

# The Real under Scrutiny: The Cutting Edge of Chinese Fantastic Narrative

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## ABSTRACT

In the politically oriented criticism of fantastic literature, the fantastic is situated in a negative relation to the dominant cultural frame of reference which constructs and legitimates what is real. Paying close attention to the negative relationality of Chinese fantastic texts vis-à-vis the symbolic order of Chinese culture under the Communist regime, the paper proposes that only by approaching the Chinese fantastic in subversive terms can we assess adequately its sharp political efficacy and avoid what is often called the “transcendentalist” theory, which regards the fantastic merely as a secondary, Utopian world of pure fantasy and desire.

In this light the Chinese fantastic can be seen as an attempt to subvert the hypostasis of the prevailing epistemological and ideological frame of reference by which the totalitarian regime sustains its political and ideological hegemony. The paper will focus on the two fantastic texts written by Yu Hua, which puts under scrutiny two major notions about the real and history. The first text sets out to play on the conceptual limits of realism, and constitutes a textual and structural disruption of the textual apparatus of socialist realism. The second text aims at the officially sanctioned notion and collective forgetfulness about China's past. By evoking the fantastic and surreal return of the brutal past in the person of a self-torturing madman, the text lays bare the arbitrary and frail distinction drawn by the prevailing discourse between the past and the present.

## KEY WORDS

fantastic literature  
madness  
Foucault

negative relationality  
socialist realism  
supernatural

real  
uncanny  
counter-discourse

Madness seems to be something which a culture prefers to shut up and lock away. There are institutionalized efforts to do this, as exemplified in the well-known asylum described by Foucault.<sup>1</sup> Similar locking away has been happening in the institution of literary criticism which addresses madness in the form of the fantastic. The fantastic, as Rosemary Jackson points out, has constantly been dismissed by critics as being an embrace of madness, irrationality or barbarism and has been exiled to the margins of literature. The tradition of the liberal humanist criticism in the West has tended to claim, in line with Freud's theory about art, that the fantastic is a pure fantasizing activity, providing human beings with compensation for having to submit to the reality principle. Madness in fantastic literature can be tolerated because it seeks to create a secondary world of romantic wish-fulfillment, thus making up for and transcending the bondage of everyday reality which is unsatisfactory and insufficient for desire. These so called "transcendentalist" and "compensatory" theories thus lock up the fantastic in a harmless realm of escapist refuge and romantic Utopia.<sup>2</sup>

Similar locking away is going on in the criticism of a host of texts written by a new generation of Chinese writers after 1985. These texts possess many resemblances, thematic and structural, to what criticism in the West has established as "fantastic texts."<sup>3</sup> They are marked by a strong interest in madness and insanity; by an incessant probe into the taboo areas of Chinese culture, into schizophrenic psyche; an obsession with the dead and metamorphosis; a tendency to experiment with narrative structure and linguistic innovation. To call these texts "fantastic" seems to beg the question of method that often vexes "comparatists." The fantastic is a term that suffers an uncertainty of referent: It seems futile to try to define something whose existence baffles and parodies the very notion of definition itself. As a working concept for this essay, however, I will treat the fantastic implicitly as a generic category, as a historically codified convention which possesses a familiar inventory of themes and motifs, such as ghost, dream, death, metamorphosis and so on. Thus some generic similarities, however arbitrary and remote, aligns the Chinese fantastic texts with those of Hoffmann, Poe, Borges, Cortázar and many others. On the other hand, I will take seriously the proposition by Bessière and Jackson that the fantastic is predicated on the category of the "real." It stands in a "negative relationality" to dominant cultural frames of reference which construct and legitimate what is real.<sup>4</sup> Thus my approach will strive for the method of "bricolage" as described by Derrida in Lévi-Strauss' work,<sup>5</sup> but in a cross-cultural sense, retaining the

term "fantastic" as methodological instrument while displacing it into Chinese context.

Paying close attention to the negative relationality of the Chinese fantastic texts *via-à-vis* the symbolic order of Chinese culture under Communist regime, I will argue that only by approaching the Chinese fantastic in subversive and transgressive terms can we assess adequately its sharp political efficacy and avoid what might be called the "ontological fallacy," which regards the fantastic merely as a secondary, compensatory world of pure fantasy and wish-fulfillment, and I will look at two texts to see how they work to subvert the discursive formation concerning the concepts, which are specifically Chinese, of the real and of history.

