

Banalized Suffering in Yu Hua's Fiction

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One of the important traits that runs through the writings by the so called Chinese “avant-garde” writers in the 1980s is a persistent nihilist view of the Chinese situation in post-Mao era. Faced with a devastated post-Cultural Revolution wasteland, this nihilist vision is generated to interrogate Chinese cultural heritage and its moral/ethical principles. One of the major themes in this avant-garde fiction, thus, delineates an existential meaninglessness. Yu Hua, one of the essential members in this group, presents a fictional world in which human life in general takes the form of suffering and is ultimately devoid of any purpose. Sufferings, catastrophes, and incidents of deaths occur frequently, contingently, and without redemptive value. Yu Hua's characters respond to the brutal, and yet incoherent, events in their lives with such an indifference that horror becomes a thoroughly anesthetized experience.

Yu Hua's interest in using violence as a disruptive force in life began with the publication of his “On the Road at Eighteen” in 1987. Immediately, the story caught the attention of major literary critics of the time. Li Tuo, for example, offered his highly positive regard of Yu Hua and his fellow experimental writers as being directly responsible for bringing the much belated and greatly needed “writerly literature” to China following a much bewildering reading experience of “On the Road at Eighteen”.¹⁾

In this story, the first highly regarded major publication by Yu Hua, many of the recurrent motifs, scenes and themes, such as the despairing youth or the sudden eruption of violent encounters that were to be found in his other works, were already present. Detailed and detached accounts of a violent process often of no articulated causal explication, distrustful and irrational humans who are easily given in to their disruptive impulses, night and darkness as the only condolence, death as the overhanging threat consciously or unconsciously present, man's entrapment in an unspeakably horrifying yet simultaneously anesthetizing moment, the narrator's “inappropriate” detachment from the narrated situation, all can be clearly seen in this work.

The story also establishes one of Yu Hua's favorite narrative viewpoints of a young man entering adulthood. As critics have observed Yu Hua's interest in the Bildungsroman persists in many of his works, such as “On the Road at Eighteen”, “Siyue sanri shijian” [April Third Incident], “Plum Blossoms of Blood”, *Zai xiyu zhong huhan* [Screaming in the Drizzle] and “Xiaji taifeng” [Summer Typhoon].²⁾ Unlike in traditional Bildungsroman which delineates the developmental process of growing up as actively engaging with society and as development toward eventual accomplishment, success or recognition by that society, Yu Hua's young protagonist often receives a

negative, or at least senseless, education through incomprehensible experiences that end with violence, death or regression. In fact, “anti-Bildungsroman” would seem to be a more fitting term.³⁾

“Plum Blossoms of Blood” can be read as a tale of anti-Bildungsroman because of Yu Hua’s resistance to having the protagonists mature through resolving various conflicts. His “On the Road at Eighteen” is a different kind of anti-Bildungsroman, marked by the devastating outcome of a first encounter with the real world.⁴⁾ In this story, violence, which was to become one of Yu Hua’s sustained fascinations, is already seen as disrupting and threatening our rational mind to construct meaning out of our experience, the experience of growing up and learning our position in the world. Contrary to what we are deceived into believing, instead of the promise of rosy gentleness and freedom, the world is dangerously impregnated with irrational force that will soon turn into absurd attack. Violence quickly claims the forming ego as a casualty in a senseless battle. The 18-year-old narrator “I” sets off on his journey to “know the world outside” at the kind request of his father. Little does he know a catastrophe of quite incomprehensible nature awaits him at the end of the day.

The catastrophe begins without warning with a few country folks robbing a broken-down truck whose driver has just offered the young man a lift. The truckload of apples soon attracts more robbers, some of whom give the young man several severe beatings till he cannot stand up. More and more people come to join in the robbery while the truck driver watches from the side in amusement. Eventually not only the apples but all useful parts of the truck are taken away. To make matters worse for the young man the truck driver leaves with the last group, and takes with him the young man’s bag which contains all his money and belongings. As darkness engulfs the beat up young man, he finds condolence in the equally beat up truck in a deserted place with nothing in sight.

The violent nature of the world is manifested through a painful experience which “has a most ominous atmosphere about it”, as Xiaobing Tang points out.⁵⁾ The “catastrophe” arrives in such a sudden, unwarranted and unpredictable manner that it is impossible to rationalize. It is interesting Yu Hua uses the phrase “haojie” [catastrophe] to refer to this incident, for to the Chinese readers of the late 1970s and 1980s, the word is exclusively associated with the Cultural Revolution. But as is often the case with Yu Hua as well as with other avant-garde writers, historical specificity and linkage to political tribulations tend to be avoided in general. In this story no specific background information is volunteered to point to any particular direction, so that the incident “is not merely a brutal violation of all social relations and institutions, it is also violence made absolute because of the absence of any significant articulation.”⁶⁾ Not only is there no sufficient causal explanation but the narrator “I”’s tone of voice is set at a flat range that tends to erase pain, suffering and anguish associated with such an experience. Already in this early publication, a distance is maintained between Yu Hua’s narrator and the narrated, despite the first-person point-of-view. It is as if “I” is telling someone else’s story to someone else, just as Yu himself wants it.⁷⁾

The inarticulate experience of violence also relates to patriarchal authority, as the ending of the story suggests. The baggage passed on to us from our father, as symbolized by the red backpack in the story is one not to be accepted without doubt

and suspicions. The contrasting picture between the pre-catastrophe of “mid-day with extraordinarily beautiful sunlight” and the post-catastrophe of “total darkness” with “the body covered in wounds all over” finds its linkage with father’s “gentle” command “You’re 18 now, you should go and know the world out there.” (9) The world given to us is one full of dangers that threaten to erupt anytime. Yu Hua’s Bildungsroman delineates the young protagonist’s experience with the world as discontinuation and regression into the “womb” of the truck, rather than engagement toward positive development.⁸⁾ Haphazard violence not only exposes the dark side of human nature but diminishes the meaning and value of life itself. The image of the lone adolescent against the all-encompassing darkness is powerful, and at the same time, strangely anesthetizing because anger, frustration and despair fail to be voiced, and remain as only a hollow echo and dim memory.

