

Toward an Allegorical Interpretation: Myth and Class Fantasy in Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum*

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ABSTRACT

Hong gaoliang jiazu (*The Red Sorghum Family*) chronicles the romance and heroic deeds of the narrator's ancestors over a period of raging banditry and anti-Japanese resistance. The deliberate omission in the narrative of the bitter class struggle in the Maoist era represses a historical experience, with its anguish deeply buried beneath the imaginary form of fantasy construction. The narrative invested with the heroic grandeur of the peasant class is interpreted in an allegorical framework in order to illuminate its distorted representation of history and the hidden agenda of social criticism.

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For crime and madness are objectivations of transcendental homelessness—the homelessness of an action in the human order of social relations, the homelessness of a soul in the ideal order of a supra-personal system of values.

Georg Lukacs, *The Theory of the Novel*

Myth, History, and the “Peasant Ideology”

Mo Yan's (莫言) *Red Sorghum* (紅高粱), his first full-length novel, is arguably his most successful work in that it has created among critics a swirl of discussion, debate and polemics.¹ In this regard, the literary text exuding the extremities of violence and sex is often loosely identified with such notions as “fantastic,” “mythic,” and “romantic.” But it immediately provokes controversy over the appropriate methodology for reading and interpretation in literary criticism. In this paper, stressing the grand historical framework in which the literary form is conceived, I attempt to explicate its ideological underpinnings and sociocultural meanings deeply buried behind the mask of a “magical” or “mythical” narrative paradigm.

The startling family saga, which chronicles a peasant family's romance and heroic deeds over a period of raging banditry and anti-Japanese resistance in China, has certainly captured critics' and readers' attention with its unique artistic achievement in mythmaking.² The I-narrator's remembering his forebears as demonic heroes as well as patriotic peasants cannot but create the extraordinary effect of ele-

vating the tales of the past to mythic levels. We may be especially stunned by the gruesome details of how Uncle Arhat (羅漢大爺) is flayed alive by the atrocious Japanese soldiers. The blood-curdling event is, however, transformed into a beautiful legend with the mysterious disappearance of the family employee's dead body in the sorghum field. Equally astonishing is the motif of the degeneration of the human species, and the fantastic episode of the fight for human corpses between men and wild dogs. In short, the geographical locus of Northwest Gaomi (高密) County, invested with the mesmerizing symbolism of the "red sorghum," is turned into a fairyland, a paradisaical location, where human suffering and death are paradoxically represented as heroic deeds and the individual pursuit of freedom. That is, therefore, where the most sacred and the most profane (patriotism, savagery, seduction, kidnapping, banditry, injustice, love and hatred) are permitted to coexist in their own right as the legendary and nearly-forgotten events in history.

At the extreme, it could even be argued that the symbol of the "red sorghum" borders on a certain "totemic" existence with its rich mythopoeic and religious qualities—for instance, its function to sterilize diseases, and the ritual practiced by wine workers during its manufacturing process. In this sense, the association with its primitive and magical attributes, as well as its concomitants of having a naturalistic vitality and being a liberating force for humanity, may easily invite a myth-critical approach of interpretation (Wu 57-62). And the "imaginary homeland" of Gaomi is thus conceived as an arena of exotic characters and events, an idealistic enclave that stands outside the "real" history.

The tendency to mythologize the text arouses the argument over the interpretative scheme we should propose for the fabulous, fairy-tale ambiance of the work. Meanwhile the enigma is fostered by Mo Yan's own confession about the "mysterious" link between his homeland and his fiction writing:

Many of the strange characters and events in my homeland have entered my novels. Of course, they have

been subjected to (artistic) fabrication. . . . History is, to a certain extent, a corpus of romances and stories. In the (rural) community, the oral transmission of characters and events in history is indeed a process of “romanticization” (傳奇化, *chuanqihua*). In telling stories, people will unconsciously enrich them with their elaboration. Eventually, all of them will be elevated (to mythic levels). . . .

People will miss the past because they are not contented with the present-day reality. They will admire their ancestors when they are dissatisfied with themselves. In fact, this (way of thinking) is very like Ah Q’s. . . .

For me, the homeland is synonymous with a faraway dream, a pensive mood, a refuge for one’s soul, as well as a place where one can escape from real life. (“My Hometown” 39; translation mine)

In his confession, the novelist has also mentioned his “inheritance” from Pu Songling (蒲松齡), a seventeenth-century literary figure acclaimed for his ghost stories in *Liaozhai* (聊齋). According to Mo Yan, Shandong (山東), the home of both himself and Pu, abounds with fantastic stories of ghosts and spirits. The fabulous atmosphere to a certain extent has shaped his views of life, as seen in his awe and amazement when faced with the frightening aspect of nature—in particular, the “spirit-charged” red sorghum. His assumption logically follows that his uniquely mysterious homeland has contributed substantially to inspiring his works. Mo Yan’s self-mystification of his own fiction could even lead critics to draw the conclusion that indigenous cultural traditions blending ghost stories and fairy tales constitute the earliest impressions and memories of the novelist, and culminate in the rich imagery and the fundamental mythic structure of his narrative (Wang 23-27). Such an explanation of his works is not unlike the way by which Gabriel Garcia Marquez is treated as a “mythic writer,” while his imaginary Macondo is but the microcosm reflecting his desire for a homecoming by fictionalizing his childhood reveries (Detjens and Palencia-Roth).

The conception of the mythic consciousness of narrative production certainly eradicates the grand sociocultural dimensions of different times and places, in which specific works are invoked. Its emphasis nonetheless contains and represses the historicity of a work back into the realm of personal memories and individual psyches. In this sense, criticism will run the risk of neglecting the concrete social and historical contents lying beneath the text's dramatic archetypes, magical devices, and the narrative scheme of nostalgia. To "desacralize" the author's own commentary on mysticism, I would attempt to initiate a preliminary discussion of Mo Yan's problematical statements by looking into the ideology of myth thinking and his radical rhetoric of the homeland.

Mo Yan has confided to readers two possible methods of myth creation. The first is achieved by the reinscription and reinterpretation of fairy tales and fables from the legacy of traditions. It is, however, far less significant than the second fashion he mentions—that is, the "romanticization" of history. Through the narrator's artistic representation and decoration, Mo Yan suggests, historical and imaginary characters can loom large as mythic figures, while real and unreal events are elevated to the legendary horizon. The most significant point made in his claims lies in the intricate relationship between history, myth, and narrative which plays the mediatory role between the true and the untrue. His notion of "romanticization" as the synthesis of the real and unreal reminds us of Harry Levin's contention that the elements of romance and realism can be intermixed in a work of art. The comparison here is instructive, for Levin propounds that improbable miracles and fantasized happenings in the novel can be perceived as a refracted form of social reality (28). The expression of private fantasy or public myth in a work cannot but unveil the wish-dreams or the nightmares shared by the social subjects or by the individual. In this sense, the distorted image of the heroic ancestors and the idyllic Gaomi County in *Red Sorghum* indeed underscores a hidden revulsion of the epoch, which I shall discuss in this paper.

Mythmaking is generally conceived as the legitimization of lie, the projection of one's needs and values in fictional form. A myth

writer strives to depict an illusory world of extraordinary happenings and dreams as an opposition to factual events and the logic of ordinary knowledge. At the same time, the author tends to play down realistic details, plots, and characters in the narrative so as to invent an "other-worldly" existence withdrawn from the stresses of real history and society. In this regard, *Red Sorghum* can be said to deal on a large scale with the "mythical past" as noted by Avrom Fleishman—the rightful realm of myths that take up the primordial and fundamental concerns of people and their symbolic representations of these concerns (Qtd. in Chou 33). Yet the historical consciousness as mediated by the magical narrative is itself a complicated issue awaiting a detailed analysis. For in the fissures and gaps in the narrative, there are explicit references to the "historical past." They are indicated by clear time markers referring to epoch-making events in modern Chinese history, say, the conflicts between the central government and the warlords, local officials and bandits, the Nationalists and the Communists, as well as the Chinese and the Japanese. Hence the task of critical interpretation has to tackle this tension between myth and history. We have to read out the meanings of the fantastic mode of writing, in which the grand historical moments are treated as presuppositions in such a way that it cannot be coherently expressed otherwise.