Although some critics have noted the fantastic phenomenon in contemporary Chinese narrative as "a revolt against language," meaning a linguistic rupture within the discursive constraint of "socialist realism" – the dominant literary discourse in China.<sup>6</sup> The criticism of the fantastic texts basically treats them dismissively, in the way of western transcendentalist and compensatory theory. Criticizing what he calls the "New Wave" 新潮 writers, one critic argues that in the eye of the fantastic writers, "this world is unknowable and unintelligible; existence is mysterious. They only want to use fiction writing as a means of experiencing vicissitudes of their own private inner life, as a mode of experiencing creative process. They also invite the reader to experience his private spiritual life in fiction and fantasy. What is at stake in such writing is that seeing the hopelessness and inadequacy of reality, they try to find escape and refuge in fantasy and dream, to seek self-preservation in the text."<sup>7</sup> The critic then charges that in their narcissistic obsession with the text where they try to seek private fulfillment or *jouissance*, they lose touch with reality.

In such criticism, the fantastic is locked away in a private realm of escape, where the author's self seeks vicarious fulfillment in the face of "inadequacy" of reality. For western critics in the liberal humanist tradition, such wish-fulfillment can be tolerated and assimilated into cultural order, for it is considered compensatory in relation to the reality principle. However, in the context of Chinese orthodox critical theory which insists that literature must serve the vast majority of society, for a writer to seek private fulfillment in textual adventure amounts to a misdemeanor, a crime almost, because by so doing the writer forsakes his sacred duty as the "conscience of society" or "the voice of the people." It has been an unwritten law or ideological imperative that the responsibility of the writer is to look reality

square in the face and to represent it truthfully as a way of engaging it. Western transcendentalist and compensatory criticism has attempted to neutralize the fantastic into a harmless Utopia of self-fulfillment; Chinese criticism attempts to neutralize it by ignoring its sharp political edge, by depoliticizing it into a private sphere and an artistic closet. It is no wonder that this depoliticizing attempt seizes upon purely formal and structural categories in dealing with the fantastic texts, and tries to conceive of the fantastic merely as an ingenious experiment with narrative structure, image-building or play of purely linguistic kind. This "formalistic" criticism is best illustrated by a recent publication which groups a number of texts more or less fantastic in their themes and motifs, into a collection called *Structuralist Stories*, 結構主義小說<sup>6</sup> as if all the texts selected indulge themselves in some kind of verbal and structural exercise.

Underlying such "escapist" and "formalistic" criticism is a Chinese "metaphysics" which is part of ideology which has dominated intellectual and cultural thinking as well as public discourse. Such view insists on the ontological status of represented "content" in literary representation. Accordingly the fantastic is treated as a substantive entity or presence "out there," independent of discourse and representation. It is assumed that things in the world have their own set of laws which constitute their intrinsic "nature." A phenomenon, however incomprehensible or phantasmagoric, is capable of being explained once objective and rational explanations are found. If such phenomenon eludes rational explanation it is relegated either to a "supernatural" realm where laws of explanation are beyond human understanding, or to an imaginary realm of the private mind, where caprice often reigns over reason. The latter is the explanation that Chinese criticism has found for the fantastic.

This also seems to be what Todorov does when he tries to define the fantastic. A captive of the empiricist way of thinking, he argues that the marvelous is the "supernatural accepted" whereas the uncanny is "the supernatural explained."<sup>9</sup> He situates the fantastic between these two realms, and defines it as the intellectual uncertainty on the part of the reader as to the reality or non-reality of supernatural events in the fantastic text. The fantastic thus becomes a question about the ontological status of the real and imaginary. This is why he privileges narrative fiction over poetry as the fantastic genre. For him fiction has "representative aspects," referring to the "events as they occur in the world evoked." And this is also the reason why he urges that we should not read the fantastic as mere combination of

worlds, as in poetry or impose an allegorical meaning on the otherwise empirical experience.<sup>10</sup> This, at the risk of drastically simplifying Todorov's sophisticated argument, can be seen as analogous to the interpretation of dream before Freud. Dream is either apprehended as divine visitations of supernatural powers, or as a pure fantasy divorced from man's cultural and social existence.

