Humidified Inspiration, Sensual Dampness, Corporeal Frenzy: Towards a Reading of Yu Hua's "Shishi ruyan 世事如煙" (World like Mist)

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the relationship between physical climate and corporeal consciousness as reflected in Yu Hua's writings, particularly in his much anthologized story "Shishi ruyan 世事如煙" (World like Mist). Specifically, I examine how Yu Hua, through building up an intimate connection with a world of humidity and dampness, evokes or suggests a larger view of human existential realit(ies). In the paper I ask and address the following questions: What is the discursive power of humidity and climate in Yu Hua's stories? How does this power affect human imagination, as well as human perception of reality? Furthermore, is there any correlation between humidity and sensual faculty? In other words, how does climate affect corporeal consciousness and how does the latter get represented in literature? An attempt to address these questions will lead to a better understanding of how Yu Hua engages climatic reference and cultural/literary consciousness in an interesting dialogue with each other in order to create a corporeal and linguistic experience of the natural/supernatural world.

KEY WORDS

climate patterns, subtropical zone, phenomenology, auditory

telepathy, cross-referential significance, climatological awareness, meteorology, corporeal consciousness, "cai yin bu yang"

I.

In his widely acclaimed book *Climate, Man, and History*, Robert Clairborne made the following remark:

> Differences in [climate] patterns from place to place, and changes in them from time to time, have inevitably exerted a powerful influence on human affairs. They define regions in which man must exert special efforts to avoid freezing or roasting to death . . . . Climate, along with soil (which is itself heavily influenced by climate), determines what plants can flourish and thus what animals—including man—can survive by eating the plants, or one another. (Claiborne 26)

Indeed, the whole history of humanity is one of how civilizations have responded to, or been radically shaped by, climate change. In a significant sense, climate functions as one of the driving forces that transform human history, a kind of force that is a more important historical factor than we have previously thought. This is another way of saying that humans have been subjected to climate change ever since the dawn of human civilizations. Even upon entering the twenty-first century, we have found ourselves living in a world that is increasingly vulnerable to climatic shocks of various kinds that affect not only agriculture and industry, but more fundamentally human society and survival.

The implications of climate on human affairs can be examined on

two planes. While climate change affects human affairs in all possible ways, it also displays a metaphoric face by "settling into a consistent set of imaginative uses" (Sweeting 5), by means of which human imagination has acquired a new perspective and understanding of its relation with physical nature. One prime example is seasonality in which seasonal changes reflect a sensitive reading of and an emphatic response to nature's inevitable advance, corresponding to various stages of development in human life. Thus, while spring suggests youthful exuberance, summer ushers in juvenile adulthood; autumn ripens into maturity; ultimately winter implies old age and decay. The reciprocity of climate and human civilizations is perhaps best seen in literary expression in which details of the climatological milieu are rendered more metaphoric rather than mimetic. A good case in point is Romanticism which sentimentalizes climatic conditions by idealizing, if not entirely agonizingly unwarranted, balmy seas and gentle zephyrs. In a similar vein, the literature of naturalism presents a bleak, cold, and above all, depressingly dreary physical climate that becomes a familiar metaphor for the surroundings of filth, squalor, and corruption -- a bleak slice-of-life documentation of irredeemable and brutal realities. Indeed, climate and its effects are alluded to in works ranging from China's oldest books such as Yijing 易經 (the Classic of Changes), Shijing 詩經 (the Classic of Poetry), and Chuci 楚辭 (Book of Songs) to Greek and Roman mythology such as *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and *Apollonius of Rhodes: The Voyage of the Argo*, all the way down through the works of modern times in which climate and weather either form part of humanism, signaling a revival of interest in human nature and the dignity of man, or reflect a sentimental phase of romanticism, or implying a modernist rebellious consciousness against Victorian mores and ideas.

Recent critical consciousness focuses on the interaction of natural/social forces and literature in order to show their mutually enhancing qualities and cross-referential significance. Scholars and critics have argued, without losing (at least trying not to lose) sight of scientific explanations, that "seemingly natural categories such as race and gender emerge from the complex interaction of social forces and

history" (Sweeting 4). In other words, such natural categories are perceived to be more of a product of socio/cultural construction rather than the result of biological determination. In his thought-provoking study *Beneath the Second Sun*, Adam Sweeting reconceptualizes a cultural history of a well-known east-coast phenomenon: Indian summer. According to Sweeting, Indian summer, which appears to be a "mixture of hot and cold seasons [with] its lack of temporal specificity," comes into people's climatological awareness more as something of "certain cultural circumstances [which] have created the very conditions that enable the season to exist" rather than a natural phenomenon that can scientifically reflect its specific meteorological nature (Sweeting 4). In his research, Sweeting tries to re-negotiate a relationship between climate and culture by putting meteorology and literature in dialogue with each other. "Culture," Sweeting even argues "can construct weather" (Sweeting 4).

II.

In this paper I investigate the relationship between physical climate and corporeal consciousness as reflected in Yu Hua's writings, particularly in his much anthologized story "Shishi ruyan 世事如煙" (World like Mist).

Specifically, I examine how Yu Hua, through building up an intimate connection with a world of humidity and dampness, evokes or suggests a larger view of human existential realit(ies).

