madman in "1986."

Several years after Ma Yuan and Can Xue, the core group of the avant-garde—a generation younger than those two trailblazers—began to publish their best works. Sun Ganlu published "I Am a

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[8] See Chen Xiaoming, "Zuihou de yishi: 'Xianfengpai' de lishi jiqi pinggu" (The last ceremony: The history and evaluation of the Avant-Garde School) *Wenxue pinglun* 5 (1991): 131.

Young Drunkard" in early 1987; in late 1987, Ge Fei's "The Lost Ferry" ("Mizhou") and Yu Hua's "1986" appeared side by side with Wang Shuo's "Masters of Mischief" ("Wanzhu") in *Harvest*.[9] Wang Shuo's anti-intellectualism and his portrayals of street hooligans risked alienating the elite establishment. Naturally, in 1988 and throughout 1989, literary critics like Li Tuo, Zhang Yiwu, and Chen Xiaoming,[10] and literary journals like *Literary Review (Wenxue Pinglun)* and *Bell Mountain (Zhongshan)*,[11] were much more interested in promoting the avant-garde's experiment with language than paying attention to the soon-to-be-popular "Wang Shuo phenomenon." In the following year, *Harvest* published another cluster of the avant-garde fiction that included Ge Fei's "Green Yellow" ("Qinghuang"), and works by Su Tong, Sun Ganlu, Ma Yuan, and Yu Hua.[12]

All these showcases of the avant-garde in 1987 and 1988 brought to the fore the hypothesis about a "new generational logic" and simultaneously, the proposition of "Chinese postmodernism." As the new school came to define itself more and more around a small group of younger avant-garde writers who belonged to the post–Cultural Revolution generation, Ma Yuan's and Can Xue's membership in the club acquired an increasingly symbolic stature. By 1988, they were remembered as mere antecedents rather than as mainstream avant-gardes.

Although the proposition of a new generational logic was questioned by some critics,[13] the experience shared by younger avant-gardes was undeniably one that deviated from that of their immediate predecessors in the generation of "root-searching" writers. The "root searchers" were a generation that went through the catastrophic experience of the Cultural Revolution, of "agonies and sufferings that were deeply engraved on the tomb of history."[14] But what did their followers, the avant-gardists, possess? They possessed texts about utopia, discursive critiques of dystopia, and volumes of Chinese translations of classical and modern Western masters.

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[9] See *Shouhuo* (Harvest) 6 (1987).

[10] The earliest criticism of the avant-gardist fiction can be seen in Zhang Yiwu's "Xiaoshuo shiyan: Yiyi de xiaojie" (The experiment of fiction: The deconstruction of meaning), *Beijing wenxue* 2 (1988): 76–80; see also Zhang Yiwu, "Lixiang zhuyi de zhongjie: Shiyan xiaoshuo de wenhua tiaozhan" (The end of idealism: The cultural challenge of Experimentalist Fiction) *Beijing wenxue* 4 (1989): 4–11; Chen Xiaoming, "Wubiande cunzai: Xushu yuyan de lingjie zhuangtai" (Borderless existence: The liminal condition of narrative language), *Renmin wenxue* (People's literary monthly) 3 (1989): 109–112; and Li Tuo, Zhang Ling, and Wang Bin, "Yuyan de fanpan: Jinliangnian xiaoshuo xianxiang" (The rebellion of language: The tendency of fiction in the last two years), *Wenyi yanjiu* (Studies of literature and the arts) 2 (1989): 75–80.

[11] Between Oct. 12 and Oct. 16, 1988, *Wenxue pinglun* and *Zhongshan* sponsored a symposium on "Realism and the Avant-Garde" at Lake Tai in Jiangsu Province. A summary of the discussions, recorded by Li Zhaozhong, was published in "Xuanzhuan de wentan: Xianshi zhuyi yu xianfengpai wenxue yantaohui jianji" (A summary of the revolving literary field: Realism and the avant-garde), *Zhongshan* 1 (1989): 181–183.