The interpretation of the uncanny, a much discussed theme in the criticism of the fantastic, also suffers from such ontological fallacy. The uncanny has been considered as an form of anxiety regarding the return of the repressed. This anxiety is specifically related to the "event" of castration in the subject's development. The discovery of the child of the penislessness of the mother disrupts the infantile sexual theory which assumes that all living human beings are equipped with the male organ. This negative perception—the perception of the absence of the maternal phallus, as Weber and Silverman have noted, has been mistaken as a "real" and empirical discovery, a discovery of the non-existence of penis. Thus the phallus, the non-representational signifier, becomes representational in such ontological interpretation, referring to the "real" penis, the real pound of flesh. What the subject is confronted with in such event, however, is not an immediate experience, but a violent restructuring of his experience, a crisis concerning his perception. The negative perception of absence, as Weber argues, "confronts the subject with the fact that it will never again be able to believe its eyes, since what they have seen is either simply visible or wholly invisible." The perception violently dislocates what Freud calls the "System Perception-Consciousness," which dominates both everyday experience and the tradition of western thought in general. It is both a crisis of "normal" perception and a crisis of phenomenality.<sup>11</sup>

These ontological assumptions, both in western and Chinese criticisms of the fantastic, reveals a representational conception of language. Such conception collapses meaning into being, and confuses mode of understanding with mode of being. What seems to be badly needed with regard to the criticism of the Chinese fantastic is to move from an ontological view, which basically repeats transcendentalist and escapist theories in the humanist tradition in the West, to a discursive view which reconceptualizes the fantastic as discursive intervention in the general frame of reference of the dominant cultural order. It is to read the fantastic as discursive subversion and transgression. The question to ask about the fantastic is not "What does it mean?" or "What kind of world does it depict?" but "What does it work against?"

and "How does it work?" Recent criticism of the fantastic in the West, in response to poststructuralist discursive space, has redefined the fantastic in relational terms—in a relation of opposition to dominant symbolic order, in particular to the epistemological framework concerning the real, with the whole cluster of related concepts such as truth, sanity, rationality and normality. For Bessiere, the fantastic is defined in "negative relationality" with such prevalent cultural frame of reference. The fantastic uses socio-cultural frameworks not to arrive at certain metaphysical certitude but to effect a relativizing confrontation of heterogeneous elements and discourses in a given culture.<sup>12</sup> The fantastic and culturally dominant are not set in an antinomy of two opposing positivities, or two opposing ontologies. Madness and lack of rationality in the fantastic, for instance, is not to be equated with the irrational, but should be characterized as anti-rational: that is, as the inverse side of reason's orthodoxy.

It is in the same spirit that Beer discusses the theme of the ghost in the fantastic. The presence of the ghost in the fantastic is not a question whether the ghost can or can not return to the life of the living, or whether there is life after death. Such questions presumes the ontological status of the ghost. "Ghost stories are to do with the insurrection, not with resurrection of the dead."<sup>13</sup> The insurrection of the dead works by calling into question our normal distinction between life and death, without asserting its own "truth." In such conception of the fantastic is a way of thinking that is political and transgressive. The ontologically oriented criticism of the fantastic in China can use such notions to reconceptualize the Chinese fantastic in subversive and transgressive terms. Such reconceptualization will enable us to move, to quote Foucault, from "a form of thinking in which an interrogation of limits replaces a search for totality and in which a movement of transgression replaces a movement of contradictions."<sup>14</sup>

To view the Chinese fantastic in transgressive and subversive terms is to position it in a relation of opposition or symbolic resistance to the dominant symbolic order of Chinese culture under Communist rule. Approached in this way, the fantastic can be seen as an attempt to take issue with and to disturb the hypostasis of the prevailing epistemological and ideological frame of reference and discursive formations derived from such an epistemology, by which the culture dominated by Communists sustains its political and ideological hegemony.

A quick glance at the fantastic texts written in recent years reveals that their concerns are many and varied. The rest of this essay will focus on the

discussion of the two important categories of dominant ideological discourse in contemporary China, which have been put under critical scrutiny in the fantastic: the concept of the real and the related concept of history.

The fantastic texts apparently create a world which is "unreal." But the fantastic does not seek to insist on the unreality of the world; it probes into the fictionality and falsity and constructed nature of what we normally think to be the "real world." The Chinese fantastic, therefore, can be predicated in relation to a discursive formation which has dominated critical thoughts and literary practice in contemporary China, which is often dubbed "socialist realism." It is the discourse of socialist realism and its epistemological and ideological underpinnings that the fantastic tries to subvert and dismantle. By looking closely at two texts, I will demonstrate the "negative relationality" of the fantastic as a counter-discourse.

Let us consider first a fantastic text by Yu Hua 余華. It is a story entitled "Ssü-yüeh-san-jih shih-chien" 四月三日事件 (The April 3 Event).<sup>15</sup> The title itself, with its specific date and the word "event," seems to encode the story as a text of realism. The concept of "event," in the discourse of socialist realism has much wider range of meanings and connotations than in European realism. It does not simply denote a discrete unit of plot, a series of occurrences in the real world, or a set of happenings in the past. There are a number of epistemological, political and literary associations involved in the very idea of "event," that it seems necessary to make a short detour to this conceptual network before we come to the "event" in this story.