The function of the "mythic" mode of expression is generally emphasized as the polar opposite of the "historical." While the former marks a release from the flux of temporality and a retreat to a sacred realm of timelessness, the latter often stands for process and inexorable change that produces the future by destroying customs and traditions. In this light, some critics would argue that the craze for myth designates the "fear of history" (Vickery 109-118). The classical texts of modernism, such as T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*, indeed demand a socio-historical consideration in their reaction against history and denial of historical time. In this respect, history will exist in a mythic work as "absence," as Terry Eagleton rightly argues:

History, then, certainly “enters” the text, not least the “historical” text; but it enters it precisely *as ideology*, as a presence determined and distorted by its measurable absences. (72)

Let me distinguish between the different historical moments overlapping in the magical narrative in order to examine the interaction between text, ideology, and history. Spanning a period between 1923 and 1976, the story treating the panorama of a peasant family’s several generations in fact traverses three distinct historical periods. They are, namely, the “contemporary present” (with the year 1976 marking the ending of the Maoist era), the “immediate past” (the Maoist period between 1949 and 1976), and the “mythical past” (the pre-Communist era that is “mystified” with legendary accounts). Especially remarkable is that the “real” historical events in the “immediate past” (e.g. the vigorous class struggle and the Cultural Revolution) are deliberately erased, whereas those in the “mythical past” are foregrounded in the narrative (e.g. the peasants’ anti-Japanese battles). It is exactly due to the “absence” of the “immediate past” that literary criticism has to detect the operation of ideology upon the text.

At this point, we have to go beyond the surface narrative of mythmaking, which exalts the peasant world as a marvelous landscape invested with heroic grandeur, to examine the novelist’s ideological commitments to depict the peasantry and reevaluate the notion of the “peasant consciousness” (農民意識, *nongmin yishi*) in the post-Mao reform period. By “peasant consciousness,” I refer to the set of ideas, virtues, and systems of beliefs that the peasant subjects *presumably* share in common. Strictly speaking, there is no such pure “class consciousness” of the peasantry. Its concomitant attributes are, however, inevitably and inextricably tied to the vested interests of the ruling regime or the particular social groups that promote them. A prominent example is May Fourth intellectuals’ preoccupation to portray the peasants as innocent and unawakened beings. Under the Maoist leadership, the peasants were elevated to be the vanguard of the revolution, although they might still be objects of social engi-

neering for their “feudal” beliefs.³ But as experts in Chinese studies have claimed, the Party’s deceptive rhetoric to promote the peasants as the makers of history has been challenged by intellectuals during the 1980s (Link 135-39). Intellectuals nowadays would no longer see such “peasant consciousness” (as embodying the values of simplicity, honesty, and frugality) as an ideal to emulate but as a narrow class outlook and a serious impediment to the nation’s economic progress.

It is under this trajectory that *Red Sorghum*—a fable characterized by its overwhelming nostalgia for a poor but noble peasant race—can be understood as a symbolic as well as desperate response to both the Maoist image of the peasants (who are eager to build socialism and communism as described in the stereotypical “worker-peasant-soldier fiction”) and the turnabout in people’s attitudes toward the traditional peasant virtues and values in the post-Mao era. It is also in this sense that we can comprehend the reason why Mo Yan, a novelist of genuine peasant origin, has been tormented and torn between the two antagonistic versions of “peasant consciousness” in the course of his literary profession, namely, the “positive” (unyielding, progressive, and revolutionary) and the “negative” characters (cowardly, vicious, and crafty). As he has once acknowledged:

The positive and admirable aspects of the peasant consciousness have become the primary spiritual support for us writers, especially for myself. . . . My critique of the backward and unenlightened aspects of the peasant consciousness, I think, is profound enough.

On the one hand, I acknowledge we (peasants) have the revolutionary, the progressive, and the outstanding qualities. On the other hand, I also realize Lu Xun’s (魯迅) unfinished project: we have yet to relentlessly expose the ugliness of our (peasant) souls. (“My Conception” 40, 42; translation mine)

Such an obsession with a “revolutionary” and “progressive” peasantry indeed characterizes the novelist’s “peasant ideology,” a

decisive factor governing the unique narrative of *Red Sorghum*. By “peasant ideology,” I do not only denote the writer’s deformed representation of the peasantry. Borrowing Louis Althusser’s notion of ideology,⁴ I also consider the imaginary way by which the author strives to express his longing for an ideal situation of the peasants, rather than describing the real social conditions in which they live. If, as Althusser claims, it is a function of ideology to achieve an illusory resolution of real contradictions, then the task of criticism has to restore the concealed social conflicts to the mythical narrative exaggerating the distinguished and admirable qualities of the peasant ancestors. In fact, *Red Sorghum* cannot be adequately explicated without comparing the fable of peasant aggression with much of Mo Yan’s short fiction written before it, and with particularly his subsequent peasant novel, *The Garlic Ballads*,⁵ for these works have conveyed the concrete predicaments of abject poverty and social discrimination plaguing the peasantry. Depicting the fates of peasants still on the bottom of the social hierarchy, these stories serve as hidden social critiques of the Party’s broken promise to attain economic betterment and social egalitarianism in rural society (Duke 43-70).

Rural impoverishment aside, the “peasants’ plight” that preoccupies Mo Yan’s writing consists in the crucial social marginalization of the peasant class. In his confession, the novelist has expressed his grievance against the Party policy toward the peasants, who have been discriminated against in society. Compared with the urban dwellers, he claimed, rural residents have had a poor living standard and a low political status since 1949. Most of them cannot share the fruits of economic reform implemented during the 1980s (“My Conception” 39-43). But other than the worker-peasant hierarchy, class antagonism and social injustice exist even within the peasants themselves, which is vividly shown in the rural drama of *The Garlic Ballads*. Seizing the painful memory of the past class struggle during the land-reform campaigns and the Cultural Revolution, the novel recounts the barbaric cruelty of the rural Party cadres who were formerly the “poor and lower-middle peasants” under the Maoist differentiation. Supported by the county administration and the state

apparatus, these local elites have acquired “special powers” (*tequan*) to tyrannize the peasant protagonists—those with political labels of “rich peasants” or “landlords.” It is this implicit class conflict that is partly responsible for the peasant protest in the story.

The point I attempt to illustrate is that only after we have specified the group of “peasants” whose suffering mostly concerns the novelist and the concrete social problems confronting them can we understand the peasant class “fantasy” and the peasant protagonists’ defiance against established orders in *Red Sorghum*. The subsequent novel, *The Garlic Ballad*, indeed provides “realistic” references to the harsh social reality which are, however, “distantiated” in the magical narrative. The omission of the Maoist period in the novel marks a repressed historical experience with its anguish and anxiety deeply buried beneath the imaginary form of fantasy construction. In order to articulate the ineluctable link between the novel’s mythical world and its socio-historical subtext, I would propose for the work an allegorical interpretation as propounded by Fredric Jameson.