[12] See *Shouhuo* 6 (1988).

As latecomers for whom utopia, disillusionment, and patricide were merely oversaturated signifiers derived from texts rather than real-life experiences, the avant-gardists were acutely aware that they had missed the encounter with history—not just the climactic history of the Cultural Revolution and of the nation's crude awaking from it, but also the history of world literature, philosophy, theories, and the arts that now emerged suddenly in all its weightiness as the signifier of absence for the Chinese literary and cultural elite. This sense of belatedness is in the end indistinguishable from the avant-gardes' urge and rage to overtake contemporaneity and their crisis of historical consciousness. Thus for them, the strategy to deconstruct history is a symptom of a lack—a complex too difficult to subvert except through the vicarious experience of committing violence to language and to the concept of history itself.

What the young avant-gardists experienced, in short, was an existential dilemma of a different order than that of the "root-searching" collective. It is here that the proposal of the generational logic came into play. The dilemma that the young rebels (and the heroes they depict) faced on the eve of the Tiananmen Square crackdown can be summarized as follows: "Perhaps we have nothing, and perhaps we have everything."[15] This contradictory mood reveals itself as an epochal orientation, an emotional plight characteristic of the post–Cultural Revolution generation—a crowd that includes not only the high-minded avant-gardists but also Wang Shuo and his hooligans, and those millions of youngsters who chimed in with rock star Cui Jian when he sang "I Have Nothing Whatsoever" ("Yiwu suoyou").

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[13] Both Li Tuo and Zou Yu critiqued the proposition that the avant-garde fiction foregrounded a logic that can be conceived of as generational. In their view, the "contemporaneity" of the post–Cultural Revolution generation cannot be reduced to the singular experience of elitism voiced by the literary avant-garde. See Huang Ziping, recorded "Wenxue piping: Yuyan yu xiezuo kongjian" (Literary criticism: Language and the space of creative writing), *Jintian* (Today) 2 (1994): 174–175, quoting Li Tuo and Zou Yu.

[14] Chen, "Zuihou de yishi," 132.

[15] Li Jie, "Lun Zhongguo dangdai xinchao xiaoshuo" (On contemporary Chinese new wave fiction), *Zhongshan* 5 (1988): 138.

This is a generation that gallops freely in the realm of desires ("perhaps we have everything"), but feels unrequited and restrained in action. The avant-gardists may not deserve the title "spokespeople for the new generation," but their fiction renders the metaphorical situation of this contradiction palpable. The collective persona in the new fiction experiences its own emptiness, or perhaps even more precisely, its own impotence ("we have nothing") before its entry into the linguistic order of fiction making.

The local realities thus constructed in the avant-gardist fiction are conscious of their own fragility and artificiality. Yet paradoxically, at the same time that language provides the avant-gardists with the means of articulating the withering of reality, it also promises its own emancipation from the continuum of sign-representation-reality (a three-tier system of signification that realism and modernism reproduced relentlessly). It is the dramatic breaking down of this continuum, the annulment of the real and the referential, and the ensuing foregrounding of the floating signifiers that called for the critical assessment, from some quarters, of the new fiction as a mere linguistic maze, a pure energy field, and an "aesthetic game of narration." And yet, for others who would consider themselves historically minded, the revolution that the avant-gardists initiated did not merely stop at the discursive level. The proposal of the new generational logic also meant for them the dawning of an epistemological revolution that bid farewell to humanism and the philosophy of representation in pursuit of the cultural logic of postmodernism.