The concept of event is closely linked to the concept of the real. The concept of the real in the discourse of socialist realism and ideological discourse in general does not put emphasis on the natural, the quotidian and the tangible reality of an average individual, as is often encountered in 19th century European realism. Instead the concept of the real is often understood in an inverted Hegelian sense: the Absolute Spirit inverted into Absolute matter. One of the important books of Marxist philosophy which has popularized or rather vulgarized Marxism and which has been a "must read" for many Chinese writers of the older generation has this to say:

With regard to the relation of matter to consciousness, dialectical materialism first and foremost insists that matter is the ultimate source of consciousness, that is, matter is primary, which precedes consciousness. Consciousness on the other hand, is only the product of the evolution of matter; it is an attribute

of matter which has reached a higher level of development. . . . Dialectical materialism not only insists that our consciousness is the reflection of the objective world, but points out that man's consciousness is capable of achieving more or less correct reflection of the surrounding world, of reaching a state of correspondence between consciousness and objectively existing things.<sup>16</sup>

The real is thus said to exist in inert matter, independent of our consciousness. Cognitive activities are nothing but reflections of matter. More importantly, the real is also believed to have its own nature, its own set of laws and dialectics of development. All cultural and intellectual activities, the productive processes of thought and imagination, are mere reflections of the real. Thus in official and public discourse in China, scientists are supposed to inquire into the "laws of nature"; economists into the laws of economy; artists are supposed to represent, not superficial phenomena of social life, but the manifestations of quintessential character of social development and historical trends. In connection with history the real is understood as the historical real or has a historical grounding. What is ultimately real is history, the supreme arbiter and authority. The real, constituted by its self-unfolding necessity and telos realized in evolution of social life, is always invoked as ultimate reality and source of truth. Thus "Seeking truth from facts" 實事求是, a classical Chinese phrase turned into a political slogan by Mao, becomes the ultimate principle of all cultural and intellectual enterprises.

In literary discourse, this conception of the real imposes certain limits on what can be considered as legitimate themes. Literary themes that address the "historical real," that "reflect" a self-unfolding dialectics of history in its triumphant advance toward the final victory of socialism over capitalism, are encouraged and sanctioned as politically "correct" and anything that goes into the private, the psychological, or the quotidian is likely to be considered "insignificant" or erroneous literary practice. Writers are exhorted to write novels, plays and stories which are about the great campaigns and movements that the people and the nation, led by the Party, have waged in the breathless and epoch-making endeavour to go with the irresistible tide of historical necessity. Thus it can be said that socialist realism is very much "event-oriented." One only has to recall how many novels written after 1949, the year when the People's Republic was founded, are about military

campaigns, campaigns of land reform and other political movements. Even the historical novel, a well-loved genre which mostly takes the past as its materials, is often conceived in terms of some gigantic and epic historical events which are the surface manifestations of a vast underlying, progressive master narrative.<sup>17</sup> Indeed modern Chinese history, under the shadow of the historical real, is often conceived as composed of a series of big campaigns—events.

The story "The April 3 Event," a somewhat drab story from an aesthetic perspective, takes on significance when it is situated against this epistemological subtext of "event."

Nothing that can be called an event happens in the story. It is evident that the title itself is a parody on texts that are concerned with events. It will do serious injustice to the story to attempt to give a summary account of the string of "events" that form the narrative, for the text actually is about the non-occurrence or non-eventfulness of event. I will just give a brief account for the purpose of analysis.

The story depicts a listless, and lonely young man who does nothing from day to day but loafing around in the streets, making unwanted visits to his friends, staying at home and daydreaming. He does not have any kind of relationship and communication with other people, to whom he is nevertheless related under the empty rubric of friend, acquaintance, schoolmate and so on. In his encounter with his friends, strangers and his parents, he is seized with a paranoia that all of them are joint in some kind of secret conspiracy against him. And this conspiracy, as he reads from various hints, innuendoes and hearsay, evolves around what he believes to be an "event" which is to occur on April 3. Sensing that the date is approaching, he manages to flee the town where he has lived all his life.