Yu Hua was born and brought up in Haiyan County, Zhejiang Province, which is located in southern China on the east coast. This province is situated in a typical subtropical zone with a warm, humid, and wet climate. More than 80% of its territory is mountainous and hilly with the highest peak at 1,920 meters, which renders its level of humidity as high as 86%. In summer this level can climb even higher. The average annual rainfall in this mountainous area is around 1,850 mm, with as much as 70% falling in the humid and wet months of April, May and June, a period widely known as "rainy season" or known more poetically as "Plum Rain" (because it is a season of plum blossom).

This can be a very unpleasant time of subtropical monsoon climate when the sky remains ominously gray and gloomy, with a minimal level of sunshine. One can easily feel a high amount of water vapor saturating the damp air. The sticky body sweat attracts biting insects that spread disease, which surely becomes a major health concern. No less uncomfortable but certainly more irritating is eerie greenish mould that grows (during the unbearable rainy season), layer upon layer, on the surface of almost everything: windows, doors, furniture, cupboards, closets, books, shoes, even quilts and blankets on the bed. Worse still, frequent cold airstreams from big mountains and the ocean form a high level of cold humidity that is not only soggy and damp, but more obnoxiously "wet" cold. If people are what they eat, so they are also what their bodies feel. In other words, humans are critically influenced by physical sensations their bodies receive. People who have to tackle stifling humidity and dampness, either hot or cold, can easily become listless, petulant, irritable, and above all, moody and ill-tempered.

These kinds of extreme climatic conditions have an immediate impact on the characters Yu Hua has created. As a matter of fact, climate has rendered itself so important a component in Yu Hua's creative writings that it has become an indispensable part of his imagination. Many of Yu Hua's stories and novellas have characteristic subtropical climactic conditions as their physical backdrop which not only set the mood, but more importantly shape and determine subsequently the fate of the characters in these writings. Some well-read stories such as "Shishi ruyan 世事如煙" (World like Mist), "Xianshi yizhong 現實一種" (One Kind of Reality), "Zai xiyuzhong huhan 在細雨中呼喊" (Screaming in the Drizzle), "Nantao jieshu 難逃劫數" (An Inescapable Fate), "Wo danxiao rushu 我膽小如鼠" (I Am As Timid As a Mouse), "Bengbeng tiaotiao de youxi 蹦蹦跳跳的遊戲" (A Jumping Game), and "Yi ge dizhu de si 一個地主的死" (The Death of a Landlord) either start with a repulsive rain that seems never-ending or feature an obnoxious drizzle that forever stays and often reaches unbearable extremes. Some other stories like "Xibeifeng huxiao de zhongwu 西北風呼嘯的中午" (One Afternoon in the Whistling Northwest Wind) and "Xiaji taifeng 夏季台風" (Typhoons

in the Summer) make use of climatic allusions either to evoke an emphatic atmosphere or form a metaphor for problematic human relationships. "Shishi ruyan 世事如煙" in particular is an excellent embodiment of all kinds of inhospitable climatological conditions at work to reflect "a human ecosystem" that suffers from paranoia, desperation, paralysis, and finally resignation and death. In this fictional world, physical climate intertwines with human feelings and their sense of existence. This world is both real and surreal, fact and fiction, metaphor and mind-set. It is against this dramatic and sensual backdrop of dampness and humidity that climate/weather and human corporeal consciousness work together to stage a human/superhuman drama of phantasm, sexuality, and incestuousness.

In this paper I ask and address the following questions: What is the discursive power of humidity and climate in Yu Hua's stories? How does this power affect human imagination, as well as human perception of reality? Furthermore, is there any correlation between humidity and heat and emotion and rationality? In other words, how does climate affect corporeal consciousness and how the latter gets represented in literature? An attempt to address these questions will lead to a better understanding of how Yu Hua engages climatic reference and cultural/literary consciousness in an interesting dialogue with each other, thus creating a corporeal and linguistic experience of the natural/supernatural world. Before proceeding to a textual analysis of the story "Shishi ruyan 世事如煙," I would like to discuss briefly some of the epistemological concerns Yu Hua has displayed in his writings with regard to the real and the unreal, the world of the present and the other worldly. Such discussion will facilitate our study of Yu Hua's acute climatological consciousness and his subsequent literary creations.

III.

Arguably, Yu Hua is one of the most popular writers in contemporary Chinese literature. For years running he was ranked as the No. 1 favorite writer by Chinese college students and was recently

named as one of the ten most influential writers over the decade in mainland China. To many, however, Yu Hua still remains a critical enigma, if not entirely an undecipherable literary anomaly. He is at once realistic and unconventional: realistic because he has created such down-to-earth figures as Fugui 富貴 in *Huozhe* 活著 (To Live) and Xu Sanguan 許三觀 in *Xu Sanguan maixueji* 許三觀賣血記 (The Chronicle of a Blood Merchant), with whom many Chinese readers can identify. At other times, however, Yu Hua is outrageously unconventional and avant-garde not only in narrative strategy, representational mode, thematic choice, but more significantly in epistemological concerns with possibilities of some "pre-reflective" modes of understanding human experience. His representative works, such as "Shishi ruyan 世事如煙" (World like Mist), "Xianshi yizhong 現實一種" (One Kind of Reality), "Shiba sui chu yuanmen 十八歲出遠門" (Leaving Home at the Age of Eighteen), and "Wangshi yu xingfa 往事與刑罰" (Past and Punishment) are either ghostly narratives of supernatural experience, spectral accounts of a seemingly surreal existence, grisly stories of a world governed by chance and necessity, or fearful prophecies of imminent disaster.