Unlike “One Kind of Reality” in which the patriarchal father figure is uncannily made absent and consequently “excused” from making any moral judgment on his very unfilial, not to mention inhumanely cruel, descendants, in this story the young protagonist’s first defeating encounter with the world casts doubts on the authoritative voice of the father once and for all. Yu Hua’s strong distrust and suspicion toward positive outcome as the definitive characteristic of our maturation often sets his lone adolescent young man against an indifferent universe in situations imbued with dread, horror and despair, motivated and framed by violence.

Physical brutality often seems the only way in which human beings can interact with each other in Yu Hua’s fictive world. It brings the young protagonists’ bildungsroman abruptly to a halt in “On the Road at Eighteen”. Occasionally Yu Hua’s narratives slide from this extreme way of communication to the other extreme, whereby conflicts are displaced by the blank of experience, as we have already seen in “Plum Blossoms of Blood”. There, Yu Hua’s anti-bildungsroman is defined by a disturbing lack of events and interactions between the young protagonist and other human beings. Yet the end result is similar with the sudden termination of Ruan Haikuo’s bildungsroman. This disruption, however, assumes nothing in the form of violence, but as accident, irrelevance or indirect intervention. Incidentally, the story ends with the same image in which the lone protagonist is engulfed by an expansive dark night, with a profound numbness occupying the center of the consciousness.

In another story, entitled simply “Aiqing gushi” [Love Story], Yu Hua again adopts the Bildung motif.⁹⁾ This time the central focus is the theme of love, sexuality and marriage. Unlike most of Yu Hua’s stories in which deaths or fatal accidents occur naturally and frequently as one turns the page: here nothing happens. From high school sweethearts to a married couple in middle age, there is an obvious void at the center of this marriage: nothing at all happens to generate real passion, feeling or even resentment. As the husband confesses they are doomed to a kind of life defined merely by an elated feeling, which is “a kind of happiness that can be found everywhere on the street.” (31) The husband summarizes the banality of married life: “My biggest mistake was on the night before our wedding not to realize in time that she will be all her life walking back and forth in front of me.” (24) He is terrified by the experience of repetition of familiarity and expectedness, which vacates life’s energy and meaning. Such a worn-out existence is not even redeemable by memory as the

ending suggests. The husband feels thoroughly defeated by a lack of surprise, which seems to be the essence of his married life.

This, a rare confession of love in all of Yu Hua's writings, certainly is revealing of Yu Hua's own philosophical understanding of love and happiness, which are seen as nullification. To this extent the simple title of "Love Story" becomes paradoxical and ironic, because it is nothing about love but rather about the threatening nature of love. Contrary to their total impotence of love, Yu Hua's characters are easy victims of bodily desire. This desire, once fulfilled, is often not without serious consequences. In fact it becomes suffocating if not lethal, a fatal calamity inescapable, just as indicated by the title of Yu Hua's novella dedicated to the theme. "Fatal Calamities Inescapable" is a story in which violence, vengeance and disaster are connected through sexual appetite to form the basic composite preludes to several deaths.¹⁰⁾

Set against an icy cold and almost unreal setting similar to that of "The Ephemeral World", the nameless small town in this story is also captured by a mysterious physical presence and an eerie atmosphere. Like Mr. Fortuneteller in the nameless town in "The Ephemeral World", situated in the center of the town here is also an aged patriarchal figure, the Lao Zhongyi [Old Chinese Medicinal Doctor] through whom the road to the nether world passes. Unlike Mr. Fortuneteller from whom the town's residents seek advice, the Lao Zhongyi secretly peeps at the alley of his town and at everyone and everything that appears within the range of his sight. For twenty years he has stored all that his vision could contain in his memory.

Men and women in this town inevitably fall victims of lust, unable to refrain from succumbing to sexual desire. In fact, licentious interaction seems to be the only means of communication available. And again as in many of Yu Hua's works death becomes the most likely resolution. Unlike elsewhere such as in "The Ephemeral World" where deaths occur mysteriously incomprehensible, in this story they are definitively related to sexual instinct. Or more precisely, the opposite seems to be the case, that is, sexual instinct eventually leads toward death or self-destruction, regardless of whether it is gratified or inhibited.

In this story, Yu Hua's men and women are equally prone to brutality, violence, vengeance and destruction and even murder, as they are elsewhere, such as in "One Kind of Reality", except that these actions exclusively relate to sexual instinct. When this instinct is stripped down to its basest level, human beings become totally consumed, losing their intelligence and wisdom. When this desire cannot be immediately gratified, anger sets in and displaces the unreleased sexual energy into destructive force. When Guangfu realizes his sexual appetite cannot be satisfied because of a young boy's innocent and curious interruption, "Guangfu's anger wells up suddenly, thereafter Guangfu's disaster will arrive certainly." (189) But first Guangfu has to release his forced energy by taking the boy's life. In a passage which recalls a very similar scene in "One Kind of Reality" Yu Hua's narrator apathetically and unhesitatingly delineates how Guangfu raises up his foot and kicks into different parts of the boy's body, again, and again, the kicking repeats and seems to offer comfort and release, just as he would have had had he been able to continue with his sexual intercourse.

When he tells the boy's father: "I have killed your son", he even manages to smile.