Allegorical Reading

Jameson’s allegorical criticism is an interpretative tactic to decode the “personal fantasy, collective storytelling, and narrative figurability” of literary works and film texts so as to elucidate their contextual significance in the sociocultural and politico-economic dimensions (*Signatures* 38).⁶ This strategy of exegesis can be traced to his notion of “allegorical realism” in analyzing Balzac’s *La Cousine Bette* (241-54). Balzac’s novel, Jameson argues, should not be seen as the eternal family drama about individuals’ private destinies. It is, however, the symptomatic indication of a profound sociological change in the West, namely, a breakdown of the historical stage that might still allow the thinking of the collective fates, succeeded by the modern triumph of individualism. In appearance, the family drama conveys a naive object lesson, warning against the kept mistress and stressing the supreme importance of the wife as the unifying force of the family. But beneath the surface narrative to identify with the fa-

mily institution, Jameson notes, lies Balzac's social and political conservatism. Balzac's obsession with the great noble families as the very support of society reveals the necessary ideological distortion to create a resisting force against inexorable social upheavals. In this sense, the crisis of the Parisian family corresponds to a specific historical moment in modern society, when older kinds of collective groups such as nation, family, class, and party have been disintegrating, giving way to the middle-class values of individualism.

It is from this emphasis on reading the diachronic meanings into the formal structure of a work of art that Jameson derives his principle of "metacommentary" ("Metacommentary" 9-18).⁷ Any interpretation, he propounds, must account for the necessity for its own existence and trace the specific historical moment in which the commentator is situated and the work is formed. Writing at a time when the basic problem of interpretation has often surrendered to the temptation of structural analysis, he combats the formalist doctrine that tends to short-circuit the issue about the meaning of art with abstract thought or metaphysical paradigms. Any valid claim of elaboration, he argues, has to distinguish the manifest and latent contents of the work and explicate the distinction between the two, in order to restore its original "message" which is essentially social and historical.

Jameson also offers a symptomatic analysis of the science-fiction movies of the 1950s, as a response to Susan Sontag's statements that these films express human being's "deepest anxieties about contemporary existence . . . about physical disaster, the prospect of universal mutilation and even annihilation," and more particularly "about the condition of the individual psyche" (220). He draws attention to the specific historical moment in which this form of mass culture is situated—the post-World War II period of the 1950s that has seen rapid economic expansion (with the dehumanization of work, the quantification of working hours, the specialization and monetary calculation of the value of human labor, etc.) Beneath the surface disguise, he notes, the movies reveal a collective folk dream and fascination with the "ideal" work condition of the scientist. Unbound by the routine boredom of middle-class lifestyle, the scien-

tist is permitted to be engrossed in his intellectual operations for the sake of the collective human race. In this light, Jameson contends that all the catastrophic violence of the filmic narrative is simply a distorted reflection of the 1950s' male feelings and wish fulfillment about the idea of work satisfaction. These movies indeed hide the deepest fantasy about nonalienated work and human solidarity, which "deals with collective life, and which uses the cosmic emergencies of science fiction as a way of reliving a kind of wartime togetherness and morale, a kind of drawing together among survivors, which is itself merely a distorted dream of a more humane collectivity and social organization" (*The Ideologies of Theory* 1: 15-16).

With respect to Jameson's idea of allegorical interpretation, we can see the neo-Marxist critic's grave concern about the annihilation of meaning in modern criticism, about the danger of the autonomy of texts, and about the cultural ineffectiveness of social critique. For Jameson, these crises are embedded in the social and historical situation of western capitalist society. In this regard, he argues that it is high time Western critics and scholars should turn attention to third-world literatures, and makes the controversial statement that "all third-world texts are necessarily . . . to be read as . . . national allegories," in his seminal essay published in 1986 ("Third-World Literature" 65-88).

Such allegorical structures, then, are not so much absent from first-world cultural texts as they are *unconscious*, and therefore they must be deciphered by interpretive mechanisms that necessarily entail a whole social and historical critique of our current first-world situation. The point here is that, in distinction to the unconscious allegories of our own cultural texts, third-world national allegories are conscious and overt: they imply a radically different and objective relationship of politics to libidinal dynamics. (79-80; italics original)

According to Jameson, in the culture of the Western realist and modernist novels, there is a radical split between the private and the

public, between the poetic and the political, between the domain of sexuality and the unconscious and that of the public world of classes, of the economic, and of the secular political power. By contrast, in those third-world texts, the private sphere is inherently linked to the larger political dimension by virtue of national allegory: "*the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*" (italics original). He rates highly the representational power of Lu Xun's works such as "Diary of a Madman" (1918) and "Medicine" (1919). The master trope of cannibalism in these works, Jameson notes, is not shown as the unspeakable inner feeling or delusion that is psychologized and subjectivized in a pathological selfhood. Rather, the fear of being eaten can readily be perceived as a critique of Chinese society as a whole. Lu Xun's stories are typical allegories for they deconceal "a social and historical nightmare, a vision of the horror of life specifically grasped through History itself."

Jameson's allegorical interpretation, however, provokes a more profound polemic in literary studies. What is at issue here is the concern with the political engagement of literature. While Western culture has shown a growing tendency to recontain political commitment in the private domain, Jameson highlights the vision of history and the urge for social and political change as advocated in modern Chinese literature. Yet such an opinion is not without dispute. Longxi Zhang, for example, charges that Jameson's interpretation may be susceptible to a certain "crude politicization." Zhang fears that by reading social implications or political aspirations into Lu Xun's works, criticism may repeat the normative stance taken by the ideological state apparatuses in the PRC. It would thus erase the wish, as embodied in Lu Xun's works, for the autonomy of individual consciousness in a repressive political reality. To fully comprehend the controversy, Zhang's statement is quoted as follows:

At the same time, however, the idea that this kind of allegory is somehow related to Third World "nationalism" seems to me to set up a very limited and limiting frame-

work, in the Chinese context at least, for understanding literary works, those of Lu Xun in particular. Lu Xun and many other writers of the May Fourth new literature clearly saw it as their vocation to mold a sense of the independent and responsible individual against the effacement of the self in a repressive moral and political totality, whether the patriarchal family or the society at large, and therefore they were very far from championing the cause of any nationalism, and indeed far from promoting the interest of any organized collectivity. Moreover, I would hesitate to concur with Jameson when he declares in absolute terms that “*All* third-world texts are *necessarily* . . . allegorical” (emphasis added). Not only would such a totalizing statement fail to do justice to the rich variety of heterogeneous texts worthy of the name of a literary tradition, but the very emphasis on the allegorical, that is, the public and the political domain, is likely to prove, in the specific context of reading modern Chinese literature in general and reading Lu Xun in particular, self-defeatingly counterproductive. (76)

In brief, the contention resides mainly at the polar extremes of “individualism” and “collectivism,” which have diverse meanings and values as a result of cross-cultural differences between the Chinese political reality and Western capitalist society. While Jameson cherishes the sense of collective thinking as conveyed by third-world texts, Zhang is alert to the danger that this interpretative model will subordinate all literary works to the uniform discourse of political allegories in the hands of the ideological establishment.

Borrowing the insights of this debate, I would argue that an allegorical reading is applicable to the present study of *Red Sorghum* in order to bridge the growing gap between the mythologized text and its distorted vision of history and hidden social criticism. To decipher the fantasized narrative, we should inquire into not only the sociopolitical subtext of the rural drama, but also the historical moment in which

the specific narrative form is constructed. The uncommon “historical consciousness” that informs the novel—the narration of a mythical past in the pre-Communist era and the omission of the Maoist period—can be understood if we situate the work in the movement of the “root-searching” literature of the 1980s. The broad concern with the self-reflection on Chinese culture initiated by that literary movement is itself politically provocative. The drive to uncover an ancient past, as exemplified by the works of Zhang Chengzhi (張承志), Zhaxi Dawa (扎西達娃) or Han Shaogong (韓少功), bespeaks an “anticenter” impulse to search for a cultural “motherland,” which is unstained by the political campaigns of recent decades, and in particular by the Cultural Revolution (Lee 207-26). In fact, the ideological orientation is not unfamiliar in Mo Yan’s work, considering the radical rhetoric of the homeland (Northeast Gaomi County) and the longing for the ideal peasant heroes in the narrator’s reconstitution of the past.