In an essay entitled "Xuwei de zuopin 虛偽的作品" (A Hypocritical Work)[1] which was regarded by Yu Hua as a kind of manifesto for his creative writing, Yu makes this remark: "Now I seem to know better than ever before why I write. I am writing in order to get close to the real" (4).[2] He further indicates: "When I realize that the kind of writing I am familiar with leads to nowhere but a mere description of the surface reality, I know I must seek a new form of expression" (4). The real is, to Yu Hua, an unmediated and unreflected human experience which is possible and perceivable only when it is free from presuppositions such as reason, cognition, order, and rationality.[3] For this matter, he warns against any empirical assertion of the truth of human experience, as such assertion blunts one's mind, leading one to presumptions based on so-called "facts" which are little more than interpretative exercises. In another well-known essay "Wo neng fou xiangxin ziji 我能否相信自己?" (Can I Believe Myself?),[4] Yu Hua reiterates: "People are fond of presenting their opinions and

thoughts . . . believing that they possess an insight into realities. What they don't realize is that what they call opinions and thoughts are nothing but some kinds of 'epithet'" (2–3). That is, they are no more than an act of interpretation. To break away from the established pattern of thinking, it is imperative to reflect upon human experience on the basis of a descriptive rather than prescriptive analysis.

Yu Hua's creative imagination is informed by a simultaneous insistence on two seemingly different, yet epistemologically inter-implicated, views of reality that everything is part of some vast, mysterious, and universal plot and that everything is a random event unconnected to anything else. In the essay "Xuwei de zuopin," Yu Hua discusses the indeterminacy and uncertainty of the real with reference to the relativity of time and experience. In his opinion, the past and the future are only two mutually referential forms of the present and they are inter-implicated in the moment of the present. "Although my stories take place in the temporal framework of the past, the narrative itself activates only on the plane of the present" (4). In other words, the present is the time of experience through which the past and the future are made meaningful. In a metaphorical sense, the perfect present would be a time without time; it is a moment of "liminality" which abstracts one from the contingencies of everyday life to allow a more nuanced and sensitive approach to the complexities of human existence, in which the past, the present, and the future fuse into one level of consciousness. The metaphorical moment of the present erases the binary oppositions such as the real and the unreal, life and death. Within such an anti-system there is no absolute meaning or center: things are both possible and impossible, depending on a certain time schema. This understanding of the real and the unreal enables Yu Hua to perceive experience both in its self-governess and interrelatedness. The question is: How does Yu Hua's perception of the real/unreal relate to his acuity of the relation between climatological phenomena and corporeal consciousness?

IV.

Yu Hua's narrative world is, to use Girard's words, one of a "formless and grotesque mixture of things that are normally separate" (Girard 49). This world follows its own logic, defying the principles of causal uniformity and contradiction of modern reasoning. In this structure of "mutual identity and consubstantiality" between the real and the unreal, the living and the dead, the past and the future, Yu Hua tries to "get things back to themselves," to a phantasmal existence of the participatory and the contingent that is empirically indiscernible, but is universally decisive and effective. According to Yu Hua the world we live in operates on the principles of the participatory/the contiguous that meditates on the mystical institution as a means to perceive lived experiences such as "persons, groups, animals, places, and natural phenomena . . . in a relation of contiguity . . . existential immediacy and contact, and shared affinities" (Timbiah 84). This "mystic unity" is undifferentiated, contiguous, and above all, participatory, in which natural phenomena, especially climate and weather appear as a powerful cosmological force capable of affecting human feelings and even their concepts of reality. Indeed, in many of Yu Hua's works, climatological references serve as a unifying structuring device to express his world view. Various kinds of climatic elements seen or alluded to in his works often evolve from playing a purely literary function to become a symbolic and emphatic character in itself, forming a kind of "human geography" filled with desire, passion, sensuality, paralysis, desolation, phantasm, misery, and death. "World like Mist" is a paradigmatic text of such astute intention in which the climatic phenomena contribute to and participate in human characters' physical and spiritual lives.

"Shishi ruyan 世事如煙" was first published in 1989. It tells a spectral story of several households living within a compound in a small town. This is obviously a haunted place, as the residents, each of whom has and is a nightmare, are either sick, insane, incestuous, paranoid, or possessed, dying and deceased. The life they live is so

uncanny that it cannot be experienced in any empirical sense. The story doesn't really have a coherent narrative plot; the whole narration is pieced together by seemingly unrelated phantasmal occurrences which, the author tries to tell the reader, are actually manipulated by some predestined mechanism or fate, so much so that these random happenstances eventually become part of some vast, mysterious, and universal plot. The story is enveloped in a ghastly atmosphere in which the boundary between the real and the unreal and between life and death dissolves, and the world of the eternal present becomes a contesting place for past spectral experiences and future apparitional events.