The debate over naming—whether the new fiction is "postmodernist" or not—continued even into the 1990s, long after the avant-gardists lost their creative momentum in the face of the challenge posed by writers of popular fiction.[16] In early 1993, *Bell Mountain* presented an array of oppositional views on this debate in the "Written

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[16] For a detailed discussion of the late 1980s debate on "Chinese postmodernism" see Wang, "The Pseudoproposition of 'Chinese Postmodernism,' " chap. 6 in *High Culture Fever.*

Exchanges on 'Postmodernity' " contributed by well-known literary critics. The forum did not yield unpredictable results. Zhang Yiwu and Chen Xiaoming, the two most earnest proponents of "Chinese postmodernism," reiterated their earlier argument for the universality of postmodernity. They declared that the West does not own the copyright on postmodernism and that the avant-gardists had already succeeded in appropriating the foreign version into "our" own.[17] Arguing against this position, Sheng Ning and Wang Bin attributed the proposition of postmodernism to some critics' "fin de siècle dreaming."[18] For "without modernism," Wang Bin asked, "how could we even begin to talk about the 'postmodern'?"[19] This written debate, like many other, earlier discussions of "Chinese postmodernism" since 1989, came to a deadlock as contestants on both sides felt compelled to ask a single question (Do we have postmodernism now?) and answer it either in the affirmative or in the negative. What was left unexamined was, on the one hand, the rich history of the textual construction of "postmodernism" in the West, and on the other, the complex agenda of Chinese cultural politics in reinventing Occidental discourses such as postmodernism. In the mid-1990s, it became more and more clear that the debate over avant-garde fiction would redefine itself around a set of questions that highlighted the Chinese project of taming and challenging (on the discursive level at least), rather than reproducing or imitating, Western postmodernism. The gradual articulation of this position—one that stressed the ideology of the alternative post/modern—brought to the fore the issue of cultural locality and subjectivity. The making of this ideology, no matter how problematic it is, was especially significant in the decade of the 1990s, as Chinese mass culture became more and more susceptible to the homogenizing process of globalization. In fact, one could argue that it is the imminent invasion into the Chinese market of waves of American cultural exports (such as the importation of Hollywood Blockbusters since 1995) that made the agenda of the Chinese alternative—an imaginary localism—meaningful and compellingly persuasive.

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[17] Zhang Yiwu was one of the earliest proponents of "Chinese postmodernism," stressing the global applicability of the concept. See his 1989 essay "Lixiang zhuyi de zhongjie: Shiyan xiaoshuo de wenhua tiaozhan" (The end of idealism: The cultural challenge of experimentalist fiction), *Beijing wenxue* 4 (1989): 11. Zhang continued to elaborate his earlier position in "Houxiandai yu hanyu wenhua" (Postmodernity and the culture of Chinese language), in "Houxiandai bitan," 179–181. Also see Chen, "Houxiandai Zhuyi," 181, 182, 199.

[18] Wang Bin, "Shijimo de mengxiang" (The fin de siècle dream) in "Houxiandai bitan," 177.

[19] Sheng Ning, "Houxiandai zhuyi wenxue shi buke mofangde" (Postmodern literature cannot be imitated) in "Houxiandai bitan," 174.

In 1989, however, the configuration of the power relationship between Chinese cultural elites and the hegemonic discourses of the West was subtly different. When the controversy over the avant-gardists' hypothetical relationship with postmodernism first broke out, critics were far more concerned with catching up with the newest intellectual fad in the West than with engaging themselves in articulating an ideology of localism. How to justify the postmodernist label formed the focal point of discussion. For a short while, every critical essay on the avant-gardists harped on the theme of the deconstruction of meaning and the end of history. And it was not until later that a more complex reckoning of the avant-gardists' encounter with history would be delivered.