(191) The boy's death, and even his own death sentence fail to make Guangfuo come to some understanding of himself, of life. He attributes the tragic incident as his foolish ignoring of warnings from fate. Such kind of reasoning, apparently irrational, but nonetheless well-accepted within the superstitious Chinese frame of mind, is annihilative and self-deceptive. Life now becomes meaningless to Guangfuo, "a pile of rubies", and death becomes unredemptive, something which only "will wipe away his life, just like he now wipes off the spittle from his mouth." (196)

Guangfuo volunteers elaboration on how fate has tricked him and how he has repeatedly ignored its warnings, and how not only himself, but others are also entrapped by an inescapable fatal calamity. This "truth", though, is only revealed to him while the others seem to turn a deaf ear to his "final warnings". Perhaps reading from these extended passages on fate Yu Hua's own admonition enables Guan Yimin to comment:

He watches people in deception and persecution, listens to the echo of the world's collapsing. His warning to the world appears so pale and powerless after passing through the mortal human crowd, distant like the bells ringing from Athens temples. He can only wait for the desolation of disintegration indifferently and quietly, a fatal adversity predetermined and inescapable.¹¹⁾

This critique, however, seems to grant too much didactic intent to Yu Hua's narrative desire because again there is an obvious element of indifference and dis-attachment injected between the narrator and his/her narrative object so that the narrator is telling someone else's story to the listener. In other words, there is a strong intention to undermine the overlapping of the writer's consciousness with that of the narrator's. This effect compounds the feeling of meaninglessness.

Unlike in Guangfuo's case where sexual encounter quickly becomes displaced by anger and ends in murder and self-destruction, with Luzhu and Dongshan the deliriously blissful moment of bodily encounter at first seems promising. When Dongshan sees Luzhu's oversize underwear which sways in the wind with "a hundred year's of seduction", he knows he is doomed to marriage with Luzhu. What he doesn't know is that Luzhu's uncontrollable desire for him can not be fully satisfied unless measures of extremity are executed. In order to possess Dongshan completely to herself, Luzhu pours a bottle of nitric acid over her husband's handsome face on their wedding night. What begins as a passionate courting game quickly gives way to destruction, which then takes Luzhu's life, as well as Dongshan's manhood. Violence, vengeance and death, again, become natural companions to sexual instinct, marriage in this case only serves to legitimate a destructive impulse.

It is from Lao Zhongyi, Luzhu's own father that she receives her "dowry" the bottle of nitric acid. It is also from him that Dongshan receives, after killing Luzhu, the medicine that leaves him impotent for life. As another "death incarnate" besides Mr. Fortuneteller, Yu Hua delineates Lao Zhongyi's reaction in his chilling and indifferent voice: "Luzhu did a pretty good job" after Lao Zhongyi clearly observes Dongshan's face and obviously feels satisfied. He tells Dongshan: "Your face is like a pair of gray shorts covered in patches." (217) There is no denouncement, no condemnation, nor hardly any comments available in the narrative. Like most of Yu Hua's characters the

characters in this text are endowed with a capacity for brutally displaced and misguided passion. Sexuality in Yu Hua's delineation not only seems inseparable from violence, but also is "chopped off of its psychological and social meaning" with its denotation for life and mysticism lost.¹²⁾ His characters have lost the capacity to hope, in order to maintain their human existence through their interaction with the world and with other human beings, since these experiences have all been tainted by violence, irrationality and madness. As such they no longer provide meaning and value. The sudden, yet unanticipated transformation of sexual desire into violent impulses of destruction does not grant life new energy, much less hope. It only takes the life force away from the characters and turns life itself into a meaningless and wasted experience. The men and women in Yu Hua's nameless town are drowning unconsciously in the delusion of a river that appears to be sexual desire but instead provides a thanatopic encounter with the worst of human potential.

Yu Hua continues with his surmise of the pointlessness of human existence and expands his scope of contestation to incorporate the themes of growing up, love, lust, and marriage into the larger picture of life in his novels *Huhan yu xiyu* [Screaming in the Drizzle] and *Huozhe* [To Live]. Yu Hua's interest in regulating his narrative through a male youth's viewpoint, again persists in his first novel *Screaming in the Drizzle*, a loosely structured "psychological autobiography" of the first-person narrator's early life, spent between his village home and his adopted family home in a distant town.¹³⁾ In this novel published at the end of 1991, Yu Hua further pursues his embellished magnification of human suffering, which some critics regard as the unifying theme present in all of Yu Hua's works.¹⁴⁾

Yu Hua's "consciousness of suffering", though, does not usually manifest itself in the text through sympathy, compassion or forgiveness. With the writing of *Screaming in the Drizzle* his zero-degree narrative seems to warm up, though just slightly. This perhaps explains partially its good appraisal from critics who have experienced too much shuddering from Yu Hua's killer-like atmosphere. One of the reasons that critics seem to regard this novel as having some kind of human touch is perhaps due to the shortening of the distance between the narrator and the narrated in contrast to Yu Hua's more experimental pieces. However, this seemingly more interested and concerned narrator does not necessarily indicate profound change in Yu Hua's general attitude toward life, because in the final analysis much of the delineation of the suffering and pain does not seem to amount to further probing of human nature or social justice in order to reach for a more profound understanding. In fact, many of the unhappy incidents in the novel are plainly laid out, and without moving toward cohesion or final resolution.