One noticeable feature of the story is that all the characters remain disturbingly nameless; they are identified either by numbers such as "7," "4," "3," "6," and "2," or by profession such as "driver" and "fortune-teller," or by their physical distinction such as "a lady in gray," "a man in leather jacket," and "the blind." As if living in an intricate phantasmal web of predestination, each of these characters is, in one way or another, related to others by some unperceivable yet inescapable fate. For example, in his dream, the driver runs over a lady in gray, a bad omen that is later tragically fulfilled. The driver himself commits suicide after being humiliated in a strange manner at a wedding banquet held by "2," the gray lady's son, immediately after the tragic death of his mother. "3," an old woman in her sixties, is impregnated by her seventeen-year old grandson and is worried to death about the identity of the newly. born. The midwife, the dead driver's mother, being possessed, delivers a phantom baby for the ghost of a dead woman inside a grave and dies soon afterwards. Another weird figure, "6," trades his dead daughter's body with "2," who is haunted by the ghost of the dead driver for humiliating him when he was alive. In order to appease the dead driver, "2" finds him a phantom bride in the dead daughter of "6."

On the narrative surface, the characters in this story seem to be living their own life, unconnected to each other. But the hidden controlling force, as the author implies, ties them together as if in a well-staged play of the phantasm. Like links in an endless chain, these

characters are haunted by a ghostly fate, which spares no one and fills their lives with a vicious meaning of doom. The story's loosely-structured narrative is salvaged by the eerie figure of the fortune-teller, a senile man at the age of ninety, who prolongs his life at the expense of his five children by "Cai yin bu yang 採陰補陽" (extract the essence of "yin" from both the young female and the young virgin male to sustain the life of "yang," which is a Taoist prescription for longevity). Like a giant spider sitting in the center of its vast web, the old fortune-teller is either present or alluded to throughout the story. Because he possesses an exceptional ability to know past happenings and foretell future events, whenever people are troubled by some evil omen or bad dream, they would go to him for explanation or emotional comfort.

Climate and weather have played a very important role in "Shishi ruyan 世事如煙." There are more than 46 climatic references, explicit or implicit, in this story that not only contribute to, but more significantly, become an essential part of the dramatic backdrop, highlighting a disturbing human existence. The narrative begins with a sad gloomy picture in which climate starts very early: "Outside the window spring is weeping in tears. '7,' a male, has been seriously ill and has therefore been confined to bed for several months" (67). As "7" is dying from some unknown illness of which no diagnosis could be given, he begins to have delusions, becoming exceptionally sensitive to physical surroundings, especially climatic conditions. In his hallucinating mind, "7" hears a bird fluttering in the rain. Then, he sees a wet and drenched street unfolding before his eyes, which reminds him of "the glistening trace of nasal mucus his five-year old son left on his dirty sleeves" (68), an image that comes back to haunt him later repeatedly. Watching her husband emasculated by the unknown disease day by day, the wife is deeply worried: "She was watching the heavy raindrops hammering the window pane. The exploding droplets make her feel that the window pane "7"'s inevitable end. Because of this, her son's head under the window appears to be a murky cloud in her eyes" (67).

From the beginning to the end, the whole of the narrative is

swathed in the intolerably prolonged precipitation. The menacing image of this endless rain overshadows each and every character, offering an unconscious unity that binds the spectral story. When finally "7" has lost all hopes for a cure, he is taken by his wife to visit the senile fortune-teller. It is another portentously dreary day, overcast and gloomy, without slightest trace of sunshine. According to the old fortune-teller, who dwells inside a dark room and whose hair "appears to be phantasmally greenish," "7" is dying because his life is in fatal conflict with that of his five-year old son. Since "7" was born in the year of sheep, he is doomed to fall a prey to his son who was born in the year of tiger, just as a familiar saying goes, "A sheep is trapped inside a tiger's mouth." At these frightening words, "7"'s deluded mind catches a fearsome sight of "a sopping wet land" right in front him (103); he feels that's where he derives his physical problem and is therefore hopelessly stricken by an overwhelming sense of terror. The only way out, as the old fortune-teller warns, is to sever the blood relationship between them as father and son so that the meek sheep can escape the preying tiger. This "7" does by letting the fortune-teller adopt his son, who is thus turned into yet another young victim, becoming the source of bolstering the old man's life-force (Cai yin bu yang 採陰補陽). Here, rain and wetness as the composing elements of climate assume an increasingly important role with the suggestive description of a world between the real and the unreal. The repulsive image of dampness figures largely in this story foregrounding the magical quality of the nauseating rainfall.

Another example of the use of perpetual spring drizzle as a dramatic backdrop for underscoring a mysterious human existence is found in the life of "6," father of seven daughters, who profits by selling all his children. Because of this "6" earns no one's respect, not even his wife when she was alive. "6" has a strange habit: he would often get up in the wee hours and go fishing in a big river. Recently, however, "6" has encountered something weird. One early morning:

> "6" went out of door. It was pitch-dark. There were only some dimly-lit street dark lights. In the shady lighting of the street lamps

> spring drizzle was falling down like mist, as if many fireflies were pouring down. . . . The misty rain made him feel as if everything was wrapped up in steam. . . . (103–104)

As "6" was fishing, he felt that he was accompanied by two murky figures without legs. Since they had no legs, "6" couldn't tell whether they were actually "sitting" or "standing." He couldn't even tell for sure whether they had a face because "the front side of their face seems to be the same as the back of their head" (75). These two shapeless figures were very close to him, fishing quietly. Each time "6" tried to talk to them, they would jump into the river and would then reappear at the same distance. In the following days "6" kept on encountering these same uncanny figures. Mysteriously, all this happened in the small hours when there was cold, dark and unbearable drizzle, accompanied with freezing airstreams. In this evocative description the repulsive presence of a fine and persistent rain suggests an oppressive atmosphere condition that reinforces the notion of an eerie realm of the damned and cursed. The author's frequent allusions to the unwelcome rain is nothing but another aggravating element of the unbearable climatic condition that contributes to the supernatural dimension of a fearful human existence which finally amounts to some catastrophic proportion. Thus, as the persistent drizzle falls down like mist, "6" feels mesmerized: ". . . He feels very exhausted. Slowly he begins to see a vast stretch of light spots dancing in the waves of the river. Then, he feels his body sinks. . . . He doesn't know what happens next" (108).