China's young literary rebels have indeed subverted everything that the revolutionary generation held sacred. Their greatest achievement started with the depoliticization of language. In their effort to construct a new fictional subject that has no historical, sociopolitical, or even personal identity, the avant-gardists map out an imaginary subject position that language simultaneously creates and deconstructs. Although their carnivalesque self-exile in the imaginary takes various forms—a realm indistinguishable from the dream state and mirage (Ge Fei and Sun Ganlu), the hyperspace of violence (Yu Hua), the hallucinatory (Can Xue), the tautological mental maze (Bei Cun), the fabulous and the fantastic (Ma Yuan), and the personal historical (Su Tong)—they share with each other a common thematic interest in "the legendary," "the dilapidated spectacle of history," "violent death," an unresolved complex involving the father, the paralogic of coincidence, and for Yu Hua and Ge Fei in particular, the sadistic urge to disembowel the human body (especially a beautiful female body).

Underlying this thematic cluster of the new fiction is an antihumanist position, a rebellion against a morally, historically, and epistemologically centered subject assembled laboriously throughout the decade of the 1980s by the different schools of writers that preceded the avant-gardists. This holistic subject is undone in the new fiction. It reemerges as nothing more than the semblance of a linguistic construct, an unpredictable aleatory confluence of its chance encounters with history. Invariably, Ge Fei's and Su Tong's protagonists always wander into the labyrinth of history and are fated to retrace the footsteps of history (whether it is the legend of the water god or the genealogy of the nine fishing families in "Green Yellow") only to find that it is ultimately unavailable because its decrepit path merges imperceptibly into the trails marked by the pursuers' own footprints. The flimsy boundary between the historical, the fictional, and the real never exists in the first place.

"History" paradoxically only comes into being when the chase for its traces begins "here and now." In Su Tong's, Ge Fei's, Yu Hua's, and Bei Cun's tales, the presence (or absence) of history can only manifest itself when it enters the illusory dialogue with its pursuer and thus triggers his activity of making linguistic simulacra of the missing sign. "History is neither being nor nonbeing. It is in the end no more than a rewriting of reality."[20] This act of discoursing about history leads us to roads that bifurcate, corridors that go nowhere except to other corridors. This merging of reality, fiction, and history—the linguistic construction of the unreality of the unreal—is a familiar configuration underlying all the avant-gardist works. In 1987 and 1988, during the two best years of the school, the writers' formal experiments were pushed to an extreme. Serving as a mere allegory for the impasse of narration, "history" was turned into a blank sign. It is conceivable how their preoccupations with narrating the paradox of narration, a mind game, can empty history of its narrative content even though on the discursive level, the avant-gardes have always been telling tales that took place in early modern Chinese history. It was, however, not until the 1990s, with the appearance of full-length novels (Su Tong's *Rice* (*Mi*) and Ge Fei's *Enemy*

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[20] Chen Xiaoming, "Lishi tuibai de yuyan: Dangdai xiaoshuo zhong de 'houlishi zhuyi yixiang" (The allegory of the degeneration of history: The trend of "posthistoricism" in contemporary fiction), *Zhongshan* 3 (1991): 148.

[21] *Mi* was published in *Zhongshan* 3 (1991): 4–94. *Diren* was published in *Shouhuo* 2 (1990): 120–195. The English translation of *Mi* (*Rice*) by Howard Goldblatt was published by William Morrow and Co. (1995).

(*Diren*)[21] come to mind as notable examples), that "history" would unfold itself in the avant-gardist fiction as a palpable, albeit dilapidated, human landscape of depth, rather than as a mere signifier of absence. This return to the tropes of historical discourse instigated the emplotting of several humanist themes that the avant-gardists earlier vowed to subvert, among them, the nostalgia for the missing sign of the father—the origin of history. The earlier patricide complex of the avant-gardists—Shu Nong's story—now enters a new phase. As one critic put it, "the fear of being fatherless (without history or without reality) has begun to reveal itself in the subconscious [of the avant-gardists]."[22] The two post-1989 stories collected in this anthology, Bei Cun's "The Big Drugstore" and Ge Fei's "Whistling," address this symptom of bereavement in their poetic revisit of the haunting spectors of the Father and History respectively.