The question of historicity also brings us back to another concern about the formal experimentation of the text. We shall not forget that the moment in which the novel is conceived is extremely important for Mo Yan since it marks the outset of his literary career. In an ambitious attempt to construct a distinct form of his own, in searching for a way to deviate from the official Maoist brand of socialist realism, the peasant writer has been influenced notably by Gabriel Garcia Marquez and William Faulkner: in the thematic implication of species degeneration, the interweaving of myth and reality, the treatment of narrative angles, etc. It is under such conceptual limitations and ideological censorship imposed on the work—his aesthetic thinking, his peasant ideology, and the indirect reference to present-day society—that the magical narrative is energetically projected in its disguised form.

Class Fantasy and the Carnavalesque

In the character of Grandpa, Commander Yu Zhan’ao (余占鰲), we are offered an ideological representation of what the novelist has called the “revolutionary” type of peasant hero. In the portrayal of the

rise and fall of this larger-than-life figure, itself a dramatization of the peasants' collective fates, we can observe that the projection of peasant heroism in a pseudo-past is thrown into contradiction in the resolution of the story. The mythmaking of the peasant class and its ultimate dismantling can be read out from the two interweaving narrative movements that cancel each other out in the fiction. On the one hand, as seen in their ambush of the occupying Japanese troops in 1937, there is a figuration of the peasants' desperate attempt led by Grandpa to resist and fight against the invading force at the most dangerous historical moment. However, Grandpa's legendary acts of courage are compounded by his subsequent failures in the decline of his banditry leadership and his descent into savagery when exiled to Hokkaido. As the hero's tragedy suggests, the mythical vision of the peasants' rebellion is unmasked as the survival of more primitive forms of savagery, sexism, revenge, and violence.

The early part of Grandpa's life—his ascendancy from a pauper to the head of the winery, the patriotic warrior, and finally, the bandit leader—is inextricably tied to the most tumultuous age of Chinese history in the first half of this century. In spite of the appalling and barbarous accounts of the hero's eventual downfall, I would argue that the "manifest content" of his adventure during his youthful life cannot but reveal a deeper and unconscious fascination with the "ideal" living condition of the peasant. It is important to note that, in the "romanticization" of Grandpa's life history, the protagonist is purged of the political campaigns of land reform, class labeling, and the torments of class struggle that most of the peasants did not escape in real history. In most cases, peasants like Grandpa who once owned the means of production (the winery) and even had control of land would be defined as a "landlord" or "rich peasant" and subjected to public condemnation and humiliation in the 1950s. Instead, legend has it that he is honored as an anti-Japanese champion by people.

Impoverished as he is in his youth, Grandpa is never bound to the distressing working conditions nor persecuted by the ill-treatment by the ruling regime and landlords in the community. Born into poverty and having lost his father as a child, he and his mother work

on a miserable piece of land to earn a living. But when he becomes independent, he decides not to be tied to the farmland. Unlike normal peasants, he does not need to pay rent to local landlords, working instead as a free laborer. He serves as a hired hand, first doing menial jobs for a funeral parlor, and soon afterward as the chief sedan bearer. Later, he enters the Shan family (單家) distillery as a wine worker.

Grandpa's rebellion begins when he decides to murder the Shan father and his leprous son, who are the representational power of the hierarchical order in the community. The wealthy family is synonymous with the patriarchal institution that legally possesses Grandma, the married woman, who then becomes Grandpa's desired object. The peasant's successful disruption of the ruling establishment is mainly due to his physical strength and clever hands. Apart from his skill and courage, he manages to achieve upward mobility within conventional social boundaries by his criminal aberration of societal norms. Focusing on the surface eulogy of human desires and valor on the hero's part, therefore, the romance serves to distract us, diverging from the agonizing life experience of the peasants in real rural life.

Neo-Marxist critics would contend that the heroes and villains in fantastic and romantic literatures can be conceived as the "Otherness," constituting a very real and urgent threat to the existing social order (Jameson, "Magical Narrative" 140; Jackson 52-53). In this sense, the defiant and evil peasant characters in *Red Sorghum* can be seen as the threatening existence seeking to upset the norms and prohibitions imposed on society, as vividly shown in the sedan-rocking scene:

When the sedan chair reached the plains, the bearers began to get a little sloppy, both to make up time and to torment their passenger. Some brides were bounced around so violently they vomited from motion sickness, soiling their clothing and slippers; the retching sounds from inside the carriage pleased the bearers as though they were giving vent to their own miseries. The sacrifices these strong young men made to carry their cargo into bridal chambers

must have embittered them, which was why it seemed so natural to torment the brides. . . . *It was a custom back then for sedan bearers to tease the bride while trundling her along: like distillery workers, who drink the wine they make, since it is their due, these men torment all who ride in their sedan chairs—even the wife of the Lord of Heaven if she should be a passenger.* (45; italics mine)

In this episode, we are not told about the exact relationship between the peasant workers and their patrons in the existing class hierarchy. What the scene reveals is that during the journey carrying the bride, the laborers can enjoy a moment of rebellion against an unknown power structure by tossing their passenger, even if she happens to be “the wife of the Lord of Heaven.” Their frustration and miseries are thus converted into sexual aggression against the married woman by tormenting her to gain a passing moment of pleasure. In this imaginary time-space construct with no social or cultural restraints, marking the suspension of all hierarchical ranks and privileges, their subversive action can thus be “legitimized.” In this heightened sense of fearlessness and freedom, the peasants would make up for their sufferings by teasing the bride, *as though they had the right to claim back the fruit of their non-alienated labor, just “like distillery workers who drink the wine they make.”*

The celebration of a temporary liberation from the established order is congruous with Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque spirit argued in *Rabelais and His Work*. From his study of Rabelais’ encyclopedic work of folk culture, Bakhtin extensively examines what he calls the “popular-festive forms” (eating, drinking, cursing, abusing) and “the grotesque images of the body” (sex, defecation, pregnancy, birth, and death). Bakhtin notes that Rabelais’ work is infamous for its breaches of “good taste,” the sheer physicality of the body, and the crudest presentation of scatological details. These carnivalesque devices vividly reflect the basic ideological resistance of folk culture to the official orthodoxy of the ruling class in the early Renaissance. The carnival serves to bring people together in a com-

munity, especially in the popular space of the marketplace. It is the unofficial occasion where a genuine festive celebration of the other can be tolerated and legalized against the backdrop of the systematic theologies, legal and social norms, and class hierarchies.

Also noteworthy is that Bakhtin's elucidation of the Rabelaisian world in the sixteenth century seems to be a certain kind of dialogic projection of his contemporary era. For instance, he argues that the modern images of the individual body have radically changed their meanings in modern times. They have been transferred to the private and psychological level where their significance becomes narrow and specific. In a totally different sense, the grotesque bodily principle that the folk humor extolled in Rabelais' time connotes a broader social meaning. Here, Bakhtin seems to yearn for a return of the human body from its private imprisonment to the public domain. Only in this way can the individual feel that he or she is an indissoluble part of the collectivity, a member of the people's mass body. In this regard, the carnivalesque spirit stresses the unity of the people in embarrassing the dominant social order. It designates a desire for change from below, an impulse to debunk authority and reverse the power system.