In my discussion of Yu Hua's perception of the real, I argued that according to Yu Hua human existence seems to have based itself on the principles of the participatory/the contiguous that meditates on the mystical institution as a means to perceive lived through experiences. This "mystic unity" is undifferentiated, contiguous and participatory. It does not distinguish between the living and the dead, the real and the unreal. Rather, it is a world of insubstantiality, as is suggested by the title of the story "Shishi ruyan." But insubstantiality is not non-substantiality, as it suggests a substance of its own, that is, the

ghostly matter that circulates in a field of energy and intensity, affecting "intentions, motivations and expectations" of the individuals in their relation to others, and above all, to the physical surroundings. Furthermore, in this "mystic unity" everything, including humans, are engaged in a relation of contiguity, sharing affinities with each other. Consequently, human feelings and their concepts of reality change in accordance with their relation with natural phenomena including climatic conditions. In other words, human existence is part and parcel of some vast, mysterious, and universal plot. Here, Yu Hua provides a prime example of how climate, as a literary element, "can be manipulated just like a character in order to heighten or underscore what is going on in the work" (Perez & Aycock 83). By cleverly employing the image of an everlasting drizzle, Yu Hua creates a metaphor for the interconnectivity of the world of the real with the world of the unreal in which everything becomes both possible and impossible. Thus, when the transfixed "6" later visits the senile fortune-teller, he is terrified to learn that the two shadowy figures he encounters on the river in the crack of dawn are actually phantoms and he shouldn't go near the river in the wee hours anymore if he doesn't want to be possessed and doesn't want to depart this world.

Enveloped in the obnoxious and ill-omened rain which has caused overcast weather conditions, the whole physical setting of the story is depressingly dreary and gloomy. Allusions to the gray spring (in contrast to a conventional rendition of a warm and green spring) have become a kind of leitmotif, accentuating a mysterious and ghostly existential atmosphere marked with the droning color of grayness: the gray sky, the gray houses, the gray streets, the gray clothing, and the unhealthy grayish faces of equally grayish people. This overwhelming grayness is fully embodied by a woman known in the story simply as "a lady in gray" as she is always dressed up in gray clothes. The phantasmal incident that happens to this gray lady interconnects her to the nameless driver, leading both of them to a mysterious death.

Confused and frustrated by the fact that her daughter, after a five-year marriage, is still unable to get impregnated, the lady in gray visits the old fortune-teller and is told by the latter to make a wish to

Bodhisattva. On her way back from the Buddhist temple outside the town, the gray woman encounters the driver who asks to buy her worn-out gray outer garment. Though puzzled, the gray woman sells her jacket and watches the strange driver run his truck over her gray clothes. After the driver leaves, the woman picks up her run-over gray clothes and wears it again. However, at this particular moment, she looks even more dreadfully gray and pale. "She feels very empty. . . . She has a feeling that her body is becoming weightless and is flying up like rising mist. . . . The gloomy sky makes her believe another heavy rain will fall at any moment" (79). When the gray woman reaches home, she sees on the face of a young girl, daughter of "6," a shadow of looming death, which terrifies her. On the following morning, the gray woman is found dead on her bed.

In the meantime the driver has an ominous dream in which he runs over the body of a woman in gray. Unable to interpret this dream, the driver and his mother, the midwife, go and visit the senile fortune-teller. After obtaining the birthday information from the driver, the old fortune-teller tells his mother: "Your son is right now on the threshold between this world and the nether regions. There is not much that could be done. . . . The only thing your son can do now is to halt his truck whenever he sees any women in gray on the way" (72). Two days afterwards, when the young man was driving downhill, on his way back home, he spotted a tiny figure walking in front of his truck. However, "Due to the grayish overcast weather, the driver wasn't able to distinguish the color of the woman's outer garment. . . . Not until he was very close to the walking woman did the driver realize that she wore a gray jacket. The driver hurriedly stopped, however, the truck already passed the gray woman" (73). Utterly terrified, the driver offered to buy the gray garment from the confounded gray woman. "When the driver took the gray jacket from the woman, he had a feeling that the jacket was freezing cold, as if it were just taken off from a corpse" (73). The driver then put the gray jacket in front of his truck and ran over it. As he was leaving, he saw in the rear mirror the gray woman staggering downhill. That made him feel at ease because "The gray garment has undertaken the disaster on his behalf" (74).