I do not wish to examine the avant-gardists' change of course at the end of the 1980s in the allegorical framework of the political unconscious. On the one hand, it is almost impossible to disregard the historical trauma that the Tiananmen Square crackdown has bequeathed on Chinese intellectuals. And yet the reorientation, or disorientation, of the fictional logic of the avant-gardists seems also part and parcel of the response of the literary elite to the seige of pure literature by rampant popular culture in the 1990s. The ferment of activities that used to characterize the earlier phase of the school is no longer visible in the new era of mass culture. Elitism bit the dust. And the literary vanguard have much more at stake now if they continue to churn out the kind of highbrow experimental fiction that estranged the reading public. Whatever their aesthetic reorientation may yet signify, regression or compromise, the avant-gardists have left the best of their formalist careers behind them. It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that the term "avant-gardism" lost much of its exploratory edge and incentive at the beginning of the 1990s. It is miraculous that some of them are still publishing furiously. However, their persistence (or resistance) in the new decade only attests to the truism—today's avant-garde may become tomorrow's cliché.

This anthology aims at presenting the golden years—the formalist period—of the Avant-Garde School. Most of the stories collected here were published before 1989. The two stories published in the 1990s—"The Big Drugstore" and "Whistling"—may not be the best specimens of the school in their transitional, post-1989 phase. (Indeed, better examples are the two full-length novels I indicated earlier.) Those two tales were chosen because of the author Bei Cun's own preference in the one case, and because of the editor's partiality in the other.

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[22] Chen, "Zuihou de yishi," 135.

The project of anthologizing Chinese avant-garde fiction fulfilled a wish I made several years ago. To this day, I recall the electrifying experience of my first reading of Ge Fei and Yu Hua, which left indelible repercussions on the critical scholarship I have pursued since then. As contemporary Chinese literature becomes increasingly an integral part of the academic curriculum of Chinese studies and/or comparative literature across the nation and beyond, there is a need for an anthology of the Chinese avant-garde composed with an awareness of the global debates over the issues of local history, cultural locations, and postmodernity.

For lay readers, the avant-garde showcase may drive home a different lesson. It serves to contradict the prevalent myth propagated throughout the decade of the 1980s by Western media: that Chinese writers were preoccupied with issues of human rights and that their ultimate cause can be defined as championing the principle of liberal democracy against the autocratic regime of communism. The avant-gardists demonstrate eloquently that writers in China could afford to turn an impervious back to sociopolitical consciousness. What is collected in this anthology is, in a nutshell, a dramatic manifesto of the aggressive making of a postrevolutionary literary sensibility obsessed with form and the pleasure of storytelling.

REMEMBERING MR. WU YOU ❀ *Ge Fei*

1

Not until the two middle-aged policemen in white uniforms and their young skirt-clad female partner showed up did the villagers reluctantly recall Mr. Wu You. That bygone episode, like a maiden's lost chastity, stirred the people's emotions. And since their recollections were triggered by the introduction into their lives of the three outsiders, village elders were quick to tell youngsters eager to revisit the painful past, "Time erases all memories."

Thanks to the three uniformed guests, the villagers learned of such things as handcuffs and, so they were told, alarm sirens. A sense of security accrued from the presence of the outsiders, even though they were not above putting on airs at times. One of their favorite pastimes was getting farmers to stop work, either out in the woods or in the shade of high walls, to relate obscure details regarding Mr. Wu You. They failed to get the answers they sought, not because the people were uninformed but because they were so blasé. Nothing excited the people of this village. I, on the other hand, was eager to work with the outsiders. I still recalled how the condemned man was shot that morning.

Mother reacted to the news that I was going to watch them shoot Mr. Wu You at a spot five miles from where we lived by slapping me across the face. "Killing a man is the same as killing a chicken," she said. So I went out back to watch my younger brother do just that. Old K, who was still little then, held the chicken by its neck in one tiny hand and a small penknife in the other. As I walked up to him, he asked me to help. "Killing a chicken is the same as killing a man," I said.

"They're the same thing," Old K replied.