Indeed, critics like Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist have indicated that Bakhtin's interpretation of the carnival cannot be rightly grasped if we overlook its own historicity (295-316). The Bakhtinian discourse, they propound, has to be conceived as a political allegory and a dialogic mediation of freedom upon Bakhtin's own time. The Rabelaisian rhetoric has been appropriated by Bakhtin as an implicit attack on the Soviet Union in the 1930s, the time of Stalinism's hierarchization, centralization of social institutions, and heightened state control and repression. The carnival is seen as an unconsciously political impulse to provide a general lowering and democratization of classes in society as opposed to the Soviet leadership.

The historical dimension of Bakhtin's theory sheds light on how literary criticism should initiate a dialogic mediation on the carnivalized underworld shared by Rabelais, Bakhtin, and Mo Yan. In short, we must avoid formalizing the heritage of carnival themes as a static

configuration of symbols. It is always necessary to look into the historical originalities from whence these images and devices spring. Bakhtin's idea of the carnival is not a universal system of signification that is applicable to any pure textual form. It is conceived on a concrete base of materials inherited from the folk culture of Rabelais' time. In this light, an appropriate illustration of the carnival in *Red Sorghum's* mythic universe cannot be adequately explicated without trying to trace the hidden Maoist orthodoxy that is "overthrown" in the text—say, the literary guidelines of socialist realism that prohibited the showing of sex and the grotesque body, the lack of individual freedom, the subjugation of all human needs and desires to the Party's ideology, class hierarchization, immobility of conventional social boundaries, etc.

The sedan scene, in which Grandpa and Grandma have a brief encounter with each other, marks the resurgence of the peasantry's untamable and regenerative force in rocking the static social structure. Impelled by his instinctual desire for the woman, and the longing to destroy the authority, Grandpa goes to kill the Shan father and son. It is when the authority figures are removed that a radical change and an "anarchic" situation are created. Grandma becomes the young, female householder of the wealthy family with its promising wine business. Uncle Arhat, who has served the family loyally for a long time, is trusted by Grandma and put in charge of all distillery affairs. Grandma even trusts Uncle Arhat to take possession of the keys of the house. She says to him: "My possessions are your possessions." Apart from the suggestion of the ambiguously sexual relationship between the mistress and the foreman, the episode implies an egalitarian sharing of wealth among the family "members." Meanwhile, the intimate relationships even extend to the community habitants. The heroine believes that if they treat the customers and villagers fairly and courteously, they will still have a thriving business in the future. To celebrate the new order, Grandma and her hired laborers, in a delighted mood, engage in an energetic "disinfecting process" of the old system. They work together, spraying wine over the house, burying the corpses of the old Shan masters, and burning their belongings. When

the work is finished, Grandma gives each worker three silver dollars, a symbol of the harmonious relation between employer and employee.

What I want to highlight here is the fascination with an ideal working condition in the winery and a return to intimate human relationships in the renovated environment. When the order is restored by the maternal power, the class boundary between the master and the hired hands disappears instantly. The peasants are no longer exploited by the bullying feudal bosses. An idealized sense of brotherhood is suggested among the workers in the distillery. To the laborers, the remuneration seems not monetary. And most important, the whole process of wine production does not rest in its sole objective of capturing profits for individual entrepreneurs. It is rather a business of the collective communality, a kind of social event in the Bakhtinian sense. In erasing the threat of market competition, in the absence of the motivation of self-interest, the family organization can marvelously attain a self-sufficient economy. The peasants maintain the stable operation of the winery until they are menaced by the foreign invasion of the Japanese army. Furthermore, there is a dream of an "economic miracle" for the sorghum wine. The legend goes that the unscientific formula for making sweet, aromatic wine is inspired when Granddad pisses in one of the wine casks. This becomes the family's secret recipe for making a unique sorghum wine in the homeland. As a result, the products of Northwest Gaomi County are superior to all others and have nearly cornered the market in the age of economic reform of the 1980s.

The fantastic episode of the family history and the carnivalized situation represent a wishful dream concealing a complex of real contradictions in reality. The fantasy of removing class boundaries, on the one hand, is emblematic of the existing social hierarchy and the peasantry's inferior social position as Mo Yan has mentioned. On the other hand, the call for individual freedom is indicative of the rapid socioeconomic change in which peasants nowadays are reluctant to be tied to their position in the social structure under the state's policy. They will yearn for a greater degree of social mobility when

economic development has had a gradual impact on the old hierarchies in society. But the revitalizing thrust of capitalism also implies a host of negative problems: say, a breakdown of collectivity, alienation, bureaucratization, exploitation, the quantification of human production, the interchangeability of commodities, etc. Thus it is a period of great confusion of values in the midst of the market reform—the collapse of Maoist dogmatism, the emphasis on individualism, the residual consciousness of the as yet unchanged hierarchical system, etc.—that constitutes the work's historical subtext.

In returning to the pre-Communist period of the 1920s when banditry is rampant, it is important to see an underdevelopment of what Louis Althusser has called the ideological and repressive state apparatuses. The institutions of law and the police here are displaced and transfigured into the representation of an official figure, whose authority is contested by the outlaws. In a most chaotic age of Chinese history, Nine Dreams Cao (曹夢九) is appointed by the Northern Warlord Government as magistrate of Gaomi to uphold local order. The narrator tells us, in a pejorative tone, that the high official is respected by people for his righteousness and determination to stamp out banditry, opium, and gambling. When Grandpa was young, he had once been arrested by the magistrate for gambling and given three hundred lashes with a shoe sole as punishment. When he becomes the bandit leader, he takes the opportunity for vengeance by kidnapping the magistrate's son. The local official, however, in turn holds Grandma and Douguan (豆官, the narrator's father) as hostages. Finally, the bandit chief and the county official reach an agreement to maintain a brief period of peace in the region. By going back to the pre-Communist social formation of a backward and rural community, Grandpa is thus permitted to kill the clan heads (the Shan father and son) and to upset the legal institution.

The powerful bandit's defiant action brings us back to the earlier discussion on the author's ideological obsession with a revolutionary peasant class. Only in this light can we understand the greatest ironic effect the novel has achieved in dramatizing the inevitable defeat of Grandpa. The most interesting point here lies in how the figuration of

class consciousness and the uprising of the peasantry are defeated by its own self-deception. In the story, we are presented with an individual hero, whose insurrection is motivated by his ignorance, his instinctual desires, and his demonic character, rather than driven by the collective necessity of the social class. Worse, in his adventurous course throughout the story, the hero is ceaselessly faced with historical dilemmas which are totally beyond his power to comprehend. His furious revolt does not come out of a profound consideration of human liberation or a protest against social conditioning. It is rather an urgency to protect his own property, his livelihood, and his family.

In retrospect, the plan of his village militia to destroy the Japanese convoy is only a sporadic eruption. In an immediate sense, it is triggered by their retaliation after Uncle Arhat is brutally killed by the Japanese. (In the long term, their whole dream of the idealized work-situation and communality is to be shattered by the Japanese aggression). The peasants' resistance, under Grandpa's leadership, only manifests their strong will to survive. They show a sense of solidarity only at the most dangerous moment when their properties and lives are threatened. Their reaction is to a large extent spontaneous and aimless, demonstrating that they are not inherently endowed with a collective consciousness and will to revolutionize the existing social hierarchy. Their fortuitous opposition and ambiguous class solidarity, here, contrast sharply with the collective dream projected by the carnivalized work-situation in the distillery, which conveys a strong feeling of class sympathy and intimate human relationships.