If the story has a center at all, it is this impending event which hangs throughout the story like a big question mark, and which is a structural factor that faintly resembles a realistic narrative. On the textual and structural level, the story undermines and dislocates the conventional narrative structure of socialist realism constructed on the presumed structuredness, coherency, and end-directed linearity surrounding an event. Apparently the text takes on some trappings of the realistic text, and presents a verisimilitude of the natural world in mimetic code. The houses, streets, shops, people and physical objects together evoke a realistic image of a small town in southern China. The sense of the solidity of this world is coupled with a "normal" process of psychology. The impressions, innuendoes, and gossips registered

by the protagonist are seen by him as the surface manifestations of a deeper plot, and assume a coherency as leading up to an impending event. Within this seemingly structured narrative, however, there is a host of small narratives which fragment the general narrative framework and disrupt any sense of narrative continuity. These small narratives are scenarios, dramatic encounters and scenes imagined and enacted in the protagonist's dream and imagination and then are found visible and realized before his very eyes. He constantly projects hypothetical scenarios and then tests them against the real events, but it is never made clear whether his projected scenarios correspond to the real or whether the "real scenarios" that he sees before him are simply hypothetical projections. The text plays on the difficulty of distinguishing mind and matter—one of the favorite discursive strategies in the fantastic repertory in the West—by hovering over the intertextual space between realistic discourse and the fantastic, and in a micro-textual way, offering a good illustration of what Barthes calls the "experience of limits" when he describes the subversive text as "that which goes to the limit of the rules of enunciation."<sup>18</sup>

Towards the end of the story, for instance, the protagonist is anxious to find out what is cooking behind his back by going to a girl who used to be his classmate and who, he believes, may be sympathetic and tell him about it.

"I want you to tell me, now, why they spy on me, what are they going to do next?

She shook her head, "I don't know what you mean." . . . . . He stood up, walked out of Snow-white's bedroom, and found the kitchen on the right. He entered the kitchen and saw a sharp knife stuck there. He reached and took it, tried its blade and was satisfied. Then he went back to Snow-white's bedroom, knife in hand. At this moment he saw Snow-white rise and back out in terror into the corner. As he went up to her he heard her scream. Then he found he had already put the knife on her neck. Snow-white was shaking with fright.

Snow-white stood up and so did he. But he was still hesitating as to whether he should go into the kitchen and get hold of the knife. . . .

Snow-white asked, "Guess what will happen tomorrow?" He was seized by a sudden fright. What would happen on April 3? April 3? He recalled that his mother had said something

about it and his father, too.

He realized Snow-white was giving him hints. She could not tell because she might be at risk. He felt that he must leave. It would do no good to her to stay on.

As he walked out of Snow-white's bedroom he found the kitchen was not on the right, but on the left. (pp. 262-263)

The "realistic" textual strand as exemplified by the murderous scenario and its sudden evaporation in the protagonist's hesitation about the possibility of staging this scenario; his perceptual uncertainty, the ambiguity of the real and imaginary in this passage, can be said to constitute a textual and structural disruption with regard to the textual apparatus of realism. The parodic and subversive edge of this story can only be assessed when one situates such text in relation to the general conception of the real, of the distinction between mind and matter. By playing on the conceptual limits of the realistic text, by breaking down the frontier between mind and matter, between the real and the imaginary, between event and fiction, the text puts under scrutiny the epistemological categories whereby contemporary Chinese culture thinks about the event. All the "events" in this story are devoid of specific time and space, for in the protagonist's projected world or the world as projections, yesterday and today are jumbled, devoid of eventfulness associated with mass movement and historical action. All occurrences in the story seem to be about waiting for an event that never comes, and the story can be read as a joke on the idea of "event" in the dominant ideology and realistic discourse of contemporary China.

In one way or another, the fantastic elements in contemporary Chinese narrative set out to play with the textual apparatus of realism which is institutionalized as ideologically and politically correct way of literary representation. It transgresses the cherished and sanctioned conceptual categories which set limits on how we think about the real and the imaginary, mind and matter, and disturbs the unquestioned certainty of our culture built on the sharp distinction between the two polarities. It is the inability to see this conceptual and epistemological attempt at disrupting the prevailing framework of culture that prompts some critics to accuse the writers of these texts of frivolously playing with literature.<sup>19</sup> If this subversion of the real in the shape of "event" in our story appears a bit too abstract and does not seem to be politically self-conscious, another story by the same author, which I will examine shortly, may convince us that such texts do not rest

content with a structural dislocation of realistic textual apparatus and working havoc with the "airy" epistemological categories which are the basis of dominant ideology, but have moved to a more politically self-conscious plane of subversive operation. The story aims at a concept of history which dominates public discourse about the past.