The driver, however, is unable to escape an inevitable fate. Driven by an unknown force, he attends the wedding banquet of "2," son of the dead gray woman. At the banquet, the driver senses an uncanny atmosphere haunting the place. He feels that "A weird mixture of cheerfulness and gloominess is at work inside the building. . . . And a piece of gloominess stays on his jacket, mystifyingly gleaming" (84). What follows afterwards is a series of insults and humiliations thrown at him by "2," which leads to the driver's suicide inside the kitchen. Here, the author's focus is very much on the interconnectivity of physical climate and metaphorical climate of sexual relationships, which both informs and affirms the characters' anxiety and apprehension. The first example is the use of water image. As part of a heinous humiliation conspiracy, "2" orders his bride to wash the driver's face with a towel, for which the driver has to pay. "When the bride carries a bowl of water towards him, the driver seems to have noticed some gray clothes, but this vision soon disappears" (86). In his confused mind, the driver is enamored of the two beautiful and slender female arms with fair complexion. He envisions ten delicate fingers at work gracefully. At this point, the repulsive image of grayness seems to give way to a suggestive description, becoming instead lyrical, evocative, and sensual. "In the sight of the driver there is no towel; there are only ten fingers, dancing a series of intriguing and captivating dances. Water drips down gracefully. Water becomes an integral part of the dance" (86). The sensuous image of water in this description contrasts sharply with the repellent dampness and humidity seen in the previous passages. It becomes an allusion of warmth, an allusion to the driver's male erotic desire that offers him a moment of inner peacefulness, albeit very brief. The driver fancies a fond and affectionate massage the bride performs on his face, "He feels that many fingers are tenderly and caringly caressing his face" (86). But very soon this dancing water image is replaced by some irritating sensation as "2" keeps exhorting money from the driver for the face wash. The seemly "expressive" scene cuts to that of agony and misery. "As the bride once again puts the towel on his face, the driver feels an excruciating pain as if a hard brush were rubbing his face. . . . He hears

the whistling wind shrieking around. He sits quietly in the shrilling wind. . . . There is a sudden blow-up of the laughter which lasts for a long time before it fades away like a heavy rain" (88).

In this passage, Yu Hua makes use of a contrasting climatic image: a cold, windy, rainy spring to foreshadow an imminent death the driver has to face and to reinforce a gloomy mood in which other phantasmal happenstances will soon follow. When the driver finally cannot stand any longer the humiliation in public from "2" who shamefully asks for his underwear as a payment for the continued face wash, he commits suicide. The metaphorical climatic references now switch to dramatic allusions of dread and terror, causing a flesh-creeping sensation. At this point, the author's detailed treatment is accorded the use of such harsh images as "chilly wind," "darkish steams of red water running out from the kitchen [where the driver kills himself]," "'2's dead-fish like face," "spectral footsteps," and "the ghostly street" to evoke an uncanny atmosphere so as to add to the mysterious quality of the narrative.

When "2" realizes that his humiliation conspiracy has led to the driver's death, he immediately feels haunted by the ghost of the dead driver. As he leaves the building, he sees only "the grayish rings of the ghastly street lights. . . . A cold draught is whistling by, as if penetrating his body. He hears some soft footsteps . . . . He knows the dead driver is chasing him" (89). Haunted and terrified, "2" dares not to look back; he runs towards wherever there is light. Right at this moment, he perceives in front of him:

> A pool of glittering water. The road leading to his home disappears. In its place there is only water. He knows the dead driver is inside this luminous water. ["2"] kneels down, begging "Please spare me." . . . But the water is still gleaming. So he keeps kowtowing to the glistening water like mad. . . . When he raises his head again, the road to home reappears (89–90).

Once again, the author resorts to the use of water imagery. But this time the exaggerated water image is derived from the contrast with the previous dancing water image to invoke a strong sense of the

ghostly by giving the water a consciousness. Here, water is transformed from a pure physical image into an imaginative set of metaphorical uses. While describing the wet southern spring with a realistically specific treatment of endless rain, cold humidity, and chilly airstreams characteristic of the subtropical area, the author also turns the physical climate into an allegory of a mysterious human existence which is intertwined with subjective feelings of anxiety, skepticism, and desperation. It is not difficult for the reader to detect the use of magic realism in this kind of fundamentally metaphorical treatment of climatological conditions. This is a prime example of Yu Hua's use of precise, if imaginary, climatic details to "add verisimilitude to his magical accounts" (Perez & Aycock 79).

V.

"Shishi ruyan 世事如煙" is also an excellent example of the author's focus on the interconnectivity of physical and metaphoric climate relationships. While almost all the characters in the story are haunted by some mysterious force of destiny, "the blind," a young man who was abandoned soon after he was born, seems to be the only exception. Rather than being manipulated by fate, "the blind" tries to control his own lot by "searching" for a missing part of his life, i.e., a desire to love and to be loved. The suggestive description of "the blind" contrasts sharply with other murky figures surrounding him: "[He] sits on a big rock. His handsome face has some freckles. He knows what happened in the past and what is happening at the present. Because of this, his silence becomes particularly meaningful and momentous" (68).

It's interesting to note that in Chinese culture, as well as in other cultures, blind people seem to assume a unique image. Despite the fact that they lost a physical capacity to see, being blind seems to have endowed them with a magical power to perceive with their mind's eye--an exceptional gift to foresee and foretell. Usually, blind people possess a high level of sensitivity and aptitude. For example, many well-known Chinese musicians are blind people. The most famous of

them is Ah Bing, a blind Erhu 二胡 (a two-string fiddle instrument) player. The unfortunate loss of sight and vision is compensated with an acute sense of hearing and feeling, which is made even more sensitive and susceptible to changes in climatic conditions: "The blind sits on that damp street. The eternal bitter rain makes him just as soggy as the wet street. . . . Nearby, there is a middle school. The blind sits here because he can hear the tender voices of the girl students, which makes him feel spring is running in his heart" (71).