As a commander of the peasants, Grandpa is however imprisoned in his "unenlightened" mentality, dislocated from historical change. He encounters the problem of upholding a just order in the army when Big Tooth Yu (余大牙), his uncle, has incidentally raped a girl. At first, he tries to defy the law and refuses to send his uncle to the firing squad, since he thinks that sleeping with a woman is definitely not a serious offense. Indeed, it is exactly by transgressing societal and collective norms, impelled by sexual aggression and violence, that he succeeds in abducting Grandma to the sorghum field and murdering the Shan patriarchs. In his strife with the Nationalist

and Communist commanders, he is totally ignorant of the dynamics among the various factional forces that are pitted against each other. Too simple-minded to comprehend the complicated plots and schemes of the various parties, his attitude to politics is coupled with cynicism. Whereas he is contemptuous of the political struggle between the Communists and the Nationalists, he does not understand the purpose of his battles, which finally turn out to be a series of unconnected events in the course of history. In this regard, a sense of situational irony is prevalent in the doomed fate of the protagonist. For there is a disparity between the real historical facts with which we readers are all too familiar (for instance, the Communists and the Nationalists fought against each other in their collaboration against the foreign enemy) and the character's inability to translate his opponents' actions into historically significant forces. He is fated to act blindly to his own undoing.

In a later supplementary ending that provides readers with Grandpa's final page of history, the ironic and self-correcting effect of the peasant myth is intensified by the reflexive foregrounding of savagery as seen in Grandpa's after-history.⁸ In the additional chapter, the demonic character is arrested by the Japanese and is sent to a labor camp in Hokkaido in 1943. A year later, he runs away and takes refuge in a cave, leading an animal-like life. Driven by hatred of the Japanese, coupled with the primitive instinct of sexual aggression, Grandpa is alleged to have tried to assault a Japanese woman in a village. Noteworthy is that this episode of human barbarism is wittingly spliced with the scene of the Communist Party's grand ceremony in Tian'anmen Square on the day of October 1, 1949. The montage-like arrangement is politically suggestive, for it juxtaposes the rise of the Communist Party on the one hand, and the peasant hero's descent into barbarism on the other. Suffice it to say that the destructive impulse and libidinal investment on Grandpa's part has to be read in primarily political and social terms. The allegorical meaning here should be clear for the focus is apparently not restricted to the individual's fate. The tragedy of the protagonist is emblematic of the sufferings of the peasants. (And they are, more specifically, the

“rich” and “upper-middle” peasants). As Grandpa’s horrific drama vividly suggests, the eruption of carnivalesque impulses in the beginning of the novel has to meet its ultimate dissolution in the end, in the form of regression to the basic instincts of human beings.

Demystification and Social Critique

From a realistic point of view, the betrothal of Grandma to the leprous son of the Shan family reflects the dreadful fate of women in rural society. Women are subjected to domination by familial doctrines, clan authority, and male ruling. Apart from this multiple exploitation, arranged marriages of women are also closely linked with rural poverty in economic terms. Indeed, Grandma is treated by her parents as a kind of property. They are glad to exchange their daughter for merely a big black mule given by the Shan patriarch. In the narrator’s surrealistic reconstruction of Grandma’s personal history, however, such painful reality is distracted and disguised. Instead, we see that all conventional behavioral norms are vigorously shaken up by the disruptive force of human instincts and desires. The familial institution, as the supporting social structure imposing official and hierarchical values, is replaced with a human instinctual system manifested by Grandpa and Grandma’s mutual love, hatred, and aggression. What is especially worth our attention is how Grandma, after gaining control of the winery, decides to desert her own patriarchal family, as shown in her following dialogue with her father:

“Little Nine,” he protested, “you’re my very own daughter!”

“Go on,” she demanded, “I’ve heard enough!”

“But I’m your dad!” he rebuked her angrily.

“You’re no father of mine, and I forbid you ever to enter my door again!”

“I *am* your father!”

“Magistrate Cao is my father. Weren’t you listening?”

“Not so fast. You can’t just throw one father away be-

cause you found yourself a new one. Don't think having you was easy on your mother and me!" . . .

Great-Granddad cursed and ranted as he led the donkey out the gate: "You misbegotten ingrate! What makes you think you can turn your back on your own family? I'm going to report you to the county authorities for being disloyal and unfilial! I'll tell them you're in league with bandits. I'll tell them you schemed to have your husband killed. . . ." (129; ch. 2)

The episode recounts the quarrel between Grandma (Little Nine) and her biological father. Grandma's endeavor to denounce the virtue of filiality and refute her genuine father is congruous with the carnivalesque spirit of the novel in overthrowing the foundations of the social hierarchy. Great-Granddad's appeal to Magistrate Cao to reclaim his patriarchal authority, after all, discloses the conventional coalition between the clan system and the legal apparatus to maintain ideological control in the rural community. But in the carnivalized and unofficial domain, the alliance between Grandma, the bandit (Grandpa), and the peasant workers in the winery overpowers the old system. As the incredible legend goes, the impious woman later succeeds in denying her real father and claiming Magistrate Cao as her foster-father. That the symbolic figure of authority—the "father"—is at stake in the imaginative narrative may refract a certain degree of social reality in which many of the old values and beliefs have been collapsing. On the one hand, Grandma's efforts to establish a non-natural affinity with the county Magistrate are informed by her self-interest to assume the wealth and possessions of the Shan family. At last, Great-Granddad's accusation fails as Magistrate Cao finally puts the verdict on Grandma's side, so that she can legitimately assume the status of householder. On the other hand, the chaotic family membership suggests a long-repressed human motivation to pursue individual happiness and liberation, to the point of radically turning the foundation of the family unit upside down. Such an "anarchic" situation may, in fact, bespeak the crisis of an emerging "value-free" social system

at the historical juncture of the market reform in the post-Mao era.

The family genealogy reveals that the narrator's forebears were engaged in promiscuous sexual relationships. They had no respect for such virtues as filial obligation and committed love, in a world where family values had lost their own validity. As the narrator traces the romantic chronicles of his ancestors, he gradually discovers that its perpetuation is merely marked by measures of spontaneity, chance, and uncertainty. Worse, when the narrator has dug deeper into the enigma, he comes to question his own identity as to whether Commander Yu Zhan'ao is his real Grandfather.

To begin with the "impure" origin of the genealogy, Grandpa lost his father when he was just a boy. At the age of sixteen, he is taunted by villagers because his mother has had an affair with a monk. Infuriated by the villagers' gossip, he takes his sword for the first time in his life and murders the monk. At the outset, the Grandparents' mad love affair on the sorghum field and Grandpa's ensuing killing of the Shan male masters have been labeled by villagers as adultery and murder. Their relationship would nonetheless imply a strong sense of immorality. Although the force of Eros as embodied by the couple has transgressed all societal prohibitions, the characters finally cannot sustain a happy marriage. They become malevolent and hostile toward each other as they lasciviously indulge in extra-marital relationships. Grandpa falls in love with Lian'er, a hired girl in the winery who later becomes the second Grandma. And Grandma has suspect relationships with the County Magistrate (her foster father) and Uncle Arhat (the family's foreman). She has openly taken up with Black Eye, another bandit chief. In this way, the narrator doubts whether his father (Douguan) is really Grandpa's child. For the sake of accuracy, he rather refers to Grandpa as Yu Zhao'ao in compiling the family chronology.

While the thematic suggestion of incest and species degeneration is borrowed from the magical realism of Faulkner and Garcia Marquez, what is revealing here is the narrator's attitude to the credibility of "his" family tales. For one thing, the story-time of the novel covers predominantly the period from the 1920s to the 1940s,

whereas the speaker was not born until 1954, when all the major events in the family history have passed. As a consequence, the grandson is thrown into an ambivalent position as to whether he should be “inside” or “outside” the family saga he is recounting. There is an apparent disparity between the discourse-time of the speaker and the story-time of the mythic past. He is not sure, for instance, if he himself was the boy pissing on Father’s grave, just as he says: “Someone said that the little goatherd was me, but I don’t know” (4; ch. 1). In his narration, he has to rely on county records, folk beliefs, and most importantly, his father’s witnessing account.