As I have discussed earlier, the concept of the real in contemporary China is in the last analysis the historical real, which is understood to be a teleological unfolding or dialectics of natural and social laws, independent of human tempering. Chinese history, in accordance with the necessity and inevitability of historical laws, is believed to have passed through several stages of mode of production, from the feudal, through the semi-colonial and semi-feudal to the socialist period. Although in art and culture there is reverence for cultural heritage, in public discourse China's past, especially the period before the "brave new epoch" 新紀元 of the People's Republic, is often regarded as the "dark age" and is commonly referred to as the "old society" 舊社會. It is generally assumed that this past is something we have left behind once and for all on the morning when socialism was declared in China, and under the leadership of the Party, the people are striving forward to a better future in a long march toward "modernism" (now a substitute for discredited "Communism"). "Recall the bitterness of the past and appreciate the sweetness of the present" 憶苦思甜, which used to be a widespread slogan, an ideological imperative and institutionalized practice during the Cultural Revolution, still persists today in various forms, particularly in the attitude toward the recent catastrophic past: the Cultural Revolution. Since the Party officially "negated" the Cultural Revolution in the early 1980s, this past has increasingly become a tabooed area. Any serious theoretical inquiry into and literary presentation of it would seem to open up the old wounds or at best foster a complacent feeling that we have fortunately survived that national disaster. Such attitude toward China's past has long since become a collective illness, aptly described by the dissident Fan Li-chih 方勵之 as the "Chinese Amnesia" 中國健忘症,<sup>20</sup> the tendency of the Chinese to forget past repression. And it is encouraged by the political authorities. It serves the interest of the political regime to repress the undisputable fact, repeated time and time again in the past, that its central authoritarian power structure and ideology, which arguably go back to China's feudal past, have gone bankrupt and proved destructive to Chinese culture.

It is in such ideological and political context concerning the past that

Yu Hua's story "1986"<sup>21</sup> strikes us like the uncanny return of the repressed. The story can be seen as evolving around the tension between the attempt to forget and repress the past and the incessant assertion of history. The title "1986," denoting the tenth year after the officially declared end of the Cultural Revolution, cannot but suggest some kind of Orwellian allegory. Todorov has postulated that the fantastic effect vanishes when a fantastic text is treated as allegory, but allegorizing the fantastic, it seems to me, is not only unavoidable but necessary. Any reference from the text in question to a cultural framework, which Todorov himself does not hesitate to make, necessarily constitutes an allegorical move.<sup>22</sup> The fact that the fantastic tends to baffle a certain line of allegorizing only suggests that it is open to multiple allegorizing, to heterogeneous allegorical mappings. Interestingly enough, in "1986," the fantastic would not be "fantastic" enough, and would lose its politically and ideologically subversive edge and become a pure isolated fantasy or madness if it is not read as a political and national allegory.

Only ten years after the disastrous Cultural Revolution, people are trying to forget it. This forgetting is represented in the story by a woman and her family. The woman's former husband was a high school history teacher. He was very interested in the scholarly study of various forms of physical tortures and punishments 刑罰 throughout China's feudal dynasties dating back to about 500 BC. Such interest got him into trouble during the Cultural Revolution. One night he was arrested at his home and taken away by the Red Guards, in the presence of his wife. He was persecuted, tortured and then was not seen for years. His wife married another man, changed her daughter's name, because the name is too intimately associated with the past suffering. The new family lives in peace in the present. Life goes on and the past seems irrevocably gone.

But the past comes back with a vengeance. It comes back in the person of her former husband, now an old man gone mad. The madness of this man is represented as ceaseless self-torture, which, though apparently masochistic, has its deep cultural implications. He wanders around in the streets of his familiar small town, and performs various kinds of cruel and bloody torture on his own body. These tortures were the dehumanizing punishments inflicted on criminals in feudal China. They include flaying 剝皮, burning, 炮烙 branding with a hot rod 墨, cutting off the nose, 剝 dismembering 凌遲, castrating 宮 and so on. The madman re-enacts all these cruel tortures on himself with an old knife and other odd instruments, bleeding,

shouting and gasping, all the while uttering the professional terminologies designating these tortures. It is no wonder that the on-lookers, though they first treat him as a laughing stock and a topic for the after-dinner chat, are gradually terrified and scandalized. With the help of police, they try to get him out of the street and out of sight. The horrifying message in these graphically gruesome, mad scenes cannot be mistaken. What the madman brings back right into the midst of complacency and self-satisfaction of the present is not simply the cruelty and barbarity of the tortures from the feudal past, hence of the totalitarian regimes, but the repetition of this past in the Cultural Revolution, when bodily torture was a commonplace, and in all the political campaigns of purge that are characterized by brutal violence on the human body. His public re-enactment of the tortures compresses the feudal past and the Cultural Revolution (which is supposed to be a break with the past) into one glaring image charged with collective memory. This is the memory which the public know intimately, having just survived the Cultural Revolution, but which they would rather forget. Indeed such glaring scenes immediately evoke what Lu Hsün characterized as the "man eating man" 喫人, the cannibalistic character of Chinese culture,<sup>23</sup> and is a telling index of a culture seriously gone awry.