Of those fond voices, one delights his senses particularly. That's the voice of "4," a young girl of sixteen: "["The blind"] hears her voice for the first time. . . . The voice enters his mind like a gentle breeze. It is as sweet as fruits and flows to "the blind" like dripping droplets. . . . Each time "the blind" would tremble at this voice" (71).

"The blind" displays an extraordinary faculty for sensual auditory communication, which seems to be at its best when it rains. As is indicated in the previous analysis, the unbearable endless spring drizzle, with its overriding grayness and dampness, overshadows the whole of the mysterious narrative and all the ghostlike characters. In the story, the ominous backdrop is rendered with dramatic allusions of lethargic mountains soaked in the never-ending rain, dilapidated houses sodden and moldy, dark and deep streets which are drenched and stale, and humid and cold airstreams whistling around at night. Finally, mention should be made of the ruinous cemetery where the portentous night when the mid-wife delivers a phantom baby for a dead woman reinforces the terror of looming death. Indeed, climate and its effects are here presented in their most evocative terms, indicating unmistakably the intertwining of human feelings with some unique perception of climatic phenomena. It is in a series of dramatic climatic episodes that "the blind"'s auditory communication has reached a mythical level of revelation/self-revelation. For several days, "the blind" hasn't heard the "4"'s voice. Then, amidst a wide array of voices wafting from the nearby middle school, "the blind" recognizes the melodic voice of "4" which comes to him like a marine zephyr, "That voice enters his ear like water droplets . . . making "the blind" aware of the elements of worry and anxiety contained in them" (83). Soon,

however, the "4"'s warm voice is drowned by several well-coordinated sounds which sweep away, like a gust of wind, the girl's whispering. "The blind"'s desire to love and to be loved manifests itself in his efforts to distinguish and identify the girl's voice that is at once fresh and repressed, warm and chilly, inspiring and worrying. While affectionate and almost sensual allusions are lavishly used by the author to describe "the blind"'s erotic longing for "4," images of excruciating clamor and adverse weather conditions are employed to suggest a sense of desperation and anxiety which is heavy with a phantasmal existence. Thus, when the "4"'s young and tender voice is drowned by other human noises, the earsplitting voice of "3" as a mourning singer penetrates most proudly into each corner of the small town:

> The "3"'s mourning voice travels around in the numerous buildings. When it comes to "the blind," it sounds like a mating cat, crazily moaning. . . . The cries of "3" are suggestive of all the terrifying sounds humans could possibly make: the hopeless wailing of a child falling from a building, the intolerable clattering of window panes, the deafening pounding of a door blown wide open in a mid-night gale, the groaning of someone dying on his deathbed (83–84).

The auditory world which "the blind" experiences is fraught with dramatic tensions and ominous moods, much of which derives from his sensory reactions to a mysterious existence that penetrates all his senses with anxiety and desperation. In this world mimetic descriptions of detailed meteorological realities of the sadly gray physical setting (which is, by the way, characteristic of the actual climatic conditions in Yu Hua's hometown) externalize "the blind"'s feelings of apprehension and despair.

Another example of metaphorical erotic desire that stems from climatic differences can be found in "the blind"'s auditory engagement with the external world of lust, desire, paranoia and death. In the story "4" is a sixteen-year old girl who suffers from "dream talks" at night.

While a kind of pathological symptom, the talks "4' has in her dreams surprisingly produce some soothing effect on the bedridden "7" who lives on the other side of the wall. "Like gentle winds blowing across the river . . . the "4"'s nightly dream talks bring warmth and kindness to the seriously ill "7" (67–68). On the other hand, however, "4"'s dream-talk problem worries her father. So, he takes "4" to the senile fortune-teller. When "4" arrives at the old man's phantasmal residence, she hears the old man murmuring, which "sounds like a gust of wind chafing irritatingly on an old newspaper patched on the wall" (100). The old fortune-teller tells "4"'s father that "4" is possessed by a ghost which dwells right inside "4"'s vaginal orifice. His solution is to dig the ghost out of "4"'s private parts. This happens on a cold spring rainy day shrouded in gloomy grayness. The harsh and inhospitable climatic conditions provide an allegory of "male-female antagonism and predation" in terms of male sexual lust and the consumption of female body. As the senile fortune-teller begins his licentious operation on "4"'s young body, (once again on the principle of "Cai yin bu yang" 採陰補陽), the reader has acquired "a feeling for the sense of desolation and desperation brought on by the constant whistling of the wind around the walls of the house" (Perez & Aycock 77). Right at that moment, "the blind" hears the first cry from "4": "That cry seems to gush out from a cut-open chest, full of explosive sound, sharp and penetrating. Once outside, it cracks into tiny pieces. By the time the sound reaches "the blind," it seems to have become an insignificant broken piece" (101).