Especially interesting is the way in which most of the details, in the first chapter of the novel, are given through Father’s perceptions and conceptions. At that time Father is in his boyhood. It is through the vision of the boy that the characters are easily perceived as larger-than-life heroes, and past events tend to be enveloped in an incomprehensible and mystic atmosphere. For instance, from the oral transmission among the villagers, coupled with Father’s elaboration, the narrator learns of the legendary death of Uncle Arhat, of how he screamed abuse from his shapeless mouth at the Japanese tormentors when his face had been peeled away. In Father’s mind, as the narrator depicts, even such an evil figure as Big Tooth Yu would suddenly command people’s respect at the moment of his execution (for his sexual assault on a girl in the army).

At certain critical points of the narrative, furthermore, the narrator adds his personal judgment and subjective belief to the past. He is reluctant to believe in the folklore sung by an old woman about the dubious affair between Grandma and Uncle Arhat. In his own interpretation, Grandma’s biography cannot be tainted by rumors. She is, undoubtedly, a heroine of the resistance and a model of women’s independence. In this sense, the narrator’s role of mediation serves as the key to understanding the formal experimentation of the novel. Here, the striking point resides in the grandson’s supersensory insights into his forebears’ thoughts when he is writing their individual biographies. In his flights of surrealistic and gory description, he can decipher the characters’ nearly ecstatic states of mind. From a realis-

tic perspective, he can never have known himself or learned of from others.

One of the achievements of the novel, especially in the first chapter, rests with such manipulation of narrative voice and the storyteller's distanciation from, or participation in, the legendary tales he fabricates. Indeed, the tension existing between the fantasized narrative and the "mythic vision" the novelist ventures to fabricate calls to mind Pierre Macherey's notion of ideology and narrative (*A Theory of Literary Production*). For Macherey, the work is not a direct expression of the author's ideology, nor a faithful reflection of the social subtext underlying the artistic product. By endowing an ideological utterance with aesthetic representation, he claims, it always ends up problematizing the former with its own unmasking. Thus the text is always disparate and self-critical, containing symptomatic gaps and fissures that convey its "meaning." In this sense, we can examine how the ideological distortion of the peasant world in *Red Sorghum* is persistently discredited by the narrator's voice informed by personal judgment, subjective interpretation, and indirect mediation.

The overt intrusion of the narrator's commentary in the narrative seeks to forge a dialogic alliance between the mythical past and the present-day reality. The insinuation of the narrator's vision, itself emblematic of a modern worldview, conveys the specific "historical consciousness" of the work with its implicit social critique.

She is writing the final page of her thirty-year history. . . . She is holding on to the fleeting present with all her might. . . .

Grandma is exhausted: the handle of the present, the handle of the world of men, is slipping from her grasp. Is this death? Will I never again see this sky, this earth, this sorghum, this son, the lover who has led his troops into battle? . . . Have I sinned? Would it have been right to share my pillow with a leper and produce a misshapen, putrid monster to contaminate this beautiful world? What is chastity then? What is the correct path? What is good-

ness? What is evil? You never told me, so I had to decide on my own. I love happiness, I loved strength, I love beauty; it was my body, and I used it as I thought fitting. (71-72; ch. 1)

The episode describes the moment when Grandma has fallen from the Japanese gunfire in the peasants' ambush. In a nonlinear presentation of events and time-space interweaving of the past and present, the storyteller narrates in retrospect Grandma's romantic love affair with Grandpa, her revolt against feminine subservience of traditional China, and her state of mind before her death. The episode employs interior monologue in the first person in order to unveil the mental state of the heroine. In her last moment of life, Grandma's reflection is concerned with whether she has sinned in her violation of societal norms. After a string of self-interrogation, she concludes that individual values such as happiness, strength, beauty, and freedom should override collective social conventions.

From an "objective" perspective, the grandson can never have gained access to his ancestor's inner consciousness. In other words, he cannot perceive in the same direct or diegetic level that the characters do in their legendary histories. When the narrator reports from Grandma's perspective, naturally, he should stay on a second-order or heterodiegetic horizon, conceptualizing about the story that must always exclude himself. What I would argue is that the interior monologue reflecting the protagonist's thinking indeed embodies a dual voice. In the free direct form of presentation, itself masked in the first-person pronoun as the character's self-reference, the narrator strategically inserts his own way of conceptualizing the past. In his gesture of peering into the character's mind, the speaker actually reports its contents from his own point of view—that is, his ideology, or his conceptual way of thinking about present history. In this light, the character's "philosophizing" about the merits of individualism and the horrific societal indoctrination should not be taken literally as those happenings inside the story. By fusing the double voices, the interior monologue in fact implies a hidden agenda of criticizing the

present-day reality. And there is every suggestion that Grandma's reproaches and accusations are "directed," through the special narrative treatment, at the dogmatism of the Maoist era. The "fleeting present," which she seeks to seize in a last-ditch attempt, hints at a temporal space purged of the traumatic experience of history, and a utopian world where new values can be created and freedom allowed.

At another point, the narrator even directly presents his point of view in telling Grandma's tale. After gaining her freedom as the new householder of the distillery, Grandma shows her artistic talent and fantastic imagination by cutting out of red paper an uncaged katydid and a plum-blossomed deer. Here, the grandson adds his commentary:

Whenever I see one of Grandma's cutouts, my admiration for her surges anew. If she could have become a writer, she would have put many of her literary peers to shame. . . . Grandma, compared with you, I am like a shriveled insect that has gone hungry for three long years. (132; ch. 2)

Grandma's unbridled flights of imagination and her creativity remind us of the author's projection of the ideal peasant subject. She is free, unbounded by work, and not subjected to family and class hierarchy. She can thus pursue her own individual thinking. Meanwhile, we can also see how the narrator's intrusion takes an abrupt turn to criticize the literary circle of the present age. The grandson guesses that Grandma would certainly have defeated her literary peers should she have pursued a literary career. Her unorthodoxy and originality should put all other writers to shame, especially those guided by the socialist doctrines in the Maoist era.

In this respect, the storyteller (born in 1954) seems to be looking for gaps and disjunctions in the fantasized structure to express, albeit in an incoherent fashion, his deepest frustrations and disillusionment with his epoch which is the Maoist period. In depicting his father's fascination with the gigantic Japanese trucks during the military clash, the image of the "metallic" monsters (as perceived by Father) would immediately evoke the narrator's unhappy memories of the Great

Leap Forward in 1958, when their (metallic) wok was confiscated in the political turbulence (62; ch. 1). In fact, in the earliest edition of the novel,⁹ the narrator confides to readers a piece of information that has been omitted in later ones. In an account that passionately expresses the narrator's love and hatred for his homeland, he tells us that after he grew up and left Gaomi for the city, he "studied Marxism with great efforts." Here, "Marxism" (in the Maoist sense) designates an orthodox political ideology in which the narrator had once believed. While he does not explicitly allude to his attitude to the "Marxism" he mentions, his eagerness to go back to the homeland to compile the family's chronology suggests a negative comment on his experience of the city. From the very beginning of the story, the return to the fantastic and nightmarish territory in the mythical past is intended as a virtual repudiation of the Communist hegemony.

Other than the narrative manipulation, the author has employed the imagery of animal to dramatize the bestial nature of human beings and the savagery of warfare. The third chapter depicts a fight between a pack of wild dogs and Father, both competing for the corpses on the battlefield. We are told that the dogs wage war on their onetime masters in exactly the same manner that slaves take their revenge on their rulers in human history. In this barbarous battle, Father is nearly ripped to pieces by the dogs. He is, fortunately, saved by Grandpa and a girl who later becomes his wife. For want of other meat sources, Father eats the dogs. As the animals have already devoured human corpses, Father indirectly becomes a cannibal. In descending to the feral practice of cannibalism, however, Father strengthens his physical body, in turn contributing to his valor and heroic peasant character. Eventually, the dogs are destroyed by their human enemies because their animal leaders distrust and plot against each other. The mutual suspicion among the animals is, of course, a caricature of the various military forces vying for power in the anti-Japanese war.