The uncanny effect of the return of the past in the midst of peace and willed forgetfulness can be described, through a metaphor by Stendha, as a pistol shot in a concert, unexpected, shocking but somehow familiar. Such collective memory comes back to haunt people in the form of nightmare and fantasy, as represented by the reaction of the madman's wife. One day she unexpectedly caught sight of a note on the ancient instruments of punishment by her former husband in a salvage store (the symbolic overtone of this location is unmistakable, for in the public discourse the past is often referred to as historical rubbish 歷史的垃圾堆) and she immediately fell into a swoon:

... She heard a strange footstep. There was no moonlight. All was dark and quiet outside the house. At this moment she heard the footsteps shuffling near from far away. It sounded as if the feet were scratching the ground, but it also made one feel it was stalking closer through the air. The footstep never came close; it always remained at some distance. She knew already whose footstep it was.

Nights afterwards, she heard the footstep. It threw her into panic and terror. She screamed with utter fear.

It was in such a dark night that her husband was taken away. The scenes in which a group of Red Guards descended on their home, and the sound of her husband's footsteps vanishing away while scratching the floor, had already been buried with that dark night. More than ten years, ten years since then every night was as dark. Dark nights filled her with fear. Now, the night that she had carefully buried away for the last ten years resurfaced again. (p. 180)

The madman continues to haunt the woman and her daughter and continues to shock the public until he tortures himself to death. Everybody is relieved when his corpse, agape with wounds and covered with blood, is disposed quickly out of sight. The self-content tranquility, which has been upset by the intrusion of the madman, is restored, and life goes on again in the usual rounds of working, shopping, visiting and entertainments. But such tranquil life, full of sunshine, good health, light-hearted humor and gossip, cannot be sustained without a collective, forced forgetting of the madman and what he stands for and what his tortured body embodies. The text again plays on the ambiguity of the real and imaginary, realized in the past and the present. The present sustains itself through a violent repression of the past, which looks like a mad fantasy, but the repressed past, which is constantly looming in the background and lurking at the back of collective mind, makes the present tranquility seem precarious, superficial and gives it a dreamy and fantastic quality. The text seems to suggest how uncertain and frail is the distinction we draw between the past that we think we have left forever behind, and the present which is enjoying its stability and tranquility. Putting this text in the real political situation of contemporary China, it proves to be a good example of fantasy turned real. For it prophetically and miraculously anticipates another violent return of the brutal past, only two years after the text was written. This time the past comes in the form of another national catastrophe: the Tiananmen Massacre on June 4 of 1989, which completely shattered the distinction the shameful past and the glorious present, when the "fantastic" brutality and barbarity of the feudal dynasties was being re-enacted not just before the eyes of a curious street crowd but before the eye of the whole world as fantastic, but shocking and tangible reality.