The second time "the blind" hears "4"'s stabbing cry, he becomes frightened and begins to envision what is occurring:

> He stands up and fumbles his way all along in the direction of the terrifying cry. He has a feeling that the approaching sound is like a blustery storm, striking at his face and hurting him. As the sound becomes louder and louder, he feels that it is more than just a rainstorm. Rather, it seems to be sharp and trenchant, stabbing into his body. Soon, he feels a building is collapsing, clouds of debris smashing at him. He recognizes some brief moaning. It appears to

be soft and tender, as if caressing "the blind"'s ear. "The blind" is moved to tears. (102)

This description is replete with references to male sexuality executed by the fortune-teller. The exaggeration of such sensual images as "terrifying cry," "blustery storm," "a collapsing building," "clouds of debris," and "penetrating sensation" typical of this mythical account, provides a highly evocative and emotional backdrop for underscoring the depth of human tragedy as embodied by the vulnerable body of "4." Somewhat more revealing treatment of explicit male lust is accorded the use of depressing and deflowering climate to foreshadow what happens tragically to the defenseless young girl of "4." In the meantime what strikes the reader as being more impressive is how "the blind"'s auditory communication interlocks with detailed physical climate references to reinforce his metaphorical erotic relationship with "4," one that contrasts sharply with the inhuman deflowering act performed on the body of "4" by the fortune-teller in order to boost up his life energy. The special flavor of Yu Hua's fictional world seen in this story, to borrow Perez's words, "results from the unique blending of personal feelings and recollections and extreme and powerful climatological factors whose function is both mimetic and symbolic" (Perez & Aycock 71). While the allusions of the old fortune-teller's licentiousness and lust are presented in the repulsive images of the physical cold, and sad gray sky, "the blind"'s passion for "4" is rendered in accord with principles of "human geography" characteristic of warmth and sympathy seen in the sensuous images of gentle breeze, soothing water, and a melodic voice. The end of the story relies on a sensitive and sensual use of climatic allusions to create a dramatic spiritual union of "the blind" and "4" which is otherwise impossible in the world of human realities. After "4" is deflowered by the old fortune-teller, she chooses to drown herself in the river. Once again, it is a sad gray morning, gloomy and ominous. "4" is humming a tune as she sadly walks to the river. When "the blind" hears this tune, he first thinks it is all imaginary: "The "4"'s voice is running around like crystal clear water. It comes to ["the blind]

but doesn't leave him immediately. Rather, it runs through his body before it departs" (108–109).

"The blind" stands up and follows "4"'s song to a place he has never been before until he can hear "4"'s voice no more. "The blind" sits by the river in which "4" drowns herself. There he sits for three days, during which time he engages himself in an auditory telepathy with "4"' by listening to her song which now runs like gentle waves. On the fourth day when he once again hears "4"'s song in his imagination, "the blind" walks into the river to join "4"'s singing:

> When he puts his feet in the water, he is cold all over his body. He feels that it is "4"'s song, which becomes more and more real as "the blind" slowly drowns himself. When he is completely under water, "the blind" hears the jumping of some droplets, as if "4" was smiling. . . . After three days, on a gloomy and gray morning, the bodies of "4" and "the blind" appear on the surface of the river. At that moment a peach tree is in full blossom, its pink flowers and petals are seen everywhere. (109)

In "Shishi ruyan 世事如煙" Yu Hua has created what Bell-Villada calls "an entire human geography" which abounds in detailed climatic references, meteorological facts, as well as other elements of physical setting. Much of the magic power of this "human geography" is derived from an interactive communication between physical climate and metaphorical references, by means of which Yu Hua presents before the reader a human existence that is both fact and fiction, metaphor and mind-set, cause for escape and reason to engage. The whole of such existence is blanketed in an indescribably heavy drapery of humidity and dampness. There is an uncanny sense of eternal drizzle. Sensuous imagery of rain, mist, and sogginess has brought one to the other to a fuller appreciation of each, so much so that Yu Hua's fictional world has become, like Faulkner's Yoknapatawpa County of unbearable heat, a huge symbol. It is in this genus loci of climatic references and weather conditions that desire, memory, and corporeal consciousness stage ever repeatedly an endless cycle of

human drama of phantasm, sexuality, and sensuality.

NOTES

[1] Yu, Hua. "Xuwei de zuopin 虛偽的作品" (A Hypocritical Work) in *Shanghai wenxue pingluan* (Shanghai Literary Criticism) (1989). 4

[2] I translated the quoted passages from "Xuwei de zuopin 虛偽的作品, " as well as all other subsequent quoted passages from "Shishi ruyan 世事如煙" (World like Mist) and "Wo neng fou xiangxin ziji 我能否相信自己?" (Can I Believe Myself?).

[3] This kind of thinking readily reminds us of Edmond Husserl's phenomenological speculations about the pattern and structure of human experience and consciousness. It is Husserl's belief that through a recognition of the structure of human consciousness, of its function to perceive reality-in-itself and "Being-in-the world" one can get close to the real. To do this, the first step, as Husserl argues, is to go "back to things themselves" through a phenomenological reduction to "pure consciousness." This "pure" consciousness intends the world as perceptual existence and reality as a correlate of experience. It is obvious that both Yu Hua and Husserl are suspicious of empirical assertions of the meaning of human experience and both argue for going back to things themselves.

[4] Yu, Hua. "Wo neng fou xiangxin ziji 我能否相信自己?" (Can I believe myself?) in *Wennuan he baigan jiaoji de lucheng*. Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 2004. 2–8.

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