Suddenly, the bird broke loose and flapped its way across a block of stone before soaring over the wall. Old K stood there holding his blood-streaked penknife, mesmerized by the sight of chicken feathers floating above us. I grabbed his hand and dragged him out the gate, telling him we were going to watch them actually kill a man. He was standing beside me when they shot Mr. Wu You. His mouth hung slack, and he was a different boy from the one who was trying to kill the chicken. On the way home, he muttered the only thing he would say for three whole days: "Killing a man is a lot easier than killing a chicken."

I divulged this to the three outsiders, who wouldn't dignify it with a response, would not even record it. But when I told them I was a distant relative of Mr. Wu You's, they smiled and turned real friendly, urging me to go on with my story. My ears rang with their meticulous mandarin in a singsong twang that made my skin crawl. I said Mr. Wu You was shot on the day of the Dragon Boat Festival.

"That's perfect!" the skirt-clad young woman said.

It really was the day of the Dragon Boat Festival. Women, some of whom had stayed up all night, went down to the stream to pick leaves, which they floated home on bamboo rafts, in sampans, even in washbasins, as wrappings for their glutinous holiday treats. A gossamer mist hung in the early-morning air like evanescent steam, heavy with the subtle fragrance of water reeds. Men were washing rice in large sieves. Children played behind their parents as they worked, splashing stream water with stripped willow switches. Just then one of the younger wives took off running from one end of the village to the other, shouting the whole way. And that is how people learned that Mr. Wu You was going to be shot later that day. Everyone watched her run, except for a smattering of young fellows who had no idea what was going on, since they were too busy staring at the fleshy mounds jiggling beneath her pink chemise to worry about what she was shouting. Much later, whenever they discussed the affairs of that morning, they admitted it was the first time they had ever seen a woman run like that, and for them, all other living objects hung in a state of suspended animation.

2

As soon as they heard the clanking noise, the villagers knew that the police were out for a stroll: all manner of brass contraptions in all sizes hung from their uniform belts. Encountering a middle-aged woman out on the street, they decided to question her. One of them casually slipped a brass hoop off his belt and fitted it over the woman's head, telling her it was a high-frequency lie-detector ring, the most advanced of its kind in the world. It shrieks every time you tell a lie. So she clammed up while the hoop was in place. But as soon as it was removed, words gushed from her mouth. Their technology had met its match.

Apparently feeling tension in the air for the first time since their arrival, the outsiders asked me to show them Mr. Wu You's living quarters, in an old, dilapidated, and boxy little ancestral hall. His room had been sealed on the day of his death, and no one had entered it since. Prying open the rusty latch was hard work. When we finally got the door open, we were greeted by a thick cloud of dust. It was stifling inside, and we were sweat soaked in no time. The room was just as its occupant had left it, as if awaiting his return. A coat of fine white dust had accumulated on a pencil sketch tacked to the wall: a black sun sinking into the reedy bank of a black river inhabited by a pair of egrets with crossed beaks. The sketch had been done for him by an itinerant artist. Appearance was important to Mr. Wu You, who could not abide dirt or slovenliness. He shaved with a finely honed straight razor and wore a black oilcloth apron when doing the dishes. Years later, whenever his name came up in conversation, the villagers invariably remarked, "Just like a woman!"

While finding nothing germane to their reinvestigation of the Mr. Wu You case, the police did note that his bookcases were empty. Mr. Wu You had been a lover of books. On the day the village headman ordered the people to move Mr. Wu You's books outside and burn them, it took more than five hours for the flames to consume the whole pile. Villagers watched the curling ashes of all that paper get sucked up a chimney as their faces were turned bloodred by the blaze. Only Apricot wept. A frequent guest at Mr. Wu You's ancestral hall, where she enjoyed his books, she was the only person he ever taught to read, and it did not take her long to learn a hundred and one ways to cure measles.