In the year 1965, a boy began his unnamable fear of the dark night. I can recall that night with the drizzle falling. At that time I already was asleep. I was teeny and placed in the bed like a toy...It should have been at this time when I started to fall asleep safely and quietly... (that) a woman's wailing like a scream reached me from the distance. The hoarse voice started abruptly in that ever so quiet dark night, making me tremble in my childhood as I now reminisce...Now I can see the reason for my fear then, which was that I could not hear another voice coming out

in response. Nothing will make one shudder more than the sound of lonely and helpless screaming in the empty dark night of rain. (4)

The beginning lines of this novel does more than initiate the novel, it marks the beginning of a memory of growing up, of experiencing the world as a conscious being, it's a child's psychological condition.¹⁵⁾ Memory begins with darkness and fear, which arrives suddenly, yet noiselessly, naturally in the same way night falls, mixed with the sound of a light rain. The narrator was trembling in fear, and horrified, hoping there would be another sound come up as an answer, a response. But none ever came until a few days later when a stranger in black appeared in his memory. The boy's vague hope for the man to respond to that lonely scream, however, is quickly shattered when the man was found dead. Critics have interpreted the lone woman's cry as a desire to "enter into the center of home" and have thus speculated on Yu Hua's wish to rebuild a Utopia as a central theme of the novel.¹⁶⁾ As prelude to the boy's life as he grows up, this passage forebodes that which will accompany him, not so much in terms of real experience, but the way in which he will interpret and understand his experience, which is through loneliness, unspecifiable horror, pain, death and abandonment.

Indeed, more than anything else, abandonment seems to be the only way life manifests itself for not only the young boy, but also many other characters in the book. It is interesting to note Yu Hua's casual marking of 1965 as the beginning of the boy's Bildungsroman, the year which precedes the Cultural Revolution. It is also interesting to add as already pointed out by critics that the experience of abandonment is certainly not unfamiliar to Yu Hua and other Chinese writers born in the sixties, who, as noted by Gao Yuanbao, were thrown into the bordering regions of society, far away from the ideological center from the very beginning.¹⁷⁾ However, recent Chinese history, dotted with various political events, is never foregrounded in Yu Hua's narrative, but is lightly brushed over in passing. For example, more specifically, terms and usage of language referential to the time rarely appear in the page. There seems still the effort to disengage the narrative from any possibilities and suspicions of politicization, which is a consistent agenda for all avant-garde writers. In fact, Nanmen, the boy's home village, seems to be a place forsaken by political struggles and ideological pursuits.

Instead of marking the boy's psychological journey through political tribulation, Yu Hua moves away from the historical and focuses on the personal by beginning the boy's Bildungsroman with his adoption. At an age when the boy cannot easily forget his own biological parents, nor easily accept two strangers as substitutions, the boy is given away to a new mother who is sick, feeble, and bed-ridden most of the time. This turning point in the boy's life, occurred at the vulnerable age of six, very much determines a quality of "not-belongingness" in his character. He is doomed to live his life like an outsider, an abandoned, adopted child. Indeed to perform various chores and labor for a sick and bed-ridden woman seems the whole reason for Guanglin's adoption, and he becomes well aware of that.

Yet ironically while Guanglin is "abandoned" by his biological parents to a family half acclaimed by the deadening suffocation of illness, his second mother is already abandoned by the sunny world of life as well as by the nether world. Life to her is the

punishment of living in the state of getting ever closer to dying, ever hoping for some form of permanent release. As if that is not enough misery, she is eventually abandoned by her husband, who takes his own life after his adulterous affair with another woman is found out. Family thus dissolves in disunification instead of continuing in bondage. Life is marked by fragility, easily to be discarded or wasted. Guanglin's Bildungsroman is again brutally disrupted, as is his psychological state. Instead of moving in forward motion toward coherence, the narrative is forced into fragmentation. In fact to match perfectly well with Guanglin's threatened and disrupted experience of youth, Yu Hua's narrative proceeds in small sections, which do not follow a chronological order, but jump back and forth.

After Guanglin is deserted by his adopted family, he is left with no choice but to return to his biological family, which by now is a group of complete strangers. In essence Guanglin will never be able to reposition himself rightly in the family, there will always be a strangeness, a distance mixed with Guanglin's already uncomfortable and unfamiliar feeling toward his family, a family far from being bound by love, warmth and caring, is marked instead by mutual distrust, suspicion, and just a feeling of accidental acquaintance. As Guanglin says: "My family at Nanmen seems to me only a kind of charity." (8) Guanglin's miserable life does not come from his lonely and "adopted" position in the family but also from brutal treatments from his father and older brother, who are both apt to cause physical pain on him for no apparent reason.

Unlike many other of Yu Hua's works, in which violence receives Yu Hua's full attention and is injected into the narrative with an excessive passion and attention to detail, here the violence is presented as blandly innocuous. For example, in "One Kind of Reality" blood relations turn into enemies when conflicts arise that cannot be dissolved through rational means. Bloody hair-raising violence seems the only way available to displace anger. In this novel, Guanglin's adversarial, yet distant, relationship with his family never gets a chance to materialize into brutal vengeance. It's as if his alienated feelings toward his biological family have so paralyzed him that he can only observe his feelings at a distance. He lives in a state of permanent psychological abandonment and despair, without hope of re-possessing his own biological family or receiving their recognition. Not only is Guanglin alienated from his family, he is also an outsider in the eyes of the villagers. Present in the narrative is an element of alienation from history as well. The expansive time span covered in this novel overlaps with a rather tumultuous period in Chinese history. Yet none of the historical events which occurred in this traumatic period in Chinese history are able to filter through Guanglin's distanced consciousness. In a young boy's eyes, political struggles and persecutions are equally frightening and despairing, and certainly no more real, than personal experiences, such as the awaking to sexuality. Guanglin's tormented fears, interspersed with elated satisfaction and uncontrollable desire, experienced during his nightly masturbation were more real and life threatening to him because it is the only true and honest moment when he can feel himself as a human being. However, even that feeling is mixed with the fear of death.

In this novel, life seems to be defined by various occurrences of abandonment at different levels for many of its characters. Guanglin, for example, is not the only

adolescent whose Bildungsroman is woven around the theme of abandonment. His childhood friend Guoqing, who already lost his mother, is eventually given up by his biological father who simply walks out of his life one day. "I am getting married" is all his father has to say. "Guoqing, abandoned by people who are alive, begins his intimate relationship with the old woman downstairs, who is abandoned by dead people." (178) The forced, strange and sad binding between Guoqing and the aged lone woman cannot offer anything more to Guoqing than the mere presence of another human body, for life only means waiting to be summoned by the nether world for the old woman. Yu Hua again "deconstructs" conventional Bildungsroman by depriving Guoqing from experiencing growing up as a natural and gradual process of becoming.