The thematic implication of cannibalism, in this sense, demonstrates Mo Yan's attempt, after Lu Xun, to launch a totalistic condemnation of the whole national character as worse than bestial. Such a metaphoric association of animal and human nature, however, begs

the fundamental questions about its philosophical underpinnings and aesthetic achievement. The deconcealment of human ferocity and barbarism seems to point at two major motifs in the novel: the degeneration of the (peasant) species, and the horror and destruction of the war. As regards the question on artistic judgment, the work's scandalous content of violence and sexism has provoked great controversy among critics. As our earlier analysis indicated, the obsessive sexism and misogynist fantasies foregrounded in the novel can be understood as open onslaughts on the moral taboos and repressive hypocrisies of the literary guidelines of socialist realism. They are also indicative of the resurgence of destructive forces and ugly desires that have long been repressed. Suffice it to say that the demonic characters with their lustful desires are antithetical to the socialist heroes whose individual concerns are always subjugated to the Party ideology. In spite of this, the excessive sexuality and sadistic killing in the work have still been seen by critics as lacking an artistic sense of balance. For instance, let us quote the commentary from *Current History*.

Freed from some of the political restraints and socialist puritanism under which authors in China have long toiled, Mo Yan can be faulted for reveling in extreme effects, relying too much on violence and sex, and general showing off; thus he establishes his modernism. (Phillips 281)

Another aesthetic concern about the novel lies in the problem of its closure, which reveals Mo Yan's repeated efforts to round off his work as a more unified whole. In the Afterword of the originally five-chapter novel, Mo Yan acknowledges that he conceived the five stories as an integrated whole. But he was unable to formulate analytical statements to describe the way in which a full-length novel should work. Although the author regards the formalistic requirements of a lengthy novel as no more than "involving but a longer duration, a larger number of characters and more fabricated lies with some truth values,"¹⁰ he seems not to be satisfied with the simple conclusion and the achievement of the original version. He also tells us that the novel

is unfinished in many ways so that there is much room for him to expand the narrative further in the future.

The author then appends two more chapters to the novel, telling the after-histories of Father and Grandpa respectively.¹¹ In the original ending, we are told that the narrator has returned to his hometown to visit Second Grandma's grave. Standing before the monuments of his heroic ancestors, the grandson feels ashamed of himself because his soul has already been contaminated by the hypocrisy of high society and urban life. In a poetic and fantastic fashion, the voice of Second Grandma's spirit is heard, telling her child to come back home in order to be saved. The confrontation of values between the homeland and the city, and between the heroic forebears and their frail descendants recalls the very beginning of the novel, where the narrator has already indicated the sharp contrast by saying: "Surrounded by progress, I feel a nagging sense of our species' regression" (4; ch. 1) To a certain extent, the original closural pattern seems to sum up the major theme of the novel, in spite of the episodic appearance of the concluding dialogue between Second Grandma and the grandson. It is intriguing to see what Mo Yan has added to his "incomplete" work, since the ending is always the focal point where the author most pressingly desires to make his point.

The sixth chapter gives an account of how Father, by then a brave and strong soldier, has achieved the formidably difficult task of transporting heaps of rice for the Communist troops in 1948, a year before the Communist Party came to power. During the mission, the army encounters a wandering mob, who, during the famine, beg for food from the soldiers. A Communist commander, under pressure of the chaotic crowd, shoots at the starving people and kills a woman. Father is shocked at the killing and begins to question the meaning of "revolution" in the name of the "people." Later, the conflict between Father and the Communist army is heightened when the peasant warrior has to slaughter his own donkey for the soldiers. The indictment of the ruling regime then takes a surrealist turn in the conversation between the master and the donkey at the moment of its death. The animal eventually accepts its fate, willing to devote its body to the

revolution just because it knows full well that Father is really fighting for the interests of the peasants. It therefore consoles Father by saying: "I understand you. For protecting the people's farmland, fire!"¹²

In view of another appended chapter about Grandpa's after-history, which I have mentioned in the previous section, the supplemented epilogues seem to combine to convey an overt message of condemning the Communist regime—the rise of its ruling power at the expense of the interests of the peasant class. Strictly speaking, the author does not so much achieve a narrative ending as give appendices to the lengthy novel, imparting to readers certain "messages" which are politically provocative and polemical. The criticism of the hegemonic power is, interestingly enough, no longer masked in the originally devised mythic structure, but rather takes a more naked, direct, and "realistic" presentation. In spite of its apparent formal inconsistency between the original scheme of the fantasized narrative and the severe political criticism in the epilogues, the appendices nonetheless conform with the author's ideological preoccupation throughout the work. In an undisguised manner, they present the profound conflict between the peasants' struggles and the Communist revolution on the eve of its success, seeking to "anticipate" the deprivation and oppression of the peasantry since 1949. The peasants merely hope to preserve their land, their work, and a decent livelihood, whereas the revolutionary army undoubtedly strives for ruling power. On closer examination, Father's sacrifice of his donkey to the Communist army unconsciously bespeaks a multiplicity of political meanings that express the grievances of the peasantry. Most of them lost their land and their property. They were tortured by famine and endless political campaigns during the 1950s and 1960s. It is perhaps in this sense that Mo Yan's "peasant ideology" is ultimately to be understood as well. Plagued by a lack of political consciousness, the peasantry is not the redeeming and transformational force as claimed by the Maoist political agenda, let alone the carrier of revolutionary consciousness in the Lukacsian sense. They are, after all, insurrectionary and will take violent action against unjust rule when driven to desperation, as demonstrated by the heroism of Grandpa and Father.

But by referring back to Grandpa's barbaric seclusion and Father's anticipation of the peasants' fate in the epilogues, the novelist decides to shatter the utopian dream he has created. It is as though in this way only could the author adequately communicate his ideas and beliefs to readers, who, on retrospective analysis, may thus comprehend more fully the repressed and distorted ideological messages in the fantasized narrative.

NOTES

¹ The English translation of the novel is based upon the Taipei Hongfan Book Co. 1988 Chinese edition. All subsequent references will be to this English edition.

² For short book reviews of the English edition, see Phillips; Koenig; and Kinkley.

³ For a survey of the literary representation of the peasantry in modern China, see Siu 1-32.

⁴ Althusser: "In ideology the real relation is inevitably invested in the imaginary relation, a relation that *expresses a will* (conservative, conformist, reformism or revolutionary), a hope or a nostalgia, rather than describing a reality," *For Marx* 233-34; italics original.

⁵ The work was originally published (in Chinese) by Writers Publishing House, Beijing, 1988, and by Hongfan Book Co., Taipei, 1989.

⁶ Cf. Tay, "The Ideology of Initiation" 159 n. 9.

⁷ The article is reprinted in *The Ideologies of Theory* 1: 3-16.

⁸ The supplementary ending is found in *The Collected Works of Mo Yan* 1: 428-42.

⁹ It is anthologized in *Chinese Fiction 1986* 104.

¹⁰ In the Hongfan Chinese edition of the novel 497. Translation from Ying-hsiung Chou 33.

¹¹ Father and Grandpa's after-histories are supplemented as Chapter 6 and 7 respectively in *The Collected Works of Mo Yan* 1: 382-427; 428-42.

¹² *The Collected Works of Mo Yan* 1: 417. Translation mine.

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