Unanimity has not been reached on what actually led to the fiery episode: some say the headman was drunk at the time, but they are refuted by others who say he drank very little that day.

3

The villagers found Mr. Wu You's behavior that day shocking, to say the least. Armed with his seven-inch straight razor, he confronted the village headman in the area's largest public square, and people who saw how jumpy he was knew he had been waiting there for some time. The headman stripped to the waist and hung his shirt in the crotch of a nearby tree, exposing a muscular chest tanned the color of bark. Brandishing his razor, Mr. Wu You charged like a crazed jackass, but the headman stepped nimbly out of the way, clenched his fists, and launched a ferocious counterattack. The first blow landed squarely on Mr. Wu You's nose, spraying blood all over the place, as if a rotten tomato had splattered on his face. The second one caught him on the back of the head, and he teetered briefly before thudding to the ground—just as I opened our attic window, which gave me a ringside view of the mayhem. Surrounded by spectators filling the square, Mr. Wu You staggered to his feet, drying clots of blood clinging to his face, and took a few wobbly steps, like a circus clown trying for a few laughs. Then, with a slight churning motion, he hit the ground again.

The three outsiders danced a jig when this incident was related to them by an old man who guarded the woods. The skirt-clad young woman shocked him by planting a kiss on his whiskered cheek. It was he who had lugged Mr. Wu You home afterward, only to incur the wrath of his wife—that day and every day thereafter—for bloodstains on his shirt that wouldn't wash out no matter what she did. Even now, traces of those badges of glory remain on the back of his yellowed undershirt. After the old watchman laid Mr. Wu You on his bed, Apricot opened the door and strode in, obviously having got wind of the fight. As she approached Mr. Wu You's bed, he spat a mouthful of bloody phlegm in her direction, but she merely removed her apron, leaned over, and gingerly wiped the blood from the corners of Mr. Wu You's mouth. The watchman gets all choked up even now when he recalls that incident. "I've never seen a more fetching girl," he says. "Like a pixie."

Mr. Wu You was just another villager, no one special, even taking into consideration the fact that he had once owned a roomful of books. Then some village children came down with what everyone called the sweats, for which the only known treatment was pillowing their heads on oven-dried river gunk. Mr. Wu You tried to convince them that a certain wild herb could cure their children, but no one listened. Nothing could win over the zealous disciples of the pillow treatment until he employed an argument they could understand: bulls seldom get sick because they graze on wild grasses. The villagers decided to give Mr. Wu You's treatment a chance. It worked, and overnight, his ancestral hall became the local clinic.

4

The burning of Mr. Wu You's books shook the people's confidence in his healing arts. But he had committed an astonishing quantity of the incinerated books to memory; it was an extraordinary gift that not only saved the clinic but simultaneously invested him with mystical airs. By then, Mr. Wu You and Apricot had become nearly inseparable, a development that sparked mixed reactions in the villagers. To some, the relationship seemed shady at best, since she hardly ever left the boxy ancestral hall until late at night, in the company of Mr. Wu You. Over time, they wore a path, luminous and white, through the woods between his home and hers. Gradually, the villagers warmed to Apricot. For by then, they nearly worshiped Mr. Wu You, and rather than concern themselves with the rectitude of the relationship, they convinced themselves that an atmosphere of harmony and sanctity prevailed. Naturally, the village headman was never far from their thoughts, since he had secured his position as headman not by grasping the essentials of forest-fire prevention or by practicing the art of divination but by virtue of a robust, muscular body and a broad, menacing forehead. He was a mighty lion, or so the village women said. Later, after the headman had been carried off by dysentery, a village old-timer told me, "They were still moved to tears even when they knew the headman was feeding them a line."