Compared to "On the Road at Eighteen", in which the symbolic meaning of growing up is violently disrupted so that discontinuity, instead of progression, is forced on the young protagonist. Here, growing up is a prolonged and repetitive experience of estrangement. While this novel seems to contain a more human element and human feelings it nonetheless is equally nihilistic in view of growing up. This nihilism is reinforced by not allowing the anger, resentment or frustration to be voiced. It would be very difficult to imagine this kind of attitude from May Fourth writers writing about similar situations. For finding the right voice seems the crucial first step in fighting against oppressions at all social levels for May Fourth writers. This is not to say that avant-garde writers such as Yu Hua do not find their own voice in writing. On the contrary, searching for their distinctive voice is extremely important, except that importance is applied to the narrative itself, and is therefore self-referential, instead of pointing outward at society at large. Within the narrative this is perhaps why Guanglin is never allowed to voice his anger and resentment.

The coerced maturation might force Guoqing to successfully provide for himself as an adult, but will leave him damaged psychologically forever. While Guanglin did not experience such a disruption as Guoqing, his life as an adolescent and a young man is no less devastating. Treated as an outsider by his family and the villagers, he sought friendship from schoolmates. Yet his friendship with Su Yu quickly ends with Su's death, which left him abandoned again.

This pattern of experience, in fact, tends to claim almost every character, from the sick, men, women, adolescents, the aged, everyone. Like Guanglin and Guoqing, Lulu, another adolescent boy, who never knows his own father, also becomes abandoned when his mother is sent to a reform farm for prostitution. (100) Like Guanglin's stepmother, his biological mother also lives the life of the abandoned wife, for her husband's sustained affair with the widow is known to the whole village, herself included. The most horrifying experience of all these forsaken beings happens to Guanglin's own grandfather, who lives in the world of neither the living nor the dead, just like the old woman that lives downstairs from Guoqing. Rejected by both worlds, the grandfather exists as a shadow cast in the corner of the room, is treated in disgust by the family. Far from showing any interest in the psychological and mental impact of such renouncement, nor taking a step toward social or humanistic criticism, exorcising the evil, exalting the good, Yu Hua simply leaves it as it is.

In all these cases of being rejected, outcast and discarded, Yu Hua is careful in not

drawing up lines to segregate the oppressed from the oppressors, the winners from losers, the victims from victimizers. In fact, he refuses to stand beside any of his characters to show his moral support. Take Guanglin's grandfather, for example. On the one hand, Yu Hua describes the cruel and inhuman treatment the grandfather receives from his own son, daughter-in-law, and grandchild once old age claims his physical ability to labor in the field. The family members hardly hide their open impatience with the fact that he is still alive. On the other hand, filth, shrewdness and brutal calculatingness, creepiness, and slyness all combine to attribute to a rather repulsive and ugly picture painted by Yu Hua as if intentionally trying to cancel out the potentially sympathetic situation.

In order to get back at his own son for depriving him of food, the grandfather does not hesitate to take full advantage of his still innocent and very young grandchild. The carefully planned strategy that the grandfather concocts order to get his share of food from the family's dinner table reveals a patriarchal authority fully in control of power, yet at the same time it remains without any human feelings toward his own descendents. It is interesting to see how when placed against the background of a "new society" traditional ethical principles no longer guarantee filial piety, or even respect for the patriarchal figure in the family. In the new social strata there is no guarantee of equal social status, for when basic needs, such as food, cannot be satisfied, human decency becomes a decoration. Yet Yu Hua never directs his narrative toward blamable sources and condemnable practices, be they related to human nature or social injustice. What he creates, however, is a fictive world in which the endowments of life are experienced through the negative, the destructive, just as we experience the sun only through the darkness of night.

If old age has stripped from him any glorifying quality brought by patriarchal power, the real patriarch in the family now, Guanglin's father, seems equally ugly, indecent and mean. Not even once did Guanglin's father act like a father, showing him fatherly love and affection or displaying respectful authority. Shame and disgust are the only emotional response possible to emerge from Guanglin toward his father. But for the most part he remains distant, indifferent, observing as an outsider. In contrast to the ugly father figure that Yu Hua portrays in "The Ephemeral World" and the evil patriarch as embodied by Mr. Fortuneteller and Lao Zhongyi, in this novel stupidity, despicability, wretchedness and ridiculousness replaces evil to constitute a different kind of ugly father figure.

The problem is that Yu Hua, more often than not, contemplates our existence in the negative without the balancing force of the positive. Without such contrast, the negative becomes neutralized, losing its positive meaning and acquiring a quality of banality. Because of Yu Hua's disinterest in probing the pain brought by endless experiences of loss and misery, and his reluctance to view these happenings in light of specific causes, the horrific impact of misery and despair diminishes into an anaesthetized experience, a mere incident, which repeats over and over again. Gone is his passion for violence, blood, and physical pain, instead, plain disgust, unbearable antipathy, mischievousness and cunning are displayed in the narrative. Although the reader no longer shivers in cold sweat after reading this novel as is the case with most of Yu Hua's and especially his earlier writings, the overall effect is far from

heartwarming, either. For there is still a distinctive element of distance, irrelevance, and flatness embedded in the narrative voice that is solely Yu Hua's own invention and one of his most characteristic expressions. Despite the fact that *Screaming in the Drizzle* delineates the lives for ordinary people in ordinary small towns and villages during one of the most turbulent periods of time in recent Chinese history, there seems an intentional effort to purge the urge for over-dramatization. In other words there is a distance, if not resistance, between Yu Hua's lonely narrative voice and the historical tension pertinent to that period. Miseries and sufferings have much less to do with politics and social transformations than human nature. The lives of the people are characterized by an unhappiness that seems gratuitous even without pernicious, shattering power. The repetitions of endless miseries are "remembered" or recounted by Guanglin with a feeling of banality that seems troublesome. This peculiar quality continues in Yu Hua's second novel, published a year later in 1992, *To Live*.