## Notes

1. Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* tr. R. Howard (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965), pp. 241-278
2. For a detailed discussion of transcendentalist and compensatory theories of the fantastic, see Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981), pp. 171-175; Kathryn Hume also gives a compensatory definition to the fantastic: "Fantasy is any departure from consensus reality." K. Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis* (New York: Methuen, 1984), p. 21
3. Apart from the two texts which I discuss in this essay, some representative texts can be mentioned here. For instance, Yu Hua's 余華 "Shih-shih Ju-yen 世事如煙," in Huang Tzu-p'ing 黃子平 and Li Tuo 李陀 ed., *Chung-kuo Hsiao-shuo 1988 中國小說一九八八* (Hong Kong: San-lien Shu-tien, 1989); Ma Yuan 馬原, "T'u-man ku-kwai t'u-an te ch'iang-pi" 塗滿古怪圖案的牆壁, in Lü Fang 呂芳 ed., *Hê-sê Niao-ch'ün 褐色鳥群* (Peking: Peking Shih-fan Ta-hsüeh Ch'u-pan-shê, 1989); many of Tsa-hsi Ta-wa's 扎西達娃 stories, such as "Feng-ma chih-yao" 風馬之耀 in Huang Teu-p'ing and Li Tuo ed., *Chung-kuo Hsiao-shuo 1987 中國小說一九八七* (Hong Kong: San-lien Shu-tien, 1989). Other names that can be included in the category of the fantastic writers are Ts'an Hsüeh 殘雪, Mo Yen 莫言, Kê Fei 格非, to name just a few.
4. See Irène Bessière *Le récit fantastique: la poésie de l'incertain* (Paris: Larousse, 1974), pp. 9-14; pp. 18-28; also see Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 26: "The fantastic is predicated on the category of the 'real', and it introduces areas which can be conceptualized only by negative terms according to the categories of nineteenth century realism: thus the im-possible, the un-real, the nameless, formless, shapeless, unknown, in-visible. What could be termed a 'bourgeois' category of the real is under attack. It is thus negative relationality which constitutes the meaning of the modern fantastic."
5. Derrida remarks that brecolage "consists in conserving in the field of empirical discoveries all these old concepts, while at the same time exposing here and there their limits, treating them as tools which can be still of use." See Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourses of the Human Sciences", in *Writing and Difference* tr. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 282-293
6. Li Tuo 李陀 et al., "Yü-yen te fan-p'aa: chin-liang-nien hsiao-shuo" hsien-hsiang 語言的反叛近兩年小說現象, "Wen-yih yen-chiu 文藝研究, 1989, Vol. 2, pp. 75-78
7. Chu Shui-yung 朱水涌, "Hsin-ts'ao hsiao-shuo yü pen-wen" 新潮小說與本文 Wen-yih li-lun yen-chiu" 文藝理論研究, 1989, Vol. 6, p. 90
8. Wu Liang 吳亮 et al ed. *Chieh-kou chu-yih hsiao-shuo 結構主義小說* (Chi-lin: Shih-tai Chu-pan-shê, 1989).
9. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* tr. R. Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), pp. 41-42
10. *Ibid.* pp. 59-60
11. For discussions of the uncanny, see Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny", *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953), Vol. XVII, pp. 217-56 For Weber and Silverman's critiques of the ontological view of castration anxiety, see Samuel Weber, "The Sideshow, or: Remarks on a Canny Moment", "Modern Language Notes", December, 1973, Vol. 88, No. 6, pp. 1102-33; Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University

- Press, 1983), pp. 187-188
12. Bessière's repudiation of the ontological view of the fantastic is clearly expressed in this statement: "le récit fantastique utilise des cadres socio-culturels et des formes de l'entendement qui définissent les domaines du naturel et du surnaturel . . . non pour conclure à quelque certitude métaphysique mai pour organiser la confrontation des éléments d'une civilisation relatifs aux phénomènes qui échappent à l'économie du réel et du surnaturel, dont la conception varie selon l'époque." *Le récit fantastique*, p. 11
  13. Gillian Beer, "Ghost," "Essays in Criticism," vol. 28 (July, 1978), 260
  14. Cited in Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, p. 79
  15. *Chung-kuo Hsin-ts'ao Hsiao-shuo* 中國新潮小說 (Shanghai Social Sciences Academy Press, 1989), pp. 224-219. English translations are mine. Citations will be identified by page number.
  16. Ai Ssu-ch'i 艾思奇, "Pien-cheng wei-wu-chu-yih t'i-kang" 辯證唯物主義提綱, *Ai Ssu-ch'i wen-chih* 艾思奇文集 Vol. 2 (Peking: Jen-min chu-pan-shê, 1983), p. 495
  17. A major college-level textbook entitled *Chung-kuo hsien-tai wen-hsüeh* 中國現代文學 Wang Tsê-shu 汪澤樹 *et al* ed. (Kuei-chou: Kuei-chou Jen-min Chu-yan-shê, 1985) gives plot summaries to what the authors consider to be the major novels written in contemporary period. Almost all of them are about political, military, and land-reform campaigns.
  18. Roland Barthes "From Work to Text," Brian Wallis ed. *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), pp. 170-71
  19. See Tien Chung-hê 田中禾, "Tien Chung-hê t'an hsieh-tai p'ai" 田中禾談現代派小說, "Wen-yih li-lun yen-chiu" 文藝理論研究 No. 6, 1986, p. 89
  20. See FlorCruz and Mia Turner, "Justice in a Hurry", in *Times* December 17, 1990, p. 41
  21. Huang Tzu-p'ing 黃子平 and Li Tuo 李陀 ed., *Chung-kuo hsiao-shuo 1987* 中國小說一九八七 (Hong Kong: San-lien shu-tien, 1988), pp. 174-211 Citations are from this edition. English translations are mine.
  22. Todorov makes a lot of references to culture and society in his book on the fantastic. See the chapter entitled "Themes of the Fantastic." Todorov, *The Fantastic*, pp. 58-74
  23. Lu Hsün 魯迅, "K'uang-jen jih-chi" 狂人日記, *Lu Hsün ch'üan-chi* 魯迅全集 (Peking: Jen-min wen-hsüeh chu-pan-shê, 1981), p. 425