One day, an outsider came to the village. He swept a spot of ground clean of snow and set up a performing-monkey show. Mr. Wu You and Apricot, who were in the audience that day, looked over at the smirking headman, who said deliberately and in full voice, "I'm going to kill you two." People close by were laughing so hard at the performer's antics they didn't hear the headman. But my brother Old K heard him, and he streaked home as fast as his legs would carry him. Long after the incident, he told me he ran like the wind that day, flung open the door, and fell flat on his face. Yet even before he could clamber to his feet, he was shouting, "The headman's going to kill Apricot and Mr. Wu You . . ."

Like so many village women, Mother was off in some lovely dreamland as she stitched soles for cloth shoes, so she may not have heard what Old K was saying. Which is probably why she merely grunted in response.

Many days passed. Green buds popped from willow branches growing wild above crumbling walls at the village entrance; if you looked past the reeds on the riverbank, way off into the distance, you could see new grass in the mountain hollows. Suddenly, the village buzzed with talk that Mr. Wu You had killed Apricot. No one doubted the truth of the story, since he had confessed to the crime. A couple of forensic interns were invited to the village for what would be their first autopsy. They began by laying Apricot's body out on a three-legged Ping-Pong table, then stood on either side of her, butcher knives at the ready. She looked just as she had when she was swimming in the river in midsummer, the way people had so often seen her: ruddy faced and full of life. Not knowing exactly what to do, the two interns commenced cutting and kept at it all day, until it was impossible to tell what was what. Winding up with seven separate pieces of unequal size, they concluded that Apricot had been strangled after being raped.

5

The three visiting police officers really knew their business: the skirt-clad young woman filled every page of her thirty-by-forty-centimeter notebook. One day, she and the others spoke to the person who actually shot Mr. Wu You, a lad named Kangkang. On the eve of the Dragon Boat Festival, after the magistrate informed him he would be Mr. Wu You's executioner, he decided to make some repairs on his double-barreled shotgun, a family heirloom that hung on the wall of his mother's room. A one-time paralytic whom Mr. Wu You had cured, she had just got out of bed when her son came in to take down the shotgun, which had gathered dust for thirty years or more. "Going after wild boar?" she asked. He walked out without a backward glance.

Kangkang painstakingly wiped down the shotgun three times before taking it to the blacksmith to straighten out the barrel, which was thirty degrees off center. Then he loaded it, went down to the river, took aim at a billy goat, and fired, creating a dark hole the size of a man's thigh in the animal's belly. He smiled contentedly.

The next morning when Old K and I sneaked out to watch Mr. Wu You's execution, we encountered a woman with bound feet, moving as fast as those tiny feet would allow, sort of like bouncing along on stilts. A month or so after Mr. Wu You's execution, we learned the facts of the murder from her lips: her husband had suffered a terrible headache that night, so she took some spirit money into the woods to burn at the family grave site. There she saw the headman force Apricot, who had been walking home alone, to the ground. She was no more than twenty paces from them at the time. The night was absolutely still, she said, and the subtle fragrance of reeds along the riverbank drifted over on gentle winds. It was an intoxicating setting, with a milky miasma that hung over the woods and a lovely halo girding the moon. She declared that the sight of the headman ripping off Apricot's clothes and white underpants had moved her to tears.

For more than a month following Apricot's death, she was in the grips of dementia, her eyes vacant and clouded, until she knew she must do something to keep from going stark raving mad. So on the morning the young wife ran shouting from one end of the village to the other, the bound-foot woman, knowing she could keep the truth bottled up inside her no longer, decided to reveal what had happened that night. She ran like a woman possessed to the execution ground.

The onlookers grew impatient as a light rain fell. Kangkang took aim at Mr. Wu You on a signal from the magistrate, who held a red three-cornered flag in his raised hand. He dropped his arm, and Kangkang pulled the trigger. *Blam!* The shotgun misfired, blackening the front of Kangkang's white shirt. He spat angrily and reloaded. There was fear in Mr. Wu You's eyes. He strained to open his mouth, but his tongue had been cut out a month earlier. He was gesturing frantically when Kangkang's double-barreled shotgun roared one last time.