As noted by critics, Yu Hua persists with his concern, or some might say, obsession, with human suffering in *To Live*. Other themes dealt with in Yu Hua's other works are also echoed in this novel, but with a different perspective. The symbolic meaning of patriarchal power, for example, is thoroughly disintegrated, and turned into a "rootless" existence. Life is not defined by violence and vengeance, but by depravity and cowering. The family does not lead to procreation of future generation, but is de-rooted. More than *Screaming in the Drizzle* or his other works, *To Live* acquires a specified foregrounding of the time span of recent Chinese history, extending from the tail end years of the "old society", to the 1980s with numerous revolutionary and political movements serving as background.¹⁸⁾ Contrary to most of Yu Hua's works which seldom proceed linearly, this novel is structured chronologically in retrospect through the main character Fugui's own voice, but retold by a first person narrator.

Fugui's account of his own life begins from when he was a young man, the only son of a wealthy landlord. Passing through numerous stages in life, Fugui experiences bankruptcy, loss of all his wealth and status, brief participation in the war as a cannon firer for the Guomindang, various political social and economic movements ignited by the Communist Party, marriage, and raising children — a life not at all unusual given the tumultuous backdrop of Chinese history. Yet these major historical events that Fugui encounters are never meant to be dynamic forces that will lead to fundamental changes for Fugui. This of course has been a consistent agenda for all avant-garde writers like Yu Hua who share no sentimental view toward Chinese ideological battleground. If anything, Fugui's change comes, only once, after he learns that he has lost all of his family property, money, land, house due to his gambling habits and contents to live his life as a commoner.

Fugui's life as a commoner, however, fails to bring him much happiness. Yu Hua, again, persists in his habitually dark view of life by cruelly eradicating all of Fugui's family members one by one. None of the deaths of Fugui's son, daughter, wife, son-in-law and grandson were victims of political struggles, but are just claimed by death in its many uncanny disguises. Actually, the deaths that occur in this novel are all without Yu Hua's usual practice of feasting on bloody violence for mostly incomprehensible reasons. Deaths occur here quite naturally, such as Fugui's wife's death due to illness, his daughter's death in giving birth and his son-in-law's death in an accident at work.

The most unusual deaths occur to Fugui's son and grandson, the former died after having too much blood taken out of him to save the life of his school president's wife while the latter died from stuffing himself on beans. These deaths are at least articulated in terms of causes. Yet, as noted by critics, there is a strange and uncomfortable blank space between each incident.

This space makes it impossible to draw meaningful conclusions to either shed more light onto Fugui's character or provide more insight into the text.¹⁹⁾ Because of these blanks the narrative of Fugui's personal history does not proceed in forward motion but becomes irregularly cut-off pieces pasted back together. As a result the text seems to be pulled by a centrifugal force that undermines coherence, and diminishes the power of the narrative to create coherence. This explains why all the miseries that occurred to Fugui fail to rouse from the reader profound reflective thinking, beyond a momentary seizure of pathos. As Jiang Kongyang puts it: "I was greatly shaken. But after I read it and thought about it, I also felt very bewildered. As if after the writer finishes writing so many miserable incidents he does not really say much. The whole novel seems a work empty in the center, making one unsure about what to say."²⁰⁾

It is also interesting to note that the entire text is contained in two frameworks with two layers of narrative, with Fugui's narration in his first person point of view being enveloped by the first person narrator's relay of Fugui's life story. It's as if there is an element of hesitation involved with the first person narrator, who is one of a very few intellectual figures Yu Hua ever created, to interpret Fugui's life history. One interpretation of this gap between the intellectual narrator and the peasant Fugui comes from Dong Limin, who sees this as a continuation of the struggle that many modern Chinese writers are engaged in to bridge the gap between intellectuals and peasants in narrative.²¹⁾ In Yu Hua's delineation, however, this remains unresolved despite the fact that the narrator admits from the beginning of the novel that he is very touched by Fugui's life story and finds Fugui very interesting. Yet perhaps precisely it is this tendency to intellectualize that is problematic. Other critics have also noted that inside the narrator's reluctance to engage in a real dialogue with Fugui there lies his inability or refusal to interpret. The narrator's relinquishing his right or desire to offer comprehensive analysis of Fugui's life reflects Yu Hua's own stand as a writer who wants to forgo his obligation to put narrative footnotes to history. This seems to relate to "interpretive paralysis" which becomes the basis for an attitude complete with meaninglessness.²²⁾ Because of this reluctance, those miserable incidents that have happened to Fugui eventually fail to ignite strong emotional response from the reader but leave him in bewilderment and at a loss as to finding a proper response to the text. This confusion does not slide back toward a moral or political stance, i.e. a "proper response", but extends in the direction of nihilistic anomie.

Toward the end of the novel Fugui summarizes his own life:

This lifetime, think of it, passes by rather quickly, rather ordinarily. My father expected me to bring glory to our ancestors. He sure has set his eyes on the wrong person. Me, this is my fate. I had a few years of glamorous life when I was young, thanks to the money left by my family. Then it was increasing downfall.... It's better to be an ordinary person, fight for this, fight for that, back and forth one's own life will be lost. Like me, you can say I'm no good, more and more so.

But I live long. People I know have passed away one by one. I'm still alive.
(375-6)

Such a state of being “still alive”, which reminds us as a duplicate of the title of the novel, is one not circumscribed by achievements, or accomplishments, by realization of life's value and worth, by obtaining knowledge and understanding of ourselves, or of the universe, by the experience of choice or action, but by a simple submission and acceptance of life's miseries and death's frequent appearances. Life leads in no particular direction; all the important happenings add up to nothing. Life “seems gratuitous, because there is no justification for life, nor is there reason not to live.”²³⁾ Fugui's metamorphosis from a filthy rich son of a landlord to an old and lonely farmer whose only company is an equally aged cow at the end of the novel, is a kind of dehumanization which works slowly to take away all that gives meaning to his life. His family, his human feelings and emotions, his life force, all are severed from him, seemingly without his even realizing it. Yet Fugui's own narrative voice seems more blunt than vigorous, despite his good memory. It's as though the deaths of his entire family have drained him dry, physically as well as emotionally so that he can no longer identify with the pain, anger, resentment, and regret that he must have felt each time a death occurs. In other words there seems to be a force underneath the narrative that tends to banalize these miseries and sufferings. It is a despair, but more importantly a nihilist despair that is presented as innocuous, without any power of redemption or transformation.²⁴⁾

It is also interesting that with the publication of *To Live*, critics noticed a turning point in Yu Hua, which not only was concomitant with, or even further reinforcement of, the general retreat of avant-garde writers into “new-realism”. But more importantly, it was a shift in his thinking which diverts his attention away from a metaphysical contemplation of themes such as death, evil and suffering, and begins to focus instead on physical reality.²⁵⁾ A different interpretation comes from Yu Hua himself. In the “Preface” to this novel Yu Hua acknowledges that up to the writing of this novel he “has been treating reality with a hostile attitude.”²⁶⁾ He further contends that what a writer pursues should be a kind of truth which “resists moral judgement”, and a kind of “nobility” that can transcend good and evil and which treats them impartially without particular types of discrimination. However, if we put Yu Hua, the writer's intention aside and just look at the text, it seems difficult to locate optimism from Fugui's reaction against the world. Powerlessness and passive acceptance would be a more fitting description. After all at the end of the “Preface” Yu Hua himself acknowledges that “man lives (his life) for the sake of living, not for any thing other than living (itself).” In fact, it is precisely Yu Hua's deep suspicion and distrust of happiness in the ordinary sense that determines his “gray” outlook on the world, and his desire to bring constant disruption to life's continuation through disasters, loss, and death.²⁷⁾ And because of this “darkness” — that persistent doubt of life's real meaning that maneuvers his articulation of darkness in many places of his writing, such as the ending of the novel: “I know dusk is quickly disappearing, dark night will fall from the sky. I see the vast earth bares its strong chest. That is the posture of calling, just like women calling out to their children, the earth calls for the arrival of dark night.” (378) This darkness arrives in peace, bringing comfort to the much suffered land as well as

its inhabitants. It erases miseries, eases the pain. Yet it offers no genuine promise. All it can do is to dissolve all that is experienced in life, good or evil, happiness or suffering under its expansive cloak of darkness. Such is the state of being alive for Yu Hua.

We may contrast this rather “mild” and veiled prescription of darkness with the darkness we already saw in *Screaming in the Drizzle* which structurally also ends in the dark night falling. There, however, Yu Hua is much less cautious in showing his destructive impulse through the image of darkness. After Guanglin becomes deserted by his step-family, he returns to his biological family and arrives home as darkness falls. “At that time, raindrops fall...I saw all of a sudden fire broke out in the distance...as if unstoppable screaming bursting out of the rain, blazing away.” (226) The fire, actually, is burning away Guanglin’s own house. Not only does this serve as a structural response to the prelude of the novel in which the adult Guanglin admits his fear as a young boy of the darkness, it also offers a rare glimpse into Yu Hua’s subconscious level, behind his indifferent appearance there lies a desire to destroy, to consume what is composite of this life as we experience it. It’s the ending of the novel as well the climax, which also reveals Guanglin’s unannounced, yet unconscious desire to seek revenge on his father. “I want to find Sun Guangcai.” (227) Guanglin tells his father who is now beyond his recognition. The sentence ends abruptly, for numerous possibilities that can follow and extend it are left open. Darkness not only will engulf the house, Guanglin’s family, the world, it will also conceal Guanglin’s psychological and emotional state of being.

Notes

- 1) Li Tuo offered his highly positive regard of Yu Hua and his fellow experimental writers as directly responsible for bringing the much belated and needed “writerly literature” to China following a much bewildering reading experience of “On the Road at Eighteen”. See Li, “Xuebeng hechu?”
- 2) For a perceptive study of the present story in light of Bildungsroman, see Xiaobing Tang, “Residual Modernism: Narratives of the Self in Contemporary Chinese Fiction,” *Modern Chinese Literature* 7 (1993): 7–30.
- 3) Bildungsroman is a term translated from German meaning “development novel.” For more details consult Kathleen Morner and Ralph Rausch, *NTC’s Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Lincolnwood: National Textbook Company, 1991), 22.
- 4) References of this story are to the edition in *Yu Hua zuopin ji*, vol. 1. Translations are mine. For a complete English version, see Andrew Jones, *The Past and the Punishments*, 3–11. Or Joseph S. M. Lau and Howard Goldblatt, *Columbia Anthology*, 485–90.
- 5) Xiaobing Tang, “Residual Modernism,” 15.
- 6) Xiaobing Tang, “Residual Modernism,” 15.
- 7) See Yu Hua, “Xuwei de zuopin,” *Yu Hua zuopin ji* vol. 2, 283.
- 8) The young narrator’s experience with the world suggests, vaguely, a sexual encounter, according to some critics. See Wendy Larson, “Literary Modernism and Nationalism in Post-Mao China,” Wendy Larson and Anne Wedel-Wedellsborg, eds. *Inside Out: Modernism and Postmodernism in Chinese Literary Culture*, (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1993), 187.
- 9) References of this story are to the edition from *Yu Hua zuopin ji*, vol. 1. Translations are mine.
- 10) Page numbers of this novella refer to *Yu Hua zuopin ji*, vol. 2. Translations are mine.
- 11) Guan Yimin, “Lun Yu Hua,” 73.
- 12) Chen Xiaoming discuss the function of sexuality in works produced in the eighties in mainland China in his essay, “Polie yu jianzheng: xin qinggan de bianqian huo weiji,” 破裂與見證：新情感的變遷或危機 [Rupture and Witness: New Emotional Changes or Crisis] *Zuojia* 3 (1993): 70–78.

- 13) The quote comes from Chen Xiaoming, “Changgui yu bianyi —— Dangqian xiaoshuo de xingshi yu liuxiang,” 常規與變異——當前小說的形勢與流向 [Conventions and Variations — Trends and Directions of Contemporary Fiction] *Wenyi yanjiu* 6 (1992): 43. Chen praises this novel as a successful effort of rejuvenating the diminishing avant-garde fiction and praises highly its detailing of a very complex and extremely personalized experience of an adolescent living in a despairing world. This novel was first published under the title of *Huhan yu xiyu* 呼喊與細雨 [Screaming and the Drizzle]. The edition in this paper is from Yu Hua *zuopin ji*, vol. 3, which bears the current title. Translations are mine.
- 14) For a discussion of Yu Hua’s “explication of human suffering”, refer to Gao Yuanbao, “Yu Hua chuanguo zhong de kunan yishi,” 余華創作中的苦難意識 [Consciousness of Suffering in Yu Hua’s Works] *Wenxue pinglun* 3 (1994): 88–94.
- 15) When discussing how, as nihilists, Robbe-Grillet and Samuel Beckett are “convinced that the human cry will receive no answer” Glicksberg quotes a passage from Robbe-Grillet’s *For a New Novel*, which is similar to what Yu Hua writes here in that it summarizes the predicament of illusionless man in an abandoned world. The passage goes: “I call out. No one answers me. Instead of concluding that there is no one there...I decide to act as if there were someone there, but someone who...will not answer...I try once again...Very quickly I realize that on one will answer.” For Details, see Glicksberg, *Literature of Nihilism*, 259.
- 16) See Xie Youshun 謝有順, “Juewang shenpan yu jiayuan zhongxin de mingxiang-Zai lun *Huhan yu xiyu* zhong de shengcun jinxiang,” 絕望審判與家園中心的冥想——再論呼喊與細雨中的生存境向 [Trial of Despair and Contemplation of Home — Again on Living Circumstances in *Screaming in the Drizzle*] *Dangdai zuojia pinglun* 當代作家評論 2 (1993): 53–58.
- 17) For further discussion of “writers born in the sixties”, see Gao Yuanbao, “Kuifa shidai de jingshen pingdiao zhe-Liushi niandai chusheng zuojia qun yinxiang” 匱乏時代的精神憑吊者——六十年代出生作家群印象 [Paying Homage to Spirit in Times of Exhaustion — Impressions of Writers Born in the 1960s] *Wenxue pinglun* 4 (1995): 51–58.
- 18) Page numbers refer to the edition from *Yu Hua zuopin ji*, vol. 3. Translations are mine.
- 19) As one example, refer to Dong Limin 董麗敏, “Zou chu yiyi yu zou xiang yiyi —— Xin shiqi xiaoshuo de jiben xiansuo,” 走出意義與走向意義——新時期小說的基本線索 [Walking Out of Meaning and Walking toward Meaning-Basic Clues for New Era Fiction] *Wenyi pinglun* 文藝評論 1 (1994): 10–15. Dong’s focus is on the dichotomies of city and countryside as set up by the two first person narrators in the novel.
- 20) Jiang Kongyang 蔣孔陽 offered this reflection on reading *To Live* in a discussion with Gao Yuanbao, for details, see “Dangdai wenxue ba tiyi,” 當代文學八提議 [Eight Proposals for Contemporary Literature] *Shanghai wenxue* 12 (1994): 67.
- 21) See Dong Limin, “Zouchu yiyi”.
- 22) According to some theorists, nihilism for Nietzsche primarily refers the “the loss of meaning that follows from interpretive paralysis,” which is “a hermeneutical malaise, as some sort of breakdown of dysfunction in the interpretive processes that comprise human life.” See Carr, *Banalization of Nihilism*, 29. The lack of articulation in regard to the response to sufferings, deaths, abandonment, etc. in Yu Hua’s texts seem to point to this “disease”.
- 23) Charles Glicksberg addresses the relation between nihilism and suicide in *Literature of Nihilism*, 95–115.
- 24) The lack of redemptive value for the miseries endured by many of Yu Hua’s characters, again, reminds one of the shift that nihilist vision brings in human response. Instead of “pathos”, “bathos” seems to be the general response. See Carr, *Banalization of Nihilism*, 131.
- 25) See Xu Fang 徐芳, “Xingershang zhuti: xianfeng wenxue de yizhong zongjie he ling yizhong zhongjie yiyi,” 形而上主題：先鋒文學的一種總結和另一種終結意義 [Metaphysical Themes: One Kind of Conclusion for Avant-garde Literature and Another Kind of Ultimate Meaning] *Wenxue pinglun* 4 (1995): 86–96. Also see Xu’s comparison of Fugui’s evil and Mr. Fortuneteller.
- 26) Refer to Yu Hua, “*Huo zhe qianyan*,” 活著前言 [Preface to *To Live*] *Yu Hua zuopin ji*, vol. 2, 292. Translations are mine.
- 27) Critics have pointed out that with the writing of *To Live*, Yu Hua gave up his metaphysical

contemplation of the themes of death, evil and suffering, etc., and turned his attention to material reality. Consult Xu Fang, "Xingershang zhuti."

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